



# Re-Volvo

## SPOTLIGHT SHINES AGAIN ON ONE OF CARAVANNING'S MOST SUPPORTIVE CAR MANUFACTURERS

**O**NE OF caravanning's most supportive car makers, Volvo, has won the 24th Caravan Club Towcar of the Year competition with its V50 D5 Sport. The competition took place, as usual, at the Millbrook Proving Ground in Bedfordshire and included very comprehensive towing tests and assessments of 'caravanability'. Volvo – which picked up three trophies in last year's event – beat off competition from 41 other cars entered for the Centenary event.

Other 2007 Class winners were a Kia Rio 1.5 CRDi, Fiat Sedici 1.9 Multijet, Mazda6 Diesel Estate, Subaru Impreza WRX 2.5 and a Mercedes-Benz E320 CDI Estate. The Subaru also won the award for All-Wheel Drive cars under 1800kg, while the top AWD car over 1800kg was the latest version of Kia's great-value Sorento – our Towcar of the Year 2006.

The winning Volvo V50 was powered by the company's well-respected five-cylinder turbodiesel engine – an updated version

of the powerplant in last year's class-winning V70 and XC70 models. Launched in May, the new 2.4-litre engine develops 350Nm of torque at just 1750rpm and was coupled to the company's Geartronic transmission. Not surprising then that our driving judges were impressed by the way the V50 accelerated with a Bailey Discovery Mars caravan (loaded to 1242kg, with 75kg noseweight) on the hook.

But speed is no good in itself, and our drivers were equally impressed with its high-speed stability. "Not a wiggle", commented one, and "exceptional performance" said another. There were no problems on the hill route, where restarting was easy and the handbrake worked well. It's obviously designed for left-hand drive in this car, but the angle of operation is not a problem here.

Relatively low running costs, for a car of this quality, were something else that helped the V50 D5 take the top spot. The only real area of criticism concerned its

load area: it would take only 85% of our 'standard load' of caravanning accessories without losing part of the seating.

Over a period of four days, 'caravanability' judges compared all the cars' usefulness in real-life situations: for instance, would they carry a typical load of caravanning paraphernalia, did they ride level with a caravan attached, and how easy was it to get to the electrics sockets? Driving judges put the cars and their caravans through a demanding series of fast track and hill route tests, comparing acceleration, braking, stability, handling and hill starting ability. Totalling the judges' numerical scores gave the six price-class winners, from which the Towcar of the Year was decided by secret ballot.

Once again the judges commented that there were no really terrible cars entered in the competition, showing yet again that the secret is to make sure car and caravan are properly matched and loaded.

For many years now the Club has enjoyed a lot of support in this competition from Bailey of Bristol and chassis makers Al-Ko. All the caravans used were current Bailey models, completely standard other than having their stabilising hitches replaced by conventional Al-Ko couplings. The thinking behind this is that a stabiliser hitch might mask any inherent instability which we thought should be brought to the attention of members.

Each car was coupled to a caravan loaded to 85% of its kerbweight, and noseweights adjusted to the lowest of three figures: the noseweight limit of the car, maximum stipulated weight for the coupling head, or 7% of the caravan's running weight.

Having said there were no awful runners this year, one or two cars struggled a bit on our hill route – which was tougher than last year. Then we were restricted to a maximum 14% gradient but this year we were able to use the 17% hill (just over 1-in-6) for restarts and parking brake tests.

Over the next seven pages you can read a distillation of our judges' views. In each section the specification tables show the class entrants in price order – not order of merit – with the winner picked out in red.

### THE WINNERS

#### CARAVAN CLUB TOWCAR OF THE YEAR 2007

Volvo V50 D5 Sport

#### Cars under £13,500

Kia Rio 1.5 CRDi

£13,501 to £16,500

Fiat Sedici 1.9 MultiJet Eleganza

£16,501 to £20,000

Mazda6 Diesel Estate TS2

2.0litre 143PS Manual

£20,001 to £25,000

Subaru Impreza WRX 2.5

£25,001 to £33,000

Volvo V50 D5 Sport

#### Over £33,000

Mercedes-Benz E320 CDI Estate

#### All-Wheel Drive

#### Categories

Under 1800kg kerbweight

Subaru Impreza WRX 2.5

Over 1800kg kerbweight

Kia Sorento 2.5 CRDi XE

Manual

## CARS UNDER £13,500

CLASS WINNER – see right

**Hyundai Getz 1.5 CRTD CDX** £10,354 as tested



**Skoda Roomster 2 1.9TDI** £13,315 as tested



**Kia Cerato 1.6 CRDi** £TBA as tested



### NOTES TO TABLES THROUGHOUT:

■ A vehicle model designation followed by (<) or (>) signifies an All-Wheel Drive vehicle with a kerbweight of less (<) or more (>) than 1800kg.

CLASS WINNER  
Kia Rio 1.5 CRDi

### Hyundai Getz 1.5 CRTD CDX

I have a lot of respect for Hyundai, but the 1.5 diesel Getz is not a towcar. It struggled to reach the legal maximum speed, it was unstable and hill starts were a no-go area. The gearing is all wrong for caravanning, it seems. At least its operating costs are low, and the Getz no doubt makes a good small solo car.

### CLASS WINNER Kia Rio 1.5 CRDi

Kia's little Rio showed you don't need to spend a fortune to buy a useful towcar. The 1.5-litre diesel Rio always felt in control and left the driver feeling confident even when crosswinds gave it a good buffeting. The gearbox is well sorted, the hill start was easy and the handbrake held car and caravan rock steady on our tough 17% hill. Acceleration was acceptable rather than being in the 'ball of fire' category, and the engine quiet and refined even when it was working hard. A decent load carrier too, the Rio is a worthy winner of our lowest price class.

### Skoda Roomster 2 1.9 TDI

If you can live with its odd looks, the Roomster makes an interesting little



## THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER IN RED

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	bhp/lb ft@rpm	PRICE
Hyundai Getz 1.5 CRTD CDX	978	FWD	4/1493	109/173@1900/2750	£10,354
<b>Kia Rio 1.5 CRDi</b>	<b>974</b>	<b>FWD</b>	<b>4/1493</b>	<b>109/173@1900/2750</b>	<b>£10,632</b>
Skoda Roomster 2 1.9 TDI	1067	FWD	4/1896	105/240@1800	£13,315
Kia Cerato 1.6 CRDi	1229	FWD	4/1582	115/188@2000	£TBA

MPV, powered here by VAG's ubiquitous 1.9-litre turbodiesel engine. Keep stirring the gearbox and it makes good progress with a caravan on the back, but on our test track it didn't like being buffeted by crosswinds. The engine was so free-revving that – at least on early acquaintance – it was difficult to balance engine revs and clutch bite: resulting in clutch spin or torque steer as the wheels scabbled for grip on a half-decent hill start. It's not that we'd put too much weight on the towball – we

kept to Roomster's measly 50kg noseweight limit.

### Kia Cerato 1.6 CRDi

The 1.5-litre version of the Cerato was a class winner in last year's competition, and buyers of the new 1.6 diesel will not be disappointed. It remained stable on our test track in all conditions, and on the hill route the only problem was a little wheelspin on take-off – probably avoidable with more familiarity. On the open road you can bowl along at the legal maximum speed in 5th gear.

## CARS £13,501-£16,500

CLASS WINNER – see right

**Nissan Note 1.6 SVE** £13,555 as tested



**Vauxhall Meriva Active 1.3 CDTi** £14,023 as tested



Special guest at this year's event – former F1 driver Mark Blundell, with the Fiat Sedici

### Nissan Note 1.6 SVE

I like the Note's cheeky styling, and the shape is practical as well as trendy. But it's a bit slow with a caravan on the back compared with other 1.6s, possibly because the gearing is a bit high. That would also account for the fact that it would only just hold 60mph in 5th gear when towing, and explain its poor performance in the hill starts, where there was too much clutch slip. The Note was also one of several cars on which we found it difficult to attach a breakaway cable.

### Vauxhall Meriva Active 1.3 CDTi

Sorry, but the Meriva is not up to the



job – well, not in 1.3-litre diesel form anyway. Acceleration isn't too bad, given the size of the engine, but when the caravan was caught out by a crosswind the car took too long to regain control. Progress through the gears was a little laboured, too; the

ratios are okay but the change mechanism rubbery. At least the Meriva got away on our hill start, but only by slipping the clutch.

### Daihatsu Terios 1.5 SX

I had trouble getting the Terios up to

## CARS £13,501-£16,500 continued

**Daihatsu Terios 1.5 SX**  
£14,630 as tested



**Kia Magentis 2.0 CRDi GS (man)** £15,691 as tested



**Fiat Sedici 1.9 Multijet Eleganza**  
£15,836 as tested



the legal limit (60mph) with a caravan on the back, though I have to say it was stable enough once I got there. It's noisy and the ride was spoilt by constant pitching; but the brakes worked well and on the hill start it performed better than a lot of other cars. Caravanability judges pointed out that you can't open the rear door when a caravan is hitched.

**Kia Magentis 2.0 CRDi GS Manual**

Kia's mid-range saloon didn't feel too happy with a caravan on the back, I thought, with relatively soft suspension upsetting the ride and handling. In terms of stability it wasn't too bad, and the brakes were up to scratch, but there are better towcars available at this price. The Magentis boot swallowed about three quarters of our caravanning kit.

**CLASS WINNER**  
**Fiat Sedici 1.9 MultiJet Eleganza**

One of the great surprises in this year's competition, the little Sedici is one of those cars you want to drive enthusiastically, and it pays off. The little Fiat (actually it's made by Suzuki) stormed up our test track's long 14% gradient in the third of its six gears, braked nicely to a halt when asked to do so and

handled a 17% stop and restart with no problem. Rear end styling makes the Sedici a useful load carrier – the test car took the whole of our typical load with all seats available – and the only thing I disliked about its styling was the double A-pillar at the front end, which obstructs the forward view. Operating costs are reasonable, given the added complication of 4x4 transmission.

### THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER IN RED

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	bhp/lb ft@rpm	PRICE
Nissan Note 1.6 SVE	1054	FWD	4/1598	109/113@4400	£13,555
Vauxhall Meriva Active 1.3 CDTi	1142	FWD	4/1248	74/126@2500	£14,023
Daihatsu Terios 1.5 SX (-)	1012	4WD	4/1495	103/103@4400	£14,630
Kia Magentis 2.0 CRDi GS (man)	1335	FWD	4/1991	138/225@1800-2500	£15,691
<b>Fiat Sedici 1.9 Multijet Eleganza (-)</b>	<b>1131</b>	<b>F/4WD</b>	<b>4/1910</b>	<b>120/206@2050</b>	<b>£15,836</b>

## CARS £16,501-20,000

**CLASS WINNER – see right**

**Kia Magentis 2.7 V6 (auto)**  
£17,691 as tested



**VW Jetta 2.0 SE TDI (man)**  
£17,796 as tested



**Mazda5 2.0d Sport (140bhp, man)**  
£18,390 as tested



**CLASS WINNER**  
Mazda6 Estate

**Kia Magentis 2.7 V6 Auto**

A big car for the money, but the V6 automatic Magentis is not a caravanners' car. It may make a reasonable motorway cruiser solo, but with a caravan on the back (and using the 80kg maximum permissible noseweight) it was unstable and uncomfortable. The handbrake wouldn't hold on our tough 17% gradient and only the (standard) traction control enabled it to get away on the slope.

**Volkswagen Jetta 2.0 SE TDI**

I gave the Jetta high marks all round, but especially for its high-speed stability. When I was driving this car there were high crosswinds but the VW always stayed well in control. There's a nice six-speed gearbox to make the most of Volkswagen's well-respected 2.0-litre diesel engine, powerful brakes and a handbrake that held a heavy caravan well (though it needed a good tug). Hill starts were not easy, though, with traction control saving the day.



### THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER IN RED

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	bhp/lb ft@rpm	PRICE
Kia Magentis 2.7 V6 (auto)	1305	FWD	6/2656	185/182@4000	£17,691
VW Jetta 2.0 SE TDI (man)	1386	FWD	4/1968	140/236@1750-2500	£17,796
Mazda5 2.0d Sport (140bhp, man)	1305	FWD	4/1998	145/265@2000	£18,390
VW Golf GT TSI (5dr, man)	1278	FWD	4/1300	170/177@1750-4750	£18,808
Skoda Octavia Estate L&K 2.0 TDI	1296	FWD	4/1968	140/236@1750-2500	£18,960
SsangYong Kyron 2.0 SE (man) (-)	1701	R/4WD	4/1998	141/228@1800-2750	£19,256
<b>Mazda6 Estate TS2 2.0d (140bhp, man)</b>	<b>1292</b>	<b>FWD</b>	<b>4/1998</b>	<b>145/265@2000</b>	<b>£19,800</b>

**Mazda5 2.0 litre Diesel Sport 143PS Manual**  
Its useful shape may endear this

sliding-door MPV to some caravanners but its performance was pretty average all round, including its

## CARS £16,501-£20,000 continued

**VW Golf GT TSI (5dr, man)**  
£18,808 as tested



**Skoda Octavia Estate L&K 2.0TDI** £18,960 as tested



**SsangYong Kyron 2.0 SE (man)** £19,256 as tested



**Mazda6 Estate TS2 2.0d**  
£19,800 as tested



use as a load carrier. I didn't find the ride at all comfortable with a caravan on the back, and it restarted only grudgingly on the (admittedly damp) hill route as it struggled to get a grip.

### Volkswagen Golf GT TSI Manual

If there is one car that deserves the 'GT' moniker, this is it. The latest Golf is an absolute delight to drive enthusiastically, with performance from a 1390cc engine that is nothing short of astonishing. By bolting both a turbocharger and a supercharger on to the engine, VW has produced a car that will accelerate to well over 70mph with a caravan on the back yet trundle along at 60mph at just 2400rpm in top (6th) gear.

Best of all, it still pulls when you put your foot down! I didn't detect any instability at speed, and any hint of wheelspin on take-off was kept in check by the traction control system. The VW was only narrowly beaten into second place in its class by the Mazda6 Estate - which is certainly a more practical car for the average caravanner's needs. The VW would not accommodate our typical load without sacrificing one of the seats.

### Skoda Octavia Estate L&K 2.0 TDI

The Octavia has the right credentials, with VAG's renowned 2.0-litre diesel engine and a six-speed manual gearbox, but don't expect to be making much use of 6th gear when towing. Acceleration was a bit leisurely too, and the hill start slow. But don't be put off; the main thing is that it makes a stable towcar, it's a practical shape that took all our 'standard load' with all seats in use and the cabin is nicely appointed. If you do make a hash of your hill start, at least you can rely on a handbrake that does its stuff.

### SsangYong Kyron 2.0 SE Manual

Stability isn't a problem with the Kyron, even at high speed - but it took time to get there, and the ride was pretty uncomfortable with a big caravan on the back. Four-wheel drive is selectable, but even in 2WD the Kyron hauled its caravan up the 17% slope from a standing start. Not that we were standing for very long, because parking brake performance was very poor. The Kyron did gain marks for its 117kg noseweight limit.

### CLASS WINNER

### Mazda6 Diesel Estate TS2 2.0 litre 143PS Manual

In a way I'd describe this car as 'ordinary' - but I'm not being disparaging when I say that. I mean it isn't flashy; it doesn't shout 'look at all these bells and whistles'. It just gets on with the job. I must say it makes a mighty fine job of towing a caravan, with faultless stability, one of the best handbrakes in this year's competition and a gearbox with six well-chosen ratios and a nice action that makes you want to make the most of them. A sensible shape, with plenty of carrying capacity and a decent (75kg) noseweight limit makes this a great car for towing. In that respect it's actually quite extraordinary - and good value for money.

### Thanks

The Caravan Club is indebted to Bailey of Bristol for supplying all the caravans used in this competition, and for providing staff on site throughout the event. Simon Howard and Colin Coke ensured the caravans were correctly ballasted, noseweights kept in trim and that nothing had fallen off during our punishing track tests. Glenn Jenkinson from Al-Ko ensured brakes were adjusted, wheels kept tight and all undergear properly fettled. For the record, all the caravans returned unscathed.

## CARS £20,001-£25,000

CLASS WINNER - see right

**Kia Sorento 2.5 CRDi XE (man)** £20,218 as tested



**Mitsubishi L200 Warrior**  
£21,574 as tested



CLASS AND ALL-WHEEL DRIVE WINNER OVER 1800KG  
Kia Sorento

### ALL-WHEEL DRIVE OVER 1800KG CATEGORY WINNER

### Kia Sorento 2.5 CRDi XE Manual

Established Club members will know that the Sorento was last year's Towcar of the Year. This year the returning champ was just beaten into second place in its price class, putting it out of contention for the main prize, but it took a category award for all-wheel drive cars with kerbweights over 1800kg. It is still a great towcar, not only because of its towing attributes but because it feels like a quality package. It offers a comfortable ride, the 2.5-litre diesel engine is refined, and the selectable four-wheel drive is



easy to engage when you need it. Stability is faultless and, although the Sorento isn't the fastest AWD around, it won't embarrass you at the traffic lights. Other things that gained the Sorento its high marks included its

load carrying capacity and a hefty noseweight limit - 112kg.

### Mitsubishi L200 Warrior Double Cab

The L200 has shed its truck-like image

## CARS £20,001-£25,000 continued

CLASS AND ALL-WHEEL DRIVE  
UNDER 1800KG WINNER  
Subaru Impreza

CLASS WINNER – see right

**Subaru Impreza WRX 2.5 (5dr)** £21,605 as tested



**Mitsubishi Grandis 2.0 Di-D** £21,895 as tested



**Volvo V50 2.0 SE** £22,033 as tested



**SsangYong Rexton 270 SE (auto)** £22,741 as tested



**Toyota Avensis T180 Tourer** £23,015 as tested



**Ford S-Max Titanium** £23,370 as tested



and now provides an attractive, car-like cab grafted on to a cargo bed that will make a lot of sense for some users. It's no ball of fire but it offered rock-solid towing at speed and a choice of rear or four-wheel drive and high or low ratios. Power comes from a 2.5-litre slogger of a diesel four-pot that's still on the noisy side; but the gearbox ratios are just right – let down only by a rather clunky change. The Warrior will take up to 115kg on the ball (provided the coupling head is up to that); but check the towball position – we found it on the high side.

### CLASS WINNER AND ALL-WHEEL DRIVE UNDER 1800KG CATEGORY WINNER

**Subaru Impreza WRX 2.5**  
Think the Subaru Impreza WRX is a boy racers' car? Well maybe, but try towing a caravan with it and you may be shocked to find just how much sense it makes. Four-wheel drive ensures there is always plenty of grip; the five-speed gearbox has a lovely action and is superbly mated to an engine with power and torque to spare; and firm suspension means nice flat cornering if you want to tow at high speed. You probably will want to watch out for crosswinds as well as speed cameras. Although sudden gusts don't really upset the Impreza's handling, they can make it feel a bit nervous. It has to be said that few people will buy an Impreza WRX as a towcar... but if you're tempted, you won't be disappointed.

### Mitsubishi Grandis 2.0 Di-D

Like most Mitsubishis the diesel-powered Grandis is pleasant enough to drive, but putting a caravan on the back upset the ride and made it uncomfortable. Gearbox ratios are well chosen for towing, however, and the handbrake, despite its long travel, held well. Good news is that the Grandis would seat six, even with our typical set of caravanning accessories on board.

### Volvo V50 2.0 SE

So much like our Towcar of the Year in some respects and yet so different in others. Bodyshape is the same, of course, so there are still the load-carrying attributes; and the 2.0 SE was



### THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER IN RED

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	bhp/lb ft@rpm	PRICE
Kia Sorento 2.5 CRDi XE (man) (returning champion)(>)	1748	R/4WD	4/2497	138/253@1850-2500	£20,218
Mitsubishi L200 Warrior Double Cab (>)	1585	R/4WD	4/2477	134/231@2000	£21,574
Subaru Impreza WRX 2.5 (5dr)	1194	4WD	4/2457	227/236@3600	£21,605
Mitsubishi Grandis 2.0 Di-D	1454	FWD	4/1968	134/228@1750	£21,895
Volvo V50 2.0 SE	1241	FWD	4/1999	145/136@4500	£22,033
SsangYong Rexton 270 SE (auto) ( )	1738	R/4WD	5/2696	163/251@2400	£22,741
Toyota Avensis T180 Tourer D-4D (man)	1241	FWD	4/2231	175/295@2000-2600	£23,015
Ford S-Max Titanium	1473	FWD	4/1997	138/250@2000	£23,370
Volkswagen Passat Estate Sport TDI DPF DSG (168bhp)	1521	FWD	4/1968	170/258@1750-2500	£23,713
Renault Laguna Sport Tourer 2.0 dCi GT (175 FAP)	1245	FWD	4/1995	175/265@1750	£24,000
Kia Sorento 2.5 CRDi (facelift) (>)	1748	R/4WD	4/2497	168/393@4500	£TBA

stable at all times. The problem is its engine and (manual) gearbox are just not suited to caravan towing. Maximum power and torque are produced at 6000 and 4500rpm respectively, making hill starts difficult. The situation was not helped by the V50's handbrake, which didn't seem to hold as well as that on the overall winner.

### SsangYong Rexton 270 SE Auto

The Rexton has price on its side and it's adaptable: fascia-mounted push-buttons give you a choice of two or four-wheel drive and high or low ratio in 4WD. That's the good news. But on the down side it is noisy, the ride is wallowy and I wasn't convinced it felt totally in control at speed.

### Toyota Avensis T180 Tourer 2.2L D-4D Manual

I marked the Avensis higher than some other driving judges. I had no stability problems on the test track, I liked the smooth power delivery from Toyota's 2.2-litre diesel engine, and I

found I could use all six ratios of the manual gearbox. The hill start was slow, but the handbrake worked really well. To keep things absolutely fair, Towcar of the Year entrants run with caravans not fitted with any type of stabiliser. Our judges noted that, with the Toyota-approved towbar on this car, a caravan fitted with an Al-Ko hitch-mounted stabiliser would foul the Avensis bumper.

### Ford S-Max Titanium

Like Vauxhall's Meriva, the Ford S-Max is probably a likeable and very usable small MPV when used as a solo car, but as a towcar it has some serious drawbacks. A weak clutch meant it almost failed to restart on our test hill, and I think the odd-shaped handbrake is an ergonomic nightmare when there's a caravan to hold and you need to give it a real tug. There were mixed views about how well it held. The S-Max is not a good load carrier unless you lose the third row of seats, but that's the price you pay for buying an MPV. And there's no spare wheel – you get a mini compressor instead.

**CARS £20,001-£25,000 continued**

**VW Passat Estate Sport  
TDI DPF DSG**  
£23,713 as tested



**Renault Laguna Sport  
Tourer 2.0 dCi GT 175 FAP**  
£24,000 as tested



**Kia Sorento 2.5 CRDi  
(facelift) £TBA as tested**



**Volkswagen Passat Estate Sport TDI DPF 170 PS DSG**

This is a lovely car all round – comfortable, spacious, really well put together – and it went like stink. Putting a caravan on the back didn't seem to slow it down much and the car remained stable enough, but the problem was wheelspin. Even though traction control is standard, the initial spin made hill starts difficult and wet grass or a muddy rally field would not be good news. I had no problem with the push-button electronic parking brake, though others said it sometimes seemed reluctant to disengage.

**Renault Laguna Sports Tourer 2.0 dCi GT 175 FAP**

The French maker squeezes 360lb ft of torque at just 1750rpm from its 2.0-litre diesel engine, and attaches that to a good six-speed gearbox to make the Laguna Sport a nice package.

Third gear was usable all the way up our test track's long, curving 14% slope, on which nearly every other car needed 2nd. And on the high-speed track the car would take 6th gear at 60mph and still accelerate when you put your foot down. Torque steer can be a problem if you don't get the revs right on take-off, but on the hill restart Renault's automatically-disengaging electronic parking brake was a godsend.

**Kia Sorento Face-Lift 2.5 CRDi Auto**

The face-lifted Kia Sorento 2.5 auto maintained most of the high standards set by our Towcar of the Year 2006 winner, but this time it didn't walk away with the big prize. Although it still felt well 'planted' on the road, this year's entry lost marks on my score sheet for a slight 'wobble' at high speed, though I seemed to be in a minority here. The revised engine certainly shifts the car

along at a pace. No price was available as we went to press but you can assume that the Sorento will still be competitively priced for such a well put together towcar.



**Meet the judges**

**Caravanability (above)**

John Bramham, Tom Collin, Mick Farr, Nick Haynes

**Driving (main pic right)**

Barry Williams, The Caravan Club Magazine; John Parsons, freelance; Michael Le Caplain, freelance; Mark Sutcliffe, Which Caravan; David Motton, Practical Caravan; Steve Rowe, Caravan Magazine

**CARS £25,001-£33,000**

**CLASS WINNER – see right**

**Volvo V50 D5 Sport**  
£25,059 as tested



**Chrysler 300C 3.0 CRD  
Saloon £26,201 as tested**



**Hyundai Santa Fe 2.2 CRTD CDX (7seat)**  
£26,289 as tested



**CLASS WINNER AND TOWCAR OF THE YEAR  
Volvo V50 D5 Sport**

Crisp acceleration thanks to a willing diesel engine and smooth-shifting five-speed automatic transmission – what else could you ask for on the open road? Well, it would help if the brakes worked confidently, if the handbrake was exceptionally easy to

use and the car never gave you any hint that it might go out of shape. The V50 Sport gives you all that, clothed in a modern-looking estate car style that Volvo calls Sportswagon. Our judges liked the fact that this car has low operating costs per mile, too, though they did point out that the swept-back styling compromises its luggage carrying ability: it took 85% of our

standard load with all seats in use. Volvo has always had a strong reputation in the field of towing, as well as build quality and safety. This car carries on the tradition in fine style.

**Chrysler 300C  
3.0 CRD Saloon**

Exterior styling may not be to everyone's taste, but the big

**Saab 9-5 1.9TiD Vector**  
£26,323 as tested



**VW Passat Est SEL FSI V6 4MOTION DSG**  
£27,218 as tested



**Peugeot 407SW Exec 2.7 V6 HDi** £27,454 as tested



**Chrysler 300C 3.0 CRD Touring** £27,674 as tested



**Toyota RAV4 T180 2.2 D-4D** £27,667 as tested



**Lexus IS220d Sport 2.2 D-4D** £28,038 as tested



## THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER IN RED

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	h/p/lb ft@rpm	PRICE
Volvo V50 D5 Sport	1242	FWD	5/2400	180/258@1750-3250	£25,059
Chrysler 300C 3.0 CRD Saloon	1624	RWD	6/2987	215/376@1600-2800	£26,201
Hyundai Santa Fe 2.2 CRTD CDX+ (7 seat)	1609	F/4WD	4/2188	148/247@1800-2500	£26,289
Saab 9-5 1.9TiD Vector	1369	FWD	4/1910	150/236@2000	£26,323
Volkswagen Passat Estate SEL FSI V6 4MOTION DSG (<)	1656	4WD	6/3168	250/236@3200	£27,218
Peugeot 407SW Executive 2.7 V6 HDi (auto)	1574	FWD	6/2720	205/330@1900	£27,454
Chrysler 300C 3.0 CRD Touring	1653	RWD	6/2987	215/376@1600-2800	£27,674
Toyota RAV4 T180 2.2 D-4D (5-dr, man)	1356	4WD	4/2231	177/295@2000-2600	£27,677
Lexus IS220d Sport 2.2 D-4D (4-dr, man)	1377	RWD	4/2231	177/295@2000-2600	£28,038
Jeep 3.0 CRD Commander (>)	2049	4WD	6/2987	251/376@1500	£31,491
Mercedes-Benz C320 CDI Estate	1428	RWD	6/2987	224/376@1600-2800	£32,923

Chrysler saloon is quite restrained inside and it's supremely comfortable. Its credentials as a towcar are good, too: big diesel engine, rear-wheel drive, automatic transmission and a high (100kg) noseweight limit. It feels a bit leisurely but it remains stable at any speed you are likely to wind it up to with a caravan on the hook. But in my opinion it was braking performance that let the car down. The footbrake felt hard and lifeless and the (foot-operated) parking brake just would not hold on our tough 17% test.

### Hyundai Santa Fe 2.2 CRTD CDX+ 7 seat

There is a proliferation of foot-operated parking brakes these days and I have nothing against them in principle; but the Santa Fe's simply wouldn't hold car and caravan on our 17% hill. That, coupled with a harsh ride, low load capacity and mixed views on high-speed stability, did not endear this car to the judges.

### Saab 9-5 1.9 TiD Vector

I was surprised this car didn't perform better, but it just wasn't happy at speed. It accelerated confidently and was comfortable enough at most ordinary speeds, but at around the legal limit the 9-5 became seriously unstable. Performance on the hills was average but the handbrake won praise for its effectiveness. Useful shape makes the 9-5 Estate a good load carrier.

### Volkswagen Passat Estate SEL FSI V6 4MOTION DSG

With 3.2 litres under the bonnet, four-wheel drive and six-speed automatic transmission, this Passat makes an awesome towcar, and there weren't many marks separating it from the class winner. I marked it down for the fierceness with which the power comes on, but the car showed faultless stability and I loved the electronic, push-button parking brake that releases itself as you squeeze the accelerator; but one judge had problems with it not disengaging properly.

### Peugeot 407SW Executive 2.7 V6 HDi Automatic

While Volvo calls its V50 a Sportswagon, Peugeot dubs this rival car SW (which, for us oldies at least, presumably stands for Station Wagon). The Peugeot is a little more expensive but has a bigger, torquier and more powerful engine, though it comes into the same insurance bracket. The Peugeot came a very close second place in this class, and on another day it could have walked off with the big prize. A lovely car all round, offering excellent acceleration and stability, a quality feel and a very practical body shape that took all our standard load with all seats in use.

### Chrysler 300C 3.0 CRD Touring

This is a big beast that you'd expect to tow well, and you'd be right. But as an estate car it doesn't hold as much as you might think, making it less practical than some competitors. There's a fair bit of Mercedes under the Chrysler's skin, including a foot-operated parking brake that didn't do it any favours; I certainly had trouble getting it to hold. Full marks for the 100kg noseweight limit, though, and rear-wheel drive should help with traction on the rally field.

### Toyota RAV4 T180 2.2 D-4D Manual

I was impressed by the latest incarnation of the RAV4, as I have been with earlier versions; but it seems other judges disagreed, because it came about halfway down the rankings. It's a very pleasant car to drive, with a willing engine and useful 6-speed gearbox, and when I was driving it always felt in control, even when buffeted by strong crosswinds. One thing that definitely lost the RAV4

## CARS £20,501-£33,000 continued

**Jeep 3.0CRD Commander**  
£31,491 as tested



**Mercedes-Benz C320 CDI Estate** £32,923 as tested



marks was the fact that you can't fully open the rear door when a caravan is attached.

### Lexus IS220D Sport 2.2 D-4D Manual

I have to say I was out of step with other driving judges, because I rated the Lexus quite highly. I liked the very torquey engine (295lb ft at 2000rpm), which provided plenty of pulling power in any of the six gears. I also praised the fact that it had a conventional handbrake – quite a rarity these days – though judges were divided over its efficacy. It's not a cheap car to buy or run, and it didn't take more than half our standard load in the boot.

### Jeep Commander 3.0CRD Limited

Partly because it seems so big, the Commander also seems leisurely in the way it takes off with a caravan behind. But the 3.0-litre V6 diesel engine has at least 2.4 tonnes of car to shift before you even consider the caravan weight, and you always have the feeling that the Commander will get you there. It's comfortable too, unlike some big 4x4s, and it seems well built. Hill starting was easy (though slow) and the package was let down by a weakish handbrake, obviously designed for left-hand drive versions and the wrong side of a very wide transmission tunnel. The noseweight limit of 140kg is a nice bonus.

### Mercedes-Benz C320 CDI Estate

In terms of sheer 'oomph' there isn't much to choose between this car and the Passat Estate in this class, and there was very little difference in the driving judges' marking. But where the VW offers the raw power of a petrol engine, the Merc has the grunt of a big diesel. VW has all-wheel drive where M-B powers the rear wheels only, but gives you seven gears(!) instead of six. The C320's powertrain is so smooth that, from inside at least, you wouldn't know it's diesel powered and it's hard to detect gearshifts if you don't look at the tachometer. Faultless stability gained it extra marks but a useless foot-operated parking brake let it down.

## CARSOVER £33,000

CLASS WINNER – see right

**Jeep Grand Cherokee 3.0 CRD** £33,991 as tested



**Volvo XC90 D5 SE**  
£37,140 as tested



**Mercedes-Benz E320 CDI Estate** £40,787 as tested



**Lexus RX350 SE-L**  
£42,981 as tested



Class-winning Mercedes with the Club's Chairman Bob Black (left), and Director General, Trevor Watson

### Jeep Grand Cherokee Overland 3.0CRD

No real problems with the Overland; it's big and heavy so you would expect it to provide a firm anchor for its caravan, and there's a 140kg noseweight limit. Somehow, though, it didn't always feel happy. The suspension is perhaps a bit soft for towing. Hill starting is a doddle, and the handbrake held well even though it's positioned for left-hand drive and you have to stretch a long way across the transmission tunnel.

### Volvo XC90 D5 SE

A very competent towcar whose performance on the test track was spoilt, in my opinion, only by some pitching at low speed. Stability was good throughout and traction (even on the tough hill start) was never any problem, even on a wet track. The foot-operated parking brake worked well, though it didn't feel as competent as some, and with all the seats in use there's precious little room for caravanning equipment.

### CLASS WINNER Mercedes-Benz E320 CDI Estate

Okay, it costs an arm and a leg, and most people will never be able to afford a new one. But you can't take anything away from the fact that the



### THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER IN RED

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	bhp/lb ft@rpm	PRICE
Jeep Grand Cherokee Overland 3.0 CRD (>)	1964	4WD	6/2987	215/376@1600	£33,991
Volvo XC90 D5 SE(>)	1759	4WD	5/2400	185/295@2000-2750	£37,140
<b>Mercedes-Benz E320 CDI Estate</b>	<b>1602</b>	<b>RWD</b>	<b>6/2987</b>	<b>224/398@1600-2400</b>	<b>£40,787</b>
Lexus RX350 SE-L (auto) (>)	1560	4WD	6/3456	272/252@4700	£42,981

big Merc shrugs off its caravan load – though personally, I found the ride a bit harsh. Maybe I was expecting too much of a car I know rides like a magic carpet when solo. The seven-speed automatic gearbox is a dream: you have to watch the rev-counter to detect when it is changing up or down. And but for its huge torque – 540lb ft from only 1600rpm – you would never guess the E320's V6 engine is diesel-fuelled.

### Lexus RX350 SE-L Auto

It's a big load carrier, it's comfortable and it handles a caravan extremely well even at speeds way beyond the UK legal limit. Even the foot-operated parking brake works, which is more than can be said of some competitors'. In fact I found the big Lexus difficult to fault in most respects other than the fact that it is a bit leisurely unless you use the auto transmission like a manual. And of course, it is very expensive.