

Elddis Xplore 544

▶ ON LOCATION IN SPAIN

▶ PRICE £11,995

TOWMATCH C

We'd all love to buy luxe, but sometimes a bottom-of-the-range model can be more fit for purpose. One family took an inexpensive Elddis Xplore to the Pyrénées for a fortnight to find out if budget is actually best

TEST & PHOTOGRAPHY **SALLY PEPPER**

IT'S a while since our Skoda Superb has towed a caravan with no hitchhead stabiliser or anti-snake device, and the last time was a pootle in Norfolk. This time we were set to hare down the A1 to pick up our son from his grandparents, catch a ferry and drive from Santander into the heart of the Spanish Pyrénées. An epic 940 mile journey through the Basque country with vultures wheeling overhead, then into daunting mountain roads with hairpin bends. All this was asking a lot from one of the baby caravans in the Elddis range. We didn't know whether a basic, few-frills model could still meet the towing expectations of this technologically-pampered family of caravan testers. On this journey we were certainly going to find out.

A road traffic accident near Peterborough held us up at the beginning, and the clock was counting down to our 4pm check-in with Brittany Ferries in Portsmouth. With the pressure well and truly on, it was a relief to be towing something which weighs only 1051kg unladen. We'd loaded up with a fair amount of junk, but were lower than the 199kg payload so were towing a caravan a little under 85% of the kerbweight of our car

(1560kg). Always a good idea when you're two hours late for a date with a big boat.

One quick child and dog exchange completed with my parents at Fleet Services and we were back to Portsmouth and the ferry port with all of 15 minutes to spare before embarkation on the huge Brittany ferry. With a cast of thousands of ferry staff waving us on board, parking the Elddis tightly was not a problem and we were swiftly braked up and all set for the overnight crossing, which was a calm one.

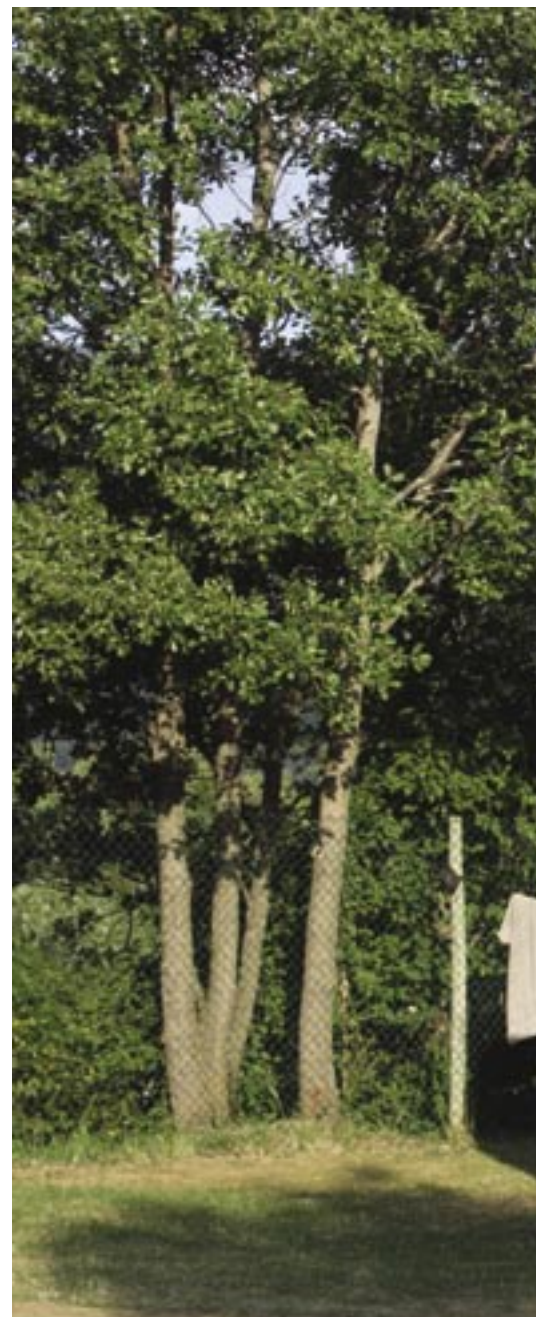
So far there'd been little to remark upon with the Elddis. We'd noticed ample storage place when loading up.

We'd used the corner steady tool provided, decided it was on the feeble side and resolved that if we owned the caravan we'd be off to an accessory shop to buy a replacement. We'd had an unproblematic tow on familiar roads and we'd yet to sleep in the 544.

Our two-week holiday was booked with Select Sites, and we chose to have an overnight stop at Camping Santillana Del Mar. From there we would head for Camping Gavin, near Biescas in Aragon for the rest of our stay. Timing was going to be tight, to get from the ferry to the site in daylight and, somewhere in the middle of Santander's interminable suburbs, we lost the road signs we were following to the campsite. Suddenly we're towing into a car park, which is jammed with tourist buses and cars all wanting to go in different directions. It's one of the most tricky manoeuvring situations we've had in our caravanning lives and it helps that the 544 is not actually all that big.

It was a problematic first Spanish journey, difficult to navigate on unfamiliar roads and we arrived at Santillana Del Mar tired and ready for paella from the on-site café. Somehow stopovers never seem quite like real caravanning. Even so, this is our first chance to try out the Xplore's beds.

There's a fixed double which lifts up on gas-filled struts revealing masses of space to store bedding. It's very easy and quick to drag out our duvets for the night and we'll grow to truly appreciate the ease of access to this storage over the next two weeks. To the front, Elddis has improved on last year's 544 layout by lengthening one of the sofas enough to make it an adult-sized bed. It's just



as well because George, 13, is almost 5ft 9in tall. (The other sofa is really intended for a child to sleep on, if you're not converting the front to a double). We sleep way too late for a family that has northern Spain to cross the following day.

It's a long haul. Santander's suburbs give way to occasional glimpses of coast, then of arid plain. There are gentle side winds and the caravan feels a little unsteady. It's not a huge problem and is never particularly worrying, but it combines with the effect of the unfamiliar territory to make the journey a tense experience. Next time we'll certainly want a hitch head stabiliser - and we'll split the journey by making another stopover on the way to the Pyrénées.

To say Camping Gavin is worth all the effort doesn't even come close. We pitch up with mountains on three sides and next morning get to swim towards those mountains in the best site pool any of us have seen. We're right next to the Ordesa National Park with its mountains and gorge. Chamois run wild



Loads of storage so its easy to keep the lounge tidy


 A circular seal with the text "WHICH caravan TESTED No 458" around the perimeter.


here and one morning an eagle almost lands on the roof of the car. Days are stiflingly hot, so our walks start early, with afternoons spent in the shade of a tree we've pitched by, listening to the Spanish kids play together.

Perhaps thanks to the tree, the Xplore 544 is never hot or uncomfortable and we don't find ourselves wishing for aircon. The Dutch and Spaniards staying at Camping Gavin think it hilarious that our door is on the "wrong" side, but on this Spanish site it works very well. This is sideways living compared to many British sites. Caravans are parked front window towards back panel, with lounging space between the caravan door and the trees or the mountain views. The only drawback to this is that the Xplore's lovely one-piece panoramic front window looks towards somebody's tent.

The 544 is now one of the cheapest family caravans made by Elddis, with just the Xplore 495 double-lounge model clocking in at £500 less. So it may come as a surprise that Xplore upholstery is every bit as nice as the



You can follow this river as it descends hundreds of feet through the Ordesa Gorge, one waterfall at a time ➤



It's hard to fault Xplore's upholstery and design, which is just as good as more expensive Elddis ranges



No separate technology suite for teenagers here, so George, 13, makes the best of things



A conventional pull-out table top, but we found the sofa cushions made it difficult to open the second drawer

more expensive Elddis Avanté and Odyssey schemes. The carpet is just a strip rather than a fully-fitted number, which suits us fine – I usually take out fitted carpet anyway and leave it at home for its own protection, but with the Xplore it doesn't feel like there is any need. The front lounge drawers are a bit stiff and the second one down doesn't pull out easily against the sofa cushions. But that's usual. We'd have liked to have secure catches on the locker doors.

The caravan is high enough specced to have flyscreens to all the windows, but in Spain it would have been great to also have one over the door (you get this with the Elddis Avanté range). Aside from that, any niggles we have seem very little to do with this being a budget level caravan.

The shower. We come back from a trip to the nearest town of Biescas one evening, turn the 12volt power master switch on and two hours later there is water creeping out from under the washroom door and soaking its way up the edge of the duvet. It's a great little corner-toilet compartment with the shower placed in front of the toilet, giving plenty of leg room. But here is the caravan's one big design flaw – as you sit on the loo you brush past the shower tap and turn it on. This is occasionally hilarious, but something of which we found we had to be constantly aware to prevent it happening.

The fridge. Well, it's OK, and piezo rather than electronic ignition as you'd expect at this price level. But the bulbous design of the salad box means that you have to store wine bottles on the second shelf up inside the door as the bottom shelf is too slim. Beer bottles ended up lying down in the

salad box itself. In these euro-greedy times, when finding a cheap supermarket matters, a family simply needs a bigger fridge for two weeks in Spain.

We would also, if we could, elect to have a microwave rather than an oven for this type of trip.

The bed. Well, I love that fixed double but Matthew is an 18-stone bloke with a tendency to sleep diagonally, so he feels hemmed in by the wall of the washroom. It's a personal thing and the bigger folk among us might be better off with an island bed.

In layout terms, generally, the Xplore 544 really scores for this family of three. Partly that's because, unlike our last test caravan, it has no separate lounge. This may seem like a drawback but it means we've had a good reason to say that the X-Box couldn't come. We've spent a lot more time together in the fabulous swimming pool, than we would have done if equipped with a room full of consumer electronics.

The sideboard area opposite the kitchen has proved unexpectedly valuable. It makes do as a low-level work surface for cooking, and has enough cupboard space to accommodate all our assortment of hobbies equipment, maps and books. It would be ideal for the television too, if we'd brought one. It more than makes up for the fact that the overhead lockers are a little on the shallow side, and it also has a hatchway into the bedroom - ideal for passing through a morning cuppa.

To understand whether this unpretentious Eddis is right for you, you'd need to know where it sits. Last year Xplore was bang slap in the middle of a raft of rationalisations



Pitching side on, Camping Gavin style, means that you don't get the full benefit of the one-piece window



The storage space under the double is easy to access



Sofa is stretched this year to make a longer bed



Relaxing outside the Xplore in the sweltering sun it's easy to see why so many Spaniards buy pull-out awnings



A practical washroom, except for the shower tap

which swept the caravanning industry and which brought Xplore into the Elddis range (it was previously a stand-alone range from the same manufacturer as Elddis). This was great news in terms of the visual appeal of the caravan - where its slightly garish turquoise graphics formerly marked it out as being a budget caravan, now it looks as good as any other Elddis. Theoretically all this means that if you want upgrades, you simply order extras or shift up to Elddis Avanté, Odyssey or Crusader in ascending price order.

So far so good, except that you can't get this layout in Elddis Avanté form, and so you have to go up two steps to the Odyssey 544 to get something similar. The Odyssey version of this layout costs £15,995. There's an Elddis Crusader version (Aurora) at £16,995. The extra £4000 for the Odyssey 544 buys you a wider caravan (2.29m), a 115-litre fridge, a microwave, and most importantly a Winterhoff hitchhead stabiliser and the option to have a BPW iDC anti-snake device fitted. There are other extras such as alloy wheels and a memory foam mattress. Crusader Aurora takes you into true luxury caravan mode: 175-litre fridge, a very swish half smoked glass door effect and the option of leather upholstery.

How much you want these things is very much up to you. After a fortnight's inexpensive holiday in Spain, we like the unpretentiousness of the Xplore, love the big living space you get with this layout for the length of the caravan - and reckon we can live without all the Odyssey's extras except the Winterhoff stabiliser. The Elddis Xplore can have a stabiliser fitted as an optional extra (though the anti-snake device is not an option). The stabiliser costs £219 and £269 buys you stabiliser plus an anti-theft, locking device. Peanuts for this much piece of mind.

So we'll have the Xplore thank you very much, with Winterhoff added, and the £3731 difference in our pockets. ■

Elddis Xplore 544

£11,995



► SCORES

Layout	8/10
Styling/comfort	8/10
Towing	7/10
Kitchen	7/10
Washroom	6/10
Sleeping	8/10
Storage	9/10
Build quality	7/10
Equipment	7/10
Value for money	10/10
TOTAL	77/100

► SPECIFICATION

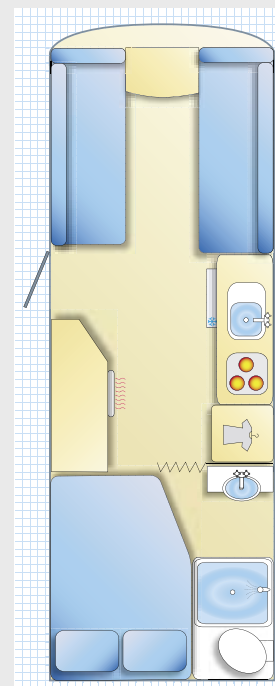
Axes: 1
Berths: 4
MRO: 1151kg
MTPLM: 1350kg
Width: 2146mm
Overall length: 7341mm
Headroom: 1908mm

► WE STAYED AT

Camping Gavin
 Biescas, Aragon, Spain
 Booked through: Select Sites
Tel: 0844 406 0127
Web: www.select-site.com
Cost: Seven nights for two adults with pitch and ferry £837 (low season) to £1437 (high season)

CAMPING Gavin is near to the small hillside town of Biescas in Aragon, Spain, and is surrounded by footpaths. The site has its own (fairly pricey) restaurant, and an excellent shop. The generous pitches are on terraces, with trees for shelter. Washing facilities are clean and modern, though the heart of the site is its pool.

Roadside access is good, though the road westwards towards the beautiful gorge and



mountains of Ordesa National park is twisty and unlit.

Our Brittany ferry was Portsmouth to Santander, returning Santander to Plymouth through Select Sites.

YOU'LL FIND MORE INFORMATION IN OUR COMPREHENSIVE CARAVAN GUIDE ON PAGE 66