



Zoom, zoom, zoom!

MAZDA LIGHTS UP THE TOP OF THE TOWCAR TREE

A NEW name will be engraved on The Caravan Club Towcar of the Year trophy this year: Mazda has taken TCoY 2005 honours with its Mazda6 diesel estate. At £18,700, the new champion offers practical and affordable towing for family caravanners.

It is fitted with a new 16-valve common-rail diesel engine that produces maximum torque at just 2000rpm. It's particularly quiet and refined and impressed all our judges with its flexibility and the composed way in which it handled a caravan loaded to 85% of its kerbweight.

With up to 134bhp power on tap it's no slouch, yet all drivers

commented on how comfortable the car stayed when pushed hard round the punishing Millbrook test circuit. Equally important, brake performance was good and the handbrake inspired confidence when needed.

Low operating costs (including Group 9 insurance), a useful body shape and sensible towing limits were other factors that endeared the Mazda6 to the judging panel. In a nutshell, it's a well-made and sensible towcar for the cost-conscious caravanner.

This was the 22nd year of the Club's highly-regarded competition, which this year attracted 51 entries split into 10 categories according to body type. Vehicle definitions were as used by *What Car?* magazine, who also helped with a bit of arm-twisting among the car manufacturers. *What Car?* Editor Steve Fowler was among this year's judges, drawn from a panel of experienced caravanning and motoring journalists and the Club's Events sub-Committee.

To comply with the competition's rules, most were

cars released or significantly changed within the last 12 months; but last year's class winners were invited to return to defend their 2004 titles. Of the six who did so, the Toyota Corolla, Renault Grand Espace, Subaru Forester and Volkswagen Touareg V10 held on to their class wins, and the Mitsubishi Space Star and BMW 330d Touring came very close to doing so. Other 2005 class winners were the Citroën Berlingo Multispace, Vauxhall Vectra Elite 3.0 CDTi Auto, BMW 525d SE Touring, Isuzu Rodeo Denver and Seat Altea 2.0 TDI Sport.

Former World Land Speed Record holder Richard Noble OBE joined the judges and competition organisers for the final day of testing at the Millbrook Proving Ground in Bedfordshire, and on 20 September presented the coveted class awards and overall trophy to representatives of the winning manufacturers.

There were 10 classes in this year's competition, covering cars from £11,915 to £53,750, and everything imaginable from humble

hatchbacks to mighty 4x4s. Testing was spread over four intensive days in unpredictable August weather with a number of sudden, heavy downpours. There were no disasters, however, and all but a VW Caravelle, withdrawn after it developed clutch trouble, survived the competition without bumps, scratches or mechanical failure.

Apart from their extensive towing tests by seven experienced towcar drivers, each of the cars was thoroughly assessed for its 'caravanability'. Two teams of judges looked at the cars' ability to swallow large, bulky loads such as water carriers and awning bags, and also checked ease of access to electrics sockets, the cars' attitude when hitched and provision of somewhere to attach the caravan's breakaway cable. Changes to the marking scheme this year helped refine the scoring system for the caravanability teams and should have helped produce a more meaningful result.

Over the page, Barry Williams gives a condensed report on each car.

WINNERS AT A GLANCE

CARAVAN CLUB TOWCAR OF THE YEAR 2005
Mazda6 2.0D TS²
136ps Estate

CLASS WINNERS
CARS UNDER £13,500
Citroën Berlingo Multispace Desire 2.0HDI
SMALL FAMILY CARS
Toyota Corolla T: 2.0D-4D*
FAMILY CARS
Vauxhall Vectra Elite 3.0 CDTi Auto
ESTATE CARS
Mazda6 2.0D TS² (136ps) Estate
EXECUTIVE AND LUXURY CARS
BMW 525d SE Touring
UTILITY CARS
Isuzu Rodeo Denver
MIDI MPVs
Seat Altea 2.0 TDI Sport
MPVs
Renault Grand Espace 3.0 dCi Initiale*
COMPACT 4x4s
Subaru Forester 2.0XT*
FULL SIZE 4x4s
VW Touareg V10 TDI*
*Returning champion

THANKS

The Caravan Club is very grateful to
■ Bailey of Bristol, who once again supplied and helped maintain all the caravans used in the competition
■ Al-Ko Kober for trackside support and continually checking that all caravans remained in perfect mechanical order
■ WhatCar? for help with car manufacturer liaison

WHATCAR?

towcar of the year

CARS UNDER £13,500

CLASS WINNER – see right

CITROËN BERLINGO MULTISPACE DESIRE 2.0 HDi
£11,915 as tested



MAZDA3 1.6D TS
£12,800 as tested



CITROËN C3 XTR
£12,815 as tested



SEAT IBIZA FR TDI
£13,150 as tested



MITSUBISHI SPACE STAR 1.9 DI-DS
£13,189 as tested

CLASS WINNER

Citroën Berlingo Multispace Desire 2.0 HDi

Last year a Berlingo took second place in this class; this year the Desire version was back to take the big prize. 'Lovable' isn't a word I'd normally use when talking about cars, but the cheeky little Berlingo brings a smile to my face every time I drive one. Every inch of the box-shaped body is used to provide clever storage and it took all our caravanability judges' load. Citroën's superb turbodiesel engine thrums away to provide bags of torque, and the five-speed gearbox is a delight to use. There's virtually no rear overhang so the ride never gets bouncy, and there were no qualms about traction even on steep hills. The 70kg noseweight limit should suit most, and there's a proper pigtail on Citroën's towing bracket for the breakaway cable.

Mazda3 1.6D TS

Little brother to this year's overall winner, the Mazda3 faced strong opposition in the Under £13,500 class. In my book it fared really well, with a free-rewind and torquey diesel engine and solid-as-a-rock stability. The gearbox is just right: hold on to the lower ratios and you get plenty of 'go' when you need to overtake, but once you are up to 5th gear you can trundle along nicely from 50mph. Brakes are good too, and the hillstart was easy.

Citroën C3 XTR

A fun car with lots to recommend it, but the little C3 weighs in at just 1067kg so

CLASS WINNER
Citroën Berlingo
Multispace Desire

its towing potential is limited and it took only half our 'typical load'. Having said that, it coped manfully in our track tests, remaining stable throughout and with power in reserve from the 1.4-litre turbodiesel engine.

Seat Ibiza FR TDI

Second in its class, the Ibiza has got plenty of go and has a nice combination of engine and gearbox. Third gear was usable all the way up our long 14% gradient. There was just a hint of swaying on the test track but not until I'd got above the UK speed limit; and just a little scrabbling from the front wheels when I took off on the 17% hill. A nicely put-together car with lots to recommend it for couples and families with a small caravan, but loadspace is limited unless you lower the rear seats – and the noseweight limit is only 50kg.

Mitsubishi Space Star 1.9 DI-DS

Returning champion

The Space Star didn't retain its crown this year but still got a very respectable score. A nicely sorted engine and gearbox mean it's nippy when you need to get past slower traffic but you can use 5th gear when towing at speeds as low as 50mph. A short rear overhang helps promote stability and there's a 75kg noseweight limit. The Space Star is a pretty good load carrier too, and a fine car for those with trailer tents and low-weight caravans.

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|---------------|---------|
| Citroën Berlingo Multispace Desire | 1100 | FWD | 4/1997 | 90/151@1900 | £11,915 |
| Mazda3 1.6D TS | 1169 | FWD | 4/1560 | 109/180@1750 | £12,800 |
| Citroën C3 XTR | 907 | FWD | 4/1398 | 92/147@1750 | £12,815 |
| Seat Ibiza FR TDI | 1051 | FWD | 4/1896 | 128/229@1900 | £13,150 |
| Mitsubishi Space Star 1.9 DI-DS | 1071 | FWD | 4/1870 | 115/196@1800 | £13,189 |

NOTES TO TABLES THROUGHOUT:

■ Prices are for cars as tested, including manufacturer-approved towing equipment, unless otherwise stated. Prices with a + sign indicate OTR retail, to which the (unknown at time of printing) cost of towing equipment must be added (estimate adding approx £350+ for rigid towball/electrics)

and down the hills as well as on the flat – just don't expect stunning acceleration. In normal running you'll find top (5th) gear usable for anything above 50mph when towing. The five-door Corolla swallowed only half our testers' typical load, but otherwise the car is a good practical shape and one that sits well on the

road and keeps its caravan firmly planted. Toyota's legendary reliability is a plus point.

Vauxhall Astra SRI 1.8

Accelerates like a rocket and brakes safely to a halt, at which point the handbrake works confidently. Unfortunately, in between starting



small family cars continued

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| Toyota Corolla T3 2.0 D-4D | 1148 | FWD | 4/1995 | 114/206@2000-2200 | £15,179 |
| Vauxhall Astra SRI 1.8 | 1061 | FWD | 4/1796 | 123/125@3800 | £15,715 |
| VW Golf GT TDI DSG | 1302 | FWD | 4/1968 | 138/236@1750-2500 | £20,205 |

and stopping I wasn't always happy with the Astra's road manners and it wasn't too happy to restart on the 17% hill. No problem with traction, but the clutch slipped. Like most Vauxhalls the Astra has a sensible noseweight limit – 75kg.

VW Golf GT TDI DSG

Same basic platform as the Seat Altea that won our Midi MPV class and the same superb 2.0-litre turbodiesel engine, this time coupled to VAG's six-

speed DSG automatic transmission. Super-smooth gearchanges added to superb performance all-round, but I thought the Altea's ride was better.

Caravanability judges docked marks for the car's relatively high running costs and lack of a breakaway cable anchorage.

FAMILY CARS

CLASS WINNER – see right

VAUXHALL VECTRA ELITE 3.0 CDTI AUTO
£24,845 as tested



SKODA NEW OCTAVIA 2.0 TDI
£15,754 as tested



PEUGEOT 407 SE HDi
£17,915 as tested



TOYOTA AVENSIS 2.0 D-4D T Spirit
£20,125 as tested



VOLVO S40 2.0D SE
£20,471 as tested



TOYOTA AVENSIS 2.4 T4 Auto
£21,625 as tested

CLASS WINNER
Vauxhall Vectra
Elite 3.0 CDTI Auto

CLASS WINNER

Vauxhall Vectra Elite 3.0 CDTI Auto

A 3.0-litre six-cylinder diesel engine and five-speed automatic transmission bode well for any towcar, but not all such machines will behave as well as the Vectra. The gearbox is so well sorted that there's rarely any need to shift out of 'D', roadholding was exemplary whatever the speed, and superb brakes always brought the outfit to a safe, controlled stop. Icing on the cake was a handbrake that was easy to use and held the outfit rock steady. Bad points? Lack of a proper anchorage for the breakaway cable and fairly high running costs.

Skoda New Octavia 2.0 TDI

I also had high hopes of this car right from the start, and it lost out only to the bigger-engined Vauxhall. Coupled to the super 2.0-litre turbodiesel engine (236lb ft torque from only 1750rpm) is a six-speed gearbox that you can really use. The Octavia and its caravan bowled along nicely at 60mph in 6th on the flat and I was confident all along it would not go out of shape. Fifth gear was usable from about 45mph upwards. Ride and handling were exemplary and the hillstart, apart from a little wheelspin at



the start, was accomplished easily. The New Octavia is a good load carrier too!

Peugeot 407 SE HDi

Here's one car everyone had high hopes of: its predecessor, the 406 was a previous TCoY champion, after all. Unfortunately the 407 let the side down somewhat with instability at speed despite experimentation (with Peugeot's blessing) with tyre pressures and varying noseweights. I also had a problem with some wheelspin on the hills. The 407 is nevertheless a very nice car to drive, with a six-speed gearbox and torquey 2.0-litre engine. Boot space is a bit disappointing, and the 407's noseweight limit is a bit measly at 60kg.

Toyota Avensis 2.0 D-4D T Spirit

The T Spirit had Toyota's 2.0-litre diesel engine and five-speed manual gearbox. Again stability and braking

performance were faultless, but acceleration was pretty poor on the flat, and on the 17% slope the car bogged down and pulled away only grudgingly. Still, it made it and the Avensis is a fine car overall.

Volvo S40 2.0D SE

Positioned third in its class, the Volvo S40 made easy work of the long 14% gradient and made no trouble of restarting on the 17% hill, where the handbrake also performed well. On the high-speed track there was never any hint of the outfit becoming unsettled until well beyond the UK speed limit. Six gears mean you should always have the right ratio to hand; but don't expect to use 6th much when towing.

Caravanability judges complained about lack of a suitable anchorage for the breakaway cable.

Toyota Avensis 2.4 T4 Auto

One of two Avensis models in the competition, the 2.4 petrol model with five-speed automatic gearbox was quick off the mark when pushed but, left in D, gearchanges were a bit abrupt. Fortunately it's a nice 'box to use manually – or you could just drive more sedately. Either way you'll find stability up with the best, braking is excellent and the restarts were OK after a little wheelspin. Loadspace is quite good in the Avensis, which has a 75kg noseweight limit.

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| Vauxhall Vectra Elite 3.0 CDTI Auto | 1353 | FWD | 6/2958 | 175/243@1600 | £24,845 |
| Skoda New Octavia 2.0 TD | 1313 | FWD | 4/1968 | 140/236@1750-2500 | £15,754 |
| Peugeot 407 SE HDi | 1421 | FWD | 4/1997 | 136/240@2000 | £17,915 |
| Toyota Avensis 2.0 D-4D T Spirit | 1241 | FWD | 4/1998 | 114/206@200-2200 | £20,125 |
| Volvo S40 2.0D SE | 1212 | FWD | 4/1998 | 136/236@2000 | £20,471 |
| Toyota Avensis 2.4 T4 Auto | 1188 | FWD | 4/2362 | 161/170@3800 | £21,625 |

SMALL FAMILY CARS

CLASS WINNER



TOYOTA COROLLA T3 2.0 D-4D
£15,179 as tested

CLASS WINNER

Toyota Corolla T3 2.0 D-4D
Returning champion

For the third year running a version of the Toyota Corolla gets a class win in Towcar of the Year. It must be doing something right! Lots of low-down torque makes the car easy to use up

and down the hills as well as on the flat – just don't expect stunning acceleration. In normal running you'll find top (5th) gear usable for anything above 50mph when towing. The five-door Corolla swallowed only half our testers' typical load, but otherwise the car is a good practical shape and one that sits well on the

road and keeps its caravan firmly planted. Toyota's legendary reliability is a plus point.

Vauxhall Astra SRI 1.8

Accelerates like a rocket and brakes safely to a halt, at which point the handbrake works confidently. Unfortunately, in between starting

ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible for entry to the competition, cars must have been new or current in the UK market on 1 January 2005 and not entered in previous competitions. The only exceptions were last year's class winners (where available), which were tested

against this year's new entries. Recommended on-the-road costs and cost per mile quoted as at 18 August 2004. Cars were tested at the Millbrook Proving Ground, Bedfordshire, and were ballasted to include typical passenger weight. Caravans were

loaded to 85% of the car kerbweight unless otherwise stated. Noseweights were set at the noseweight limit of the car or caravan, or at 7% of the caravan's running weight – whichever figure was the lowest.

ESTATE CARS

CLASS WINNER – see right

MAZDA6 2.0DTS² 136PS ESTATE
£19,165 as tested



RENAULT MEGANE SPORT TOURER 1.9 dCi DYNAMIQUE
£16,186 as tested



PEUGEOT 307 SW XSi HDi
£18,819 as tested



VAUXHALL VECTRA 1.9 CDTi SRi Estate
£20,935 as tested



SUBARU LEGACY SPORTS TOURER 2.5i SE
£21,195 as tested



VOLVO V50 2.4i SE
£22,621 as tested



HONDA ACCORD TOURER 2.2i-CTDi Executive Sat Nav
£23,373 as tested

Richard Noble OBE
with the Towcar of the
Year 2005



TOWCAR OF THE YEAR AND CLASS WINNER

Mazda6 2.0DTS² 136PS Estate

Conventional by current standards, the Mazda6 as tested comes with a 2.0-litre turbodiesel engine, five-speed manual transmission and a 'normal' parking brake. There's plenty of torque low down and nicely sorted gear ratios, making for undramatic hillstarts and leisurely towing. You can cruise through roundabouts in third gear when it's safe to do so, but if you need that extra 'oomph' to overtake, the power is there. Mazda's suspension keeps the car nicely composed and the steering set-up is such that you know exactly what the front end is doing even when there's a caravan bearing down on the back end. Noseweight limit is a very acceptable 75kg. To top it all the car is very well finished and tastefully done. It has relatively low operating costs and took 90% of our typical caravanning load even with all seats up; but marks were lost for spare wheel access and provision for breakaway cable anchorage.

Renault Megane Sport Tourer 1.9 dCi Dynamique

No fireball on the test track so the Sport tag seems a bit misplaced, but the diesel-powered Megane estate is a good towcar that stayed in control of its caravan all the way. There's a six-speed gearbox, though you'll rarely need top gear when towing, and a gimmicky-looking handbrake that looks like an aircraft throttle control. It works well

though and is ergonomically sound. As an estate car it works fairly well, taking about three-quarters of our typical accessory load.

Peugeot 307 SW XSi HDi

No problems over stability with this car, but progress was a bit leisurely and the hillstart performance wasn't good. It's got a six-speed gearbox and you can – just – use 6th when towing on the flat at 60mph. But let the speed drop and you have to drop to 4th to make the outfit pick up again. The 307 SW makes a good load carrier, but watch the rear door on your caravan hitch.

Vauxhall Vectra 1.9 CDTi SRi Estate

To call the Vectra Estate 'average' sounds a bit disparaging, but I gave it mid-range marks under almost every heading except stability, where it was very good. Don't expect startling off-the-line performance, judge your hillstarts carefully and don't expect to use 6th gear when you are towing. Then you'll have a nice, perfectly capable towcar that's also a practical load carrier.

Subaru Legacy Sports Tourer 2.5i SE

The Estate Car class was the biggest in this year's competition, and the well-respected Legacy was up against several other good contenders. The

fact that it didn't win a prize takes nothing away from a beautifully-made car that took almost all our typical load and comes with the advantage of permanent all-wheel drive and selectable high/low-ratio gearing. I had no problems with stability and there's always plenty of power on tap from the nice-sounding boxer engine. Maximum torque comes in at a high 4400rpm, though, so severe hills can be a problem unless you select low-ratio.

Volvo V50 2.4i SE

One of only a handful of petrol-engined cars in this year's competition, the V50 was quick off the mark. The free-revving engine and nice gearchange tempt you to drive enthusiastically but its ride wasn't up with the best and neither was its performance on the hillstart. As a practical load carrier it was a mediocre performer, taking about two-thirds of our typical load.

Honda Accord Tourer 2.2i-CTDi Executive SatNav

Honda's first-ever diesel engine has been a long time coming but it was worth the wait. It's beautifully smooth and quiet and there's plenty of 'grunt' when you need it – 250lb ft at 2000rpm. I bet it's lovely as a solo car, but for towing the gear ratios are not quite right. Take-off is OK even on the hills (where the handbrake is really excellent, by the way) but from then you have to work the gearbox to get the most out of the car. I also noticed a small amount of buffeting when the outfit was caught by crosswinds, but the Accord Tourer always recovered quickly. As a load carrier it works, swallowing all our typical caravanning accessories, but the rear door can foul the caravan hitch.

Jaguar X-Type 2.0D Sport Estate

I'm surprised the Jaguar Estate didn't take any honours in the year's competition and can only assume it was because the opposition was so strong. The 2.0-litre turbodiesel engine is a gem, the gears are nicely



JAGUAR X-TYPE 2.0D SPORT ESTATE
£23,420+



BMW 330d SE TOURING
£30,295 as tested

spaced and the whole car feels 'taut'. No problems with stability either, and as a driving judge my only concern was a small amount of pitching over rough surfaces. Caravanability judges rated it highly too: it took all our accessory load apart from a big waste water tank.

BMW 330d SE Touring

Returning champion

Getting back into the 330d estate car again after 12 months, it didn't take me long to realise why it had been a

class winner last year. All that torque, supreme handling and BMW's renowned build quality. The outfit romped up Millbrook's long 14% gradient in 3rd gear, while on the flat you could put it into 6th at 45mph and leave it there for almost as long as you liked – in fact, until you reached speeds that would get you a ticket anywhere in Europe. The ride is supremely comfortable too... so why did it lose out to the Mazda6? It doesn't swallow as much load, and just look at the price differential.

estate cars continued



THE JUDGES

DRIVING JUDGES

Stuart Craig, Oakwood Village; Steve Fowler, What Car?; Michael Le Caplain, Caravan Life; Andy McPhee, Practical Caravan; Steve Rowe, Caravan magazine; Jo Vaughan, freelance; and Barry Williams, The Caravan Club Magazine – assessed each of the cars, towing a Bailey caravan loaded to 85% of the car's kerbweight, for acceleration, stability, gearbox suitability, traction, handling, braking and restarting on a severe gradient

CARAVANABILITY JUDGES

John Bramham, Tom Collin, Mick Farr and Adrian French – assessed each of the cars for its load space and accessibility, rear door opening when attached to a caravan with hitch-type stabiliser, towball clearance, cable attachment, handbook towing data, mirrors and operating costs

the test car. Some drivers thought the twin-turbo diesel engine was down on power. Later in the competition the Jag seemed to pull itself together but when I had it, getting away on the hills was a problem – added to which the electronically-operated parking brake doesn't sit well with manual transmission. I wasn't the only one to comment on the car's instability at speed. Caravanability judges commented on the narrow boot opening.

Mercedes-Benz E320 CDi Avantgarde Estate

Second-placed in its class, the big M-B estate was fast and stable to speeds well beyond those you can use anywhere with a caravan on the hook – helped, no doubt, by rear-wheel drive, self-levelling suspension and a host of electronic gizmos designed to prevent this luxury towcar ever getting out of shape. The five-speed automatic transmission worked really well and made Mercedes' trademark foot-operated parking brake quite usable on the hillstarts. One thing that did grate with me, though, was the noisy engine. I like the thrum of a well-made diesel engine, but this six-cylinder unit made more racket than I wanted to hear in a £37,000 car. Two things you'd expect: running costs are high and the E Class estate swallowed all our typical load.

EXECUTIVE AND LUXURY CARS

CLASS WINNER – see right

BMW 525d SE TOURING
£32,000 as tested



MERCEDES-BENZ C220 CDi SE AVANTGARDE SALOON
£25,085+ as tested



JAGUAR S-TYPE 2.7D CLASSIC
£27,670+ as tested



MERCEDES-BENZ E320 CDi AVANTGARDE ESTATE
£36,865+ as tested



CLASS WINNER

BMW 525d SE Touring

A small point but an important one for caravanners: the 5-Series Beemer was the only car in the competition to which I awarded full marks in the handbrake department. The car also sailed away up the 17% gradient as if it wasn't there, while on the fast track it went like a rocket. Fortunately it's got brakes that make it stop as well as it goes (ventilated discs front and rear) and the six-cylinder turbodiesel engine is a dream – far more refined than the 6cyl Mercedes'. The 525d Tourer is a good

load carrier and its 90kg noseweight limit is above average. You'd expect its operating costs to be high, and you'd be right.

Mercedes-Benz C220 CDi SE Avantgarde Saloon

A classy saloon, as you'd expect at this price, with a five-speed sequential automatic transmission. Engine and transmission seem well set up for towing, as does the suspension for most of the time, though at one point the outfit felt a little wobbly at high speed (beyond the UK limit). I find M-B diesel engines noisy and a bit unrefined for this class of car: but I don't have any problem with the foot-operated parking brake provided you opt for automatic transmission. Hillstarts were certainly easy with this outfit. As a load carrier the C Class saloon is about average.

Jaguar S-Type 2.7D Classic

I had really high hopes of this car and as a solo vehicle it's probably wonderful; but there was something not right about

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|-------------------|----------|
| Mazda6 2.0-D T2S2 Estate | 1280 | FWD | 4/1998 | 134/228@2000 | £19,165 |
| Renault Megane Sports Tourer 1.9 dCi Dynamique | 1118 | FWD | 4/1870 | 120/221@2000 | £16,186 |
| Peugeot 307 SW XSi HDi | 1332 | FWD | 4/1997 | 136/240@2000 | £18,819 |
| Vauxhall Vectra 1.9 CDTi SRi Estate | 1353 | FWD | 4/1910 | TBA | £20,935 |
| Subaru Legacy Sports Tourer 2.5i SE | 1182 | 4WD | 4/2457 | 162/167@4400 | £21,195 |
| Volvo V50 2.4i SE | 1220 | FWD | 5/2435 | 170/170@4400 | £22,621 |
| Honda Accord Tourer 2.2i-CTDi Executive SatNav | 1364 | FWD | 4/2204 | 140/250@2000 | £23,373 |
| Jaguar X-Type 2.0D Sport Estate | 1339 | FWD | 4/1998 | 128/244@1800 | £23,420+ |
| BMW 330d SE Touring | 1437 | RWD | 6/2926 | 184/287@1750-3200 | £30,295 |

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|---------------|----------|
| BMW 525d SE Touring | 1424 | RWD | 6/2497 | 177/295@2000 | £32,000 |
| Mercedes-Benz C220 CDi SE Avantgarde | 1309 | RWD | 4/2148 | 150/251@2000 | £25,085+ |
| Jaguar S-Type 2.7D V6 Classic | 1463.7 | RWD | 6/2720 | 206/320@1900 | £27,670+ |
| Mercedes-Benz E320 CDi Avantgarde Estate | 1727 | RWD | 6/3222 | 204/313@2000 | £36,865+ |

UTILITY CARS

CLASS WINNER – see right

ISUZU RODEO DENVER
£20,474 as tested



FORD RANGER SUPER CAB THUNDER
£16,613 as tested



NISSAN RALLY RAID PICK-UP
£19,368 as tested



MITSUBISHI L200 DOUBLE CAB WARRIOR
£21,322 as tested

CLASS WINNER

Isuzu Rodeo Denver

In a small class of utility vehicles, the Isuzu was everybody's favourite: the double-cab body is just so much more comfortable and civilised than the others. There's no getting away from the fact that we're talking about tough workhorses here. Don't expect too much mechanical refinement, but when push comes to shove the Isuzu delivers. The 3.0-litre turbodiesel engine has only four cylinders and clatters away to produce maximum torque at just 1600rpm, but it treats hillstarts with disdain, even in the wet, and the leaf-sprung back end will put up with noseweights up to 120kg even if your caravan won't. Not only did the Isuzu take all our caravanability judges' typical load, but a Truckman top kept it dry and out of sight.

Ford Ranger Super Cab Thunder

Once you get this truck up and running it sits glued to the road, so no problems with stability; but it takes ages getting there. Hillstarts were easy even in high-

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|------------------------------------|----------------|---------|---------|---------------|---------|
| Isuzu Rodeo Denver | 1568 | RWD/4WD | 4/2999 | 129/207@1600 | £20,474 |
| Ford Ranger Super Cab Thunder | 1462 | RWD/4WD | 4/2499 | 108/196@2000 | £16,613 |
| Nissan Rally Raid Pick-Up | 1557 | RWD/4WD | 4/2488 | 131/224@2000 | £19,368 |
| Mitsubishi L200 Double Cab Warrior | 1500 | RWD/4WD | 4/2477 | 113/177@2000 | £21,322 |



which, to my mind, looks and sounds a lot more agricultural than it is. Not that it's a sheep in wolf's clothing, because it really does its stuff. In top (5th) gear it would accelerate from 60 to 75mph on the test track and it always remained stable. The track was wet when I drove the Nissan, but it got away OK on our 17% gradient even in 2WD. Loadspace was open with no way of securing items, but at least they all went in.

Mitsubishi L200 Double Cab Warrior

In terms of cabin refinement the Mitsubishi gives the Isuzu a fair run for its money, but in towing performance it loses all round. It's stable enough but it's slow and I would find the ride too wearing over any distance. The handbrake only just held on our 17% gradient and, although it did get away in high-ratio two-wheel drive, progress was slow. This was also the only Utility class entrant that didn't take all our typical load of caravanning accessories.

range 2WD but I didn't like the very long-travel footbrake or umbrella-type handbrake – the first I've seen in about 30 years! All our caravanning load piled into the loadspace, but it was open to the elements and there was no way of securing the items.

Nissan Rally Raid Pick-Up

You've really got to have a sound business reason for buying any of the vehicles in our Utility class because they are designed as trucks rather than for comfortable passenger transport. Having said that, I liked the Rally Raid

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| Seat Altea 2.0 TDI Sport | 1284 | FWD | 4/1968 | 138/236@1750-2500 | £16,930 |
| Citroën Xsara Picasso Desire | 1116 | FWD | 4/1560 | 110/177@1750 | £16,050 |
| Ford Focus C-Max Ghia | 1295 | FWD | 4/1998 | 134/235@2000 | £18,813 |
| Renault Grand Scenic 1.9 dCi Privilege | 1301 | FWD | 4/1870 | 120/221@2000 | £19,668 |

Citroën Xsara Picasso Desire

It was in March that the Xsara Picasso became available with Citroën's new, small (1560cc) diesel engine. This latest model is comfortable enough and I like its useful shape; but it's slow and it doesn't get away too well on the hills. The Picasso took all our accessories with just one seat down, noseweight limit is a creditable 80kg, and here at last was a car with a proper pigtail for the breakaway cable!

Ford C-Max Ghia

Ford's free-revving 2.0-litre turbodiesel engine really is a stunner, with plenty of low-down torque and enough power to make the C-Max a delight to push round the test track. There's a six-speed gearbox, too, which will help economy in solo driving, though for towing you can forget 6th. In 5th the C-Max

will accelerate to speeds well beyond the UK limit with a caravan attached. On our hillstart, the electronically-activated parking brake – just flip a small lever on the central tunnel – held the outfit steady but it wasn't the easiest to co-ordinate with clutch action. Nevertheless, a fine performance from a car that's also a reasonable load carrier. There was only a hair's breadth in the marking between the C-Max and the Seat Altea.

Renault Grand Scenic 1.9 dCi Privilege

Same engine and gearbox as in the Megane Tourer, this time with MPV bodywork with lots of usable space. My driving comments were much the same: a bit sluggish but stable at all times, and with a six-speed gearbox where 6th is a bit redundant when you are towing. I like the Grand Scenic's parking brake, though: it disengages automatically as you let in the clutch, so hillstarts are a doddle.



MIDI MPVs

CLASS WINNER – see below

SEAT ALTEA 2.0 TDI SPORT
£16,930 as tested



CITROËN XSARA PICASSO DESIRE
£16,050 as tested



FORD FOCUS C-MAX GHIA
£18,813 as tested



RENAULT GRAND SCENIC 1.9 dCi PRIVILEGE
£19,668 as tested

CLASS WINNER

Seat Altea 2.0 TDI Sport

'Chuckable' is probably the word that sums up the Altea's performance round the high-speed track and through the twists and turns of the mountain route. It stormed up a long 14% gradient in 3rd gear and I found its stability faultless at over 80mph on the high-speed bowl. In day-to-day towing you'll find 6th gear usable right down to about 50mph, such is the flexibility of this 2.0-litre, 140bhp engine; and when you come to a stop you'll find the handbrake works really well. The small amount of wheelspin on our 17% take-off I put down to the dampness of the track. As a load carrier, the Altea took about two-thirds of our accessory mix – not bad for such a small car.

MPVs

CLASS WINNER – see right

RENAULT GRAND ESPACE 3.0 dCi INITIALE
£34,490 as tested



CITROËN C8 SX
£23,065 as tested



MITSUBISHI GRANDIS ELEGANCE 2.4 AUTO
£23,413 as tested



MERCEDES-BENZ VIANO 2.2 CDI AMBIENTE LONG
£24,530 as tested

CLASS WINNER

Renault Grand Espace 3.0 dCi Initiale

Returning champion
Towing honours last year and nothing appeared this year to take away its crown. The big MPV was solid as a rock on our test track and the five-speed automatic transmission always seemed to have the right ratio. Put the parking brake on with just a finger and it holds a 1600kg caravan on a 17% gradient. Squeeze the accelerator and the brake disengages. A very small amount of wheelspin was the only thing I commented on, but the track was damp. To take all our caravanning accessories we had to lose the third row of seats. The Espace was tested towing 85% of its kerbweight, with Renault's permission. This exceeds the handbook towing limit for other than 'driver only'; we advise checking Renault's latest advice before purchasing.

Citroën C8 SX

The C8 was a bit of an also-ran in this contest. Wheelspin was part of its downfall, even allowing for a damp track at the time I was driving. More worrying was instability at speed and the poorly



mode: left to its own devices, it didn't change smoothly. Loadspace is poor unless you sacrifice the rearmost row of seats.

performing handbrake which, as well as not being very good, is awkwardly sited. It's on the offside – nothing wrong with that for us right-handed people, but I scraped my knuckles on the door every time I used it. Forget about loadspace unless you fold down the rearmost seats.

Mitsubishi Grandis Elegance 2.4 Auto

The new Grandis is a good all-round performer; my only criticism was high-speed stability when the outfit was caught off-guard by sudden crosswinds. I also felt the sequential automatic gearbox was better used in manual

Mercedes-Benz Viano 2.2 CDI Ambiente Long

A good-looking people carrier with clever, adaptable layout and plenty of storage space, the Viano almost knocked the Grand Espace off its pedestal. I found it stable on the track despite buffeting crosswinds, and the automatic transmission meant easy hillstarts. I docked marks only for a lack of outright power, and caravanability judges didn't like the fact that the rear door fouled the caravan hitch. But at least all our typical load fitted, even with six seats in use.

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| Renault Grand Espace 3.0 dCi Initiale | 1607 | FWD | 6/2958 | 180/350@1800 | £34,490 |
| Citroën C8 SX | 1516 | FWD | 4/2179 | 130/232@2000 | £23,065 |
| Mitsubishi Grandis Elegance 2.4 Auto | 1555 | FWD | 4/2378 | 162/159@4000 | £23,413 |
| Mercedes-Benz Viano CDI 2.2 Ambient Long | 1777 | RWD | 4/2148 | 150/243@1800-2400 | £24,530 |

COMPACT 4x4s

CLASS WINNER



SUBARU FORESTER 2.0 XT
£21,145 as tested



HYUNDAI TUCSON 2.7 V6 CDX
£18,695+ as tested



MITSUBISHI OUTLANDER 2.4 SPORT SE
£19,049 as tested

CLASS WINNER

Subaru Forester 2.0 XT

Returning champion
Last year's Caravan Club Towcar of the Year title holder, the Forester XT was best-in-class again though it didn't carry off the main prize. The Forester is an unusual mix of smart estate car and go-anywhere 4x4 and doesn't look out of place outside the Ritz or covered in mud on a caravan rally site. The fact is that, as a towcar it's a very practical workhorse with useful loadspace (it took all our bits and pieces except the Aquaroll), permanent four-wheel drive

and a beautifully sorted engine and gearbox. There's a long 14% gradient at Millbrook and most of the cars needed 2nd gear all the way up. In the Forester I was able to change from 2nd to 3rd partway up; I can't think of any other 2.0-litre petrol-engined car in which I could have done that.

Hyundai Tucson 2.7 V6 CDX

One of the new breed of 4x4s from the Far East, the Hyundai Tucson looks good and offers great specification for the money: For less than £19,000 you get a 2.7-litre V6 engine (petrol),

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|---------|---------|---------------|----------|
| Subaru Forester 2.0 XT | 1233 | 4WD | 4/1994 | 174/181@3200 | £21,145 |
| Hyundai Tucson 2.7 V6 CDX | 1426 | 4WD | 6/2656 | 173/178@4000 | £18,695+ |
| Mitsubishi Outlander 2.4 Sport SE | 1330 | 4WD | 4/2378 | 158/159@4000 | £19,049 |
| Nissan X-Trail 2.2 dCiT-Spec | 1577 | FWD/4WD | 4/2184 | 134/231@2000 | £23,846 |
| BMW X3 3.0i Sport | 1500 | 4WD | 6/2979 | 170/221@3500 | £34,185 |

RIGHT: Director General Trevor Watson (left) with guest Richard Noble



sequential automatic transmission and selectable 4WD. The interior is quite presentable too. It was disappointing to find the Tucson a bit lacklustre on the test track. Left to its own devices, the auto box couldn't make up its mind which gear it needed at times, and the outfit was slow off the mark on the flat as well as on the hills. Using the gearbox manually helped, and I have to say that stability was never a problem.

Mitsubishi Outlander 2.4 Sport SE

You can only write as you find, and my marks for Mitsubishi's new 4x4 were out of kilter with some other judges'. I gave the automatic-transmission Outlander high marks for stability, acceleration

towcar of the year



NISSAN X-TRAIL 2.2 dCi T-Spec
£23,846 as tested



BMW X3 3.0i Sport
£34,185 as tested

and hillstarting – though I suspect hillstarts would have been more laboured if the Outlander had been available with manual transmission. If Mitsubishi's figures are to be believed, maximum torque doesn't come in until 4000rpm. Loadwise, the car swallowed three-quarters of our load without sacrificing any of the seats.

Nissan X-Trail 2.2 dCi T-Spec
A likeable car in the 'soft-roader' class with good loadspace, the X-Trail

performed well in almost all respects, though I had trouble on the severest hill. I couldn't get the handbrake to hold the outfit on the 17% gradient, and when I tried a restart I had to engage 4WD to get sufficient grip on the wet surface. In general towing, however, the X-Trail was stable and more comfortable than many.

BMW X3 3.0i Sport
BMW has equipped the X3 with a stability system that is said to ensure your caravan never goes out of shape, so

compact 4x4s

everyone was curious to see how it worked. During my time at the wheel there was never any indication that the system had cut in, braking individual wheels to ensure snake-free towing – so either it works or I didn't push it hard enough. However, I can tell you the X3 tows superbly, with rock-solid stability and no body roll. My only criticism was that, left to its own devices, the five-speed automatic transmission sometimes seemed confused. Load space is good but not exceptional.

FULL SIZE 4X4s

CLASS WINNER – see right

VOLKSWAGEN TOUAREG V10 TDI
£53,750 as tested



Volkswagen Touareg V10 TDI
Returning champion

It will be a long time before anyone comes up with a towing vehicle that outclasses the huge-engined Touareg. It's very expensive of course and only a few will be sold, but you can't take away the fact that this monster of a car is in fact quiet and refined, and it will take any caravan anywhere. On the 17% hillstart I could change up to 2nd gear, on the long 14% gradient I used 4th, and on the flat at 60mph in 6th gear the Touareg was barely ticking over, at less than 1500rpm. It was stable all the time and always comfortable, with no wallowing. Add to all that the fact that it's a good load-carrier too, and this is a truly great car for the fortunate few.

SSANGYONG REXTON 270 SX AUTO
£24,225 as tested



VW TOUAREG 2.5 TDI TIPTRONIC
£31,880 as tested



VOLVO XC90 D5 SE
£33,444 as tested



MERCEDES-BENZ ML350 SPECIAL EDITION
£35,690 as tested



LAND ROVER DISCOVERY 3 TdV6 HSE
£41,995 as tested



VW Touareg 2.5 TDI Tiptronic
Most judges expected the 2.5 TDI Touareg to fare well. Perhaps we were expecting too much, but it doesn't have the V10's sophisticated air suspension so it doesn't ride so well. Lack of power isn't a problem because the five-cylinder turbodiesel still kicks out 172bhp, but you have to work it and the result is a noisier, less refined car. Still a great towcar, though – as it should be at over £31k.

Volvo XC90 D5 SE
I was expecting more of the XC90 fitted with Volvo's fine five-cylinder diesel engine. Progress seemed ponderous, and when I did get up to a decent speed I didn't always feel in complete control. The parking brake works well but it's foot-operated and is only suited to automatic transmission. The big Volvo had the standard six-speed manual

(with very nice action) which proves awkward on difficult hillstarts. All our load fitted, even with all seats in use.

Mercedes-Benz ML350 Special Edition
Mercedes' American-made 4x4 has matured, with a nicer interior to go with its chunky exterior. As you'd expect, the 3.7-litre off-roader was quick off the mark, and with automatic transmission there's no problem in coping with steep hills. However, I wasn't overawed by the ML350's ride and the brakes didn't inspire confidence. Loadspace is pretty good, but not up to Discovery standards.

Land Rover Discovery 3 TdV6 HSE
As all readers of this magazine will know, the Discovery is a very firm favourite with caravanners everywhere. That's not going to change with Discovery 3, supplied to us with 2.7-litre, six-cylinder diesel engine and six-speed automatic transmission. Full-time 4WD and independent air suspension make this one of the most desirable towcars on the planet. Although the Discovery wasn't as fast as I'd thought it would be, it was stable and refined and my only real criticism was that the ride was a bit wallowy. Caravanability judges praised the amount of towing data in the Discovery's handbook and commented that it took all their typical load with ease, with all seats usable.

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

| MAKE/MODEL | CARAVAN WT(kg) | DRIVE | CYLS/CC | bhp/lb ft@rpm | PRICE |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| VW Touareg V10 TDI | 2230 | 4WD | 10/4921 | 309/553@2000 | £53,750 |
| SsangYong Rexton 270 SX Auto | 1738 | 4WD | 5/2696 | 163/251@2400 | £24,225 |
| VW Touareg 2.5 TDI Tiptronic | 2043 | 4WD | 5/2460 | 172/295@2000 | £31,880 |
| Volvo XC90 D5 SE | 1788 | 4WD | 5/2401 | 163/340@1750-3000 | £33,444 |
| Mercedes-Benz ML350 Special Edition | 1798 | 4WD | 6/3724 | 235/255@3000-4800 | £35,690 |
| Land Rover Discovery 3 TdV6 HSE | 2310 | 4WD | 6/2720 | 188/324@1900 | £41,995 |