

Family favourites

You're spoilt for choice when you go looking for the perfect family caravan. Here are three of the different layouts on offer, at reasonable prices too



TEST PHIL STEPHENS | ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY TONY WRIGHT

OF all designs, it's the family caravans that offer the widest choice of weights, lengths, price and layouts. There's no such thing as one-size-fits-all when it comes to families - size and priorities vary.

You might want a large shower to hose down the kids, a set of fixed bunks for a hassle-free bedtime or a lounge at each end so you and the kids can have one each.

These three caravans have four, five and six berths, but that

doesn't mean you have to fill them with as many bodies.

With so much choice out there, you're bound to find the best caravan for your family. These three represent a spread of what's on the market.

SPRITE MAJOR 6
£11,548

XPLORE 495 **£11,295**

BAILEY RANGER GT60
510-4 **£11,868**



OUR CRITERIA: A strict budget of £12k and enough beds and living space for a family, whatever size that may be. That's why there's a four-berth, a five-berth and a six-berth. More people means more luggage, so a reasonable starting weight is a must to allow for all that extra kit.



Along with stabiliser, microwave and shockers, this is free



BAILEY RANGER GT60 510-4

PRICE **£11,868**

TOWMATCH C

LAYOUT 8/10

A magnificently simple and versatile four-berth layout loved by touring couples and families alike. The two-box design (main cabin and rear washroom) means you can't buy any caravan layout with a more open feel to its daytime space. Lounge, kitchen and dinette comfortably share the same room: no ugly bulkhead or full height cabinet carving up space into a maze of compartments. This design is the only one here that gives you a full-width washroom and separate shower across the rear. Popular? You bet. Every manufacturer has had a go at this layout.

STYLING/COMFORT 8/10

Handle-free locker doors promote a clean fuss-free interior. That continues with the absence of any sort of locker valance, corner pod, or any shelving for that matter. Soft furnishings are unashamedly neutral and together with that simple cabinetry you get something that's far from elaborate.

But these neutral designs are a perfect base for adding your own personally selected cushions and decorative pieces suiting your own taste, not the manufacturer's.

The lounge is long, if not especially wide given the 7ft 2in body width, and allows comfortable TV viewing.

TOWING 9/10

It's longer and significantly better equipped than the Xplore (as it should be given the price), and yet it tips the scales 8kg lighter at 1079kg. Although in fairness the Xplore does provide accommodation for another body.

Use the 202kg payload and you'll achieve the Ranger's 1281kg maximum weight, meaning the everyday Mondeo, Passat or Vectra should have no problem with the Bailey, or indeed the Sprite and Xplore. But unique to the Bailey is the standard stabiliser and you'll get shock absorbers.

KITCHEN 9/10

There's very little wrong here, so let's dispense with the hiccups first. Other than the pan drawer in Spinflo's separate oven and grill, there's no lower cupboard storage. There are two very large, useful drawers but pans, colanders and bulky kitchen stuff need lodgings elsewhere. Visually, it's not quite as appealing as the Sprite and Xplore.

But it remains a high scoring kitchen. Worktop space is immense and the layout affords the cook use of the dinette table opposite. Bailey sinks are big, bold affairs, as is the four-burner hob. By comparison to its rivals, kit level is frankly astonishingly; you get a microwave (even if its sticky-out profile ruins the line of those new flush-fit lockers) and a stylish 113-litre Thetford fridge with metallic gunmetal frameless door.

WASHROOM 8/10

As we're only packing four beds into this layout, remember you'll get that full-width washroom. The large, rectangular shower sits

on the nearside and it's big enough to hose down two kids at once.

It's a shame that the indentations that invite toiletries are hampered by the tap lever, which knocks lotions and potions to the floor where they'll have to stay. Does it spoil the room as a whole? Of course not.

The latest large capacity and wheeled Thetford C250 loo sits in the opposite corner whilst wardrobe storage beats the much larger competition. The huge space below the wardrobe would benefit from a drawer or two, instead of a black hole, but then the price would probably rise too.

SLEEPING 7/10

A front double, whose base utilises the usual pull-out slats, forms a 6ft 6in x 4ft 5in bed or two (his and hers) 2ft 3in wide singles at 6ft and 5ft 10in in length. Construction is swift and easy, though seats must be lifted to retrieve bedding first as there are no drop-down hatches. The Pullman-style bunk shackled to the wall in the central dinette folds out to form the upper bunk. The lower bunk is bigger, more den-like.

STORAGE 7/10

Dinette seat bases are usually the place for bedding. Here the rear-most base is filled with the water heater and other plumbing. The remaining seat base isn't brilliant either with the wheel arch getting in on the act.

Happily, with the watery bits here, that leaves two long lounge settees with free space below. Upper lockers provide all that a family of four could reasonably expect.

BUILD QUALITY 8/10

Bailey's build quality continues to improve, although look around the interior of the gas locker and you'll see finish isn't as neat as the competition. Inside, locker hinges are anchored to a common alloy rail, dispensing with the need for hopeful grub screws biting just 5mm into soft pine. The cabinetry with simple plastic strip clasps is far superior to the previous Series 6 Ranger. Cheap and cheerful ceiling lights and a plastic tone to cabinetry try to spoil the tone, but keep your disappointment in perspective at this price.

EQUIPMENT 9/10

The Bailey is the most expensive here, but it's easily the better specified. The Thetford fridge is big enough for a real family and a stylish model to boot. Factor in the AL-KO stabiliser and shock absorbers, top end loo, microwave, radio/CD/MP3 and three 230v sockets you can see the extra money has at least been showed on the interior.

VALUE FOR MONEY 9/10

Forget - for a moment - storage, layout and comfort. Look at the equipment list, then look at the competition, now look at the price. After that consider how cheerful Bailey's look on a dealer's used forecourt. That helps sell your caravan privately or as an attractive trade-in for your dealer.



If this is important to you, then scrub the other two



Worktop space is immense, but someone please push that microwave in a bit further - it ruins the clean lines



Put the TV where the flowers are and the top bunk inhabitant can watch



No visible handles or hinges on the overhead lockers make for clean lines



Front locker has a gas-filled strut to support the lid



There's more prep space here than in the Sprite and Xplore put together, great for feeding four



It's an attractive rear end, with panel and lights, and still a cheap caravan. Listen up, Xplore and Sprite



The stabiliser is part of the extra Diamond pack



You see a bunk, they see an adventure playground



Not as big as the Xplore but there's better access



Flojet pump ensures good water distribution



The widest caravan here means loads of room



The two-part door doesn't have a window in it

SPRITE MAJOR 6

PRICE **£11,548**

TOWMATCH **C**

LAYOUT 9/10

With six bodies to fit in, you won't find a full-width washroom with separate shower in the Sprite. Priorities lie elsewhere. This is also one to choose as a luxurious four-berth, since you won't have to build bunks twice a day.

The Major 6 gives you the same central(ish) dinette, on the nearside this time, but where Bailey puts its washroom across the rear, the Sprite fixes bunks. The bottom bunk flips up to create a garage area for bikes and the like, accessed by an offside door. The washroom is also on the offside, just forward of the bunks. Although the washroom juts out into the cabin space, it's far back and is opposite the dinette and so feels as spacious as the Bailey set-up.

It's also the widest here and, coupled with the panoramic front window sucking in light, it achieves a more airy feel to the lounge than the triple-paned Bailey.

STYLING/COMFORT 9/10

Know your caravans? Then the interior can be described as typically Swift. If you don't, that means contemporary and lots of chrome (well, the pretend stuff anyway): handles, valances, fridge surrounds and bed ladders. Mock slate worktops continue the modern slant and hit the spot.

The lounge has more floor space and light than the other caravans tested here. At the other end, the lack of windows for the bunks and in the door make for a dim area.

TOWING 7/10

The Sprite is the heaviest here, but excuses itself by being the widest and longest. The Bailey isn't much smaller, houses more kit and yet remains significantly lighter with a MRO of 1079kg (Sprite's MRO is 1176kg). Of course the Sprite is by no means heavy and isn't a challenge to tow.

Unless you opt for the £299 Diamond Pack you'll not get a stabiliser on your hitch head. What's more, the spare wheel/carrier and radio/CD are a part of this package too, taking the total price a little closer to £12,000.

KITCHEN 7/10

The kitchen is neat and compact with the same generous family-friendly 113-litre capacity fridge as the Bailey, but this time with auto ignition and digital controls. Taken as a whole though, the kitchen isn't necessarily up to the culinary demands of six people. The oven and grill is adequate as is the three-burner hob, but serious food preparation, storage and worktop space are limited. That's if you view it as a six-berth; buy this and use it for four people and the criticism is turned on its head. Then the kitchen area becomes more than capable.

WASHROOM 7/10

Sprite's effort at the unitary washroom isn't bad. There's plenty of space given over to showering; it's generous in comparison with other similar models. There's no window but

it's very white and very bright, with a frosted roof light. The manual flush loo doesn't compare to the Bailey's superior throne.

SLEEPING 9/10

If you want fixed bunks, buy the Sprite. If you do choose this layout, two things are certain: you will end up using the bunks for storage in the daytime (and you can shut the curtain); and the kids will see it as a play area.

It's a six-berth so there's always the dinette's Pullman bunk. It mirrors the Bailey's dimension. Spacious sleeping for six people on a single axle? Other than the new breed of triple bunkers on the block, it doesn't get much better than this.

STORAGE 9/10

With the demands of six on the Sprite, storage ability betters that of the Bailey. Dinette bases are pleasing free of service equipment and though now under the lounge seats, they're tucked away at the front in dead space in terms of stowing things.

The wardrobe is large enough and the stack of five shelves built into the end of the fixed bunk are useful, though not as practical as you'd think. There's a suitable array of large upper lockers, so big and crying out for splitter shelves. The best unit is the central cabinet between lounge and dinette. This isn't some tiny useless table compartment but a full-on triple-shelved unit.

BUILD QUALITY 8/10

The components, fit and finish can only be described as superior. Inside, the space-frame system of cupboards, lockers beds and cabinets is far more advanced, although the feel doesn't always transmit that.

There's no doubt that Sprites are well made, but in the test model, there was a curtain tieback screwed through the blind runner, holding the blind shut. The dealer PDI would've picked it up long before it reached a paying customer, but it shouldn't have left the factory with such an obvious fault.

EQUIPMENT 7/10

Without the Diamond Pack this section could be quite short. Dig deep and you'll see the Sprite's plumbing has a pressurized system featuring Flojet's onboard pump; it gives a more even distribution to taps and improves showering. The fridge's digital controls look up to date. The thick washroom door has substantial handles fitted. The list ends there. Socket count only reaches two (there are three in the Bailey), in a six-berth. Now how much was that Diamond Pack again?

VALUE FOR MONEY 9/10

It's clear that to get the best value you have to break our £12k ceiling and buy that Diamond pack. Like the Bailey, the Sprite is attractive inside but not as appealing out. Price differential is minimal but kit level is quite different. Both hold their value when it comes to sale or trade-in time.



Kitchen will have to work hard to feed six mouths



Nearside unit is a handy addition to the kitchen worktop space, or you can use it to take the television



Another true and practical six-berth layout with bunks fixed at the rear end



Other than the manual flush loo, this is how to do a good unitary washroom



Gas locker is propped open with a metal stay



Lounging at the front or at the back? You can choose. And the rear lounge is only marginally shorter than the front lounge so there won't be any arguments



The fine design means it's not as narrow in reality as it actually looks here



If you plan to fill your caravan with five people then this is the layout to go



No stabiliser but there is an easy-on handbrake



Tight kitchen has a real job on for feeding five



Ladder is useless if the lower double is made up



Budget price, and you get the budget washroom



Styling is restrained and forgettable on its own

XPLORE 495

PRICE £11,295

TOWMATCH C

LAYOUT 8/10

The Xplore splits the four-berth Bailey and six-berth Sprite by offering five berths. It's shorter than the other two so offers neither fixed bunks nor the separate shower advantages of the others.

But if you intend to spend significant time aboard and with a full quota of five this is the layout to go for. That's because the 495 offers twin lounges. Measuring the bit you can actually sit on in the front lounge reveals the rear lounge is only marginally shorter. Central washroom and wardrobe loom out from the offside whilst the kitchen does the same from the other, creating a central thoroughfare amplifying the feeling of two separate lounges.

STYLING/COMFORT 8/10

Twin lounges can often make the caravan feel partitioned and smaller than it actually is. So comfort-wise, the Xplore's a loser? No. Whilst the 495 can't shake a stick at the central space and open feel of the others, it has somehow made the most of this central area. Are the wardrobe and washroom thinner? The tape measure says not.

Like the others styling is restrained and instantly forgettable on its own. That's not a dig, as at this money it too remains a perfect base for personal makeovers. Scatter cushions, anyone?

TOWING 7/10

Like the Sprite, for added safety you'll want to add a stabiliser to the total cost of this Xplore. That aside a good tow appears assured with sensible weighting starting at 1088kg MRO and 1300kg MPTLM. And remember you don't have to use all that payload and, if you have the means to pull it, you can ask for it to be plated even higher. At 2.20m wide you'll see more clear air in your mirrors than the other two, and the easy-on handbrake on the BPW A-frame makes the others' ratchets feel like old farm trailers.

KITCHEN 6/10

The kitchen gets a full oven and separate grill plus three-burner hob. It also gets a practical, if not pretty, sink with integral drainer. The 108-litre fridge is good for the money and sufficient for five. So far so good, then. Not so hot is the prep space for five meals, amounting to a foot-long flip-up shelf. And the mains socket is here so the kettle has probably already beaten you to it. Realistically, no cooking whatsoever can take place without setting up either of the tables. Unfortunately kitchen storage for five is also a real issue. This isn't about kit and cost, purely functionality as a five-berth, and here this particular Xplore is found wanting.

WASHROOM 7/10

Compared to the Sprite's unitary shower, the Xplore loses in every area. The Sprite is bright and the Xplore dull. Dedicated shower space in the Sprite is generous, here it's tight. But

the cabin space taken up by the washroom is relatively small compared with the Sprite. If your preference is for site facilities, then you'll want as little space as possible given over to the caravan's showering facilities. Just decide what's important.

SLEEPING 7/10

Most people will probably use the 495 as a four-berth. The Pullman bunk along the rear panel makes up simply using pull-out slats (ditto front double). The second rear double below the bunk needs making up if you want to sleep five. The problem is you lose the ability to use the ladder and the top floor occupant will have to climb down onto those below. The layout is old and well tested so there are obviously those who don't mind. But with new triple bunks on the block, the days of layouts like these are numbered.

STORAGE 8/10

Twin lounges mean four long loading areas for bulky gear, and caravan services are packaged in such a way that limits intrusion. As far as five are concerned, wardrobe capacity is fine, as are upper locker numbers and depth. Inexplicably the table cupboard next to the wardrobe is huge and the space would be better off used elsewhere.

A word about the gas locker: once inside, it's so big that you're in danger of losing two Aquarolls, a waste water container and two gas bottles. Now that's practical.

BUILD QUALITY 8/10

To coin a phrase, it's a game of two halves. The build is top-notch, as is the blue print on which it's built. So far, so good. It's difficult to pinpoint whether it's the exterior door, rear panel or jockey wheel clamp, but it looks and feels a bit "budget".

In many areas, the Bailey and Sprite also model the suppliers' cheapest parts, keeping costs low, and there's nothing wrong with that. But they somehow manage to disguise it so well; not so with the Xplore. Thankfully, the interior doesn't suffer and certainly feels well built.

EQUIPMENT 7/10

When the brochure champions the 'virtually indestructible glass hob and sink cover', you know kit level isn't going to be thick. In fact searching the spec sheet for something over and above what you might expect on an entry-level tourer, apart from the easy-on handbrake and water filter, you'll be searching in vain. But read on...

VALUE FOR MONEY 9/10

At £11,295 the Xplore is cheaper than the Bailey and the Sprite. That's why it's as basic as it is. The Xplore could easily match the others toy for toy, but what's the point? You buy the Xplore knowing that the low list price reflects spec, and that's just fine. Whether the layout wins out over more practical designs depends on your demands.

► SCORES

	Xplore 495	Sprite Major 6	Bailey Ranger GT60 510-4
	£10,745	£11,548	£11,895
Layout	8	9	8
Styling/comfort	8	9	8
Towing	7	7	9
Kitchen	6	7	9
Washroom	7	7	8
Sleeping	7	9	7
Storage	8	9	7
Build	8	8	8
Equipment	7	7	9
Value For Money	9	9	9
TOTAL	75	81	82

XPLORE 495 75/100

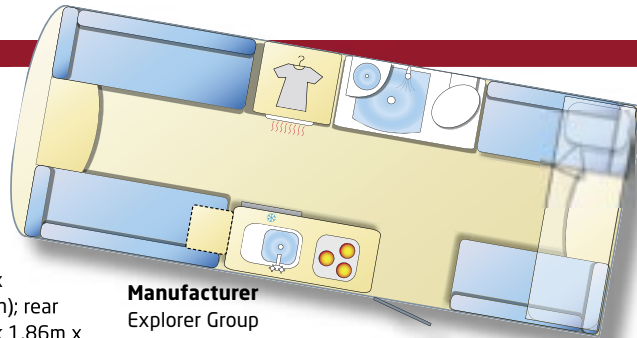
SPRITE MAJOR 6 81/100

BAILEY RANGER GT60 510-4 82/100

► SPECIFICATION

► XPLORE 495

Price £11,295
Axles 1 | **Berths** 5
MRO 1088kg
MTPLM 1300kg
Width 2.20m (7ft 2in)
Internal length 5.03m (16ft 6in)
Overall height 2.72m (8ft 11in)
Bed sizes double 1.98m x 1.37m (6ft 6in x 4ft 6in); singles 1.83m x 0.67m (6ft x 2ft 3in); rear double 1.98m x 1.14m (6ft x 3ft 8in); bunk 1.86m x 0.57m (6ft 2in x 1ft 10in)

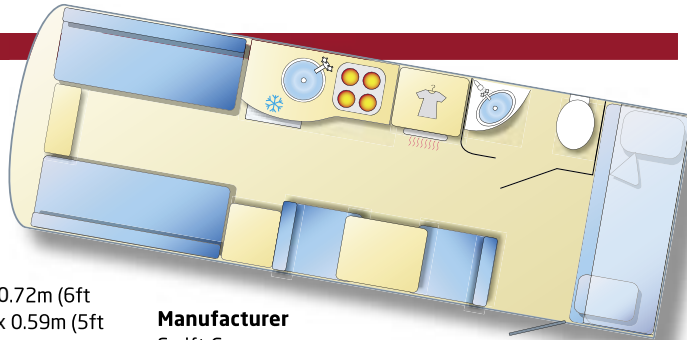


Manufacturer
 Explorer Group
 01207 699000

FOR & AGAINST **PROS** ► Price ► Twin lounge space **CONS** ► Overall visual appeal ► Poor kitchen for five

► SPRITE MAJOR 6

Price £11,548
Axles 1 | **Berths** 6
MRO 1176kg
MTPLM 1425kg
Width 2.23m (7ft 4in)
Internal length 5.50m (18ft 1in)
Overall height 2.58m (8ft 10in)
Bed sizes double 2.08m x 1.80m (6ft 10in x 5ft 11in); singles 1.90m/1.80m x 0.72m (6ft 3in/5ft 11in x 2ft 4in); side bunk 1.78m x 0.59m (5ft 10in x 1ft 11in); rear lower bunk 1.80m x 0.62m (5ft 11in x 2ft 1in); rear upper bunk 1.84m x 0.60m (6ft x 2ft); nearside single 1.80m x 0.70m (5ft 11in x 2ft 4in)

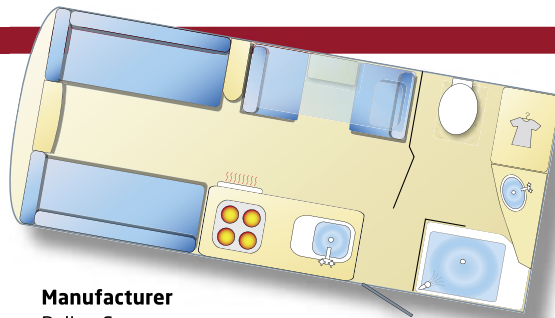


Manufacturer
 Swift Group
 01482 847332
www.spritecaravans.co.uk

FOR & AGAINST **PROS** ► Great for six, fantastic for four ► Garage flexibility **CONS** ► Diamond pack optional

► BAILEY RANGER GT60 510-4

Price £11,868
Axles 1 | **Berths** 4
MRO 1079kg
MTPLM 1281kg
Width 2.19m (7ft 2in)
Internal length 5.10m (16ft 9in)
Overall height 2.58m (8ft 6in)
Bed sizes front 1.98m x 1.35m (6ft 6in x 4ft 5in) or two singles 1.78m/1.83m x 0.69m (5ft 10in/6ft x 2ft 3in); side single 1.80m x 0.66m (5ft 11in x 2ft 2in); bunk 1.75m x 0.61m (5ft 9in x 2ft)



Manufacturer
 Bailey Caravans
 0117 305 2939

FOR & AGAINST **PROS** ► Cracking value ► Fab washroom **CONS** ► Still have to build beds ► Low-level storage

► VERDICT

Climb aboard any of these and the first thing you'll want to do is personalise them. None of them has had heaps of cash thrown at soft furnishings and bling that only serve to inflate prices.

The Xplore is the cheaper product. But it also looks the cheaper product.

The layout competes head-on with its competitors' corresponding designs, and maybe that's all we should be bothered about at this level.

The problem is that there are caravans that meet the standards when it comes to looks, quality and price. When it comes to layout, you'd buy the 495 for its twin lounges, which

are impressive for the caravan's size. But for sleeping five there are better layout solutions out there, not least in other Xplores.

The Sprite's six-berth layout is only challenged by the new triple bunks. The combination of interior and exterior appeal, coupled with flexibility and contemporary design, make this Sprite a compelling option.

The Bailey has the easiest job, only having to sleep four. But this is the layout for those who don't mind cushion shuffling to make up those beds and who like a proper washroom. There's no escaping that it's more expensive, but it's still a bargain for the amount of kit. ■

► THE CAR



HONDA CRV 2.2i CTDi EX

£24,599 (Prices from £18,630)

This second generation of the CRV isn't the prettiest bit of sheet metal on the road but it does the job, and does it well.

Subjected to some of the toughest test conditions possible - the infamous snowstorms of February 2009 - it didn't put a foot wrong. Even when provoked, with a caravan on the back, the CRV's braking, anti-skid, anti-tilt and anti-that, helped to pull things back into line.

It's a little bit plastic-heavy inside, but then you could say the same of the Toyota, Nissan and Mazda. Even so, there are many interiors made of sturdier stuff.

A decent 251lbs ft of torque gives you twisting power for many mid-range caravans, whilst 1745kg of kerbweight ensures a choice of weights too.

► THANKS TO

Vantage Caravans
 Tattershall, Lincolnshire
Tel: 01526 345670
Web: www.vantagecaravans.co.uk

YOU'LL FIND MORE INFORMATION IN OUR COMPREHENSIVE CARAVAN GUIDE ON PAGE 74