



Star of the two-berths?

FLEETWOOD FIRST INTRODUCED THE 'EUROSTAR' LOOK ON ITS TOP HERITAGE RANGE. **ROB MCCABE** CHECKS OUT ITS SMALLEST INCARNATION, ON 2005'S COLCHESTER 380-2

There aren't that many caravans that stand out significantly from their neighbours on site. This one does, though. You'll be able to spot the pointy-nosed 2005 Fleetwood Colchester from 200 paces away on a busy site in the dead of night, one eye blindfolded etc. Despite the new look,

Colchesters have enjoyed a reputation in recent years for being well-equipped but resolutely mainstream caravans: has this style injection been enough to give them added sales appeal in a corner of the market fiercely contested by some first-class rivals?

The 380-2 promises all this, plus an

all-in length under 19ft for those who need or desire a smaller caravan.

Here's its first test.

Construction

No surprises here: two-piece aluminium sidewalls with ABS panels at front and rear, the former bearing the distinctive

snout-nosed profile that's become such a recognisable signature of Fleetwood and its sibling Adria range. Full credit, though, for a very nicely finished-off caravan, with high-quality workmanship in evidence outside and in.

Five-spoke alloy wheels complete an attractive exterior, with black-edged side windows making the pure white body stand out even more. Those increasingly ubiquitous giveaways of a 21st-century caravan of a certain status – the Al-Ko hitch stabiliser and the all-or-nothing handbrake – are both here. Heavy-duty corner steadies give a strong foothold.

Over on the outside, the usual services – water pump, battery box, water heater cowl and cassette loo hatch – are ranged in line order. The two waste outlets sensibly terminate here, too; and the kitchen waste pipe is of smooth-bore construction, so those few grains of rice that never made it to your tummy will at least make it as far as the waste container and not be condemned to a life sentence stuck in a corrugated pipe somewhere on your caravan's underside.

Towability

Load the Colchester to its maximum and you'll be towing 1250kg which, multiplied by 7%, gives an ideal noseweight of a hefty 87kg. So although a Vauxhall Vectra CDTi estate would make a willing and very able towcar, likewise a compact SUV such as Suzuki's Grand Vitara, neither has a noseweight figure bigger than 78kg, so for absolute security on tow you need either Citroën's C5 Estate or a size-up SUV such as the post-1998 Frontera Sport.

The 380-2's compact bodyshell makes it easy to manoeuvre through towns and on twistier roads; and with a big window on the rear wall at the kitchen, you'll get uninterrupted see-through vision if you're at the wheel of a vehicle with an elevated driving position.

With its hitch stabiliser keeping a steady hand on things, the Colchester promises an altogether comfortable time of it on the road.

Usability

If you like to keep your caravan looking just-so when touring, welcome to your dream home. A massive wardrobe, massive kitchen cupboards, another massive one on the nearside dresser, a massive amount of space in the bedlockers (with massive, opening front hatches to gain access) and a massive gas locker mean that you can easily give your friends and neighbours the impression that you're following a massively minimalist lifestyle, with all your worldly goods stashed out of sight.

The overhead locker doors, secured

by sturdy metal stays, will withstand many years of being opened to hide yet more things out of the way. In one of them, you'll be greeted by the sight of a fitted stereo radio/CD player, which I'm sure sounds very nice: but the one on our test caravan didn't want to play ball, so I can't confirm this.

The 380-2 gained a tick in a particular section of my scoresheet that has stayed blank in so many tests recently. Yes, let's hear it for separate blinds and flyscreens that can be pressed into service at the same time, rather than the trendy-but-useless variants that converge on each other from top and bottom. A summer's touring without any midges or mozzies getting in at night? Yup, it can still be done.

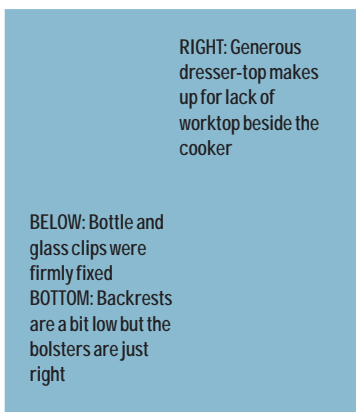
A two-berth caravan isn't destined to see many muddy-booted kids trudging through it; so, while a fixed carpet is always less than well-received by Yours Truly, it's perhaps not a huge priority among the kind of buyers Fleetwood is hoping to attract for this model. The carpet feels long-lasting and looks good: it's a sensible colour that

won't show every last crumb or smudge.

The nearside wall boasts a sealed wet locker with a mains socket (also weather-protected), while if you find yourself on one of the increasing number of sites that allow gas barbecues only, you're in luck: the Colchester has a socket for one of those, too. Wonder who'll be the first dealer or manufacturer to include a gas barbecue to go with this fitment that, I wouldn't mind betting, goes unused in most cases?

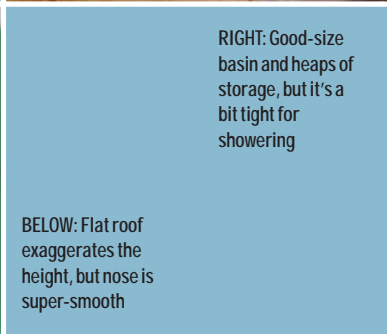
The front chest of drawers features the usual, seriously useful extendable table top; but it's been executed particularly well here. Pull the top handle and out comes the extension; it then slots neatly and securely into place adjoining the regular dresser top, with zero risk of it being dislodged. Very user-friendly and very sensible. There is, of course, a freestanding table, too – it lives in a bespoke house by the wardrobe, roomy enough to accommodate some other stuff as well. Not that you're going to be struggling to find stowage space in this thing, mind.

"it's a very well-made, sensibly specified two-berth"



RIGHT: Generous dresser-top makes up for lack of worktop beside the cooker

BELOW: Bottle and glass clips were firmly fixed
BOTTOM: Backrests are a bit low but the bolsters are just right



RIGHT: Good-size basin and heaps of storage, but it's a bit tight for showering

BELOW: Flat roof exaggerates the height, but nose is super-smooth



caravan test

RIGHT: Alloy wheels are standard

BELOW: Yet more storage behind the toilet



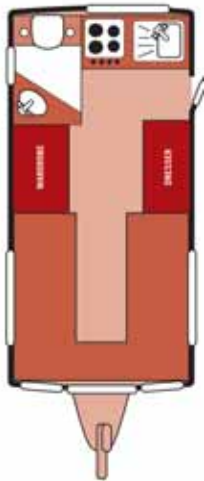
ABOVE: Double bed is huge even before you remove the chest

LEFT: Super wet locker houses shielded power point for outdoors

TECHNICAL	
RRP	£13,995
Internal length	4m (13ft 3 1/2in)
Shipping length	5.7m (18ft 9in)
Overall width	2.21m (7ft 3in)
Overall height	2.72m (8ft 11in)
Int headroom	1.94m (6ft 4 1/2in)
MIRO	1045kg
MTPLM	1250kg
User payload	205kg
Berths	2

VERDICT	
Construction	●●●●●
Towability	●●●●●
Usability	●●●●●
Living & Sleeping	●●●●●
Kitchen	●●●●●
Washroom	●●●●●
Lighting & Electrics	●●●●●
VERDICT	●●●●●

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Living and sleeping

Big, substantial bolsters at either end of each sofa do a great job of encouraging you to lounge a while, and there's plenty of support from the squabs. Pity the backrests aren't up to the rest of the ensemble: they're just a bit too short for my liking. It still passes muster as a very comfy lounge, but another couple of inches behind my back would have made a tangible difference.

Those substantial kneerolls are all very well during the waking hours but, when pressed into service to form part of the double mattress at night, they make their presence felt rather too obviously, no matter how you rearrange them (not an issue in single-bed mode). Again, I accept that this will worry some more than others: I commend a shoes-off showroom test-bed session.

That front chest is proving to be a bit of a smart-alec in this test – it does something else clever, too. Unbolt it, and it lifts off completely and sits under the pull-out slats, providing a double bed that verges on the gratuitously large: at 6ft 4in by 6ft 1in, it's almost as wide as it is long. Never mind a double bed, you could get four in there without a struggle... which is probably a good point at which to move on.

Kitchen

The storage space we've covered. In fact, there's so much, some could well have been used to provide a pull-out wire basket or vegetable drawer. What there ain't a lot of, though (to be frank, there's none), is work space. But then you have the huge nearside dresser top to help you out within two paces.

I wasn't that enamoured by the lighting provision, either. Two 12V downlighters are sensibly sited above the hob and sink respectively, but they don't cast a very substantial glow and the nearest alternative source of light is the dome light on the roof towards the middle of the caravan.

The washroom door is hinged on the right, thus opening out in front of the cooker. A minor irritant, yes, but some left-side hinging action would have negated it.

No complaints about cooking and chilling facilities: Country Leisure hob/grill/oven and a 77-litre Dometic Powerfridge with full-width freezer compartment are state-of-the-art fitments. There's an overhead extractor fan, too.

Washroom

Storage? Yes, lots. Two mirrors as well, so there's no escape from how you look the morning after that late night in the clubhouse. The shower you'll no doubt be looking forward to will be best taken in the site block: there's not much room in this one, and many owners may not choose to liberate copious amounts of water and condensation in a room where textured surfaces prevail over smooth plastic ones.

The big ceiling dome light does a good job, while the blown-air heating is a boon for chilly autumn or winter trips. There's a nice, big towel rail, too – often overlooked in the wee room.

Lighting and electrics

At first glance, you'd be forgiven for thinking you have just the one TV viewing

station – on the nearside dresser top – which is fair enough. But look... move the sofa bolsters nearest the front, and another one, otherwise totally hidden, hoves into view. That boosts the number of mains sockets on the 380-2 to three: four if you include the one in the wet locker. More than enough.

The Carver heater is both gas and electric-powered: with blown-air outlets, too, the compact Colchester warms up in no time – a welcome attribute, given the less than balmy conditions of our test.

All controls are conveniently sited on board: the electric function for the heater on the wardrobe sidewall, and the water heater just below it, at floor level. The fusebox is at the back of that huge wardrobe.

Plenty of lights are dotted about the place; all 12V apart from two mains wall lamps at the front. The 12V fitments don't exactly chuck out stacks of illumination, so there's perhaps scope for a bit of a lighting boost – especially in the kitchen. A *soupeçon* of light under the big dresser top wouldn't go amiss, either.

Verdict

Fleetwood has added a distinctive, modern-looking and stylish exterior to what remains an unashamedly conservative caravan: the interior treatment lacks the sparkle you'd find in, for example, a current Swift Group product in a similar price range.

But it's a very well-made, sensibly specified two-berth, let down only by arguably poor kitchen workspace and a lack of bright lighting towards the rear, things that might not concern you at all.