

MMM TEST REPORT EXTRA



THE BREEZE AND I

Road testing for MMM is a breeze, says Jonathan Lloyd, as he tests the Thor Four Winds 23J slide-out on Ford Econoline 450

A slide-out is a novelty in Europe, but not in the States, where even overcab coachbuilts (C-class motorhomes, as they say over there) have them. This one is compact by American standards, at less than 25 feet in length, but it still comes 'fully loaded' and powered by a massive 10-cylinder petrol engine. It is built under the Four Winds brand name by Thor and is imported into the UK by Cheshire American Motorhomes.

Four Winds fired up their motorhome production line as an independent company around the beginning of 1981. Just two years later the expanding Thor Industries Group decided to increase their RV (Recreational Vehicle) production base and bought the Four Winds company to add to their collection of brands. The rest, as they say, is history, and Four Winds have continued to grow and prosper under the Thor umbrella. They build

both A-class and C-class motorcaravans using Ford and Chevrolet chassis. Elkhart, Indiana, is the location of Four Winds' manufacturing facility. (Have you noticed how everything is a 'facility' now? Factories and workshops seem to have gone the way of slide rules.)

Cheshire American Motorhomes are based in the charming village of High Lane, just a stone's throw south of Stockport. Proprietors, Brian and Penny Heerey and Andy Lowry, have been in business in this area for the last 17 years. Brian has a long history of involvement with American motorhomes through his participation in international motor sport. Cheshire specialise in the corporate hire of RVs, and are the sole official UK importers of the Four Winds marque.

Before reporting on the test itself, I wish to comment on the high standard of preparation

of this vehicle and the comprehensive nature of the supplied equipment. Of course, all test vehicles for MMM should be supplied in such condition, but many aren't!

External examination

The coachwork walls are of laminated construction, with a gloss GRP cladding. The whole kit and caboodle is crowned with a one-piece (seamless) rubber roof. Body framing is made from welded aluminium tube, fabricated to a cellular design. Insulation is courtesy of a bonded high-density foam sandwich filling.

The overcab coachbuilt body is mounted on a specially extended chassis, but not directly. Four Winds have developed (and patented) a special mounting system. They claim that, 'the EMT (Energy Mount Transfer) system completely isolates the body of the

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Extra automatic extending cover over slide-out roof.

motorhome from the chassis by utilising a series of carefully-placed rubber grommets'. It works well - not a squeak or groan came from the furniture, even when driving over some pretty rough roads.

Commencing at the driver's door and moving rearwards, a glance reveals low-level access doors to a storage locker, the power unit for the slide-out, two leisure batteries, and finally the grey and black water holding tank dump valves. Fuel filler, space heater maintenance panel, hook-up and cable store, exterior TV aerial cable and power socket, and city water connection are all on the same side, but located a little higher up the wall.

The rear panel is home to the fresh water filler and drain valve, towbar receptor, and the spare wheel with its smart fabric cover. Usefully, the rear bumper is just that, a bumper bar, not a fragile piece of expensive moulded plastic.

Moving forwards from the rear offside corner, we find a storage locker, the generator, cooker extractor fan outlet, water heater access panel, fridge flu/vent and access panel, and two external mains electricity sockets. Next is the one-piece entrance door (with deadlocks, electrically-operated auto-retract double-tread step, and inner flyscreen door). Finally, between the entrance door and cab, there is another storage compartment and access to the LPG gas tank and filler. A rollout awning should have adorned this side, but the last hirer had damaged it.

All living area windows are made from single-glazed safety glass.

A substantial rear ladder, plenty of marker lights, metal running boards and front wheel



General view looking forward. Electro/hydraulic slide-out adds around 3ft to the width.

spats, plus blue/green/gold graphics complete the coachwork inventory.

Just the highly polished wheel trims are left to comment on. They were in the form of covers for the front wheels and liners for the rears.

Guided tour

The big advantage of the 23J over the 23A is that the J has a sofa slide-out. This is extended and retracted using an electric motor powering hydraulic rams. The control panel is adjacent to the wardrobe.

Step aboard the 23J with the slide-out extended and one is struck by the feeling of space. It really does feel like a 32ft 'van, yet in reality it's under 25ft.

On site, the cab was neither use nor ornament, as the seats were so much lower than those found in the residential section. As a result (and because of the unattractive and slightly shoddy cab windscreen curtain fixings) I would have preferred some means of closing this area off.

That sofa slide-out is on (our) nearside,

and on t'other side is the Pullman dinette. Opposite the centrally-placed entrance door a large double-door mirror-fronted wardrobe resides. The rest of the nearside is given over to the large changing room with separate shower cubicle. The L-shaped kitchen takes up the remainder of the offside rear.

The kitchen was found to have a very practical layout and, although there wasn't a permanent bed, this was more than made up for by the amount of daytime living space.

All Four Winds 'vans in this 'Five Thousand' series have their cabinetwork finished in a raised medium oak veneer, with hardwood edging to the cupboard and locker doors. There is a choice of three soft furnishing colour schemes.

The two-tone forest green and oatmeal geometric pattern soft furnishing fabric of the demo' vehicle luxuriated in the title of Botticelli Green. Blue and taupe are also available. A plain green deep-pile carpet, plus trimmed pelmets and side valences to the windows, added an air of opulence.

The walls were finished in a wipe-clean



General view looking rearwards, showing kitchen on left and across the back. Shower room and wardrobe on right of photo.



Full-height larder is subdivided by four shelves.



Gigantic three-way Norcold fridge/freezer is adjacent to the entrance door. Moving towards the rear there is a full-height larder followed by...

oatmeal and white marbled vinyl-faced wallboard - bright and practical, this seemed a good choice.

Kitchen

The kitchen proved to be a real joy to work in. There was all the equipment one would expect, and more, plus a useful amount of worktop. I particularly appreciated the full-height shelved larder unit. A domestic-sized two-door fridge/freezer and 1000W microwave seemed like a good combination for fast food fanatics.

Illumination by day is via two windows (with venetian blinds). At night there are a couple of overhead luminaires containing

standard filament bulbs and some downlighters mounted in the cooker hood. The hood is also home to the readouts for the levels in the various tanks, and the readout for the leisure batteries' voltage.

The electric-start generator control panel is located under the sink. Or rather, I should say sinks, because instead of a draining surface, the 23J has two large sinks - much more practical.

Lounge

Most of the time on site I lounged on the comfy sofa. With the central heating ticking over, a suitable CD playing and a good book to read, I almost managed to forget that it had

rained pretty much without a break during the whole of my 'ownership' of the Four Winds.

The slide-out has windows on all three sides, so there is no excuse for not knowing what is going on around you! All the windows are sliders, so they cannot be opened if the rain is in the wrong direction. I found the Derbyshire rain seemed to be multi-directional.

Goggle-boxers are provided with a high-level TV cupboard containing a remote-control 230V combined colour TV and video recorder. The flying saucer-style wind-up aerial functioned well, giving a good picture in some very mediocre reception areas.

Day/night blinds (as fitted in the lounge



...a useful corner worktop, two ovens, hob, and two sinks. Kitchen windows are equipped with venetian blinds.



Pullman dinette was really only wide enough for two adults and two small children. The day blind has been deliberately left in this position to illustrate how effective it was at giving privacy, but still letting the light through.



Slide-out contains sofa. Fabric is Botticelli Green. See occasional tables on either side.

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All locker doors are in raised oak, or have etched glass mirror inserts. The latter are a typical feature of American RVs.



Remote-control Roadstar combined TV/video was hiding behind one of the locker doors.



'Small room' wasn't small at all! All sanitary ware is of domestic size (also the plumbing).



Separate shower cubicle, blown-air heating, and plenty of storage were all plus points.

and dining areas) are becoming more and more popular in RVs. They are not like the European cassette-style blinds. Both day and night blinds are horizontally pleated, joined together, and top mounted behind the pelmet. They slide downwards in two halves. The first lot are the day ones, made from a type of cream open weave material. They maintain privacy, but let the light flood in. The second half is in a darker colour, and made out of a material that doesn't allow the light (or the cold air) to permeate into the interior.

The Shaker-style brass finish locker and cupboard door hinges are of the 'show fixing' variety. They complemented the oak finish furniture very well.

The roof-mounted mains-powered Coleman air-conditioning unit and the high output blown-air heater were both very

efficient.

One final point - it was very satisfying to watch the digital readout, on the Fox monitor for the solar panel, recording 'free' electricity replenishing the leisure batteries. It still worked on very overcast days.

Shower room

Plenty of room in here, though the centrally placed loo does get in the way a little. Capacious storage, and quite a bit of worktop surrounding the sink made life easy. The large mirror was well illuminated. This was a mixed blessing first thing in the morning, when my self-esteem needs all the help it can get. I was a happier bunny after it misted up!

The separate showering area provided plenty of room for 'moggie swinging', and the folding door worked well - so much better

than a clingy curtain. The pump delivered a good flow of water, and the controls made temperature selection and maintenance a doddle. A trigger on/off control should help to conserve water.

There was nothing to really criticise in the 'small room'. If I was to be really picky, then I would have preferred the moulded soap trays and shelving within the shower cubicle to have been on a side wall, rather than on the back wall. See, I told you I was picky!

Bedtime

Realistically, the 23J can accommodate five adults for sleeping, though it would be perfectly adequate for Ma and Pa plus four children. However, mob-handed motorcaravanners should be aware that only the overcab bed can be curtained off for privacy.



Bedtime provided quite a dilemma, with a choice of three beds. Here we see the large and easily accessed overcab bed and the dinette wide single/children's double. There is a ladder supplied for the overcab bed.



Remove the sofa squab cushions, pull on the handle and a double bed appears. I found it dipped in the middle.

The dinette easily makes into a wide single bed. It would probably have been alright for a couple of 'Slim Jim' junior motorcaravanners, though it's unnecessarily short at just 5ft 10in.

The sofa quickly and easily converted to a good-size double bed. I slept here for a couple of nights, but the mattress would have been more comfortable if it had been made of a higher density foam. Also, the frame dipped in the middle. Before you blame me, at a trim 13 stone, I don't reckon I was the cause!

The best bed was the one in the overcab area. It's big, has a good mattress, and, as the cab is so much lower than the caravan area, it was easy to access. Luton enthusiasts have loads of windows, and an efficient light.

Safety and security

It is my personal opinion that, in common with many motorhome manufacturers, Four Winds has a slightly schizophrenic approach to safety.

It is terrific that the driver and front seat passenger each get an airbag as standard, and that the coachbuilt body has safety cells. Another plus is that the body has been built on the stable twin-rear-wheel Econoline 450. There's plenty of available payload too - 1383kg claimed with full tanks.

The installation of the gas and electrical circuits is up to RVIA (Recreational Vehicle Industry Association) standard, and easy access to the fridge and heater burners encourages routine maintenance and safety checks.

Fitted equipment also included carbon monoxide, smoke and LPG detectors with alarms, plus a large fire extinguisher.

Not so good were the unstrengthened rear travel seats, three of which were side-facing, and none of which had high backs or head restraints. Four Winds only provide lap belts to secure passengers and it should be pointed out that safety experts warn against travelling in belted side-facing seats, as the lap belts can cause horrific internal injuries in the event of a serious accident.

Furthermore, the hob did not appear to have any flame-failure devices to shut off the gas supply - such a fitting is standard equipment in the majority of new British-built motorcaravans.



I wasn't going to open the mirror doors of the wardrobe, because then you'll know just how few clothes I own. Control panel or slide-out is on facing wall.



Point and squirt motoring. The V10 Triton engine was awesome. Automatic transmission, cruise control and dash air-con' are all standard equipment.

It's a gas

Petrol engines in the US of A are called gas or gasoline motors. With 6.8-litres of displacement over 10 cylinders, this petrol engine was destined for stardom. It didn't disappoint. Coupling it to Ford's excellent four-speed overdrive automatic gearbox meant that progress was effortless and silky smooth. It was no slouch either when ascending the hills in the Peak District - it showed most vehicles a clean pair of heels.

Down the black top

On road performance was staggering for a 25ft motorhome. Cruise control, well-weighted power steering and that stable twin-rear-wheel chassis gave a relaxed and confident drive. Deliberate attempts to set up pitching and sway were damped out immediately. This Ford chassis deserves wider recognition.

She is wide, though. The nearly 100-inch wide body (plus awning, if fitted) was OK. Squeezing the 10ft overall width (including mirrors) down anything except wide two-lane roads was fairly challenging. Drivers should be very aware of pedestrians standing right

on the edge of the kerb - one doesn't want to decapitate them with the nearside door mirror.

I did get caught out with a concrete foot and mouth disinfectant bath down a country lane. The 'van was too wide to fit through, there was nowhere to turn, so I ended up having to reverse more than a mile to find a farmer's gateway to turn around in. At least the auto' 'box allowed the vehicle to creep backwards at a nice slow walking pace, and fortunately the mirrors did give an excellent field of view.

That incident was my fault, not the Four Winds'. I knew I was driving a wide-bodied RV and should have chosen the route with more care. Get the bikes out for exploring narrow country lanes!

Inexperienced drivers of any left-hand drive vehicle should insist on a long enough test drive to make sure they are happy with the steering wheel on the 'wrong' side for UK roads. It doesn't bother me, but some folk find it quite daunting. Find out before you part with all that dosh!

Dash air-con' quickly cleared any mist on the windscreen and then maintained the cab



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at the selected temperature.

Roadstar have endowed the four-speaker stereo radio/CD player with a natty feature. When the power switch was pressed, it didn't suddenly blast out at the previously selected volume. Instead it gradually increased the volume from zero until it reached the previous setting. Clever eh?

Cheshire American Motorhomes say that owners and hirers report an average fuel consumption figure of around 15-16 mpg. They must be very gentle on the loud pedal then! Our road test editor says he recorded a steady 11mpg from a Ford-based American

motorhome of similar size and power unit.

If only

If only I had the opportunity to see how all motorcaravans stand up to seven months continuous hire by a variety of drivers, covering an average of more than 500 miles per week. With the possible exception of the sofa bed, this one had just laughed at it.

If only double-glazing appeared on the options list.

If only I had the money to be able to afford to buy and run one of these beauties. Mr Editor, please note!

Try before you buy

Still not sure about buying an American RV? Why not hire this demo' vehicle for a few days and see how you get on (acceptance is obviously subject to terms and conditions). In most cases, the cost of a short hire period will be refunded in full if you decide to purchase.

Twenty-five foot American C-class 'vans (such as this 23J) are often seen as an intermediate step between driving a typical British-built overcab coachbuilt and a 30ft-plus A-class RV. This model, with the slide-out, certainly offers a good compromise between on-site spaciousness and overall length. □

In brief

Base vehicle: Ford Econoline E450 Super Duty chassis cab

Engine type: Ford Triton V10 6.8-litre petrol
Output: 202.8kW (275bhp)

Gearbox & drive: Rear (twin wheel) drive via four-speed electronic overdrive automatic gearbox using a torque converter

Make & model: Four Winds International Five Thousand 23J

Body type & construction: Overcab coachbuilt with GRP-clad laminated side walls, one-piece rubber roof and nearside slide-out

Conversion NCC approved: No

Electrical equipment: 230V hook-up, 230V-110V 24A transformer, Saip 230V RCD and circuit breaker, MagneTek 6300 Q-series power converter, leisure battery charger, management and consumer unit with six AC MCBs and nine 12V DC fuses, two 80 amp hr leisure batteries

Lighting: Eight luminaires containing 2 x 10W filament bulbs, downlighters in cooker hood

Cooking facilities: Atwood Wedgewood Vision three-burner hob and gas oven, Samsung 110V 1000W microwave oven, domestic-size double sink and mixer tap

Refrigerator: Norcold N621 two-door 6 cu ft fridge/freezer

Water heater: Atwood storage type, gas only operation

Fresh water tank: 27 US gallons (102.2 litres) including water heater

Waste water tank: 25 US gallons (94.6 litres)

Toilet holding tank: 25 US gallons (94.6 litres)

Space heating: Atwood Hydro-Flame blown-air gas-fired furnace with three outlets

Gas tank capacity: 12.1 US gallons (45.8 litres)

Rear restraints: Five lap belts, no head restraints

Additional features: Height-adjustable seatbelts, driver and passenger airbags, electric cab windows and electrically-operated door locks (not remote control), 12V dash air-conditioning, 110V roof air-conditioning, four-speaker stereo radio/CD player, Onan generator, rear ladder, remote control TV/video combo unit, TV aerial and amplifier, exterior-access storage compartments, heated holding tanks, carbon monoxide/LPG/smoke detectors, solar panel and charge regulator

Dimensions: (*denotes figures provided by manufacturer/importer)

Overall Length: 7.52m (24ft 8in)*

Overall width: 2.54m (8ft 4in) including vents, but excluding awning and mirrors

Overall height: 3.60m (11ft 10in)*

Interior height: 1.99m (6ft 6.5in)

Bed dimensions: Overcab bed 2.41m x 1.45m with 825mm headroom (7ft 11in x 4ft 9in with 2ft 8.5in headroom), sofa 1.85m x 1.35m (6ft 1in x 4ft 5in), dinette 1.78m x 0.94m (5ft 10in x 3ft 1in)

Max authorised weight: 6373kg

Load capacity: 1383kg *(with full tanks of fuel, fresh water, and LPG)

Price

Standard model: £58 396 inc VAT, delivery, on the road charges, and UK road lights and domestic electrical conversions

As tested: £61 396

Optional extras

(*starred items fitted to test vehicle)

Base vehicle options: LPG engine bi-fuel conversion by UK approved company (£2937)

Caravan options: Upgrade includes generator and day/night blinds (£3000)*



Four Winds 23J kindly supplied for evaluation by:

Cheshire American Motorhomes, Lomber Hey Farm, Andrew Lane, High Lane Village, Stockport SK6 8HY (tel: 0161-427 6868; fax: 0161-426 0010; web site www.AmericanMotorhomes.co.uk).

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