

Island living

Three island bed layouts, two under £16,000, one nearly £18,000... Which is best for you?

TEST PHIL STEPHENS

WE all have our limits. You know, certain things we'll be flexible over and others on which not even the end of the world would see us willing to compromise. I could do without awnings and bed chests, but take away my big caravan shower and I'll seriously kick off! And what's the point of a relaxing break if sleeping on a bumpy lounge bed has you waking up less refreshed than 11pm the night before? After all, caravanning is about leisure, isn't it? That's why fixed bed caravans have zoomed up the popularity ladder since

they first appeared in quantity in the 1990s. Island beds take the concept a step nearer your bedroom at home; you can walk around three sides of the bed. We've found three island bed models for you to consider. All are pretty much identical in layout except the Bailey Senator Virginia has an 'all-in' washroom, while the Lunar Lexon SI and Coachman's VIP 545/4 have their showers separate from their loo compartments. Which price is right for you and which weight will suit your car? Read on...and find out.

BAILEY SENATOR VIRGINIA £15,395

LUNAR LEXON SI £15,595

COACHMAN VIP 545/4 £17,945



OUR CRITERIA: Island beds on single axles. Medium to upper price range, in three weight options. All are four berths but, as the vast majority are used as two-berths, that's how we judged them.



Windows are flush with the bodywork



COACHMAN VIP 545/4

PRICE £17,945

TOWMATCH E

LAYOUT 8/10

With wrap-around seat backs, the Coachman's lounge feels a VIP (very important place). Of the three it feels the best suited to year-round touring, with a plush yet snug feel here at the front. There's an offside kitchen opposite the door, with low unit for the TV alongside. There's an offside shower cubicle with sink and loo sharing a separate washroom opposite. Opening the washroom door to its maximum locks it back across the corridor to partition what now becomes a bedroom with en-suite facilities.

STYLING 9/10

With huge front and rear full-size Heki roof lights and a mini Heki in the middle, light levels certainly bring out the best of the Coachman's interior styling. Joinery looks and feels a cut above the others and instantly justifies the extra cost necessary to get you in here in the first place. In an age where simplicity and order seem to rule designers' thoughts, you could say the furniture takes too many forms and angles. And it does. But somehow that very fact seems to work here.

TOWING 7/10

With an MTPLM of 1635kg, the VIP is no lightweight. Riding on a single axle, it will never be as constantly stable and predictable to tow as twin axles. That could be said of all three here, but this Coachman is particularly vulnerable as it's so heavy. The good news, though, is the standard fit of AL-KO's ATC stability control system. Of all caravans those that benefit most from this superb trickery are these hefty premium single-axle tourers.

KITCHEN 7/10

Fortunately the Coachman benefits from our "judged as two-berths" criteria because kitchen storage is about half of that in a tiny 3.6m Lunar Ariva that happened to be sited nearby. That aside, this space functions and looks well with half a metre of worktop space and big stylish gun-metal-shade fronted fridge and microwave.

WASHROOM 9/10

Starting with the washroom we have just one problem. It's the loo; it's one of Thetford's cheapest and has no place in this VIP. The little room misses out on a score of 10/10 because of it; otherwise, everything about this small space is brilliant. Sink positioning is just perfect. A huge mirror reflects the room's quality cabinets which are identical to the main cabin. And a stylish opaque shelf strip adds to the luxurious ambiance that makes you feel quite pampered. What appears at first sight to be a circular shower actually isn't. It has a flat panel extension against the caravan wall that gives it with far more space than standard circular units.

SLEEPING 8/10

Unfortunately there's no arguing with the tape measure which shows the bed to be the

smallest here at 1.82 m x 1.37m. Although widths of the three are almost identical, the Coachman is nearly 10cm shorter than the Bailey. Worse still, the curved bottom edge starts further up the bed, meaning less overall surface area to actually lie on - so try before you buy to make sure this bed fits your dimensions. But if your frame is perfectly happy with the mattress, you're in for a treat. Because here is where you're most likely to feel the most cosseted. The cabinetry looks divine. Praise, too, for the small offside vanity area and television unit, backed by another large mirror. Coachman has exceeded expectations here, considering there's a good-sized shower, too. Two stylish shelves, twin reading lights and subtle floor lighting make this a special place to sleep.

STORAGE 8/10

Storage is one thing but access to it is quite another. All three suffer from what seems to be a fundamental problem with the island bed layout: access to those bedside wardrobes. With bedding in place the squeeze along each side of the bed side is never fun - and even less fun when the duvet insists on trying to stop the wardrobe from opening.

BUILD QUALITY 9/10

What don't we like? Well there are those 90-degree fixing brackets in the kitchen area and bedroom shelving. Point is, if I'd seen them elsewhere I wouldn't have noticed them. But this is a Coachman so I do. The fact I'm mentioning these very minor points says more about the search for pernickety problems than any issues with Coachman's build quality - of which, incidentally, there are none. What there is in this caravan is a clear demonstration in not only how to build cabinets to top quality standards, but install them to such a high degree of finish you could forget it's a caravan.

EQUIPMENT 7/10

Of course the list is extensive. Awning warmer, AL-KO ATC and Phantom Pro-Active satellite tracking system are all welcome features. More examples include the one-piece door that feels utterly solid and sets the right tone before you even climb aboard, and the flush fit windows which also enhance visual appeal.

VALUE FOR MONEY 8/10

When charging the equivalent of an MP's monthly expense claim, Coachman must not ignore the need to fit the latest kit to flagship models. The likes of Swift Conquerors are now also more technically advanced - but interior quality can't match what we see here. It's a difficult time for premium products with everybody thinking twice before investing, and the VIP is undoubtedly a premium product. Brand loyalty is so strong that many Coachman buyers wouldn't buy anything else for their next caravan, making price less important than it is among the lower-priced brands that appeal to first-timers.



En-suite at your feet



Forget the price; feel the warmth and quality of this Coachman



A fine looking kitchen. Workspace is good; storage space not so great



The U-shaped seat backs are ultra cosy and plush for four-season touring



Great bedroom but the bed is the smallest of the trio



A gas locker base so strong you could stand on it!



No quality lost just because it's a washroom



LUNAR LEXON SI

PRICE £15,595



Very functional and with a mini Heki, too. Put the money towards ATC though, Lunar



No ATC stability control system on this model



An outside locker socket is a praiseworthy point but would have been neater mounted in the locker wall



The Lunar's shower is on the offside, with the toilet and washbasin in its own room opposite



Lunar's gas bottle locker isn't as solid as Coachman's



The under-bed storage is massive

LAYOUT 9/10

This layout is more closely related to the Coachman than the Bailey. Like the Coachman, the Lunar has a separate offside shower instead of packaging it in the washroom. It follows the Coachman, also, with the low television unit opposite the kitchen with drinks cabinet above. Indeed, the harder you look, the more obvious it becomes that only furniture style and decor separate them, clearly demonstrating how look, tone and feel of identical layouts changes with simple styling.

STYLING 8/10

From the muted matt tones of the Coachman's interior, the lively hue of the Lunar's joinery is a bit of a shock. Its rich, sunny and somewhat glowing timber units do no harm to the interior's bright and general cheeriness. Surprisingly, although it lacks the Coachman's extra central mini Heki rooflight, this interior's light level is actually higher. Stunning slabs of black mock granite bedeck all available flat surfaces and entwine perfectly with equally black switchgear controls. The interior lacks the plush luxurious feel of the Coachman and somewhat smooth lines of the modern Bailey. But those cabinets and low-slung front window bestow it with unique Lunar DNA which, to many, is a fine thing.

TOWING 8/10

Yep, you've saved a quid or two over the Senator but you won't find AL-KO's ATC system or, indeed, shock absorbers on this Lunar. That's a shame, because, although lighter than most (not always an asset in turbulence) it, remains a full width (2.28m), 7.2m long high-sided box. And that's all our enemy the wind cares about. But when it comes to choosing your towcar the 1207kg MRO and 1410kg MTPLM ensure you'll have more options with this, the lightest touring caravan of the bunch.

KITCHEN 7/10

For the money, the fridge is disappointing. It's of useful capacity for two, at 102 litres, but this particular Dometic model is a bit cheerless, with manual controls and framed timber-effect door. Upper units are marginally smaller than in the Coachman but you do get an extra locker in the Lunar here. The work surface measures a decent half metre with extended lip over the table cupboard adding a tad more space, too.

WASHROOM 8/10

Continuing the 'bright' theme the washroom not only has a sizable window but clear mini Heki rooflight, too. Admirable, yes, but is it necessary? The top-end Thetford C250 loo shows Coachman the way ahead - but the tiny mirror makes me think there's an imminent glass shortage up there in the North West where Lunars are made. Move across to the shower and you'll see that the

circular unit with flat back panel is identical to the one in the Coachman. But Lunar uses a cheaper shower head, control and slider bar. Nevertheless it's the space that counts, which makes this a fine shower indeed.

SLEEPING 8/10

Just why has Lunar set its island bed a huge 10cm higher than the others? Is it to make hopping in and out easier, or to improve storage? Either way, the result is a bed that, although larger than the one in the Coachman, (but smaller than the Bailey's bed) looks simply massive. Lift it up and the deep cavern below looks as if it should have paintings of mammoths and club-wielding figures from an age gone by scrawled on its sides. But think about it. Yes, it's a bit 'in yer face' - but why not raise it and take the opportunity to provide more loading space below? Clever packaging? We think so. Here, like the Coachman, the bedroom does the en-suite trick with washroom door locking back to partition the bedroom from the rest on the Lunar's interior. One feature you'll really appreciate is the extra space along the sides of the bed. Here the Lunar's nearside offers a full five centimetres more width on your corridor leading to the wardrobe.

STORAGE 9/10

With all that under-bed space, a school of deck chairs, a pride of Aquarolls and a herd of anything else (as long as it's light) can live in here. Better still, those twin wardrobes are not only the widest but deepest on this test. Things must go wrong at the front, then? But, no. Lunar's lockers are slimmer than the competition here. That doesn't matter because there are plenty of them - 10 in all, and that's not counting the kitchen.

BUILD QUALITY 8/10

Integrity in piece-screwed-to-piece construction remains high at Lunar; that fact is particularly true of the interior. Lunar has worked hard in recent times to improve its build quality - and it shows. This Lexon looks, and is, a well-built caravan.

EQUIPMENT 7/10

Nothing sparkling jumps to view here over and above what you'd expect from any other competitor at this price. Spare wheel and carrier, barbecue point, exterior mains, wet locker and intruder alarm all make an appearance. Only that clear Heki rooflight in the washroom is a unusual extra here.

VALUE FOR MONEY 7/10

With Lunar asking just £200 more for the SI than the Bailey, comparisons are inevitable. While manufacturers might like you to think specification is a barometer of ability, the truth is somewhat different. The Lunar has less kit and costs more. But - so what? Here it works better and is a more rounded product. Depends what you define as value, really and, to me, it's not always about money.



A big bed in every respect - tall as well as long



The Lunar has the brightest interior of the three by some margin



More capable in use than the Coachman but not so much as the Bailey



The lounge size matches the Coachman; ambience isn't far off, either



Lights still look modern



Smooth locker lines but there's a lot of brown in the décor



The central area is particularly well put together. Cabinetry is great, too



A short lounge means no centre chest. Doesn't bother me!



You won't get much else in here



A panoramic window would work here. Pity they're usually reserved for entry-level models



A wheeled toilet with easy-access hatch



The manual ignition fridge is a shame; the removable freezer is brilliant



Not brilliant: the loo is cramped and you could get a black eye from the loo roll holder!

BAILEY SENATOR VIRGINIA

PRICE £15,395

TOWMATCH C

LAYOUT 7/10

While the main elements of the Virginia's island bed layout mirror that of the others, determination to do things its own, distinctive way is clear. You'll find lounge and island bed in exactly the same place as the Lunar-Coachman duo but, after that the differences appear. The lounge is shorter and has no central chest. Instead, it has a flip-up table. And, as the Bailey has a washroom which includes the shower on the nearside, its size means there's no room for that low unit with drinks cabinet above. That low piece of furniture where the television will live appears, on this model, on the offside next to the kitchen, on top of Truma's heating unit.

STYLING 7/10

As the lounge is smaller here the decision to lose the chest of drawers is a sound one. Side windows are smaller, too, but the large Heki rooflight, set in a light-encrusted surround, ensures all remains bright. Styling is typically Senator. That means big cupboard fronts plus suede-effect on selected parts of upholstery. With light brown upholstery, cabinetry, curtains, carpet, work surfaces and wall board, criticism has been levelled at the Senator for its lack of sparkle. There's cleanly neutral - and there's cleanly boring. The line between the two is blurred - and which side of that line a caravan sits depends on personal taste. The important fact is that there is nothing to dislike here.

TOWING 9/10

Other than a continental-style extended A-frame, Bailey does everything in its power to help keep the Senator from making unscheduled visits into the roadside scenery. AL-KO ATC traction control system, AL-KO stabiliser and shock absorbers are all employed in keeping this 1259kg MRO, 1495kg MTPLM, tourer glued to the road. While shorter than the others, at 7.19m, the Virginia is still a fairly long single axle caravan and the resultant natural forces on it have to be kept in mind when you're towing. At least you're not on your own here in dealing with them; you have ATC to help.

KITCHEN 8/10

The kitchen lacks the work surface size of the others but it certainly hits back with meaningful lower storage. It's good to use, too, with three sensibly-sized wire baskets. LED lighting, as in the lounge and bedroom, extends to the kitchen, providing a little extra and much-needed pizzazz.

WASHROOM 5/10

Is Bailey's idea of sticking the shower in here better than the Lunar/Coachman solution of separating them? Simply put, no. Thetford's larger C250 loo is squashed into the rear corner. It's so tight here even the loo roll holder sits at forehead height. And the towel warmer hangs over the toilet! Only the shower, with its decent size, rescues the little room from complete failure.

SLEEPING 8/10

Let's be clear. If this model is your choice you're probably buying it for the bedroom. That means bed size is important - something Bailey clearly recognises, as the Virginia's bed is a whopping 10cm longer than the others. With no shower in here, you'd think the area is aesthetically more pleasing as a bedroom. But in reality it feels much smaller. That's because, in the Lunar and Coachman, the shower adds visual space by its en suite-style location.

STORAGE 7/10

The construction of the Bailey's island bed does without any bracing cross members, allowing unobstructed loading through the top. While not as deep as the Lunar's vast under-bed cavern, it's actually wider and longer. The twin wardrobes on either side of the bed are less successful. The decision to use four openings on either side (two cupboards plus two drawers) in a space so obstructed by bedding makes the other models' single door units seem like the better solution.

Storage under the settees is inevitably restricted by the presence of electrical equipment, water heater and battery. Upper storage - which most will find of greater importance - performs much better, though.

BUILD QUALITY 7/10

The way that Bailey uniquely updates one model range only when it feels necessary instead of tinkering with detail on a yearly basis is worthy of applause. But here there's a problem. Obviously the Senator is the most expensive series in Bailey's ranges. But to my mind the more recently-launched Pageant Series 7 (a rung below in terms of cost) is the better built, designed and fitted. That's not to say the Senator has build issues; it plainly doesn't in terms of integrity. But it does in terms of design - which I feel are made obvious by competing models here.

EQUIPMENT 8/10

What you won't see elsewhere at this money is AL-KOs ATC. You also get Omnivent's latest soft-touch, soft-start, roof-mounted extractor fan that only the pricey Coachman boasts, too. Other than that manual ignition fridge, as usual the Senator offers a high spec level for a highly competitive price.

VALUE FOR MONEY 7/10

Fairly built, fairly equipped, fairly priced - so what is there not to like? The issue that muscles its way into this analysis is the excellence of Bailey's Pageant Series 7. And I can't help but return to comments made about build quality. I think the Pageant is now so good that the real problem for the Senator and its quest to offer value for money is now its younger - and much fresher - sibling. Great, so let the rivalry begin, because that will eventually mean even better Senators for customers to consider.

► SCORES

| | Bailey Senator Virginia £15,395 | Coachman Vip 545/4 £17,945 | Lunar Lexon Si £15,595 |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Layout | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Styling/comfort | 7 | 9 | 8 |
| Towing | 9 | 7 | 8 |
| Kitchen | 8 | 7 | 7 |
| Washroom | 5 | 9 | 8 |
| Sleeping | 8 | 8 | 8 |
| Storage | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Build | 7 | 9 | 8 |
| Equipment | 8 | 7 | 7 |
| Value for money | 7 | 8 | 7 |
| TOTAL | 73 | 80 | 79 |

BAILEY SENATOR VIRGINIA 73/100

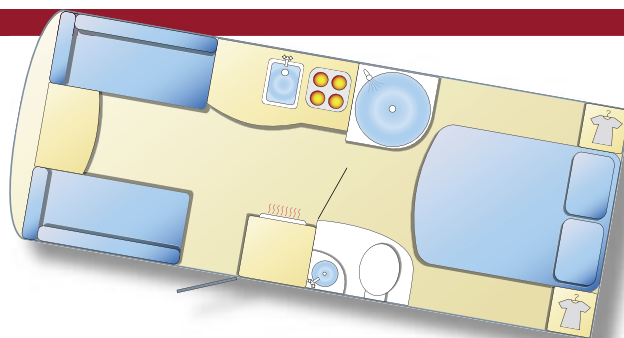
COACHMAN VIP 545/4 80/100

LUNAR LEXON SI 79/100

► SPECIFICATION

► LUNAR LEXON SI

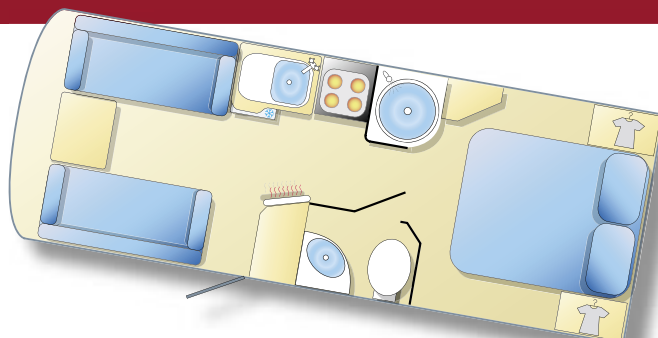
Berths 4
MRO 1207kg
MTPLM 1410kg
Internal length 5.79m
Overall length 7.26m
Overall width 2.28m
Internal height 1.90m
Manufacturer
 Lunar Caravans
Tel 01772 337628
Web www.lunarcaravans.com



FOR & AGAINST **PROS** ► Good amount of storage ► En suite arrangement ► **CONS** ► Worthy, but not Lunar's best

► COACHMAN VIP 545/4

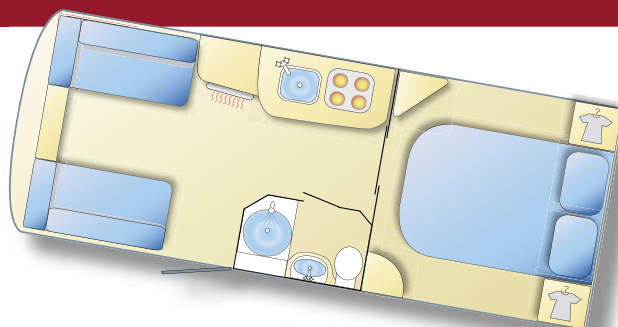
Berths 4
MRO 1444kg
MTPLM 1635kg
Internal length 5.80m
Overall length 7.57m
Overall width 2.26m
Internal height 1.95
Manufacturer
 Coachman Caravan Company Limited
Tel 01482 839737
Web www.coachman.co.uk



FOR & AGAINST **PROS** ► Well designed interior ► Good bedroom ambience ► **CONS** ► Bed shape and size

► BAILEY SENATOR VIRGINIA

Berths 4
MRO 1259kg
MTPLM 1495kg
Internal length 5.60m
Overall length 7.19m
Overall width 2.28m
Internal height 1.90m
Manufacturer
 Bailey Caravans Limited
Tel 0117 305 2939
Web www.bailey-caravans.co.uk



FOR & AGAINST **PROS** ► Large bed ► Kitchen storage ► **CONS** ► Tight washroom ► Overdosed on brown

► VERDICT

While all score 8 for sleeping, their positive attributes are diverse. The Bailey's 8 comes courtesy of excellent bed dimensions. The Coachman would score just 6 here, because of the size and shape of its bed. It gains its higher score because the room as a whole is such a fabulous place to be. Lunar hits 8 by mixing the two with decent bed sizes and thoughtful layout to the area.

But sadly it's the first time the Senator felt dated to me, not helped by the fact the Virginia isn't the range's best. And, yes, that's an odd statement when it has the best bed by far. In the Coachman it's nothing to do

with specification level or price. Simply, the VIP 545/4 makes the best use of the layout and only then goes on to visually please. But even it stutters in terms of kitchen usability when you compare this with its price. The Lunar, as often, falls between two stalls. It does just enough to please but without becoming the talking point of the test.

Undoubtedly island beds deserve their place in manufacturers' line-ups. They may lack the flexibility of other layouts but you won't get any closer to that bed at home in any other caravan layout. To many, that home-from-home feel is the number one priority. ■

► THE CAR



AUDI A4 2.0 TDI QUATTRO AVANT

From £29,080

We manoeuvred these three caravans with the help of the Volkswagen Audi group's latest two-litre turbo diesel. In a blink this four-wheel-driven beauty makes Japanese estate equivalents look as if they're trying just too hard.

While this two-litre engine lacks the sparkle of the larger three-litre unit, it still ensures there's plenty of torque distributed to all four wheels. Owners of older VWs and Audis will notice the hushed nature of this second-generation common rail unit compared to the 1.9 Pumpe Duse technology that served (and continues to do so in some models) throughout the group's range.

For towing, it makes no sense to buy the two-wheel-drive model in this range. Although blessed with the same 170 bhp and 258 lbs ft torque engine and even with huge amounts of electronic paraphernalia, you'll struggle to maximise potential if those front wheels can't plant all the power you need on the road when you need it. In short though, this is one of Audi's best.

YOU'LL FIND MORE INFORMATION IN OUR COMPREHENSIVE CARAVAN GUIDE ON PAGE 76