

Sprite Musketeer TD

▶ ON LOCATION IN THE PEAK DISTRICT

▶ PRICE £11,540

TOWMATCH C

Berths for five and two dining areas in just 4.74m of body length looks great on paper - but how does it fair when put to a family test?

TEST & PHOTOGRAPHY PHIL STEPHENS

WHEN Swift launched the lightweight Musketeer TD last year the *Which Caravan* team applauded it loudly for its brilliance in cramming two dining areas and berths for five into such a short length.

It passed our First Test scrutiny with flying colours. Then we took another close look at it and voted it Best Family Caravan under £13,500 and also Best Lightweight Caravan in the prestigious *Which Caravan* Awards.

Now, though, the Musketeer TD (that stands for Twin Dining area) faced a much more detailed examination: A normal family microscope with the Stephens parents and two offspring all determined to exercise their analytical skills to the full.

Our live-in test would prove, surely, whether this small caravan really works for a typical caravanning family...

It was up against an obstacle from the start of the test. There is a perception that budget, entry-level, low-priced (label them as you will) caravans don't provide the year-round cosseted ambience and warm feeling present in more costly tourers. They're merely designed for summer holidays, many wrongly assume. Against that background of opinion that we know is frequently held, what better than to take the Musketeer on a family tour out of the main holiday season, when it's damp, cold and very often wet?

So, in winter weather, the Stephens crew headed to the hills. The hills of the southern

Peak District National Park, to be precise.

The Caravan Club's Chatsworth site is the perfect base for accessing this more dale-like terrain - compared with high and remote moorland found further north. It's also an easy 20-minute drive from junction 29 of the M1.

With a MRO of 1052kg, the Musketeer TD is one of the lightest five-berth caravans on the market. Depending on your numbers, holiday duration and style of caravanning you could, of course, load it up to its maximum 1291kg, though many won't. For test purposes, though, we packed it to the gunwales. We then weighed it at the local quarry's weigh-bridge to make sure.

This Musketeer arrived with the optional £390 Diamond Pack. Yes, of course it's a clever marketing ploy to get you to part with more cash. But, in this instance, we'd say don't leave the dealer without it. The extra items offered by the Diamond Pack are both cosmetic and practical. You get alloy wheels, an AL-KO Secure wheel-lock receiver, an AKS 3004 hitch-head stabiliser, a spare wheel and carrier, a door flyscreen, a radio/CD player with iPod connection - and two scatter cushions. Of all those items the spare wheel is of course essential. And the hitch-head stabiliser is not far behind it. Reason? This really is a five-berth caravan that you can tow with relatively small cars, for example,



some of the heavier versions of Volkswagen's Golf. Whilst that's an achievement, it means many owners of similar-sized cars will find themselves with a small weight differential between car and caravan. And that factor makes a device that enhances stability even more important that if you're towing with a larger car.

Siting the Sprite at Chatsworth against a back-drop of caravans of all lengths, one thing is instantly clear. This five-berth Musketeer is a compact caravan. Not as diminutive as the smallest of two-berths pitched here in the parkland beneath Capability Brown's majestic beeches, but similar in size to many posh two-berth, end-washroom models that I see here sitting on the fully-serviced pitches.

I had harboured fears for the new Musketeer TD. In 2005 I tested the Elddis Avanté 475 five-berth with a similar layout to the Musketeer. I liked the 475 very much and said so at the time, but ultimately it had one berth too many forced into its svelte proportions and was much better suited to four people. Shame, but the fact was that



Dining area number two keeps the munchkins occupied and out the way



it didn't do what it said on the tin – and was discontinued later in that same year.

So why, four years later, has something almost identical gone on to win two of *Which Caravan's* awards?

The answer is simple. The Musketeer is 19cm longer, which helps enormously. But of far greater importance is that the body is wider. The 2005 Avanté was 2.15m; the Musketeer is 2.23m. These additional few centimeters of girth takes it from a “nearly” caravan layout to an absolute champion of a layout. Size, as they say, really does matter.

By the time our pitching task was complete, darkness had enveloped the valley we were inhabiting between Curbar Edge and the High Eastern border of the Chatsworth Estate. The kids, reluctant to leave their new-found and easily-made friends on the site, wandered into the caravan, warm-faced in stark contrast to the chill temperature of the day. With our previous two test caravans being eight-metre twin-axes, you'd expect some mental adjustment to our new restricted environment. But that's not the way it was. Neither my wife and I, nor the



Time to browse through a magazine before dinner

boys, seemed to notice the comparative small size of the Musketeer. After all, you section off some large caravans into small rooms (bedroom, washroom, living area) and leave it feeling only as big as the lounge. The Musketeer is a one-box design (except for the unitary washroom) meaning from front to back window it's all one single open space. This single room aspect is a design feature that's essential in making this relatively small space work successfully in housing five people over several days of holiday. During our family test time, the interior of the Musketeer TD never once felt like the compact exterior indicated it should.

There may only have been four of us but that didn't stop me making up the full quota of five beds each night. Point was, I wanted to know if building up and breaking down five beds daily in just 4.74 metres, would be something that confirmed my desire for at least one set of permanently made beds (bunks or double, I'm not fussed). I won't pretend for a moment the chore was an event I relished as cushion-juggling with tired kids, tired parents and aching limbs isn't my favourite holiday pastime. But of all caravans I've tested where this procedure to the power of five is a necessary evil, at least the Musketeer TD gives you enough space



Rose Cottage Café, Castleton - pretty out front but stunning out back

in which to complete the task comfortably and simply. Admittedly, first attempts had me confused by a multitude of cushions. But by the third day of our test it was a simple and intuitive procedure.

Space is the dominant theme of this test, of course. So we thought we'd give the kids some of it. Tell most boys they're going for a nice walk in the country and the

prospect of a great view isn't one they'll text their mates about. But I have a plan, as this walk is more of an adventure.

About 25 minutes away is Edale, and Edale is the start of the 268-mile Pennine Way. The first few minutes' walk of the path winds upwards from Edale and, while this section may elicit the odd "I'm bored", it's early days. Just as each individual whinge merges to become one joined-up disapproving chorus, the path steepens and climbs awkwardly in the shadow of Grindlow Knoll. Here, as all good parents do, you can invent a ridiculous story about it actually being called Grindlow Troll, thereby using a little pretend fear to keep the kids walking.

Suddenly the path becomes the sort of walking they'll love. The track turns to a scramble where you hop from rock to rock, continually crossing and re-crossing the stream. At times the path is actually the stream and all great fun. Eventually, at 600metres high, you reach the mist-shrouded peak bog plateau looking like a Star Wars landscape. It's all very safe and fun. And at this point the younger Stephens family members labelled it "The best walk ever". Back down the same way, then...

If your approach is to ignore the washroom in the corner of the Musketeer and use site facilities, then you might want to skip this bit. On paper the Sprite's vital statistics don't promise much washroom performance at all.



The washroom doesn't suffer because of this Sprite's compact size



Autumn tints and mist - Chatsworth pretty much at its gorgeous best



Monsal Dale - another trek to break kids in gently



Tea for five? Easy. In fact breakfast lunch and supper are all easy



Boys, wife and Charlie the Border Terrier all enjoyed this walk



Castleton, below Peveril Castle, is a fine start for the ascent of Mam Tor

Indeed, you'd be forgiven for writing off its presence as merely token from the start. But again this Sprite surprises you

The washroom follows no script. Its shape is rectangular but its entrance (and attractive metal-look tambour door) is angled to minimise the washroom's size and therefore its encroachment into the Sprite's valuable living space. Size is so well judged that this cut-off slice of washroom floor fails to impact on shower/sink use. Vitally, there's sufficient room around the loo, and shower space betters many larger tourers. The shower has a separate tap and feed of its own (as distinct from the sort of shower rose which doubles as the basin's tap), and the flow control on the head means you use half the water when hosing the kids. Really!

You could point to the smaller of Thetford's waste cassettes as impractical for five people - and this one doesn't have wheels. But then you can't have it all in a

caravan of this size - so you have to visit the site's CDP more often. Hardly a problem!

In essence, though, this is a fine washroom for the price of the caravan; it's things like that smaller cassette that help to keep down the size and the price.

Lounging and recreational space within the Sprite is the fundamental key to its appeal. The TD moniker denotes its key twin dining area feature; the front one will mostly find favour with adults and the rear one with kids. The absence of a front chest of drawers maximises lounge space.

While the Sprite is indeed excellent, it's not perfect. The rear dining area's settees are not high enough. The children found it a struggle to eat at this table because of the distance between seating and table height. And the height is too great for adults to eat in comfort here either. The squishy nature of the seating cushions doesn't help.

Another day another walk. Wife makes

breakfast in the kitchen while I make sandwiches (intended for the 517-metre-high top of Mam Tor) opposite on the unit top above the Truma heater. Without this surface the kitchen would struggle for five hungry mouths.

My sandwiches made, and subsequently criticised for looking lopsided (what is this, Master Chef?), are squeezed in the rucksack, making the original lack of presentation utterly irrelevant.

Today's walk, taking in Winnats Pass and Mam Tor, is another trail designed to break the kids into the joys of walking. You start at the car park at the bottom by Speedwell Cavern, then wander up through the mini pass that's reminiscent of Cheddar Gorge. Mam Tor (which means "the shimmering mountain") too often decided to unceremoniously chuck lumps of the A625 road off its side - so often that repeated restoration became too expensive so the old road was closed.

At the top of the pass there's a 30-minute



Enough space for both boys to clean teeth



Winnats Pass - spectacular even in the mist



Castleton: a fine example of a Peak District town

walk to the summit and, although not as high, you're treated to a more spectacular view than the previous and more remote Edale walk. The vista stretches away in all directions in a top-of-a-Pyramid sort of view.

As we return to the caravan on the last day of our test I realise how much I appreciate the level of effort that has gone into creating a budget tourer that looks anything but budget. Flush-fronted lockers underpin the Sprite's clarity of design. It's fresh, it's clean and certainly wouldn't work with extra sets of curtains and framed lockers. It's refreshingly unburdened with any hint of pretentiousness associated with more elaborate interiors.

The layout's right, the spec's right, the price and the weight excel, too. All positives seems to come together in the Sprite Musketeer TD. It's the most caravan you'll find in any 4.74 metres. ■

Sprite Musketeer TD

£11,540



► SCORES

Layout	10/10
Styling/comfort	10/10
Towing	9/10
Kitchen	9/10
Washroom	9/10
Sleeping	9/10
Storage	9/10
Build Quality	9/10
Equipment	9/10
Value for money	9/10
TOTAL	92/100

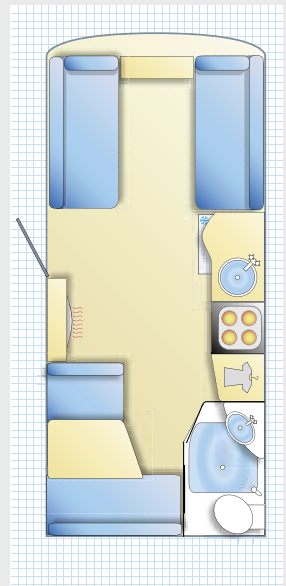
► SPECIFICATION

- Axes:** 1
- Berths:** 5
- MRO:** 1052kg
- MTPLM:** 1291kg
- Overall length:** 6.45m
- Width:** 2.23m
- Headroom:** 1.95m

► WE STAYED AT

Chatsworth Park Caravan Club Site
 Baslow, Bakewell, Derbyshire.
 DE45 1PN
Tel: 01246 582226
Web: www.caravanclub.co.uk
Open: 18 March - 4 January
Cost: £18

This site is in the gracious, landscaped grounds of a magnificent estate on which the mark of garden designer Capability Brown is obvious. Flanked by the great walled gardens of an equally great house on one side and the River Derwent on the other, Chatsworth Park feels more like



a fortress as you enter over the narrow pack horse bridge into the enclosed reception yard. Visit and you'll realise why trying to get a vacant slot here is like getting tickets for an unexpected live Elvis gig.

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