

The 320/2's interior is light and airy

A goddess is born

Rob McCabe reports on an outstanding two-berth from the new, ultra-light Venus brand which is part of the Lunar group

Vehicle supplied for test by:
Venus Caravans,
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Lostock Hall,
Preston,
Lancashire PR5 5JF.
Call 01772 337628.

When you launch a new product, your chances of success are greatly enhanced if you have a clear idea of what its unique selling point is. Well, you can't accuse Lunar of not having thought that one through when bringing its

quartet of new Venus-branded caravans to market. These aren't just lightweight caravans, they're ultra-lightweight.

Take our featured 320/2 two-berth, end-kitchen test vehicle: even with every last kilogramme of payload used up, you can hitch it up to your Vauxhall Corsa CDTi and sally forth.

In an age where £100 fill-ups aren't that unusual, keeping fuel costs in check is a hugely important consideration for many. So, it's refreshing to encounter a tourer that tackles this head-on. Let's see whether this easy-to-tow tourer can compete with the heavyweights.

CONSTRUCTION

It's a neatly pulled-off trick, this one. The Venus weighs just 763kg in its stocking

soles, yet it feels delightfully robust in all the important areas. The smooth, one-piece aluminium sidewalls and upper rear panel feel thump-tastic (the front panel and lower rear are acrylic-capped ABS), while the furniture inside is pleasantly sturdy to the touch.

The joinery is precise – no horrors await when you peer inside cupboards and bedlockers – while the aluminium-framed bed bases are impressively muscular: they could almost be described as over-engineered.

The big blind covering the single-piece front window looks like it could be storing up trouble: it was difficult to keep down, requiring a surgeon-like fine touch to latch into place. It had a tendency to crease at the edges, too.

TOWABILITY

With an MTPLM of just 905kg, here's a 'proper', nicely-equipped, British-made caravan that will quite happily take on a lifetime of towing behind such as the aforementioned Corsa or Citroën's C3 1.4 HDi. It's a doddle to manhandle on to the towball, and to push and pull into place when you unhitch. In certain vehicles you'll enjoy some see-through rearward vision, thanks to the kitchen window on the back wall.

The Al-Ko hitch stabiliser fitted to our example comes as part of the optional Plus Pack (£399), which also includes alloy wheels, Al-Ko Secure wheel lock receiver, door flyscreen and radio/CD player. Sadly, buying this pack is also the only way to get a spare wheel/carrier – none of the items in the pack is available to buy individually.

USABILITY

The diminutive size brings obvious benefits but it does mean there's limited room for manoeuvre inside. However, you do get the feeling that Venus's designers have made every last square inch fight for its right to be there. None of the areas on board – lounge/bedroom, kitchen or washroom – feels in any way cramped. I'm guessing most owners will add an awning, which makes the compact dimensions even less of an issue.

Storage options are plentiful, but I give star billing to the spacious bedlockers. The sturdy bases lift up easily and self-support on their struts – even with the upholstery still in place – to leave you with two free hands to do all the hauling out.

Although the wardrobe's not full-length (well, they had to put the fridge somewhere, I suppose!), it still offers adequate hanging space for two. The well-made free-standing table lives in here, properly secured against the wall by a rail at the bottom and a clip at the top.

Although there's no chest of drawers at the front, the usefully deep window shelf is perfectly capable of accommodating tea and biscuits or bowls of olives and glasses of wine, so you can probably get away with using the table just at mealtimes.

The flooring is smart in its own right – good news if you want to protect the removable carpet strip from the ravages of a wet, muddy rally field. Each edge of the underside of the carpet has a strip of non-slip matting, which is a nice, user-friendly touch.

Hot water and heating are available on either gas or electric. The heater is a Whale underfloor unit that takes no time at all to warm up such a small space. The only



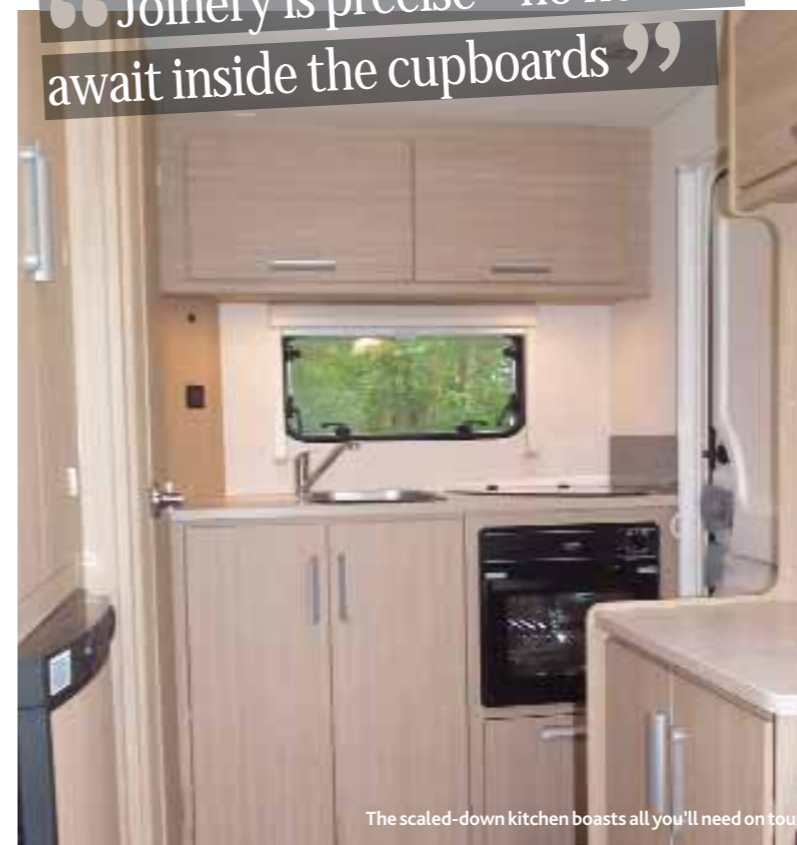
Above: how about that for compact? Easy to tow, too

Right: the double bed is not only surprisingly big, it also offers a high degree of comfort



Left: plenty of space for two diners on sumptuous seating

“Joinery is precise – no horrors await inside the cupboards”



The scaled-down kitchen boasts all you'll need on tour

TECHNICAL

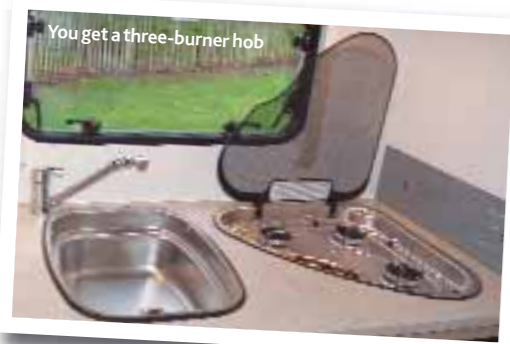
RATINGS

CONSTRUCTION	9
TOWABILITY	9
USABILITY	9
LIVING AND SLEEPING	9
KITCHEN	9
WASHROOM	9
LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS	9
VERDICT	9

RRP	£10,990 OTR
Overall length	16ft 1in (4.9m)
Overall width	6ft 10in (2.1m)
Overall height	8ft 6in (2.6m)
Internal length	10ft 8in (3.3m)
Max internal height	6ft 3in (1.9m)
MRO	763kg (15cwt)
MTPLM	905kg (17.8cwt)
User payload	142kg (2.8cwt)
Berths	2
NCC approved	yes

Figures supplied by manufacturer

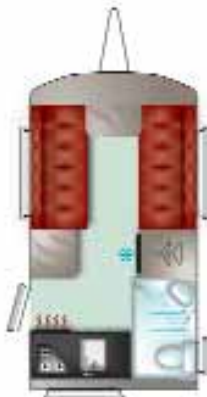
Club insurance: 01342 336610 • Info: venuscaravans.com



You get a three-burner hob



Small but efficiently designed washroom



Lift up the settees and you'll find a decent amount of storage space



downside is a slight noise which you'd probably only be aware of in a quiet caravan in the still of the night.

LIVING AND SLEEPING

What the lounge lacks in feet and inches, it makes up for in likeability. The sprung upholstery is supportive and comfy in equal measure, and there are four good corners to flop into. Sure, it would feel a bit cosy with four on board, but the fact that everyone has somewhere they can lean into makes an enormous difference.

The TV viewing station is on the big nearside shelf – perfect for watching from either front corner. But if you prefer to have your telly by the front window, the shelf will accommodate a modest-size flatscreen unit just fine. There's a mains socket in the front corner, and you can run a length of coaxial aerial cable behind the nearside sofa backrest to the aerial socket.

The double bed that appears after a swift bout of slat-pulling and cushion-arranging is big and sumptuous – and well done to Venus

for placing a reading light in each corner. Come morning, you can peel back the blind of the big sunroof and gaze up at what the weather gods have in store for you.

KITCHEN

It's scaled down – as it needs to be, really – but it's all there. It's an attractive facility, too. You'd have to be hard-hearted not to fall for the elegant, almost precocious built-in hob, which reveals three gas rings when you raise the smoked glass cover. You get a grill and an oven as well, albeit in a compact, combined form. You even have the luxury of spark ignition.

As you'd expect, there's no microwave. But if you really wanted to bring one, it would fit easily into the massive cupboard under the worktop – and you'd still have lots of space for your kitchen essentials. There's a decent amount of work surface, too – especially if you use the colour-matched fitted sink cover, which has a little cutaway to allow draining.

Lighting has been brilliantly thought-through in all areas – perfectly illustrated by the two downlighters in the kitchen, one of which is directly above the hob.

The Dometic fridge – handsomely disguised to blend in with the surrounding woodwork – has a full-width freezer compartment. The cool blue lighting that greets you when you open the fridge door is just that – seriously cool!

It's a pleasure to use this kitchen – especially on a balmy evening, when you can do so with the door wide open.

WASHROOM

I'm impressed by the space in here considering the limitations: it's nice and airy, too, thanks to the big window and skylight. Storage space is restricted to a shallow, mirror-fronted cupboard, although the plastic moulding under the wash-hand basin can be used as shelving.

If you do decide to use the shower, it benefits from its own mixer tap and a nylon curtain wraps around to keep the rest of the washroom dry. The built-in hanging rail will be appreciated by those owners intending to use the space as a wet room.

It's a facility that will do the job asked of it in an unfussy and efficient manner.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

In terms of lights per square foot, this must be some kind of record.

The interior is looked after by no fewer than 10 lamps (all 12V), six of which are in the front lounge. Endowing such a compact area with a reading lamp in each of the four corners is a real caravanner's touch: as well as the mix 'n' match options it gives while relaxing in the evening, it means you're guaranteed some helpful illumination by which to read regardless of where you're sitting – or indeed lying down. The two wall lamps are a surprising, but welcome, addition on a budget-priced caravan. They look good and perform well.

The dome ceiling light in the middle of the caravan can also be turned on or off with a switch on the 12V control panel by the entrance door. This panel also houses the 12V 'kill switch', water pump switch, battery voltage gauge and gas/electric controls for the heating system.

The splendid lights in the kitchen we know about. As for the washroom? Well, yes, there's a light in there, too.

The three mains sockets are where you'd want them to be: one in the kitchen, one by the big nearside shelf (together with inputs for 12V, aerial and satellite dish) and one in the lounge. Nice to see that the standard-equipment aerial is the excellent Status 530 omni-directional fitment. ■

VERDICT

Much to the benefit of the British consumer, I have no wish to become a caravan dealer. But if I were inclined to take on that particular career challenge, I wouldn't mind a franchise to sell this little marvel. I reckon these will be leaving the forecourts as quickly as they arrive, and quite right, too.