

The stylish Airstream actually tows very well, despite its size

Airstream 532
£34,880

CARAVAN TEST

Airstream 532

Andrew Ditton tests the first Euro-market Airstream and asks if this iconic van from the USA lives up to the hype

Price: £34,880

Berths: 2

MIRO: 1300kg

MTPLM: 1600kg
(upgradeable to 1700kg)

EXTERIOR

Nothing else on site or on the road even remotely looks like an Airstream. It is the Marmite of caravans, you either completely love it, or you hate it. 'Wow! That looks fantastic!' cried its admirers. 'That old thing looks like a submarine' sniffed the traditionalists.

EU Airstreams are built in the States but are narrower than their US siblings and are mounted on a BPW chassis, incorporating a Winterhoff stabiliser and jockey-wheel noseweight gauge.

The result? I can honestly say that the Airstream is the smoothest, most stable van I have ever towed.

The drawbar-mounted gas locker is a blast from the past, but its ease of use and the ability to accommodate BP Gas Light cylinders bring it bang up-to-date.

INTERIOR

You only have to go as far as the rugged, double-locking entry door to see that this van is constructed to last. No flimsy flyscreens here, the door's liner is a detachable metal flyscreen which even incorporates guards to prevent damage from pets.

Do you not like the futuristic, minimalist, and in my opinion drop-dead gorgeous designer interior of the International model? Don't worry, the Safari option is also available, with wood-effect furniture and muted, neutral soft furnishings for Airstreamers with more traditional tastes.

Quality and innovation abound, whether it's the spacious chrome-covered fridge, Dometic vacuum toilet, or superb Alde boiler serving the central heating radiators and hot water tank.

The environmentally-friendly vacuum toilet is chemical-free and a pleasure to use. A macerator processes the waste, and the vacuum prevents unpleasant smells entering the caravan. Aroma-free in the van it may be, but emptying the waste tank when full is a far

Ideal for

Full-timers, site wardens, and anyone who spends more nights in their van than they do at home. Also caravanners looking for a van to hang on to for the rest of their lives.



Superb views and floods of light are offered through the bay window



All-in-one sink and drainer makes compact kitchen user-friendly

NEW CARAVANS



Dining table has drop-leaves. It's such a good idea, why has no-one thought of this before?



Spacious washroom features a classy stainless steel bowl and vacuum toilet



Roof lockers are huge, but could do with racking system inside



Plenty of storage space and drawers are nice and solid too

more 'fragrant' process than emptying a chemical loo. It's also impossible to discreetly use the loo at night as the noisy macerator does a good job of waking every caravanner within a five metre radius!

Also on the noisy side is the onboard pump, but it's only us caravanners who are used to silent submersibles who would comment. A motorhome wouldn't even notice the humming sound.

Our pre-production model was not without its niggles, but everything we didn't like is

already being addressed and modified by the company.

What has impressed me more than anything else is the attitude of Airstream and its employees. The fact that Airstream are so determined to get absolutely everything 100 per cent right before selling full production models is an example that some other manufacturers could do well to follow.

Turn over for more Airstream action — on tour in Wales!

Thanks to the Caravan Club's Terry and Wenda Turrell

Our verdict

EXTERIOR 9/10

Pop-rivet construction is an acquired taste, but this bullet tows like a dream.

LOUNGING 9/10

Dual-density foam, direct or mood lighting, optional flat screen TV, and a groovy surround-sound system.

DINING 10/10

Drop-leaf table superb yet simple. No stooping or perching on the edge of your seat. Front chest an option.

SLEEPING 8/10

The most comfortable bed in the business. Pulling out bed support can be a little challenging, but is solid.

KITCHEN 8/10

Storage and lighting superb. Hob needs smaller burner or electric hotplate. Worksurface average, spacious fridge, optional microwave.

STORAGE 8/10

Plenty but needs to be organised better. No plate racks in cupboards (yet), and seats currently lacking fold-down front access.

WASHROOM 9/10

Stainless steel sink and terrific extractor fan. Needs a hanging rail in the shower.

BUILD QUALITY 9/10

Superb for a pre-pro. Give us a production model and we're sure it'll score a 10.

PRACTICALITY 7/10

If you drain your battery you lose your heating, hot water, lighting, and even your toilet. Second battery an option.

VALUE FOR MONEY 6/10

Stateside cool ain't cheap. Total out of 100 83/100

Caravan's rating

8/10

We like

Quality, longevity, head-turning design, iconic

We dislike

Price, condensation issues, heavy reliance on 12v electrics

Go west

Having tested the new Airstream on the previous pages, *Caravan's* Andrew Ditton grabbed the chance to be the first caravanner to go touring in a 532 model

Tuesday

Collect a Nissan Navara to tow the Airstream. I pack my own caravan, but components are now dropping off like it's autumn. Last week a shelf collapsed. Today the door to the battery box came off in my

hands. The Airstream has got to be better than this, surely? Very excited. Can't sleep!

Wednesday

A tedious slog to Warwick, arriving at midnight. But as we sneak on to our pitch we see a silver apparition glowing in the corner of the

site. Unable to contain our excitement we rush over and peer through the windows. The Airstream's lights have been left on so everyone could take a peek inside.

Thursday

We spend an hour stroking our new toys before we hitch up and cruise the streets of Warwick. But a surprise awaits us. We expect to receive all the attention of a

carnival float, but in the oft-disappointing reality of life, nobody bats an eyelid. Nobody points. Nobody waves. Nobody looks twice!

But what the heck. The gutsy Nissan makes short work of the sleek, smooth stunner in tow. A daft BMW driver thinks he's going to overtake us on a slip road joining the Warwick bypass, but flooring the Navara we leave him standing. Of all the many caravans I have



External shower is ace for hosing down wetsuit



Un-hitch Airstream, hitch up to kitesurfer — easy!

NISSAN NAVARA

Nissan Navara 2.5dCi Aventura Double Cab

Price £24,873

Engine 2488cc diesel

Max power 172bhp

Max torque 297lb.ft

Fuel economy 33.2mpg (combined cycle)

Kerbweight 2120kg

Max braked trailer towing weight 2600kg

Max noseweight 104kg

NEW CARAVANS

towed, the Airstream is by far the smoothest.

Back on base camp we transfer stuff from my van into the 'Stream'. Storage space in the 532 is astonishing. It doesn't look generous, but it swallows all our kit with ease.

That evening, as we sit with the lights on and the blinds open, we realise that not one person on site has been over to say hello or pass comment. Envy, or simply disinterest?

Friday

Up early again, and soon away. Less than two minutes after setting off my phone rings. I plip the hands-free and take a call from Phantom Tracking, asking if I am aware the Airstream is on the move, and had I forgotten to disarm the unit? I sheepishly apologise but in a small way am glad that I've put Phantom's system to the test yet again, and as usual it has not let me down. After dropping my friend Steve at the local railway station for a daytrip to Birmingham, I am about to leave as two excited

men rush up to me. 'An Airstream! Oh wow, it really is! Oh gosh! Oh please may we have a look inside?'

Tom had just collected his son Ed at the station. Ed had just flown in from Australia, unbeknown to his mother, who was celebrating her 60th birthday. What a wonderful story, and how lucky I was to be part of it.

Soon I'm hooning up the M40, and the stupid grin on my face is massive. My windsurf boards are on the roof, Sheryl Crowe is on the CD player, I have an Airstream gliding through the air behind me, and I'm free. This really is living the dream.

Dual-carriageway soon gives way to windy Welsh roads and I'm glad of the Airstream's sensible width. Driving through Welshpool, a driver in the car on a roundabout sticks his arm out of the window and gives us a big thumbs up. This Airstream experience is just too good!

At about 4pm I arrive at Borth in West Wales. I site, no, abandon, the Airstream on a CS and rush to the beach.

The kitesurfing is great. My fellow kites were a really friendly bunch and I stay in the water till sundown. Collecting Steve after work, from the station en route, we get back to the Airstream at about 10pm, tired, hungry, in total need of a shower, but completely stoked! It's at this point that I need to point out that we are staying on my favourite Camping and Caravanning Club CS in the country; a rustic, mains-free site with stunning views costing a mere £4 per night.

Of course, every caravanner knows that it's only at times like this that you'll run into problems, and indeed we do. Filling the inboard tank temporarily drains the battery, causing the Alde water heater to throw a wobbly. Despite the 12v controller telling us that the battery charge is sufficient, the Alde unit insists that the voltage is too low. The toilet won't work either.

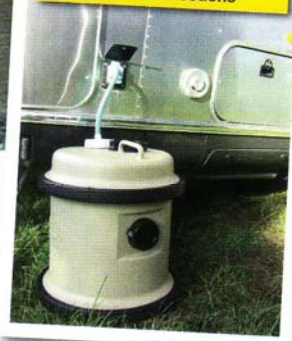
It's at this point that I must point out that our pre-production Airstream also features a prototype heating



Kitesurfers Katie and Hugh join Andrew in living the dream!



UK-spec Airstreams have the usual water connections



boiler, and we were pioneering the system.

So, at 10.30 at night, I am on the phone to Airstream's technical designer who talks me through getting all the systems up and running again.

It makes me realise that the technical wizardry incorporated into the Stream relies heavily on maintaining a healthy 12v battery. Although Airstream will be fitting intelligent battery chargers to production models, prospective owners need to consider solar power, fuel cell technology, or using a generator if they intend to spend more than a few nights away from a mains hook-up.

Showered, fed, and watered, I climb into bed after turning over the cushions. Why turn the cushions? Because they are dual density, made for sitting on one side, and sleeping on the other.

Saturday

The wind is howling a force six, and the beach is littered with resting kites. That is a good sign for me to go windsurfing! I have a good blast in the waves for a

couple of hours. That evening we witness a spectacular sunset through the front windows of the Airstream as we tuck into a delicious dinner. Can a weekend really get much better than this?

Sunday

An early start to get hitched and up and down the estuary at Ynyslas for a few photographs. Photos snapped, it's time to head on up to the Caravan Club site at Coed Y Llwyn. You'd think the circus has arrived when we pull onto the site. Kids on bikes gasp in admiration, and soon we are the centre of attention for anyone under the age of 14. It's the first time I've heard a caravan being called 'awesome!'

Leaving Steve to field the excited enquiries, I head off to savour some of the fantastic singletrack mountain biking for which Wales is famous. That evening, I also have a caravan-mad friend of mine, Gary, drop in to have a look.

Monday

Our morning sortie to the pretty village of Portmeirion is wonderful, but I have to admit

that hitching up the 532 is the highlight of my day.

At Gary's request we stop for a quick photoshoot of the Airstream next to his classic Sprite. 'The best of America meets the best of British!' he quips before waving us off.

Ten minutes after our arrival at the Caravan Club site at Cae Mawr in Anglesey, a head appears around the open door. 'May I have a look?' the polite lady enquires, so again it's time for a guided tour. But I never get tired of talking excitedly about the Airstream.

The lady's husband later appears, as does the warden, the assistant warden, the man and lady next door... we should have sold tickets, we could have made a mint!

Tuesday

It wouldn't be Wales without some rain, and it does. It's time to head back to Warwick.

The mood in the car is sombre not helped by the fact I have dented the Airstream against a parked car.

(It has since been repaired, surprisingly quickly and easily,

using panels sent from the States, but more of that in a future issue - Ed)

I reflect on reactions to the Airstream; either American-style over-excitement, or a very disinterested British-style studied indifference.

Back at Warwick, the warm welcome of super wardens Terry and Wenda Turrell make up for the bad day, and it's time to start emptying my dream van.

As I open the exterior locker door on the Airstream, I admire how it's built, using stainless steel piano hinges. Opening the plastic-hinged battery box door to my own caravan, it once again falls off. I sigh.

Hopefully I've given you a good overview of the UK-spec Airstreams. Michael Hold from the importers is always very enthusiastic about these iconic vans and now I can see why! □



Derek & Lynne
Caravanners
Derek and Lynne came over for a peek at the Airstream and enthused, 'We absolutely love it, wow!'



Rohan and Suzanne
Passers-by
Rohan and Suzanne from Worcestershire said, 'This is really amazing, we love it.'



John Wheeler
Motorcycling correspondent for the Irish Times, John commented, 'This really is something special.'



Farmer Evans
'I just had to come and have a look for myself, see. Well, you can't peek through the windows to be nosy, can you?'