



**Technical**

RRP	£14,985 (inc del £495)
Internal length	5.13m (16ft 10in)
Shipping length	6.79m (22ft 3 1/2in)
Overall width	2.2m (7ft 3in)
Overall height	1.94m (6ft 4 1/2in)
Internal headroom	1.94m (6ft 4 1/2in)
MIRO	1130kg (22.1cwt)
MTPLM	1350kg (26.5cwt)
Payload	220kg (4.32cwt)
Berths	4



Fleetwood Meridien 520 EB

**VERDICT**

Construction	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Towability	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Usability	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Living and sleeping	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Kitchen	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Washroom	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Lighting & electrics	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
VERDICT	■ ■ ■ ■ ■

# FLEETWOOD'S NEW LINE

ROB MCCABE DOESN'T QUITE GO FROM POLE TO POLE, BUT GIVES THIS NEW MERIDIEN (SIC) A FULL APPRAISAL

**T**HERE'S a new broom sweeping through Fleetwood, and it's not one that wants to dwell on tradition. The small, Suffolk-based manufacturer has done some good business on the back of its venerable Colchester range of tourers for three decades or so, but Fleetwood itself is the first to admit that the time has come for the long-running clubman-class caravans to take their place in the history books.

The replacement is the Meridien... and

you can tell just by looking at it that it's very much the product of the 21st century. The five-strong line-up, new from the ground up for 2006, features the same, highly distinctive, snoop-nosed front end that has distinguished the most recent products to come out of the Suffolk factory of Fleetwood's Slovenian lords and masters, Adria (not to mention last year's Colchesters, too).

The four-berth 520 EB, with a centre kitchen and big washroom at the back, is

sure to attract attention among family buyers. Let's see, then, how it fares under closer scrutiny.

**Construction**

In a world populated by caravans that look pretty much the same, just how refreshing is this, exactly? My immediate first impression of its steep, pointy profile was to conjure up an image of the high-speed TGV trains that gallop across France at such shattering speeds.

The go-faster image is continued round at the back, where the full-height ABS panel features a prominent spoiler at roof height. Quite a looker, then, and Fleetwood hasn't spoiled the party by inviting along some low-rent steel wheels: tasty alloys are standard, complete with Al-Ko Secure wheel lock receivers for the optional lock.

It's a very nicely finished-off caravan, inside and out. Panel fit is good and even throughout, with no nasty surprises lurking behind locker doors (which themselves are secured by hefty metal stays).

I did wonder if I'd ever be able actually to see the washroom, due to a door catch of Muffin the Mule-like stubbornness. I got there eventually, but resorted to leaving the door ajar for most of the test because the thing never did get any easier to open. One assumes a dealer's pre-delivery inspection would nip this in the bud.

To help ensure what's yours remains yours, the Sold Secure-approved Thiefbeaters security system is fitted as standard.

**Towability**

Once again, it's noseweight that dominates our thoughts here. Use all of the generous 220kg payload and the Meridien will weigh a relatively unthreatening 1350kg.

**“The twin-dinette layout is an enduring design, and with good reason”**

However, under the guidelines we operate, that means ensuring your towcar's maximum noseweight figure is 95kg or greater: a Freelander or X-Trail would do you proud but, if you'd rather tow with a lower-slung saloon, you need to aim for the giddy heights of such as an Audi A8.

As is increasingly the norm, an Al-Ko hitch stabiliser is standard.

**Usability**

Blimey, can you imagine a Fleetwood Colchester not even having carpets? The totally carpet-free environment of the vinyl-parquet floored Meridien will come as a surprise to many would-be buyers stepping indoors for the first time but, once the initial shock has worn off, it's a state of affairs that should be welcomed

warmly, thanks to its ease of cleaning and low maintenance. There's plenty of room in one of the bedlockers for a nice rug, should you want a soft landing for your toes on an evening.

The bedlockers themselves benefit from front-opening hatches, although they'd be all the more useful were they just that bit wider. Storage elsewhere in the caravan is acceptable rather than top-notch. The kitchen is especially a bit tight for space: none of the available apertures would pass the cereal packet test. There's a tall cupboard next to the fridge that might have done the trick, were it not over-endowed with fixed shelving.

You get a choice of TV locations, thanks to two aerial/12V/mains sockets – one by the kitchen and another on the front chest. If you prefer to listen rather than view, you're in luck: the built-in Blaupunkt stereo radio/CD offers rich, sweet sound quality.

That front chest's table top extends by way of pulling what looks like a drawer handle to release the extra panel; the top one then snicks securely into place behind it. Just the job – it's the easiest and most secure method.

Should you need the services of the free-standing table, it lives in its dedicated store just aft of the washroom, where it's held in

ABOVE: Comfortable sofas were very popular; and made into a bed over well-engineered slats, they are equally comfy







“This area looks good and works well, a lack of storage space notwithstanding”

ABOVE: Kitchen worktop can double as a TV station  
BELOW: Super rear washroom – except for lighting

place by a fastener attachment. The side dinette is fine for occasional seating, not to mention a potentially invaluable *de facto* kitchen preparation area – always a favoured use of mine (sitting down with a glass of wine to prepare a salad for a summer holiday barbecue, for example. What a life, eh?).

All told, the Meridien is a high scorer for user-friendliness. The fusebox has its own, neat hatch right by the front door – surely where Mr Spock would have put it if he'd been asked to design a caravan based purely on logic. He'd approve of the space heater and water heater controls being within reach of the sofas, too.

A sealed locker on the nearside exterior wall contains a mains socket for awning use, adjacent to a gas barbecue point.

#### Living and sleeping

I'd be happy to do either on board this one (even if Mr Spock might argue that sleeping is still living, but... whatever). The sofas score high marks for comfort: they're firm without being hard, and supportive. Beefy bolsters sweep boldly around all four corners, further boosting the snugability quotient. Plenty of room for four people to get comfy, too.

The supportive upholstery makes for great beds, whether single or double. And while I don't want to get too euphoric about bed slats, the Meridien's are perhaps the best-engineered I've come across in a career that has involved more bouts of unseemly slat-wrestling than I care to remember.

There are two blown-air vents here – a boon at this time of year, and certainly very welcome during the course of the test, which coincided with sub-zero night-time temperatures. With the space heater switched on to its lowest electric setting, the chill was always kept at bay.

The side dinette transforms quickly into a very good single bed; and it's an altogether straightforward operation to erect the Pullman-style bunk above it. During the day, the ladder and wooden safety panels are stashed in a front bedlocker.

#### Kitchen

This area looks good and works well, a lack of storage space notwithstanding. With a Spinflo Caprice spark-ignited cooker, latest Dometic PowerFridge and Omnivent electric extractor fan at your disposal, you're not sold short on the equipment front. The large-capacity fridge is a beauty, with a thoughtfully-designed interior that maximises the available space.

The multi-adjustable, swivelling 12V lights are just what a kitchen needs: you can aim the light where it's most needed, meaning that you stand at least a fighting chance of being able to see that your sizzling garlic's not turning brown.

There's a neat little square of work surface – which would soon be eaten up if you decided to plonk the telly on it, as Fleetwood is suggesting you may want to by fitting one of the two mains/aerial/12V socket clusters here.

You can fold the tap down on to the recessed drainer and lower the glass lid for more flush-fitting surface. But I'd leave it



raised and use the drainer as work/serving space: that way, the sink and tap are both readily at your disposal.

One of the two drawers above the heater has a cheap, glued-in cutlery tray that has been slapped down irritatingly squint: a minor point in the great scheme of things, but it's there, staring defiantly up at you, every time you open the drawer...

#### Washroom

Wow... a shower with sufficient trays to enable one's assorted ablutive fluids to be kept close at hand – yet another example of Fleetwood thinking through the little things that so often go unnoticed by others. The shower itself is a sealed cylindrical unit with a smart, stainless-steel riser rail and one-piece mixer tap: if you shower on board, this one won't be found wanting.

It's a decently sized washroom, so all the more disappointing that it's not better-lit. One light in the shower and another near the wash-hand basin just doesn't do enough to lift the gloom at night time.

A generous area of open shelving is backed up by a big cupboard under the basin, but this unit's single door takes up two-thirds of the width of the cupboard, making it awkward to reach behind and access whatever's stashed there. Two doors, please...

#### Lighting and electrics

Having just said that the washroom could use a dash more illumination, it's worth reinforcing that the rest of the caravan is extremely well catered for in this regard. As well as a quartet of multi-directional 12V lights in the front lounge, there's a pair of candle-style mains lights. The two ceiling-mounted dome lights have a two-position setting, giving you a choice of quite bright and a wee bit brighter.

The two sunken 12V lights in the side dinette are positioned to ensure that both the occupant of the bed and the bunk above has a reading light each.

All the cabling and switches are tidily finished off – and it would be rude not to mention the splendidly-sited fusebox again.

#### Verdict

At £14,490 with a £495 'delivery' charge whacked on, this is essentially a 15-grand caravan. That's expensive. Having said that, it's a stylish, nicely-built tourer that's not-quite-but-almost free of flaws.

If Fleetwood can keep up this standard of presentation across all its ranges, it looks like that new broom could be busy sweeping for a long time yet.



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