

BIG CARAVAN TEST



Six-berth vans on a single axle squeeze a lot into a compact, comfy package

Fitting living and sleeping space for six into a single-axle caravan is no mean feat. In fact, it's a remarkable achievement. This month we have three mid-priced, six-berthers from industry big-hitters Abbey, Bailey and Eddis that manage the task well.

To accommodate a family of six they all favour a roomy front lounge, a side dinette that converts into twin bunks and two transverse bunks at the rear. High specification offside kitchens and usable washrooms complete the layouts. As all three have similar layouts, the specification, kitchens and sleeping arrangements gain extra importance.

In July 2007's Big Caravan Test the Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne romped to victory. Here it faces two pricier challengers, with increased specification and a point to prove. The Abbey Expression 550 is a dealer special from Michael Jordan Caravans crammed full of kit, while the Eddis Avanté Club 556 has been heavily reworked for 2008. The Bailey is still the one to beat. It's going to be close, but there can only be one winner.

Pitching and setting up

Abbey Expression 550



Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne



Eddis Avanté Club 556



The most obvious difference when setting up these vans is the Eddis' BPW chassis and Winterhoff stabiliser. The other two have AL-KO chassis and stabilisers, which more of us are familiar with and used to setting up. The main disadvantage to having the BPW chassis is that buyers can't have AL-KO secure wheel locks. However, the Eddis counters with an integrated noseweight gauge.

Once unhitched the Eddis has the easiest steadies to lower.

At the rear of the van there are plastic channels to help you guide your winder onto the nut, and these also help prevent it slipping off. The heavy-duty steadies on the Abbey look built to last and are easy to lower, especially the front ones where the nuts are fitted flush to the bodywork, but accessing and operating those on the Bailey was just as easy.

When it comes to the front lockers there's little to separate the three. All of the locker doors open on two strong gas struts, revealing deep spaces that easily swallow two gas bottles and plenty of extra kit. The Abbey scores an extra point for its nearside exterior wet locker that's handy for stowing muddy boots and sandy sandals.

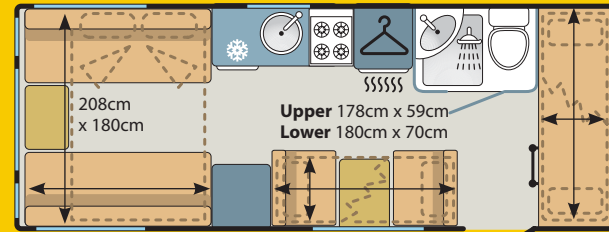
Stepping into the Eddis you're greeted with an integrated foot mat, which is a nice touch.



£13,095

Abbey Expression 550

Lower bunk 180cm x 62cm
Upper Bunk 184cm x 60cm



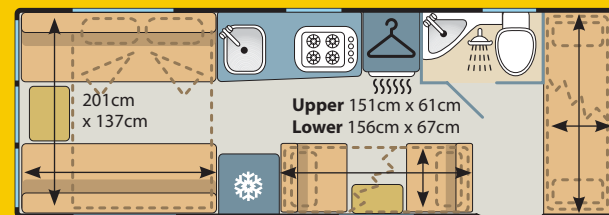
| | | | |
|-----------------|-------|--------------|---------|
| Shipping length | 7.18m | MiRO | 1274 kg |
| Shipping width | 2.23m | MTPLM | 1500 kg |
| Shipping height | 2.7m | User payload | 226kg |



£13,070

Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne

Lower bunk 165cm x 34cm
Upper Bunk 207cm x 34cm



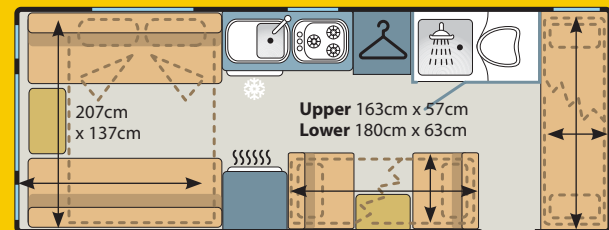
| | | | |
|-----------------|-------|--------------|--------|
| Shipping length | 7.34m | MiRO | 1195kg |
| Shipping width | 2.19m | MTPLM | 1420kg |
| Shipping height | 2.58m | User payload | 225kg |



£13,999

Eddis Avanté Club 556

Lower bunk 183cm x 61cm
Upper Bunk 183cm x 61cm



| | | | |
|-----------------|-------|--------------|--------|
| Shipping length | 7.18m | MiRO | 1297kg |
| Shipping width | 2.24m | MTPLM | 1500kg |
| Shipping height | 2.73m | User payload | 203kg |



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Abbey Expression 550
Bailey Pageant 6 Bretagne
Elddis Avanté Club 556



If the gas runs out, the hob's electric hotplate is a handy addition



Swivel-bowl
Thetford saves
space in washroom



Plenty of work
surface but sparse
storage in kitchen



Top of central chest flips over to double size of level work surface



Front lounge cushions fit snugly to make up a comfy double bed

The control panels on both the Bailey and the Elddis are handily located to the left-hand side of the door at a height for adults-only to access. In contrast, the controls in the Abbey are in the bottom of the offside wardrobe, making them awkward to get at when you first enter the van. They're also accessible for inquisitive children.

Heating controls are sensibly located on the nearside wall at waist height in the Abbey and Elddis. Bailey's Bretagne has its Truma dials on the offside sofa base, which has its benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand it's great if you're sitting down or lying in bed because you can reach them without getting up. However, it also means bending low if you're standing and again they are low enough for kids to access.

In all three vans there are offside doors to the bottom bunk at the rear. These give kids greater freedom, and means that with the bottom bunk flipped up the resulting space can stow bikes as you drive. When you arrive on site, you simply roll them on to your pitch. One school of thought suggests that this isn't the best place to stow bikes, because their weight is loaded a long way from the axle. However, there should be no problem carrying a couple of

bikes here, provided an eye is kept on how any additional kit is loaded into the this area. The Bailey gets an extra point for its rear windows, which flood the end of the van with lots of natural light.

The Elddis wins this round because it's hard to fault – its steadies are easy to use, the controls are well placed and it has the best specification with a noseweight gauge and foot mat. The Abbey and Bailey come a close joint second, but both are let down by specific gripes. We didn't like the location of the controls in the Abbey or that of the heating controls in the Bailey.

Lounge

Abbey Expression 550

Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne

Elddis Avanté Club 556

All three of the test vans have a traditional front lounge set up, with two facing sofas and a central

chest of drawers. With only a couple of centimetres difference in the width of the caravans they also have a similar amount of legroom. The Bailey wins on headroom as the roof doesn't taper to the front. There are two scatter cushions in each and two end cushions. With these removed all three comfortably seat a family of six on deep, welcoming cushions.

A big concern for many families is the location of the television. All three have a 12V socket, an aerial socket and a 240V socket on the offside wall, with a section of worktop that's perfect for a TV. Sadly for the Bailey, it is the only one not to have the same sockets at the base of the central chest of



CD/radio is located in locker

drawers. This gives buyers of the other two options over where the television sits.

The Bailey fares better with its provision of 240V sockets clustered by the offside TV area. All three vans have two 240V sockets, but Bailey's arrangement is neater. For example, if you want to charge a mobile phone while you have the TV plugged in, then having the sockets in one place minimises the number of dangling wires.

Radio/CD players come as standard in all three but the best is in the Elddis. The dealer special Abbey has a radio/CD player fitted, into which you can also plug an iPod or similar MP3 player. The Elddis boasts this top-end specification, too, but exceeds its counterpart by providing a branded stereo and speakers from market heavyweight Sony.

All three vans have drop-in carpets, which make more sense than fixed carpets in a family van, because they're easy to remove and clean. The wall boards behind the sofas, are another common feature among the vans, they help



Privacy curtains in both sets of bunks give kids individual space

the circulation of warm air and minimise condensation at bedtime.

The top surface of the central chest of drawers in all the vans extends, providing added space for cups of coffee and magazines, but the manner in which they extend varies. That in the Elddis slides forward with one tug of the handle and drops into place neatly. In the other two vans you



Cubby-hole storage and good lower space win rear bunks marks

have to flip the work top over to double its size, which is easy enough but could lead to trapped fingers with kids on board.

The additional surfaces in the Abbey and Bailey are at the same height as the freestanding table. The table in the Elddis sits slightly lower, creating a lip between the two. It's a minor point, but shows more attention to detail

from Abbey and Bailey. Dining is easy for families of six in all three vans, thanks to the practical extra seating on the side dinettes. The low seats here are better suited to children, but are fine for hosting that lazy Sunday morning breakfast for mum and dad when the kids are watching telly.

Losing the Elddis a further mark is the weight of its freestanding table. While this suggests solidity and a long-lasting build quality, it makes erecting it at meal times, and stowing it in the wardrobe, a real effort.

Finally, the handles on the cabinetry in the Elddis lounge were the most stylish on test. However, the twin catches on the doors under the sofas are unnecessary and a little annoying; the Abbey and Bailey fare better with doors that are easy to open.

It's close, but the Abbey's all-round performance and great specification win this round. Just the one TV position counts against the Bailey, while the Elddis is let down by minor niggles with dining arrangements. ➡➡

Abbey Expression 550

Pros and cons...

You'll like...

- ✓ Exterior wet locker
- ✓ Comprehensive standard equipment
- ✓ Heavy-duty steadies

You won't like...

- ✗ Location of control panel
- ✗ Limited storage in kitchen
- ✗ Needs more washroom storage areas



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Abbey Expression 550
Bailey Pageant 6 Bretagne
Elddis Avanté Club 556



Four-burner hob has controls moved out of reach of small children



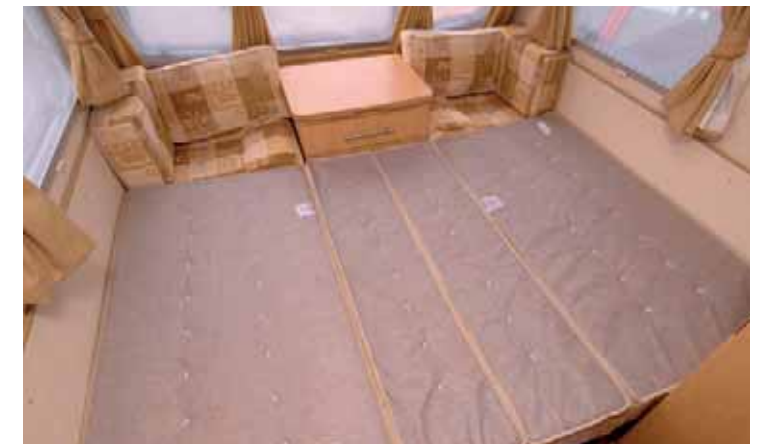
Washroom has impressive storage



Rear windows increases natural light through van



Bailey's extended roof line increases headroom and gives airy feel



Well-fitting cushions make the Bailey's front bed the best on test

Kitchen

- Abbey Expression 550
- Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne
- Elddis Avanté Club 556

In terms of specification there's little to choose between the three

Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne

Pros and cons...

You'll like...

- ✓ The best kitchen on test
- ✓ Good washroom storage
- ✓ Its low weight

You won't like...

- ✗ Position of heating controls
- ✗ Just one TV position
- ✗ Button handbrake



on test. They all have a microwave oven, separate oven and grill and at least a three-burner hob. The Abbey has an extra electric hotplate, making it more versatile if your gas runs out, while the Bailey has a four-burner hob. There are large fridge freezers suitable for families of six, with the biggest being the Bailey's 117-litre Dometic. Interestingly, they all lack the same things; for instance, none have an extractor fan.

Bearing in mind that the specifications are similar, points are awarded here for the way in which the available space is maximised. The Abbey has a great amount of worktop for preparing food to the left-hand side of the sink. It's as wide as the Thetford fridge and just as deep. What lets the kitchen down slightly is the limited amount of storage.

There's just the one overhead locker that, although deep, will struggle to hold food for six people. This is

especially true when you consider that there's just one thin cupboard with a cutlery drawer and wire tray. Crockery has to be stored in the overhead locker and pots and pans below the oven. There's space in the unit below the TV area, but storage is still limited.

The Bailey fares better. It has about the same amount of work surface, spread around the sink and hob, but more storage space. Moving the microwave to the nearside frees up extra locker space, in which are separate chrome holders for plates, bowls and wine bottles.

Under the worktop are two large cupboards, one with shelves for pans and another with two slide-out wire trays, a cutlery drawer and room below for cereals or other bulky kitchen kit. It even houses the freestanding dining table. Intelligent storage includes the little clip behind the sink that holds the draining board in place.

The kitchen in the Elddis is compromised by a lack of work surface. Opting for a recessed draining board by the sink means

the available worktop is of little use to cooks. An additional flip-up section to the left-hand side compensates for this, but it does impinge on offside sofa space. The tough chinchilla glass on the sink and hob is a nice touch, but doesn't compensate fully. Worsening matters is the lack of storage. There's a thin cupboard between the fridge and oven, a cutlery drawer below the spot for the television, and just one locker with a plate rack and storage for one wine bottle. Because of the lack of worktop there's no 240V socket in the kitchen, which the other two have, so you have to put the kettle on the nearside where the TV sits.



Big overhead lockers and shelves

The kitchen is an important area in a family van, in which cooks have to be capable of catering for six, in comfort. The Bailey does this best, with masses of storage, plenty of preparation room and top-notch specification.

Washroom

- Abbey Expression 550
- Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne
- Elddis Avanté Club 556

These caravans have been designed with the assumption that the washroom will be used mainly for nighttime toilet runs and teeth cleaning. As such, the washrooms in all three are small, with only the Elddis having a proper separate shower. At first glance this is a selling point. It has a separate shower head and adjustable mixer, plus a plastic door to section it off from the rest of the room. However, while its flip-up sink above the Thetford



Side bunks need no infills and rail board fits well and is light

bench toilet is an innovative use of space, storage is limited to one glass cabinet above the sink. Traditional buyers are likely to prefer the washrooms in the Abbey and Bailey.

Abbey's effort uses a false wall to make up the shower. So, if you'd rather use the on-site showers you still have a relatively large washroom for freshening



Top rear bunk has clever storage pocket ideal for CDs and books

up before dinner or bed. It has a swivel-bowl Thetford to save space, and good storage in a deep overhead locker.

The Bailey washroom is the best on test, if you can do without a separate shower. It's very similar to the Abbey one, being small and functional, but has a little more storage below the sink and on two adjacent shelves.

Beds

- Abbey Expression 550
- Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne
- Elddis Avanté Club 556

The three vans sleep six in exactly the same way: two adults up front on an assembled double, and then the children choose between two side and two end bunks.

The side and rear bunks in all three vans have privacy curtains so that children feel they have their own space.

The rear bunks in the Abbey are particularly good. The bottom one has enough headroom for even an adult to sit up. There are wall boards to help them stay warm, plus lights for each bunk, and cubby hole storage to the head end of each bunk.

The Bailey has the best front lounge bed, which assembles into a flat mattress with well-fitting cushions. There are also four reading lights and handy

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Abbey Expression 550
Bailey Pageant 6 Bretagne
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Chinchilla glass lids retrieve space compromised by recessed drainer



Separate shower is nice but limited storage areas



Flip up work top in kitchen impedes sofa space in lounge



Central chest top extends by sliding out, but the table stands lower



Deep cushions are swiftly converted into a comfortable bed for two

surfaces nearby for a nighttime novel and cup of cocoa.

That extra work surface in the Elddis' kitchen, which gets in the way when lounging, comes into its own when reclining in the double bed. It's big enough for a few magazines and other bits.

The side dinette bunks in the Elddis are the best on test. A

slatted section slides out easily between the two seats and the guards for the top bunk are solid wooden sections that fit snugly. The only let down is the ladder, which attaches using metal plates that must be aligned perfectly – easier said than done. The end bunks have a built-in ladder. This restricts access to the bottom bunk, but does mean you don't have to stash the ladder away.

All three vans sleep six with ease. The Abbey has the edge, though, thanks to its rear bunks, which are one of the main selling points of these compact six-berthers.

They all have plenty of storage, especially when you factor in their 'garages'. The Bailey wins by a whisker because buyers will rate the extra kitchen and washroom storage above all else.

Kids' clothes storage is great in the Abbey's floor-to-ceiling wardrobe with its five shelves. There's little clever storage in evidence elsewhere, though, except in the Bailey, which has pockets hanging from the top bunk – ideal for kids' CDs and computer games.

There is storage under the lounge sofas in every van. However, not one has strong enough springs to hold up the base when the cushions are still on.

The Abbey's kitchen storage is limited, while the Bailey fares best in the washroom. The Bailey has more kitchen storage because its fridge is on the nearside, but this means it has one less cupboard than the other two. All three have an abundance of lockers in the lounge, although one of the Bailey's is taken up by its stylish wine bottle holder.

Buying and Owning

- Abbey Expression 550
- Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne
- Elddis Avanté Club 556

Selling your van is always going to be easier if it looks the part inside. While a preference for different upholstery is subjective, every

buyer wants covers that will hide dirt. The Abbey and Elddis favour traditional neutral tones while the upholstery in the Bailey is a little brighter, which might not be as practical as the years roll by.

The woodwork seemed better in the Elddis, which goes some way to justifying the extra cost. We also like the Elddis' silver trim on the base of the cabinets and lockers; it shows attention to detail.

In terms of weight, the Bailey can be most proud of itself on the scales, having the lowest MTPLM at 1420kg. It undercuts its rivals by 80kg, which is potentially the difference between needing to own an MPV and a small 4x4.

Another factor that's important to buyers and sellers is specification. The Abbey Expression is fully loaded with kit being a dealer special, and has extras such as a dimmer switch, wet locker, gas BBQ point and a key-fob operated alarm. Still, the Bailey and Elddis boast plenty of gear, too. Both have essential kitchen kit plus luxury items such as microwaves, good security



Solid wood guides for top bunk and slatted base wins marks

protection and radio/CD head units. Being from three of the biggest names in the business – Swift Group, Bailey and Explorer Group – all have very good residuals. However, buyers might be put off the Elddis by its short three-year body warranty. This relegates the Elddis below its rivals, with the Bailey snatching the round thanks to its lighter weight.



Rear bunk's fixed ladder restricts lower bunk access, but no stowing

accommodate six people and have spec lists as long as their caravanning heritage. Being big name brands you'll be safe buying any of them, supported by large dealer networks and with every chance of recouping a sizeable chunk of your cash upon resale. When it comes to the crunch, though, we'd pick the Bailey. Its unpretentious interior feels as though it has been built with loyal customers in mind, and functions on every level very well. It has the best kitchen on test, which will be appreciated by cooks and their hungry family. The Abbey and Elddis come a close joint second, with great specification and comfortable interiors. However, both are let down by their washrooms and the Elddis by its kitchen work surface. So the Bailey wins out. But brand loyalty will dictate plenty of sales for Abbey and Elddis, and plenty of satisfied customers, too.

Elddis Avanté Club 556

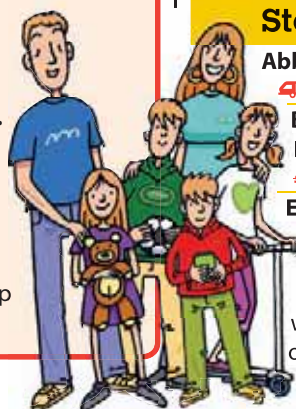
Pros and cons...

You'll like...

- ✓ Stylish cabinet work
- ✓ Sony headunit and speakers
- ✓ Solid side dinette bunks

You won't like...

- ✗ Heavy table
- ✗ Limited washroom storage
- ✗ Poor amount of kitchen wortop



Storage

Abbey Expression 550



Bailey Pageant Series 6 Bretagne



Elddis Avanté Club 556



There are offside wardrobes in all the vans on test, perfect for smart



Standard cd/radio sited in locker

Turn over page for full caravan specifications