



Orion's a belter

A winner of two classes in the Club's 2011 Caravan Design and Lightweight Leisure Trailer Awards, this new baby Bailey now impresses **Rob McCabe**

Vehicle supplied for test by:
Bailey of Bristol,
South Liberty Lane, Bristol BS3 2SS. Call 0117 305 2939.

THERE ALWAYS has been and always will be a demand for small, two-berth caravans that offer the highly-desirable combination of real-world price, light weight, fine comfort and plenty of equipment. Just because there are only two of you, your life savings aren't bottomless and you don't own a Hummer doesn't mean you have to miss out on the finer things in life when you go caravanning.

Bringing all these things together was one of the reasons why the Bailey Ranger – in all its various berth offerings – was such a massive hit when it took its bow about

15 years ago. The Ranger has gone now, even if it will be guaranteed its own chapter whenever somebody gets round to updating the history of caravanning.

But its successor is proving to be every bit as adept at getting tongues wagging. The new, much-talked-about, four-model Orion range offers the cheapest way to enter the world of Bailey's Alu-Tech construction, the build method that backs up its promise of great strength and protection from water ingress with a 10-year guarantee.

The distinctively-profiled Orions are all tastily kitted-out, and the one we're

looking at here, the baby 400-2, is a positively gossamer-like 1,076kg, even when fully laden. Worthy of a closer look? I should say so.

CONSTRUCTION

Just in case you've somehow managed to miss all the fuss surrounding Bailey's Alu-Tech process, here it is in a nutshell. The bodywork comprises just five sections – the two sides, the floor, the rear and the massive, combined ceiling/front, all of which contribute to the caravan's overall strength.

These sections (GRP on the Orion, not aluminium) are clamped together by a network of aluminium extrusions, cutting out some 90% of the external fixings employed in traditional caravan construction and therefore promising enhanced resistance to damp. There's no timber anywhere: the Orion wraps around a composite plastic internal frame.

That's the science: the reality is a caravan that feels like it's been chiselled from lead. It's solid to the touch, inside and out. Not everybody is a fan of the glossy GRP interior walls, but they'll do for me any day – clean, unfussy and bright.

I gave the Orion every chance to make public any squeaks, rattles, obstructions or loose fittings, but it declined.

TOWABILITY

We can let the vital statistics do all the talking here: MRO 959kg, MTPLM 1,076kg, overall length 17ft 7in and overall width 7ft 2in.

Okay, so it doesn't quite match the Lunar Ariva's sub-1,000kg MTPLM, but the smallest Orion won't cause your Volkswagen Golf or diesel Mazda3 any concern on the road – but there's even a hitch stabiliser as standard. The siting of the gas locker, over the axle on the nearside, is a big help in keeping noseweight issues at bay.

USABILITY

Many buyers of the 400-2 will be parting with their cash largely because of its exemplary scoring in the above section. Keeping the kilogrammes down hasn't come at the expense of payload, either – there's more than enough scope for two people's kit, and there are plenty of places on board to put it all.

The nearside exterior hatch gives access to the entire bedlocker, so you needn't miss the lack of a 'conventional' gas locker at the front too much. Further along the same wall, the centrally-situated gas locker (you can't look at it without thinking of dearly-departed Avondale...) can accommodate two cylinders, the larger of which sits inboard in a neat recess.

Indoors, it's good to see that the securely Velcro-attached, loose-lay carpets have trickled down from the posher Baileys. The two sections are both easily manageable and roll up such that they can be stashed under a bed if you're not using them.

Although there's no door flyscreen, everything else that opens has its own blind and screen – and they're of the type that can be used together, which is a great boon on balmy summer nights.

The small clip-on shelf at the front is obviously no substitute for a chest, but it's adequate for a cuppa or a couple of glasses of something cheeky. For anything else, you'll need the big table that clips on to the

same attachment – so the shelf has to be whisked off every time. I just hid it in the table store to keep it out of the way.

There is a big expanse of useful surfaces on board, though – indeed, the nearside dresser top space is enormous. Even with your TV and DVD player here, there's still plenty of room for other bits and pieces. Not bringing the telly? Fair enough – you've got a built-in stereo radio/CD player that sounds good, and which gives you the option to connect your MP3 player as well. It's wall-mounted, rather than secreted in a locker, so swapping discs or changing channels is a fuss-free operation.

Heating is taken care of by a floor-mounted Whale blown-air unit that lives in the nearside bed locker. Although it doesn't take too long to start warming such a compact space, it's still not as quick off the mark as the common-or-garden space heater – it's noisier, too.

Yes, it's a small caravan, but there's a consistent 6ft 5in of headroom throughout.

LIVING AND SLEEPING

The fact that the Orion's useable living space extends virtually all the way to the front window certainly makes the absolute most of the room available.

Recline (or even sit normally) in one of the front corners of the lounge, though, and you might find that the back of your head comes into contact with the curtains and blinds – which can become a little irritating. This would be solved by more substantial bolsters – the existing ones do little more than look pretty.

In other regards, it's a very pleasant sitting room. The upholstery is good and supportive, and the sofas are decently long: you could comfortably accommodate a couple of friends for a soiree. The lack of a front chest is mitigated by having the big surface of the nearside dresser and the kitchen worktop to plonk glasses of wine and bowls of nibbles on.

Now, who doesn't like to sit up in bed and read a few pages of a good book before the old eye lids get too heavy to carry on? Here's another problem. The front lounge is illuminated by just two reading lights so, if you've made up the double bed, somebody's going to have to do without. The ceiling dome is too far away to be of any help to the bedtime reader.

The sofas are long enough to make single beds, but if, like me, you need to make full use of the 6ft 1in length, you'll have to lie so that your feet are under the slight overhang of the front window shelf – and that puts your head at the opposite end of the lounge from the reading light. Most would-be buyers would surely prefer to pay a little extra for better, more user-friendly lighting.

The double bed is terrific – it is not only quickly made up by sweetly-gliding slats, >>

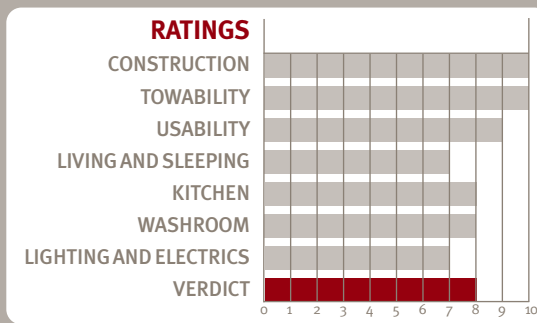


Sofas are a decent length and the upholstery is supportive



The Belfast-style sink in the end washroom is a nice touch

“The double bed is terrific – almost unfairly large for its occupants”



RRP	£12,540 OTR
Overall length	17ft 7in (5.35m)
Overall width	7ft 2in (2.19m)
Overall height	8ft 8in (2.63m)
Internal length	13ft 9in (4.18m)
Max internal height	6ft 5in (1.96m)
MRO	959kg (18.9cwt)
MTPLM	1,076kg (21.2cwt)
User payload	117kg (2.3cwt)
Berths	2
NCC approved	Yes

Figures supplied by manufacturer

Club insurance: 01342 336610 • Info: bailey-caravans.co.uk

Dark and light wood effects work well; stylish teardrop-shaped hob (inset)



but is also wonderfully comfortable and almost unfairly large for its two occupants.

KITCHEN

With its attractive, dark-wood-style worktop, light-coloured overhead cupboard with frosted windows and three strategically-placed downlighters, this is a seriously good-looking kitchen.

The teardrop-shaped hob (itself very easy on the eye) has three burners, and added to a compact, combined grill/oven there's also an overhead 800W microwave – quite an armoury of cooking options for a couple. The big fridge is good to see, too.

Ironically, given the usual state of affairs in a caravan, the kitchen is the only area on board where lighting is really up to the mark: those downlighters do a good job of covering the ground.

If you come laden with big saucepans and scarily-large packets of cereal, you may need to borrow storage space from elsewhere, because the kitchen area itself is not exactly over-endowed.

With the supplied sink cover in place, work surface is just about adequate – but that great plateau of a dresser top directly opposite is ideally situated to help out at serving-up time.

WASHROOM

It's my guess that this smallest Orion will be a fairly common sight on rally fields, where self-sufficiency is important. The end washroom features a roomy, well-sealed separate shower cubicle that will stand up well to regular use, and it has the common-sense inclusion of a nice, big shelf for all your toiletries. The

Belfast-style wash basin, as well as looking pretty, is deep and sensibly shaped.

Storage is absolutely fine for a couple – as well as the roomy cupboard under the basin, there's an open shelf above it. You'll find the wardrobe in the washroom, too.

In terms of lighting, though, the pull-cord-operated roof lamp is all you get and it's not quite up to the job. Even during daytime, the combination of tiny window and dapper little skylight only let a smallish amount of natural light in.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

It's great to see a good-quality stereo, an 800W microwave and a directional TV aerial included as standard equipment – not what you might expect to see on an entry-level caravan.

But the lighting is disappointing, even in that entry-level context: two small lights in the lounge and one in the washroom struggle to make their presence felt. The two-position ceiling dome does help out at the front end to a degree, but does little to illuminate the area at the entrance door.

There are two mains sockets – one in the kitchen and one on the big nearside dresser, which also provides attachments for TV aerial and 12V lead. This latter one is very close to the mirror by the door, so will no doubt be designated the shaving/hair straightening socket.

All the important dials and switches are sensibly located, including the master-switch cluster by the entrance door.

VERDICT

The arrival on the scene of such a lightweight, well-equipped and superbly-built caravan should be roundly applauded. It's sure to win lots of admirers – indeed, it took two category wins in The Caravan Club's prestigious 2011 Caravan Design and Lightweight Leisure Trailer Awards. Save for better lighting and a couple of heavy-duty bolsters in the lounge, the small Orion 400-2 is perfectly formed. ■