

STERLING Europa 545

Price.....	£14,605
Berths.....	4
Overall length.....	7.29m
Width.....	2.29m
Overall height.....	2.61m
MiRO†.....	1283kg
MTPLM†.....	1492kg
User payload.....	209kg

† TERMS EXPLAINED ON PAGE 119



The twin-dinette layout gives a family lots of living space by day. LEFT External access to underbed storage is small



Externally the 545 looks very similar to the best-selling 550



OUR BEST BIT

Lateral thinking

Tweaking a best-selling van has given Sterling a unique layout. We see what the Rye family makes of the 545

NO ONE HAS gone back to the drawing board with the Sterling Europa 545. Squint and from the outside the position of the windows and chemical toilet access suggest that it is actually the best-selling 550 model. The 550 has a nearside fixed bed and rear washroom on a single-axle chassis.

The 545 is essentially the same, but in place of the fixed bed is a U-shaped lounge. This not only makes it a unique layout (it's sister van in the Swift range excepted) but it is a genuine alternative for those who want the flexibility of a twin-dinette layout, with the added advantage of a proper washroom. Sterling feels that this caravan will appeal to those buyers

who want a better lounge space but like the otherwise appealing 550 layout.

The other aspect to consider is whether having twin dinettes makes the layout more appealing to the family market. While most fixed-bed tourers are four-berths, they are really sold for couples. Compact seating space limits the appeal for more than two occupants, but with the second lounge, the 545 has a wealth of daytime living space.

To find out whether the Sterling can deliver for families, we asked James and Alison Rye to take a look. They own a twin-dinette Bailey Pageant and have not yet found a caravan that would better

suit their needs. With children Millie and Matthew in tow, they moved into the Sterling to see if this could be the caravan that would change that viewpoint.

First impressions

As we approached, James and Matthew were setting up the caravan's services on a pitch at Top Lodge Caravan Club Site in Northamptonshire. Alison and Millie were inside the caravan and after exchanging hellos, we got down to the important business of finding out what the family thought.

As we were already outside, it seemed like a good place to start. Externally, the Sterling is pretty standard fare. James immediately



Access to the front locker is easy because the lid lifts nice and high

noted the standard Al-Ko stabiliser, alloy wheels and Al-Ko Secure receiver but he was particularly keen to do the maths on the Sterling's weights. The 545's MTPLM of 1492kg was a touch heavier than expected but James was confident that the family's

Who is the 545 for?

With most caravan layouts, it's perfectly obvious which market the caravan is aimed at, whether couples, small families or large families. It's not so obvious with this caravan. The 545 layout is unique, offering a choice of

places to sit by day and a large washroom. The downside is the loss of the fixed bed to provide the second lounge.

Sterling feels the caravan is best suited to couples who want flexible lounge spaces. But we

think it also appeals as a four-berth, for the family who don't want to be on top of one another in the evening or at mealtimes. The only way people can decide whether it is right for them is by sitting in it.



This month's testers

ALISON, JAMES, MILLIE AND MATTHEW RYE



The Ryes have a 2006 Bailey Pageant Provence which they tow with a 2004 Ford Galaxy 1.9TDi Ghia. With two children (Millie, 6, and Matthew, 5) to consider, the layout has to be right. The kids need their own sleeping space which can be closed off, while leaving access to the main door and washroom. The Ryes enjoy using CLs, so a separate shower cubicle, rather than a wet room, is a must.



Promise

Practical Caravan's Enthusiast Teams have been picked for their experience and passion for caravans and caravanning.

Ford Galaxy would be capable of towing it. "I know that 85% of the car's kerbweight is 1470kg and this is just over that. The Galaxy tows well, though, so it would have no problems coping."

In terms of the appearance, James felt it was fine, but for him a caravan that works inside is far more important than one that looks nice. One external detail influenced directly by the interior is the nearside storage locker. On a fixed-bed model, the locker door goes into the underbed area and is around a metre wide. As the rear lounge sits in place of the fixed-bed base, storage space is lessened and the access door is smaller, too.

Matthew was immediately intrigued by the small door, which he took to be his personal entrance to the accommodation. James peered inside.



Alison loved the interior's smart, cohesive colour scheme and was surprised to learn the Europa was the entry-level to the Sterling range

"It's a smaller space than on other caravans, but it's usable. You still have the gas locker space at the front, too, so outside storage won't be a problem."

Other than that, all the exterior service items and corner steadies were easily accessed and neither

James, nor Matthew for that matter, could find much to complain about.

Internal affairs

Matthew led the way into the 545 and joined Millie and Alison at the table in the rear lounge. After a little discussion about where the

Europa fits in the Sterling line up, Alison was surprised to learn it was the entry point to the range.

"It doesn't feel like an entry-level product at all. I love it in here. I really like the fabrics, too. A lot of caravan interiors make me feel a bit sick but I really like this," said Alison. The U-shaped near-side lounge was proving a hit, too.

"It's a good space for kids and means if they want to do colouring, you don't need the main table up and you're not all sitting in the same place. That's what we like about our current caravan. We all have our own space."

It was at this point that James looked around for the main dining table. After a bit of searching, he found it, attached to the bottom of the seat base in the rear lounge.

"I was worried it was going to be awkward to get to the table but it >>>



There's plenty of elbow room for four people to dine in the front lounge. The lightweight dining table is stored beneath the bed base in the rear dinette (inset) and is easy to get to



The mount for a small flat-screen TV slides up into any eye-level locker when not in use



The bed boxes are easily accessed. The storage options in general are very good in the 545

works well. You lift the bed base and the table rises with it. The table is so light you can lift it with one hand. It's not something we'd be doing over and over again but I'm surprised how easy it is to remove."

The front lounge is typical, with spotlights in the four corners, a centre chest with two drawers and comfy seating for four. With the table in place, it's a good dining space for four.

The cabinet separating the rear lounge area from the front of the caravan has a bit of party piece, which intrigued the kids and came under close scrutiny from James. There is a mount for a flat-screen TV. Nothing particularly unusual in that, but the whole thing slides up into the eye-level locker when not in use. It's an elegant solution to freeing up a bit of sideboard

space. James appreciated the thought that had gone into it but had some reservations.

"It's a nice idea but it feels a bit clunky," he said. "Looking at the amount of available space, there is only room for a small TV on the mount, too, particularly if you use the built-in swivel. I think I'd put the telly on the shelf underneath and not use the mount at all. The problem would be running the cables up into the locker where the aerial and mains sockets are."

Super storage

While those interesting lounge arrangements grab all the headlines, there are still plenty of normal concerns to cover. Alison was impressed at how easy it was to squirrel away all the toys, games, clothes and other



The front bed is made up in the usual way with slats stored in the chest. With a family of four, James thinks this would be the adult's bed

kiddie paraphernalia into the Europa's lockers.

"You can't complain about the storage at all," said James as he pushed a clutch of furry gonks into a cupboard. "There's loads of it."

"The wardrobe is huge as well," said Alison from her seat in the lounge. The only criticism was that a few more shelves in the roof lockers would make better use of the available space.

One place where storage comes under more pressure is the kitchen and Alison explained the problems as she prepared a light lunch for the family. "The kitchen feels the most compromised area of the caravan," she said. "It works fine, though. It's a bit short on workspace, which could lead to problems dishing up four meals, and the sink is a long way back, which makes it tricky to reach for



Good

The layout works really well for us. The kitchen is snug, but the washroom is large and there is plenty of storage and lounging space. We even like the interior, which doesn't happen often.



Bad

The TV storage unit is a nice idea, but you can only fit quite a small television onto the unit, because it needs room to swing. It is the kitchen that has been compromised the most.



The kitchen is small but it has everything. Worktop space is limited but the designers have tried to create a little more by setting the sink far back. There is only one overhead locker but there is cupboard space opposite



The wardrobe is wide but tapers at one end. It could do with a shelf



There's good storage and a towel hoop in the spacious washroom



The U-shaped lounge takes a bit of working out to assemble into a bed

shorter people. I'm surprised that there is only one roof locker in the kitchen. The small locker on the other side of the van is ideal for cereal boxes though, so I'd definitely use that one for big stuff and probably spill over into the one next to the kitchen that has the radio in it."

The large fridge with a full-width freezer shelf was well liked. "Having a big freezer means you



Fridge has a large freezer but the door hits the seat base when open

can cook a lasagne or something similar, pop it in the freezer for the journey and just pop it in the oven when you arrive. Small freezer compartments are no use at all," Alison explained.

James was sitting in the front lounge at this point and spotted something he didn't like. "The fridge door opens and hits the base of the seat. It's annoying because one of them will end up damaged."

We say



Nigel Donnelly says *There is no denying the appeal of that cosy second lounge or the large washroom in a single-axle tourer. Factor in the specification and the 545 deserves consideration by buyers who don't think luxury touring begins and ends with a fixed bed.*

In terms of equipment, there is nothing wanting. The full oven with separate grill and microwave oven are all present, although the mains-powered hotplate in addition to three gas burners is a welcome novelty.

After dark

With no fixed beds or bunks, at night the two lounges both need converting into beds. The front lounge is a standard arrangement. Slats slide out from under the centre chest and the seat-back cushions drop into the gap to make a good flat bed.

Making up the unconventional rear lounge is more fiddly. "The bed assembly is tricky to work out, but once you've done it, you'll do it the same each time. It makes up pretty easily once you're used to it," James remarked.

The bed is the same size as the fixed bed but as it is made of several small cushions, it's not as supportive. "It's big and flat," said James. "We'd use this bed for the kids and the front end for us." Spotlights and small shelves above the head of the bed made it the ideal spot to read a bedtime story.

The big selling point of the fixed-bed layout that the 545 is based on is the rear washroom squeezed into a single-axle van. Sterling's version has an opaque window above the toilet and small roof vent to provide some natural light. Despite this, it's a little dark but James and Alison recognise the benefits over the side-washroom in their own caravan straight away.

"Rather than dragging the kids over to the washblocks we make use of the washroom in our Bailey, but it is very small. This is really >>>

Live-in test: End-washroom four-berth

great and completely practical," Alison explained as she tried to tempt Matthew to brush his teeth in the basin.

"In our caravan, it's hard to shower the kids without showering yourself at the same time. With the separate shower cubicle and plenty of floor space, it's not a problem here."

Matthew made a grab for the towel hung on the wall behind him to wipe his face, which brought Alison to another plus point for the compact end washroom.

"Storage is good in here, too," she explained. "There isn't a lot of spare space in here, but with cupboards above and below the basin, a shelf above the toilet and

the towel hoop, there's not much that is missing."

With Millie and Matthew happily scribbling in their colouring books, Alison was pretty unequivocal about the Sterling's appeal and gave her verdict. "I think this has got everything. We've done a lot of these tests and been in a lot of vans but none has ever done a better job

for us as family than our own van, until we climbed in here."

James was a bit more measured in his praise but aside from a small kitchen and the TV cabinet he, too, liked what he saw.

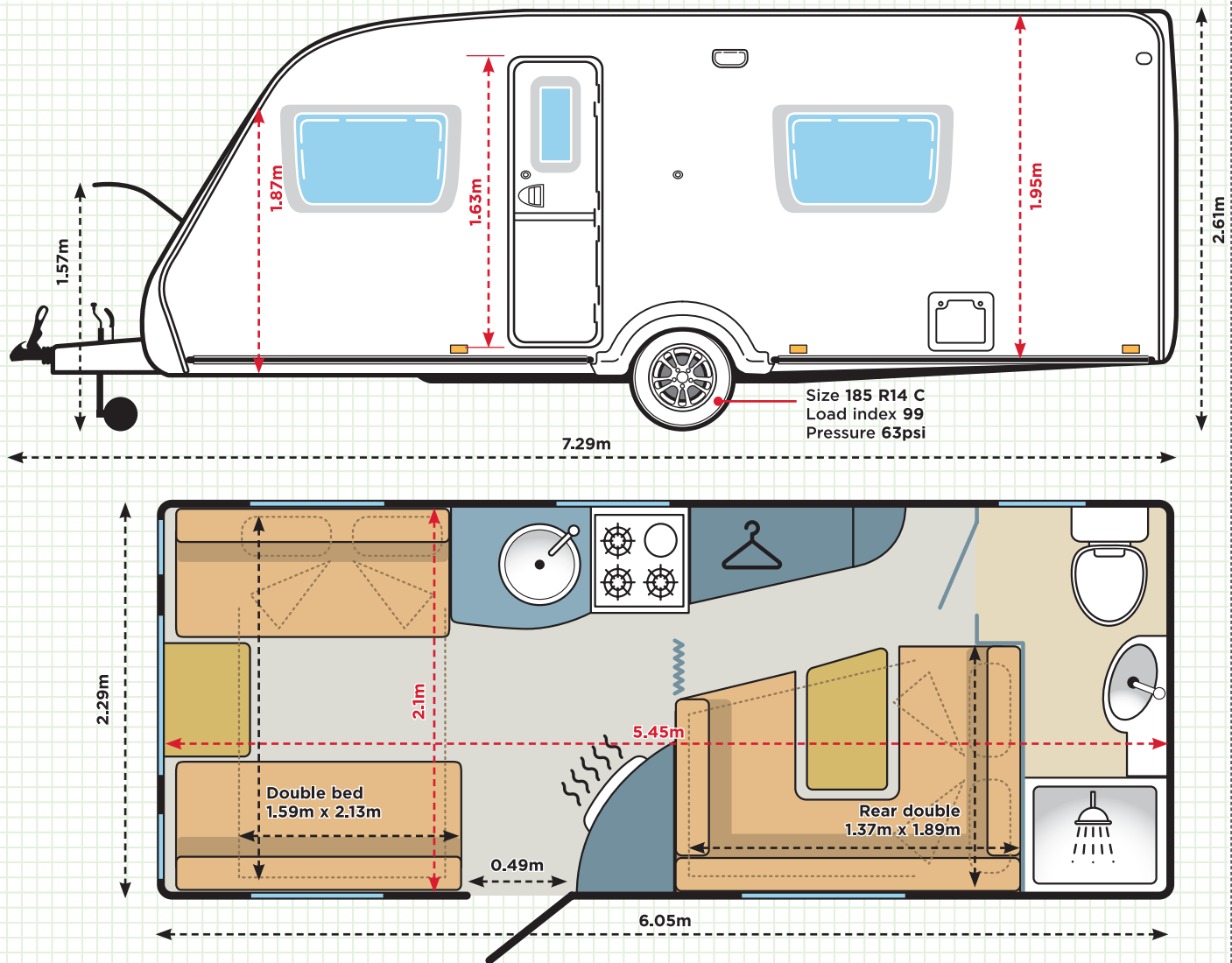
"The biggest problem for me," concluded Alison, "will be getting Mr Rye to put his hand in his pocket to buy one!"

STERLING Europa 545

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CARAVANGUARD
INSURANCE
QUOTE
£275*

VITAL STATS
Price £14,605
Berths 4
MiRO† 1283kg
MTPLM† 1492kg
User payload 209kg
Awning size 987cm



STANDARD EQUIPMENT

Construction Aluminium skin. GRP front panel. ABS back panel. Al-Ko chassis.

External equipment Al-Ko AKS stabiliser. Buttonless handbrake. 13-pin electrics. Spare wheel. Directional aerial. Two-piece entrance door. Awning light. Shock absorbers. Alloy wheels.

Heating Truma dual-fuel, blown-air space

heater. Truma dual-fuel water heater.

Lounge Blinds and flyscreens to all windows. Heki rooflight. Drop-in carpets. Radio/CD/MP3 player and two speakers.

Kitchen Thetford 107-litre digital-control fridge. Separate oven and grill. Three-burner hob. Electric hotplate. Microwave oven. GRP sink.

Washroom Thetford C-250 cassette toilet and wheeled waste tank. Separate shower.

Security CRiS identity number on all windows and chassis. Concealed security data chip. Single key for all locks. Smoke alarm.

Warranty 3 years parts. 6 years body.

OPTIONS

Al-Ko ATC (£434). Hal-Locate GPS tracker (£639). Al-Ko Secure wheel lock (£199). Alternative upholstery (£169). Wraparound seating (£128).