



CLUB CLASS

ROB MCCABE LOOKS AT AN IMPROVED MODEL WHICH SCORES A PERFECT 10 ON THE USABILITY FRONT

HERE IT is, then – an all-new caravan from Explorer Group (overlords of the Xplore, Elldis and Compass brands) that has been brought about by public demand. The compact, four-berth Avanté Club 464, with a double-bed-or-singles front dinette and a pair of fixed bunks across the rear wall is, we're told, borne of feedback from focus groups and other would-be buyers, who were turning up in tears at showrooms and demanding to know why the Elldis of their dreams hadn't been invented.

Well, it has now – so will those tears of anguish turn into tears of joy?

CONSTRUCTION

By coincidence, my neighbours at the Club's Ferry Meadows site in Peterborough, Malcolm and Valli, were in their four-year-old Elldis Avanté. Understandably, they were keen to have a quick nose around this latest example of the breed. This is retired teacher Valli's verdict: "Goodness, there is a vast difference. The quality of the materials is just so much better than in ours – and everything lines up so beautifully. I have always said I wouldn't buy another Elldis, but seeing this has made me think again."

Maybe I should stop there – after all, that's an eloquent appraisal of how much

Explorer Group's standard of build and quality control has improved in these few short years. But all I will say is that Valli is dead right – the panel fit, both inside and out, is excellent, and I do so like the attractiveness and quality of the solid wood locker doors.

The only slight niggle I have is with the old-school, obstructive locks on the gas locker and battery box, which let the side down a bit.

TOWABILITY

The focus groups et al wanted a caravan that their Ford Mondeos, Mazda 6s and Volkswagen Passats would be able to tow

comfortably, quite rightly being fed up at the number of 'family' caravans that couldn't be pulled by anything in the so-called 'family car' class.

Well, the 464 wouldn't cause the beefier versions of any of the above any problem so far as laden weight is concerned. But in order to meet the Club's recommended noseweight figure of 7% of actual laden weight, a 464 laden to 1280kg (a reasonable payload for a family of four), only the Passat can offer the necessary 90kg.

So, the 464 certainly makes it as a contender for the popular 'Mondeo' class – but you still need to do your homework.

To help you get everything just so, there's a noseweight gauge built into the jockey wheel stanchion – a welcome filter-down from Explorer Group's posher caravans, where it first appeared last year. A Winterhoff hitch stabiliser is also standard.

USABILITY

The provision of the garage at the back isn't a new concept in caravanning, but it's still unusual enough to be worthy of comment. Here's how it works: lift the mattress from the bottom bunk and stow it on top of the upper one. The lower bed base then hinges up to be secured by two bolts, giving you a wide, high storage area that you access via the door on the offside rear.

On site, if you're not using that lower bunk, you can cram in whatever you like. On the road, you can easily and safely accommodate a couple of bikes – so long as you've loaded the caravan within its limits. It's a great facility and, of course, you can still use the area underneath when the bunk is lowered. The door can only be opened from the outside, so you needn't worry about the sprogs sneaking out in the middle of the night to go clubbing!

For such a compact caravan, storage is exceptional. The table store by the



“Reliably sweet-running slats help make the transition into a big double quick and painless”

entrance door maximises space by offering useful racks, and there's another shelved cupboard next to the wardrobe, itself capacious. The front bedlockers are both accessible via wide hatches on the front. There are other aids to keeping a neat caravan: the simple addition of a hook on the inside of the kitchen cupboard is, for those of us who are forever picking up fallen tea towels, a sight for sore eyes. You get two proper metal coat hooks by the door, too. The waste bin on the inside of the door is something you wouldn't want to be without once you've enjoyed the heady experience of living with one.

The sturdy-looking carpet lifts in two compact sections – but if you should forget to remove it and manage to get a nice, muddy stain on it, it cleans off easily. How do I know that? Search me, guv – must have been some other bloke with size eights.

The universal blinds and flyscreens can all be operated independently of each other (there's a flyscreen for the entrance door, too). A formidable performance on the usability front is consolidated by the front chest-top, which extends securely just by pulling out the extra section from underneath.

LIVING AND SLEEPING

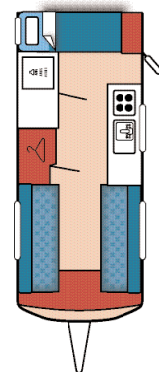
For a caravan that will be used almost exclusively as holiday accommodation for a family of four (or three), this is a winning layout. The fixed bunks along the rear wall achieve the triple whammy of

taking up a minimal amount of space, giving the kids a great bed and serving as a 'den' for them to retreat to if they want some personal space during waking hours. Being right at the opposite end of the caravan from the lounge, there's some built-in personal space for mum and dad after the children have gone to bed. A quadruple whammy, then.

The bunks' superstructure includes built-in footholds, a clever idea that saves weight and a little bit of space compared to bolting a ladder on. Each occupant enjoys a plump, well-fitting mattress, a small window and a push-on-or-off light. The upper one is probably the one that will be in demand, given its added benefits of a flyscreen and access to a big cubby hole. The lower one also makes a fine bed for an adult of 6ft tall or under.

It's a great set-up that gets my vote every time as the best genuine four-berth option in caravanning.

Up front, the long, comfy sofas seat four with lots of room to spare and make fine single beds. Reliably sweet-running slats help make the transition into a big double quick and painless. In this mode, the only noticeable concession to cost-comparing is the presence of just one reading light on either side – somebody will have to do without, or use the mains socket under the front chest to plug in a table lamp. Given the faff of accommodating this with the slats going in and out, though, a neater option might be to >>



ABOVE: Long, comfy sofas seat four with room to spare
LEFT: Tip-up sink is well made if a little awkward



ABOVE: Stainless steel microwave surround is a classy touch
RIGHT: Handy garage space

buy a mains-rechargeable lantern from a camping shop, charging it up during the day if you need to.

Niceties worth a mention are the spacer boards under the side windows that help keep condensation at bay, and the Sony-branded speakers for the stereo that sound better than the cheaper

“For a contingent of two adults and two kids, you can’t top this layout”

options that many manufacturers resort to using. The head unit has a line-in socket, allowing you to play your iPod or other MP3 player through said speakers.

KITCHEN

With the neatly-presented microwave – its stainless steel surround brings a genuine touch of class to this Avanté’s interior – and the usual hob/oven/grill, cooking for the whole family promises to be a fuss-free affair. The three-burner hob includes a larger, high-speed ring for a bigger, casserole-type pan or wok.

There’s not a vast amount of work space, but the little extension that opens out into the front dinette helps a bit. You can also use the chinchilla glass cover if you don’t need access to the sink (by the way, Valli was able to confirm that Explorer Group’s big claims about these covers’ indestructibility are all true – the ones in their well-used Avanté are apparently as good as new).

The stainless steel finish of the hob and the sink is as smart as it is practical, and the pull-out cutlery tray and two wire racks are a very good use of space.

Our Avanté owners were extremely envious of the big (115-litre) Thetford fridge, which is a new arrival on this year’s models. Even though there’s just the two of them, the smaller offering in their own caravan fills up all too quickly – and I’m sure most caravanners would agree that there’s no such thing as a fridge that’s too big.

There’s an overhead extractor fan, although I would gladly trade that for some sort of extra help on the lighting front. The meagre striplight tacked on to the underside of the locker above the sink is, frankly, rubbish.

WASHROOM

The main compromise in this attractive little facility is the tip-up sink above the loo. Yes, it’s a decent size and it empties efficiently, but it’s just a bit of a rigmarole if there’s a queue for the old ‘quick visit/wash hands/brush teeth’ routine.

A good-quality, hinged blind snaps firmly into place to separate the loo/basin from the shower cubicle. The shower itself is surrounded by textured wallboard, which may be vulnerable to prolonged exposure to water and there’s just the one tiny ledge for shower gel or shampoo – you’ll have to decide which.

A glass shelf and mirror-fronted lockers offer good storage options for other bathroom essentials outside the shower.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

The all-12V lighting is something of a mixed bag. The main letdowns are the presence of just two reading lights in the lounge and, yet again, a woeful allocation of illumination for the kitchen.

The good-looking circular lights on the upper front corners – in the traditional ‘mains lights’ location – make an attractive focal point and the ceiling dome further back is also handsome and modern.

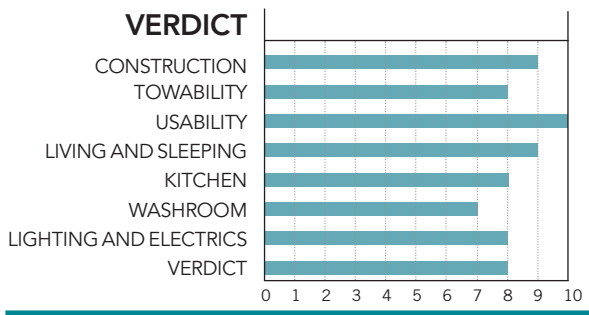
There are three mains sockets – two adjoining ones in the kitchen and the one by the floor in the front lounge, alongside the TV aerial and 12V sockets. Nice to see the Status multi-directional aerial included as standard – and to find the 12V master switch right by the front door.

The rotary controls for operating the space and water heaters are sited on the side of the wardrobe in the front lounge – the perfect place.

VERDICT

The Avanté Club 464 is thoroughly practical, offering easy-to-live-with family holiday accommodation. If your touring contingent consists of two adults and two kids, you just can’t top this layout. ■

Technical	
RRP	£13,490 OTR
Internal length	4.66m (15ft 3in)
Shipping length	6.40m (21ft)
Overall width	2.24m (7ft 4in)
Overall height	2.73m (8ft 11in)
Internal headroom	1.91m (6ft 3in)
MIRO	1129kg (22.2cwt)
Payload	191kg (3.76cwt)
MTPLM	1320kg (25.9cwt)
Berths	4



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