



Custom QUALITY

Evolution is a small custom builder with a big reputation for caring for its customers.

PICS NATHAN JACOBS



In brief...

- True custom-built caravan
- Great attention to practical detail
- First rate build quality and finish



WORDS MICHAEL BROWNING

You can tell that travellers really love their caravans when they give them names. For Evolution owners, it's a common practice and their chosen moniker is written on the van's tail prior to delivery. For example, there's 'The Love Shack' in WA, 'The Trail Snail' based in Queensland, 'Tassie Devils' in Tasmania, 'Grumpy's Retreat' in Victoria, and many more. It's a small detail, but it tells you that Evolution has a special and personal relationship with its customers that only a small custom builder can enjoy.

While many people visit a caravan sales yard to choose the stock van they plan to make their home and share their travel experiences in, Evolution customers sit upstairs in a comfortable, wheelchair-friendly lounge in a modest but immaculately clean office in Somerville, south-east of Melbourne.

There, they share their dreams with Ellen Shambrook and her son Chris, who together shape these dreams into a caravan reality. This collaborative process can take several days a month, depending on what features are required, but it's at the core of Evolution's business model.

"We simply give our customers more choices," explained Chris, who draws up the layouts on his computer to ensure they work. "We try to never say 'no' and so long as it's feasible and legal, they can have it. We offer a blank canvas and invite them to paint it."

Evolution's 'wheelchair friendly' offering is an important one and, as a direct result of its close personal relationship with its customers, Evolution believes itself to be Australia's leading manufacturer of caravans for customers with physical disabilities.

It can take a trained eye to pick a custom-built Australian caravan from an equivalent-sized production model, as they will usually employ similar proprietary items, such as windows, doors, and kitchen and laundry appliances.

However, it is the location of these features, their fit and finish, and the many small details borne from personal experience and specified in collaboration between customer and builder that separate them from their volume-produced cousins.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Ellen and her husband Murray, a painter, were enthusiastic caravanners when they broke a clip in the shower of their personal Evolution Luxliner caravan back in 2008 and called into the Evolution factory in Epping to have a new one fitted.

They were so impressed with the service and attention to detail given to them by owner Bob Ali that they formed a partnership with him under which they became his primary sales outlet through the Somerville sales office they set up.

"He understood caravanners and their needs and we shared his values, so we



Clockwise from bottom left: The water tap is well-shielded; twin gas cylinders ride on the A-frame; this custom built van is a great example of attention to detail; front tunnel boot with slide-out checkerplate tray.

Measuring up

I liked...

- 👍 The customer comes first
- 👍 High build quality
- 👍 Great attention to detail
- 👍 Very reasonable price

I would have liked...

- 👎 A front storage box
- 👎 A sturdier rear bumper



"There are little details that show the hand of an experienced caravanner behind the build"





Clockwise from bottom left: All the cabinetry is built to last, attached with staples, glue and screws; the central dinette has pull-out foot stools; plenty of window space around the queen-size bed; a well-stocked kitchen; 184L fridge with three-drawer stacked pantry.

were immediately on the same wavelength,” explained Ellen.

While all the initial planning takes place at Somerville, customers are invited to visit the factory once their order is confirmed to see it being built. Murray usually hosts these visits and liaises with the factory during the build process to ensure the customer’s wishes are incorporated in the finished product. Once it is completed, they are invited to stay in their van at the factory for a couple of nights after handover to make sure they are completely comfortable with it and all of its functions.

“It’s a lengthy process,” explained Ellen. “But it is what sets us apart as a true custom builder. Depending on the size of the van and its equipment, we might only produce three or four vans a month, but while this wouldn’t be viable for the major caravan companies, we have built our business around it.”

TICKING THE BOXES

First impressions of the 6.4m (21ft) tandem-axle Evolution Luxliner we were given to review were positive.

Outside, it ticked most of the ‘wanted’ boxes: ribbed aluminium body cladding with silver checkerplate covering the lower nose and sides, twin ‘naked’ 9kg gas cylinders on the A-frame of the 150mm Roo chassis, a single spare wheel in the centre of the rather skimpy rear bumper and a drop-down picnic table on the side.

I liked the unencumbered full tunnel front

boot with its slide-out checkerplate tray (that could hold a barbecue), but I would also like a toolbox on the A-frame for all the messy hoses, wheel chocks and cables. But being a custom builder, all I would need to do at Evolution is tick that box.

Nothing out of the ordinary so far, but then we drilled down further. The robotically-welded Roo chassis, for example, is beautifully finished and its 1.8m extended A-frame has a special 3M rubber coating claimed to prevent stone damage for up to 15 years. An under-chassis tray minimises stone damage (and holds an awning mat), a central mounting for the 8in jockey wheel facilitates the fitting of load-sharing bars and a stone shield protects the external water tap.

Further underneath, where the A-frame joins the main rails, 50mm raisers give adequate ground clearance for the conventional roller-

rocker suspension, while the same 3M rubber coating is applied to the wheelbox arches.

And when you look under the rear end, you find all the pipes are beautifully laid out and perfectly protected against stone strike by the rearmost of the two well-shielded 95L water tanks.

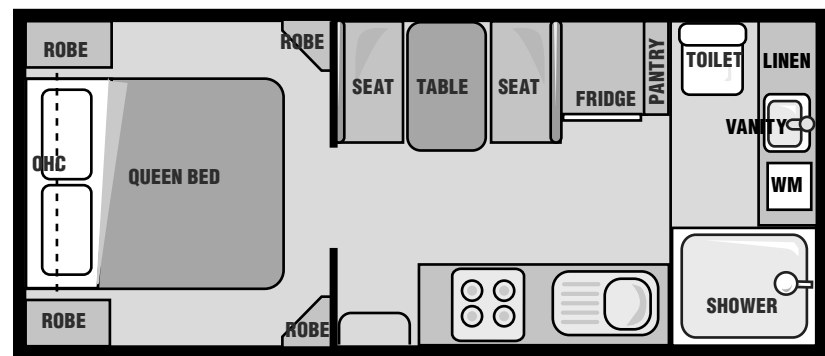
In summary, we found real attention to detail and everything was finished to a very high standard.

BUILT TO LAST

Inside, with an island queen-size bed at the front, central kitchen and dinette, and a separate shower and toilet ensuite across the rear incorporating a top-loading washing machine, it delivers on the layout that 90 per cent of today’s caravanners want for comfortable, long-distance touring.

Many people prefer a rear entry door but this Luxliner’s central door works well, with twin bulkheads serving to partially separate the bed area from the rest of the van, while adding valuable strengthening.

The same blend of quality and practicality continues here in unseen areas. While the Evolution’s wall-framing is conventional meranti timber, the wall studs are placed closer than



Tested
Evolution Luxliner 21ft

Evolution Luxliner 21ft

Weights and measures

Overall length 8.53m (28ft)
External body length 6.40m (21ft)
External body width 2.44m (8ft)
Travel height 2.88m (9ft 5in)
Internal height 1.96m (6ft 5in)
Tare 2580kg
ATM 2980kg
Ball weight 240kg

External

Frame Meranti
Cladding Aluminium ribbed exterior wall panels with insulation and ply inner lining

Chassis Roo 150mm A-frame with 50mm main frame raisers

Suspension Tandem-axle roller-rocker

Brakes 10in electric

Wheels 15in alloy with 235/75R15 tyres

Water 2x95L

Battery 2x100Ah deep-cycle

Solar 2x150W

Air-conditioner Aircommand Ibis

Gas 2x9kg

Sway control Optional Al-Ko ESC or Dexter DSC (\$950)

Internal

Cooking Swift combo four-burner with grill, oven and rangehood

Fridge Thetford 184L three-way

Microwave Swift

Toilet Thetford cassette

Shower Full-height one-piece moulded fibreglass

Lighting LED

Hot water Swift 28L

Price as shown

\$59,888 (on-road, Vic)

Enquiries

To enquire about this van, visit www.caravanworld.com.au/spec or phone (03) 8373 7330.

On CaravanWorld.com.au

Video test

More pictures

Specs to compare

normal at 250mm centres for added rigidity, while the flooring is 12mm one-piece marine ply.

All cabinets are attached at three points by staples, glue and screws, and the benchtops are a solid 30mm-thick. In other words, there is obvious attention to detail everywhere and the overriding impression is that Evolution caravans are built to last.

While the interior layout is conventional, there are little details that show the hand of an experienced caravanner behind the build. For example, most of the overhead cupboards are partitioned to stop things sliding from one end to the other when travelling, while the cupboard

Ratings

1. Value for money	★★★★★
2. Towability	★★★★★
3. Setting up and hitching up	★★★★★
4. Suitability for intended touring	★★★★★
5. Layout	★★★★★
6. Quality of finish	★★★★★
7. Build quality	★★★★★
8. Creature comforts	★★★★★
9. Innovation	★★★★★
10. X-Factor	★★★★★

A new future

PICS ELLEN DEWAR

Evolution's wheelchair-friendly offering makes caravanning more accessible.



Evolution owner Bob Ali describes his wheelchair-friendly caravans as "giving people their lives back".

It's an apt description for Gippsland, Vic, couple Arthur and Pauline O'Connor, who were taking delivery of their purpose-built Evolution Luxliner caravan when I caught up with them.

Arthur is a former Gippsland timber truck driver, who has been increasingly wheelchair-dependent for 35 years after an industrial accident. But this hasn't diminished his and Pauline's love of caravanning; it has just made it a lot harder.

"We'd set up and virtually live under the annexe," is how Pauline described their previous holidays in their former Jayco Heritage 22ft caravan. "It was just too hard to get in and out of the van during the day."

"Then, while on holiday in Townsville last year, we saw an advertisement for Evolution in a caravan magazine, explaining how they could build wheelchair-friendly vans.

"I said to Arthur, 'We've found your van!' And within three days, we had

put a deposit down and were planning a new caravanning future."

Because of the tyranny of distance from their home in Gippsland to Evolution's Epping factory, everything was done on the phone until they arrived in their Nissan Navara to collect it in March this year.

"It was a matter of trust," said Pauline. "We could tell that Bob was really passionate about building the right van for us and our confidence was not misplaced."

Easy access

The 6.3m (20ft 8in) Luxliner that Bob built for the O'Connors features a number of simple but effective modifications to allow Arthur to access its entire interior by wheelchair.

The starting point is a set of 2.5m-long non-slip checkerplate aluminium US-made ramps that separate into four pieces for transporting on a special holder on the van's rear bumper bar. Combined, they weigh 25kg, but the O'Connors are confident they will find many willing hands to assist in the assembly

wherever they park their van.

The ramps lock into an entry platform that is attached to the side of the van at one end and is held up by a pair of folding Al-Ko drop jacks at the other. The jacks fold out of the way when not required and slide together with the platform under the van via U-channels welded to the chassis. This leaves the standard fold-down step for the centre entry door for Pauline to enter the van on roadside stops.

Inside, full use has been made of the Luxliner's 2.4m (8ft) diameter body to clear a pathway for Arthur's wheelchair and instead of a standard dinette, two swivel chairs have been installed. This also allows Arthur space to reverse his wheelchair between the van's twin single beds.

The van's one-piece fibreglass floor has only a small hump to overcome to enter the ensuite, where wide access has been created to the toilet and shower, with handrails around both to assist. Among other details, the van's windows wind out, rather than push

up for ease of use from a wheelchair, and all switches and powerpoints are located at a wheelchair-friendly height.

The van is the fourth of its type built to date by Evolution and with the increase in interest shown in them, Bob Ali is already planning modifications, including a hydraulically-operated platform, similar to that fitted to wheelchair-modified taxi vans.

Meanwhile, the O'Connors are already heading off on their annual holiday to Townsville to escape the Victorian winter.

"There are a lot of people there who can't wait to see how all this works!" Pauline said.





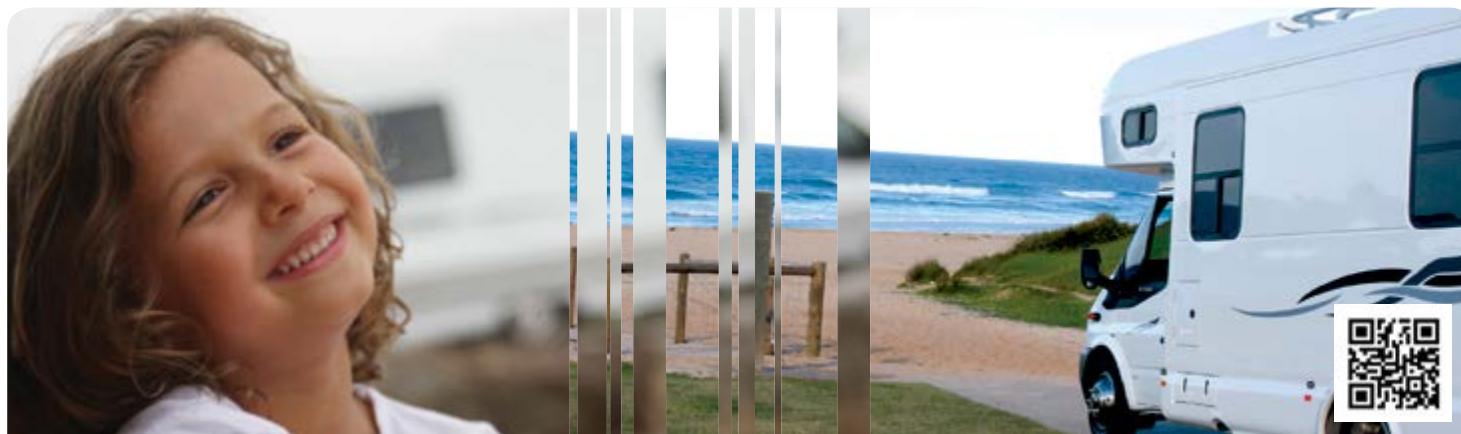
doors are held vertical by sturdy gas struts. The mirrored bedside robes are hinged on the bed side and have double powerpoints beneath them, so they can be comfortably used for personal grooming. There are three vertically-stacked pantry cupboards beside the fridge, reasonable bench space beside the three gas burners and single electric hob on the central Swift cooker, and there are two deep pot drawers.

Similar comments apply to the ensuite where there is lots of cupboard storage space, a large central mirror, and good benchspace, which is maximised above the top-loading washing machine.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The fact that you can pick and choose your own options and design the van you want to suit your own travelling needs is very appealing. And the best way I can put it in the case of our review van is that it all works. And it all works well. And those words really sum up the Evolution Luxliner. **cw**

From left to right: A top-loading washing machine sits under the vanity bench; a good amount of cupboard space in the bathroom; full-height separate shower in the rear nearside corner.



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