

BELOW: All the class winners, with the Subaru Forester 2.0 XT centre stage with our very own Director General, Trevor Watson



SUBARU SCOOPS IT!

4WD FORESTER XT BECOMES 21ST CARAVAN CLUB TOWCAR OF THE YEAR

SUBARU, a Class winner in two previous Towcar of the Year competitions, finally walked off with the big trophy this year with its Forester 2.0 XT. This was the 21st year of the competition and there was no doubt that the competition had come of age, with more than ever – 53 cars – vying for the prestigious title Caravan Club Towcar of the Year 2004.

Other winners in this year's event were a Mitsubishi Space Star, Toyota Corolla, BMW 330d saloon and estate cars, a Renault Grand Espace and Volkswagen Touareg. The awards were presented on 24 September by Sharron Davies MBE.

There were two changes in this year's competition. Cars were evaluated in groups according to body style, rather than price band – the vehicle types were those used by *What Car?* magazine and, again for the first time, the motoring magazine was represented on the panel of driving judges. Also, last year's winning manufacturers and importers were invited to resubmit the

class-winning cars to defend their titles. One of those cars – the Toyota Corolla T Spirit 2.0 D4-D – retained its honour; others competed with varying degrees of success.

The winning Subaru, launched last October with an on-the-road price of £20,995 impressed both 'caravanability' and driving judges. Its practical shape helps swallow plenty of holiday gear for the family caravanner and the higher-than-average driving position helps provide a clear view in traffic and when manoeuvring.

Subaru's unique combination of low-slung, horizontally-opposed engine and full-time four-wheel-drive makes the Forester's handling safe and predictable – remember, its underpinnings are very similar to the company's rally-conquering Impreza. The XT's four-cylinder turbocharged engine pushes out 177PS (174bhp) of power and torque is 245Nm (180lb ft) at a not-too-high 3200rpm. Traction control and a limited-slip differential are standard fittings.

The result is a car that is delightful to drive on road or across a wet rally field, without the rugged but rather less comfortable feel of some full-size 4x4s.

There were some notable performances from many of the small cars in this year's contest, and the caravanability judges in particular were impressed by the ingenuity of some manufacturers' designs.

Great performance on the test track by Mitsubishi's diesel-powered Space Star 1.9 DID S secured its place as winner of the Budget Car Under £13,500 category.

Next up was the Small Family Car class, and here the returning Toyota Corolla T Spirit 2.0 D4-D romped up the hill circuit without a second glance. On the open circuit it was a nippy performer, and finally our caravanability gave it the thumbs up for its useful loadspace.

With the exception of the overall winner, diesels certainly ruled the roost this year, with prizes for the Family Car and Estate Car classes going to

variations of the same, superb towcar: the BMW 330d. Their shared engine is a magnificent straight-six with a massive 410Nm (302lb ft) of torque available from just 1500rpm up to 3250rpm.

With the benefit of rear-wheel drive, these cars feel they would pull a house, and the quality of their engineering is beyond dispute.

Renault still sets the standard in MPVs with its Grand Espace. Its versatile seating and advanced technological features – such as a handbrake that disengages as you pull away – endeared it to all the judges, and in 3.0 dCi form it took the Millbrook Proving Ground in its stride.

The class for full-size 4x4 cars was well supported, with entrants from just over £18k to the mighty VW Touareg V10 at over £50k. The VW really did outclass the others, though there were some fine contenders also in the running.

OVERLEAF Barry Williams gives a condensed report on each car, based on the judges' findings.

WINNERS AT A GLANCE

CARAVAN CLUB TOWCAR OF THE YEAR 2004

Subaru Forester 2.0 XT

CLASS WINNERS

Budget Car Under £13,500
Mitsubishi Space Star DID S
 Small Family Car
Toyota Corolla T Spirit 2.0 D4-D
 Family Car
BMW 330d SE Saloon Estate Car
BMW 330d Sport Touring MPV
 Renault Grand Espace
3.0 dCi V6 Privilege Auto Compact 4x4
Subaru Forester 2.0 XT Full-size 4x4
VW Touareg V10 TDI

BUDGET CAR UNDER £13,500

CLASS WINNER – see right

**MITSUBISHI SPACE STAR
1.9DIDS**

£13,218 as tested



**CITROEN BERLINGO
MULTISPACE FORTE**

£10,124 as tested



DAEWOO TACUMA 1.6 SE
£11,170 as tested



FIAT DOBLO 1.9JTD ELX
£11,033 as tested



DAIHATSU YRV Turbo 130
£11,147 as tested



VW POLO SE FSI
£11,925 as tested



**Vauxhall Meriva 1.6
16v Enjoy**
£12,901 as tested



KIA MAGENTIS LX 2.0 Auto
£13,438 as tested

CLASS WINNER

**Mitsubishi Space Star
1.9DIDS**

Somehow Mitsubishi always does well in this competition, and this year the Space Star shone. It impressed driving judges with its sheer pulling power and faultless stability, and the caravanability judges called it "a cracking car" that swallowed lots of touring impedimenta. A short rear overhang aids ride comfort and means it can take 75kg on the towball, while a gutsy 1.9-litre diesel engine and well-chosen gear ratios mean it always keeps up with the traffic. Low operating costs are another plus point.

Citroen Berlingo Multispace Forte

Second place in this class, and not far behind the winner, the cheeky little Berlingo is superb value at around £10,000 as entered in this competition with optional 'Safety' package that includes ABS brakes and a full complement of airbags. There's lots of useful interior space (only problem is a rear door that can foul the caravan handbrake when applied) and the car is a delight to drive. For a 2.0-litre turbodiesel it's not a ball of fire, but neither is it sluggish. The main thing for caravanners is that it's stable, it holds the road and it does all right on the hills.

Fiat Doblo 1.9 JTD ELX

One of last year's returning champs, the Doblo was placed third in its class this time. It remains a plucky performer which, like the Berlingo, offers useful loadspace – marred again only by the fact that you can't open the rear door fully when hitched to a caravan. Open-road performance is good and stability well up to scratch, but hill starts needed care to avoid wheelspin and the handbrake was at the end of its travel before it would hold the outfit on a 17% gradient.



CLASS WINNER
Mitsubishi Space Star
1.9DIDS, with Sharron
Davies MBE

still, it let us down on the hill route. For caravanning, a car this heavy needs more than 106PS (at 6000rpm) and a stronger clutch.

VW Polo SE FSI

It's a small car but the Polo has done well in past years, so I was disappointed with the FSI. Performance was gutless (I achieved 60mph eventually but only by hanging on to third gear), and it almost didn't make it when it came to restarting on the 17% hill.

Vauxhall Meriva 1.6 16v

Enjoy

Smallest of Vauxhall's new arrivals and probably not high on most caravanners' lists, but the Meriva is high-g geared, it didn't always feel in control and hill starts were difficult. Brakes were good, though.

Kia Magentis LX 2.0 Auto

Four-speed automatic, 2.0-litre 16v engine and biggish four-door saloon bodywork looks good on paper and Magentis styling isn't bad. High operating costs (in this class) took marks away, however, and on the track it just wasn't up to scratch. It was much too slow off the mark, and on anything resembling a hill the gearbox couldn't make up its mind what to do. Shame, because Kia's 4x4s fared much better in this competition.

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	PS/Nm@rpm	PRICE
Mitsubishi Space Star 1.9DIDS	1071	FWD	4/1870	116/265@1800	£13,218
Citroen Berlingo Multispace Forte	1114	FWD	4/1997	91/205@1900	£10,124
Fiat Doblo 1.9 JTD ELX	1122	FWD	4/1910	100/200@1500	£11,033
Daihatsu YRV Turbo 130	791	FWD	4/1298	129/170@2800	£11,147
Daewoo Tacuma 1.6 SE	816	FWD	4/1598	106/142@3400	£11,170
VW Polo SE FSI	1017	FWD	4/1390	86/130@3500	£11,925
Vauxhall Meriva 1.6 16v Enjoy	1126	FWD	4/1598	100/150@3600	£12,901
Kia Magentis LX 2.0 Auto	1203	FWD	4/1997	134/180@4500	£13,438

ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible for entry to the competition, cars must have been new or current in the UK Market on 24 September 2003; or to have received substantially modified engine, transmission or bodywork. 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 26 August 2003. 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.

SMALL FAMILY CARS

CLASS WINNER – see right

TOYOTA COROLLA T SPIRIT 2.0 D4-D

£15,530 as tested



DAEWOO KALOS 1.2 S

£7745 as tested



VAUXHALL ASTRA CDTi SXi 1.7

£14,252 as tested



SEAT LEON 1.9 TDI SE (130)

£15,593 as tested



PEUGEOT 307 SW SE HDI (110)

£17,045 as tested

CLASS WINNER
Toyota Corolla 2.0
D4-DT Spirit



CLASS WINNER

Toyota Corolla D4-DT Spirit

Last year's class winner showed again why it makes sense for the caravanner: it's nippy in traffic, it remains stable when the caravan is buffeted by crosswinds and it handles delightfully. The cabin is comfortable and the whole car shouts quality. Getting away on the steepest hill needed careful clutch control because you can easily spin the wheels, but that's because there's so much low-down torque (upgraded this year). Our test course includes a long, straight 14% climb and this was one of the few cars to storm up it in third gear. Brilliant! Caravanability judges praised the Corolla's short rear overhang and good information in its handbook.

Daewoo Kalos 1.2 S

Handbrake performance was good! Otherwise the little Kalos didn't shine, but what can you expect from a sub-£8000 hatchback with 1150cc under the bonnet? Kerbweight is just 960kg so best stick to a small trailer tent with this one.

Vauxhall Astra CDTi SXi 1.7

If I had to describe this car in one word it would be 'solid'. It's well put together, towing doesn't upset the handling, and the 1.7-litre turbodiesel engine slogs away to get you over the 70mph mark (in 4th gear) – though in top (5th) gear the power drops off and so does your speed. It's pretty cheap to run, it takes a

reasonable load if you fold the rear seat, and it's got a 75kg noseweight limit.

Seat Leon 1.9 TDI SE (130)

This latest Leon, with VAG's 130bhp turbodiesel and six-speed gearbox, is certainly quick off the line – though you probably won't be making much use of 6th gear when towing. It handles well, feels nicely put together and the handbrake has a good, firm action. Operating costs are a bit higher than some competitors'.

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	PS/Nm@rpm	PRICE
Toyota Corolla T Spirit 2.0 D4-D	1143	FWD	4/1995	116/280@2000-2200	£15,530
Daewoo Kalos 1.2 S	816	FWD	4/1150	72/104@4400	£ 7745
Vauxhall Astra CDTi SXi 1.7	1050	FWD	4/1686	80/170@1800-2800	£14,252
Seat Leon 1.9 TDI SE (130)	1124	FWD	4/1896	131/310@1900	£15,593
Peugeot 307 SW HDi (110)	1208	FWD	4/1997	111/250@1750	£17,045

Peugeot 307 SW SE HDI (110)

Like the class-winning car, the second-placed Peugeot had bags of low-down torque, but this time the gear ratios weren't as well sorted: a bit too high for a decent take-off on the flat or (especially) on the hills. High marks from the caravanability judges, among other things for its practical shape and low running costs.

FAMILY CARS

CLASS WINNER – see right

BMW 330D SE SALOON

£28,344 as tested



DAEWOO NUBIRA 1.6 SX

£11,222 as tested



VAUXHALL VECTRA 2.0 T SRI

£18,277 as tested



TOYOTA AVENTIS T4 2.0 D4-D

£18,280 as tested

CLASS WINNER
BMW 330d SE
Saloon



CLASS WINNER

BMW 330d SE Saloon

If I had to nit-pick I would moan that the central console interferes with gear changing in a 3 Series and the pedals are too offset. Our caravanability judges had more justifiable moans that the 13-pin socket is difficult to get to, and so are the tools when it is fully loaded (they also commented that it swallows a good load of caravanning gear). But ah, what superb engineering! That magnificent straight-six engine and sweet six-speed gearbox! One of the few rear-wheel drive cars left, it shrugs off trailer towing and is worth every penny, if you can afford it.

litre petrol engine and five-speed manual transmission. It's not fast but the engine is willing, the car and caravan remained stable on the test track and overall its handling and comfort level were better than expected. Given its specification and price, all the judges were impressed – the Nubira was simply outclassed by a lot of much more expensive cars.

fitted as standard and performance is brisk. The six-speed gearbox has well-chosen ratios for towing – even top gear is usable – and the Vectra's shape lends itself to accommodating plenty of caravanning gear.

Daewoo Nubira 1.6 SX

Cheapest car in this sector by quite a margin, the Nubira comes with a 1.6-

Vauxhall Vectra 2.0 T SRI

You need to keep the revs up with this sporty car, but traction control is

Toyota Avensis T4 2.0 D4-D

Average marks all round for the Avensis, but no real vices – though I wasn't impressed by the way it struggled with the hill start. First gear is a bit high for smooth take-offs, but shift up through the gearbox and you

family cars continued



FORD MONDEO ZETEC 2.0 TDCi
£18,900 as tested



PEUGEOT 607 SE 2.2 HDi
£23,995 as tested



SKODA SUPERB 2.5 V6 TDI ELEGANCE
£24,855 as tested



VAUXHALL SIGNUM 3.0 CDTi ELITE
£26,334 as tested



VOLVO S80 2.5T SE
£28,092 as tested



RENAULT VEL SATIS 3.0 V6 INITIALE AUTO
£30,467 as tested

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	PS/Nm@rpm	PRICE
BMW 330d SE Saloon	1309	RWD	6/2993	206/410@1500-3250	£28,344
Daewoo Nubira 1.6 SX	1022	FWD	4/1598	109/150@4000	£11,222
Vauxhall Vectra 2.0 TSRI	1230	FWD	4/1998	175/256@2500	£18,277
Toyota Avensis T4 2.0 D4-D	1224	FWD	4/1995	116/280@2000-2200	£18,280
Ford Mondeo Zetec 2.0 TDCi	1279	FWD	4/1998	130/330@1800	£18,900
Peugeot 607 2.2 HDi	1305	FWD	4/2179	138/314@2000	£23,995
Skoda Superb 2.5 V6 TDI Elegance (defending TCOY winner)	1394	FWD	6/2496	155/310@1400	£24,855
Vauxhall Signum 3.0 CDTi Elite	1380	FWD	6/2958	177/370@1900-2800	£26,334
Volvo S80 2.5T SE	1306	FWD	5/2521	210/320@1500-4500	£28,092
Renault Vel Satis 3.0 V6 Initiale Auto	1474	FWD	6/2958	180/350@1800	£30,467

can cruise happily in fifth (top) with a caravan in tow. Toyota's diesel engine is a delight, and buyers will be impressed by Avensis quality.

Ford Mondeo Zetec 2.0 TDCi

One of the best diesel engines around, very free-revving and mated here with a nice six-speed manual gearbox. Watch out for wheelspin when you take off on the hills but otherwise the Mondeo remains a comfortable, classy towcar. With correct caravan loading you should have no worries about stability.

Peugeot 607 SE 2.2 HDi

Like the Volvo S80 this is a big saloon car, and there wasn't much between them in the marking. With the Peugeot you get a (very good) turbodiesel engine but still have five-speed auto transmission, lots of 'toys' and, most important for us, a stable, well-behaved towcar with no real vices – and it's £4000 cheaper than the Volvo. So what's the catch? Street cred maybe, and the French car

depreciates very quickly. But if you are buying a used model surely that's another good thing..?

Skoda Superb 2.5 V6 TDI Elegance

Last year's winning car, the Superb fell short of the standard set by some of its peers in this competition. No problems with engine power or delivery but some drivers complained of too-soft suspension. Still a very competent towcar, though.

Vauxhall Signum 3.0 CDTi Elite

This class was full of big hitters, and without the likes of the BMW and Volvo to contend with the Signum would have been higher placed than the middle ranking it achieved. Apart from having size and a very practical shape on its side,

Vauxhall's newcomer had a super 3.0-litre V6 diesel engine mated to a six-speed manual gearbox that made the most of all that torque. It pulled strongly even in top gear and romped away on the hill circuit, but the test car needed a better handbrake. The Signum isn't cheap to run, but what car of this size is?

Volvo S80 2.5T SE

Five cylinders under the bonnet and five speeds for the gearbox to choose between makes for pretty quick and stress-free towing in the big Volvo saloon. The S80 holds the road well and remains stable, but it's another car with a trait I don't like when towing: ultra light steering. Purchase price is near the top of the tree in this class, and running costs are high; but if you can afford it, the S80 is a sensible choice for caravanners looking for a big saloon.

Renault Vel Satis 3.0 Initiale Auto

Renault's flagship was a class winner last year and returned to fight another day. Beaten this year only by a BMW, the Vel Satis may not be everyone's cup of tea with its odd design and advanced technology – but it's still a great towcar. I dislike its very light steering, but the 3.0-litre V6 turbodiesel has guts enough to tow a big caravan at any legal speed; a short rear overhang and self-levelling suspension take care of noseweight (limited to 75kg) and the automatic transmission is sooooo smooth. Icing on the cake is the parking brake that disengages automatically when you squeeze the accelerator. Hill starts? What hill starts?



CLASS WINNER
BMW 330d Sport Touring

ESTATE CARS

CLASS WINNER – see right

BMW 330D SPORT TOURING
£30,939 as tested



FIAT STILO MULTIWAGON 1.9 (115) DYNAMIC
£15,114 as tested

CLASS WINNER

BMW 330d Sport Touring

It's not a big estate car but caravanability judges were impressed by the BMW's carrying capacity. Rear overhang is 90mm

longer than saloon's, they noted, but there was only minimal drop when the caravan was hitched on – due partly to the Sport suspension. Noseweight limit, incidentally, is

75kg. There's never any problem with BMW engineering and the whole car just feels totally in control when towing, thanks to the combination of a super-strong engine, rear-wheel



SKODA OCTAVIA VRS
£16,325



CITROËN C5 2.2 HDI VTR
£16,341 as tested



NISSAN PRIMERA SE 2.2 DCI
£17,967 as tested



FORD MONDEO ZETEC 2.0 TDCI
£19,900 as tested



VW PASSAT SPORT TDI 4MOTION
£21,050 as tested



HONDA ACCORD TOURER 2.4i VTEC EXECUTIVE
£23,755 as tested



VOLVO V70 2.0T S
£24,791 as tested



VOLVO XC70 D5 SE LUX
£32,509 as tested



MERCEDES-BENZ E270 CDI ELEGANCE
£34,223 as tested

drive and a well-sorted six-speed gearbox. A pity the pedals are so offset, though.

Fiat Stilo Multiwagon 1.9 115 Dynamic

Cheapest car in the group, the Multiwagon gained higher than average marks from our caravanability judges for its practicality and low running costs. Driving judges complained of poor hill starts, though, and there were mixed views on stability.

Skoda Octavia vRS

Fast and well built, but I found the fierce turbo hampered smooth driving. By the end of our testing the Octavia's clutch was slipping badly and making hill starts unpredictable. Thank goodness the handbrake worked well.

Citroën C5 2.2 HDi VTR Estate

Citroën played bridesmaid rather than bride once more in this class, picking up second place with its big diesel-powered C5 Estate in new VTR form. A tremendous load lugger, and fitted with legendary Hydractive self-levelling suspension that will cope with noseweights up to 85kg, the C5 Estate is tremendous value for caravanners. Well-judged gearing (six-speed manual) means easy starts on the level or on the hills, and frugal long-distance touring.

Nissan Primera SE 2.2 dCi

It takes a decent load, it doesn't cost the earth to run and, like most Nissans, it will probably last forever. What didn't the judges like, then? Tyre-scrabbling hill starts and the lumpy ride spoilt things for me, not to mention the interior and those centrally-mounted instruments. Lovely six-speed gearbox, though.

Ford Mondeo Zetec 2.0 TDCi Estate

Same super engine as mentioned already, this time powering an estate car with good load capacity. Reasonable running costs, a nice cabin and a lovely car to drive make the Mondeo a sound buy, though the estate car received a few comments from the driving judges about the odd high-speed twitch and hesitant hill starts.

VW Passat Estate Sport TDI 4MOTION

Third placed in this class, this version of the Passat Estate has the advantage of permanent four-wheel drive and will have extra appeal for

estate cars continued

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	PS/Nm@rpm	PRICE
BMW 330d Sport Touring	1373	RWD	6/2993	206/410@1500-3250	£30,939
Fiat Stilo Multiwagon 1.9 (115)Dynamic	1199	FWD	4/1910	116/255@2000	£15,114
Skoda Octavia vRS	1182	FWD	4/1781	180/235@1950-3000	£16,325
Citroën C5 2.2 HDi VTR	1290	FWD	4/2179	136/314@2000	£16,341
Nissan Primera SE 2.2 dCi	1253	FWD	4/2184	138/314@2000	£17,967
Ford Mondeo Zetec 2.0 TDCi	1329	FWD	4/1998	130/330@1800	£19,900
VW Passat Sport TDI 4MOTION	1487	4WD	4/1896	130/310@1900	£21,050
Honda Accord Tourer 2.4i VTEC Executive	1332	FWD	4/2354	190/223@4500	£23,755
Volvo V70 2.0T S	1262	FWD	5/1984	180/240@2200-5300	£24,791
Volvo XC70 D5 SE Lux	1458	4WD	5/2401	163/340@1750-3000	£32,509
Mercedes-Benz E270 CDI Elegance	1556	RWD	5/2685	179/400@1800-2600	£34,223

caravanners with a penchant for wet fields. Traction, as you'd expect, is one of its strong points. It's a good load carrier too, and its operating costs aren't as bad as you might imagine. Hill starts were easy, and on the flat you can use 6th (top) gear at anything from 50mph upwards.

Honda Accord Tourer 2.4i VTEC Executive

More of a 'lifestyle' estate car than a serious load lugger perhaps, but the brand new Accord Tourer took our typical caravanner's load in its stride but lost marks for access to its tools when loaded (you get a repair kit instead of a spare wheel). On the test track the 2.4-litre, five-speed automatic Accord was praised for its handling, stability and confidence-inspiring hill starts.

Volvo V70 2.0T S

Traction and off-the-line acceleration are impressive even on the hills – especially so when you consider this is a big, petrol-engined, front-wheel drive car. No problems with stability and a decent handbrake. To cap it all, just for once, a car with decent towing information in its handbook! I'm surprised this Volvo didn't get more marks than it did.

Volvo XC70 D5 SE Lux

Modern diesel engines certainly seem to rule the roost in today's top towcars, and they don't come much better than the five-cylinder Volvo. Add permanent four-wheel drive, a high driving position and estate car bodywork and you have a firm foundation for one of the class leaders. Have no qualms about choosing the five-speed auto gearbox – it works well when towing.

Mercedes-Benz E270 CDI Elegance

More expensive to buy and to run than the winning BMW, the Mercedes estate car again shouts quality engineering. Pull a lever inside the back of the car and the towball swings into position from its hiding place, complete with 13-pin electrics socket – but the approved towing bracket is £654 and a two-way adaptor lead is another £98. If you can afford it though, you'll get a car with superb handling, a lovely engine and an automatic gearbox that thinks for itself and always seems to have the right cog available.

THANKS

Bailey of Bristol, who supplied and helped maintain the caravans used, Moorland Leisure for use of a T@b, and Al-Ko Kober for trackside support and continually checking that all caravans remained in perfect mechanical order



THE JUDGES

DRIVING JUDGES

Stuart Craig, Oakwood Village; Steve Cropley, What Car?; Adrian French, freelance; Andy McPhee, Practical Caravan; Steve Rowe, Caravan magazine and Barry Williams, The Caravan Club Magazine

CARAVANABILITY JUDGES

John Bramham, Tom Collin, Mick Farr and Ted Holt

towcar of the year

MPV

CLASS WINNER – see right

RENAULT GRAND ESPACE 3.0 dCi
£31,002 as tested



NISSAN TINO SE 2.2 dCi
£15,522 as tested



VW TOURAN SE 2.0 TDI
£19,305 as tested



PEUGEOT 807 EXEC SE 2.2 HDI
£25,195 as tested

CLASS WINNER



Renault Grand Espace 3.0 dCi V6 Privilege Auto

The Espace still sets the standard for big people carriers. Tested with 3.0-litre turbodiesel engine and five-speed automatic transmission, it was fast, it handled well and showed all others how to hill start – except Renault's Vel Satis, which has the same brilliant electronic gizmo (see above). This MPV really impresses with its smoothness and all-round capability on the road, and the caravanability judges gave it high marks too for its load capacity. The secret is to fold the backrests in the

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	PS/Nm@rpm	PRICE
Renault Grand Espace 3.0 dCi V6 Privilege Auto	1607	FWD	6/2958	180/350@1800	£31,002
Nissan Tino SE 2.2 dCi	1233	FWD	4/2184	136/304@2000	£15,522
VW Touran SE 2.0 TDI	1445	FWD	4/1968	136/320@1750	£19,305
Peugeot 807 2.2 HDi	1488	FWD	4/2179	136/314@2000	£25,195

third row of seats forward; don't 'roll them up'. (The judges didn't remove seats because some people specifically buy cars for this facility when touring with friends.

Nissan Tino SE 2.2 dCi

Almost neck-and-neck with the Touran came the Tino, with a slightly bigger diesel engine and another six-speed gearbox. Caravanability judges praised its load carrying ability and, suffering from a bad back, I found it the easiest car in the competition to get in and out of! On the road you can forget sixth gear when towing, and stability was questionable: others reported twitchiness, and though this outfit never got out of shape I just got a feeling that I was pretty near the edge.

VW Touran SE 2.0 TDI

A very different animal from the two big French MPVs, the Touran needed lots of encouragement to make it to the top of the steepest hill. The handbrake held, though, and back on the open road there was no sway. I found the ride a bit 'jiggly' but others disagreed.

Peugeot 807 Executive SE 2.2 HDi

Not far behind the Grand Espace, another Gallic contender from rival Peugeot. High marks again for caravanability but a couple of drivers disliked the driving position and not everyone was happy with its high-speed stability. No problems with overtaking ability, though, and the handbrake (to the right of the driver's seat) held the outfit well enough.

COMPACT 4 X 4

CLASS WINNER – see right

SUBARU FORESTER 2.0 XT
£21,157 as tested



TOYOTA RAV4 2.0 D4-D VX
£21,116 as tested



NISSAN X-TRAIL 2.5 SVE
£21,686 as tested



JEEP CHEROKEE 2.8 CRD LTD
£24,501 as tested



VOLVO XC90 T6 SE
£35,206 as tested



LEXUS RX300 SE-L
£38,227

CLASS WINNER
Subaru Forester
2.0 XT with
Director General
Trevor Watson



Toyota RAV4 D4-D 2.0 VX

A returning champion, it had victory snatched away by the Forester. You still can't open the rear door properly with a caravan hitched (there's now a sticker to warn you) but otherwise the Toyota has a quality feel and handles a trailer well. It sticks to the road, goes where you point it and brakes nicely. Toyota's D4-D diesel engine is sweet and refined, and the five-speed gearbox a delight to use.

Nissan X-Trail 2.5 SVE

The X-Trail will take 100kg on its towball. It's comfortable, with a willing 2.5-litre, and you can rely on the X-Trail for stable towing and good grip. But be careful with the clutch when you restart on severe inclines.

Jeep Cherokee 2.8 CRD LTD

Equipped with a 2.8-litre, 4cyl diesel engine and 5-speed automatic transmission, the Cherokee was slow off the mark. It won praise for the way it handled Millbrook's hill starts, though handbrake action is a bit awkward – the lever is on the passenger side of the transmission tunnel. Biggest complaint was about the hard ride, but the Cherokee got high marks for ease of access to the luggage area when hitched (ie the rear door clears the caravan running gear).

TOWCAR OF THE YEAR AND CLASS WINNER

Subaru Forester 2.0 XT

£21,116 as tested

Great all-round performance from the Forester. Turbocharging pushes up the power and torque to provide fast pulling power, and Subaru's unique combination of flat four engine and four-wheel drive aid stability and sure-footedness. Another feature unique to Subaru is the 'hill holder' clutch – a real boon for caravanners. Bodyspace has a short rear overhang and the latest version has a nicer cabin than before, with better-quality controls. Group 15D insurance, but legendary reliability.

Volvo XC90 T6 SE

The XC90's shape makes it a good load carrier but judges noted that its running costs are high. The sequential/automatic gearbox is well matched to the car's 3.0-litre petrol engine but drivers found the outfit a bit twitchy at speed. The foot-operated parking brake works well with the automatic.

Lexus RX300 SE-L

You have to work the Lexus 3.0-litre petrol engine hard (max torque is at 4500rpm) and make the most of the sequential 5-speed gearbox. The parking brake (foot-operated) wasn't really strong enough to hold car and caravan, and though the car scored well overall for caravanability it has high operating costs.

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	PS/Nm@rpm	PRICE
Subaru Forester 2.0 XT	1233	4WD	4/1994	177/245@3200	£21,116
Toyota RAV4 2.0 D4-D VX (returning champion)	1233	4WD	4/1995	123/161@4000	£21,001
Nissan X-Trail 2.5 SVE	1241	F/4WD	4/2488	165/230@4000	£21,686
Jeep Cherokee 2.8 CRD LTD	1726	4WD	4/2776	150/360@1800-2600	£24,501
Volvo XC90 T6 SE	1818	4WD	6/2922	272/380@1800-5000	£35,206
Lexus RX300 SE-L	1598	4WD	6/2995	204/283@4500	£38,227

FULL SIZE 4X4

CLASS WINNER
VW Touareg V10 TDI

CLASS WINNER – see right

VW TOUAREG V10 TDI
£50,860 as tested



KIA SORENTO CRDI 2.5 XE
£18,379 as tested



HYUNDAI TERRACAN 2.9 CRTD
£18,705 as tested



MITSUBISHI L200
WARRIOR CAB
£21,356 as tested



KIA SORENTO 3.5 V6 AUTO
£22,379 as tested



NISSAN PATROL 3.0 TDS
£24,210 as tested



TOYOTA LAND CRUISER LC5
3.0D4-D AUTO
£32,774 as tested



MITSUBISHI LWB SHOGUN
3.2 WARRIOR
£32,796 as tested



MERCEDES-BENZ ML500
£43,600 as tested

CLASS WINNER

VW Touareg V10 TDI

Okay, it costs over £50,000 and it's not going to be cheap to run, so you'd have a right to expect good things from the V10 diesel-powered Touareg. Does it live up to expectations? You bet, and a whole lot more! This beast gives a new meaning to the phrase, "I didn't know the caravan was there," with self-levelling air suspension to smooth out any bumps, a 140kg noseweight limit, 750Nm of torque and a six-speed Tiptronic gearbox. If you can afford it, just go and buy it.

Kia Sorento CRDi 2.5 XE

Not many of us can afford even Land Cruiser prices, so if you have set your heart on a full-size 4x4 you'll be bowled over by the 2.5-litre Kia Sorento at under £18,000 on the road. Good looking, stable, a usable shape and excellent fit and finish for the price. Catches? Severe hill starts can be tricky unless you engage low ratio – you just turn a knob on the fascia – and the diesel Sorento isn't the fastest kid on the block.

Hyundai Terracan 2.9 CRTD

Poor marks for steering, hill starts and handbrake hold. Add to that the odd doubt about stability and you could say the Terracan hasn't got a lot going for it. But the 2.9-litre diesel isn't bad, the gear ratios are OK and the Terracan does cost under £19,000 – but so does a Sorento.

Mitsubishi L200 Warrior Cab

The word 'agricultural' springs to mind again, and here it's not far off the mark. If you are a farmer (or a builder, or a plumber...) you might find it useful to use one of these for work and play. No huge vices when towing a caravan but the L200 isn't really a leisure vehicle, being slow, noisy and not very comfortable.

Kia Sorento 3.5 V6 Auto XS

The V6 petrol-powered Sorento with 4-speed automatic transmission made light work of the hill start; but it's more expensive to buy and to run than the 2.5 diesel. It's



considerably faster, as you'd expect, and – like its twin – has no problems with stability.

Nissan Patrol 3.0 TD S

One of very few cars in the competition to have a good, strong fixing for the caravan breakaway cable! On the road it felt a bit agricultural alongside most of the opposition, the 3.0-litre 4cyl diesel engine churning away on the long uphill sections of the test track. The Patrol always gets there in the end, but it doesn't sparkle.

Toyota Land Cruiser LC5 3.0 D4-D Auto

If you can't afford the Touareg(!) you could save £18,000 and get the latest Land Cruiser, with 3.0-litre diesel engine and 4-speed automatic. Acceleration from standstill is a trifle disappointing but traction remains good (there's full-time 4WD) and it makes mincemeat of restarting on severe gradients. In short, it does everything very well, including

swallowing a big load easily, and buyers have the benefit of Toyota's legendary build quality.

Mitsubishi LWB Shogun 3.2 Warrior

If I had the money and the need for a vehicle of this type I'd be hard pressed to choose between this and the similarly-priced Land Cruiser. The latest incarnation of the Shogun has 3.2 litres of diesel power and automatic transmission, and it will haul your caravan almost anywhere. I did find it a bit slow, however, and the steering felt somewhat vague compared with some competitors'.

Mercedes-Benz ML500

Despite the name and the high price, the Merc, returning to the competition after a Class win last year, was outclassed. Acceleration was good (...well, it has got five litres under the bonnet) but the caravan upset its ride and the gearbox sometimes seemed to struggle to find the right ratio. Good access to the luggage compartment, though.

THE COMPETITORS – CLASS WINNER FIRST, THEN PRICE ORDER

MAKE/MODEL	CARAVAN WT(kg)	DRIVE	CYLS/CC	PS/Nm@rpm	PRICE
VW Touareg V10 TDI	2145	4WD	10/4921	313/750@2000	£50,860
Kia Sorento CRDi 2.5 XE	1750	R/4WD	4/2497	138/314@1850-2500	£18,379
Hyundai Terracan 2.9 CRTD	1832	R/4WD	4/2902	150/333@2000	£18,705
Mitsubishi L200 Warrior Cab	1500	R/4WD	4/2477	140/274@3100	£21,356
Kia Sorento 3.5 V6 Auto XS	1787	4WD	6/3497	195/294@3000	£22,379
Nissan Patrol 3.0 TDS	2002	R/4WD	4/2953	158/354@2000	£24,210
Toyota Land Cruiser LC5 3.0 D4-D Auto	1785	4WD	4/2982	163/343@1600-3200	£32,774
Mitsubishi LWB Shogun 3.2 Warrior	1845	R/4WD	4/3200	160/372@2000	£32,796
Mercedes-Benz ML500 (returning champion)	1879	4WD	6/4966	296/444@2700-4250	£43,600