

Moving by Stealth

Elite Caravans has set up a clandestine product test site and we get a sneak peek inside

WORDS RICHARD HOLDSWORTH



There is an understanding in the UK leisure industry – where I worked for 28 years – that the top manufacturers put systems in place to ensure only the best design and quality finds its way out onto the road; while others seem to let the buying public do the testing for them. After spending some time with Elite Caravans, I have to say it falls very much into the first category.

Maybe that's why the company picked up the Caravan Manufacturer of the Year award in 2013 and 2015. Current owners Adrian Cappola and Peter Smith have been at the helm for a little over six years and have assembled a team that's almost obsessed with searching for the best and then building it for their customers.

It all starts with research and development (R&D) department head, Jared Pearson, a young man with a passion. "I love my work," he tells me on my visit to the factory. Jared was originally recruited as an electrician, but worked his way up, taking on a two-fold remit: finding suppliers, equipment and methods of construction that are as good as they can possibly be and making sure it's right before it gets to the customer.

SECRET LOCATION

I'm then taken to the company's secret R&D premises – fortunately I'm not blindfolded and stuffed in a boot, but the owners are serious about the importance of the location not being divulged. "Some of the work here is top secret," says Adrian Cappola. "The last thing we want is our competitors getting wind of what we are up to and capitalising on our research and development work." It's my sentiment entirely, having had a similar workshop in a secret location in the UK.

Here Elite Caravans store a special one-off caravan that has been built to trial, test and prove new technologies and features. Appropriately named Stealth, it has already been spotted over the past year on roads in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria on numerous trips covering more than 10,000km.

The idea behind Stealth is to test and perfect a whole host of new equipment and methods of construction. On my visit, I'm shown a number of these new technologies. Some are destined for inclusion in the company's future caravans, having come through R&D scrutiny. I have been sworn to secrecy over many, while a few are now being revealed to customers who want the latest tech in their vans. One such example is roof-mounted solar panels



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that follow the trajectory of the sun via a GPS system. Then there's the German-built methanol-powered fuel cell, which generates 210-amp for up to six months, providing the caravan's 12-volt electrics without having to hook-up to mains or use a supplementary unit.

The next innovation is a big one: the use of bonded panels in place of conventional timber-framed sides, top, floors and ends, with aluminium extrusions to tie them together. My own experience is that this is as good as you can get. It reduces weight, with Elite anticipating the saving to be around 400kg, which goes straight onto the payload of the van.

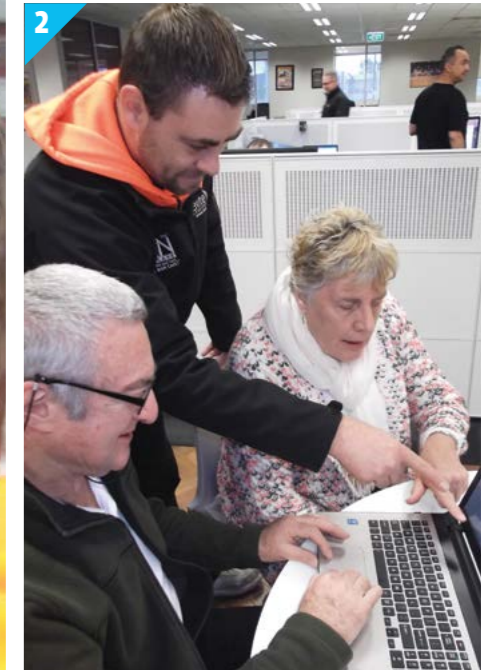
One new technique Jared has perfected involves the problem of attaching furniture within the van. In my time, we used galvanised plates at crucial points within the bonded panels, but Jared has sourced an adhesive to render this unnecessary. I'm invited to tear test strips of sheet metal from a sample of the side panels and try with zero chance of success.

The R&D building, hidden away from the main factory, is what Jared calls his "second home". It houses more exciting experimental work for the future – and also some basic testing of the supplier's assurances. No stone seems to be unturned here – simple buckets of water hold

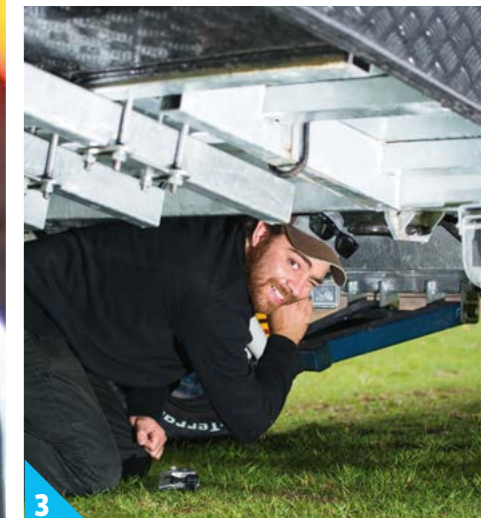
samples of wood framing used in caravan construction. Jared explains, "The supplier assured us it will not warp or deteriorate – but it does." There are sheets of ply that were exposed to lengthy bouts of Melbourne rain and sun to see how they perform. Some function well and some don't – there's no need to tell you which of them find their way into an Elite caravan.

ENTER THE OFF-ROAD TESTERS

I next meet Peter Horley and his wife Margaret, who spend much of their time with prototype vans in places where 'off-road' means some of the toughest terrain that Australia has to offer: dirt



TOP-SECRET CLEARANCE (1) Former army sergeant major turned van tester, Peter Horley, in deep discussion with Elite R&D man, Jared Pearson. (2) Margaret Horley is the other half of the van-testing team. (3) Jared climbs under an Elite to inspect its suspension in the field.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard was a manufacturer of motorhomes for 28 years in the UK, and his company, Richard Holdsworth Conversions, earned full engineering approval from the likes of Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Ford and Renault. It was even winner of the UK Motor Caravan of the Year award on three occasions. Richard is also the author of two books: *In The Hot Seat – Richard's Adventures Down Under* and *Six Spoons of Sugar*, which is a novel about WWII Britain.

and corrugated roads, plus deep sand and scattered rocks. Peter is also president of the Elite Owners Club and gets vital feedback from other members. Like those same owners who know their vans inside out, Peter isn't shy about offering his own comments and criticisms. All of it then goes back to the factory to be digested and acted upon.

I join Peter and Margaret when they return the latest Elite van to the factory and they give me a fascinating insight into how they became involved with Elite. It all goes back to the first Elite caravan they bought, which was also the first Elite unit built with an alloy chassis. At the time, they asked for a number of small changes to the caravan and enjoyed three months of touring. They then thought it would be worthwhile to report its performance back to the factory. This was received well and after a further trip (this time an epic 13,000km trip to Western Australia) and another detailed report, the directors formally asked Peter if he would consider the role of independent tester for the company.

Peter, a former sergeant major in the army, accepted the role. Now, it's well known that sergeant majors don't mince words and certainly don't accept second best. In short, it was just what owners Peter Smith and Adrian Cappola were looking for – and so began the perfect partnership.

THE SHAKEDOWN

The remit for Peter and Margaret has been simple one: take a new van, or one that has a new layout or new component, and give it a "good old shakedown". Based on the formal request from Elite, the pair develop a test plan detailing distance, time and conditions. And the roads? Usually they propose highways, secondary roads, gravel and bush tracks, which are interspersed with simple living in the van for days or weeks at a time.

"The whole idea is to stress the van and its components to something beyond what the usual caravanner will experience," says Peter. "There's no point in pussy-footing around."

After testing, they then send a written report up the chain of command, which includes pictures and even videos to support any comments or criticism they feel will be helpful in perfecting the van.

They've recently applied this same rigorous, military-tough testing to the Stealth prototype with its new layout, equipment and bonded construction. It also seems entirely appropriate that the Stealth features an army camouflage-inspired painted exterior. And when I finally go to leave the top-secret site, I hold back an urge to salute all those involved, opting for a very British "cheerio" instead. ACHRV



TRACKING TECHNOLOGY

(1) Taking the Stealth on a test run. (2) The high-tech van features innovative solar panels that track the movement of the sun via GPS. (3) You can just make out Elite owner, Peter Smith, getting his hands dirty at a test site – well, figuratively speaking of course as they're in his pockets!



Where 'off-road' means some of the toughest terrain that Australia has to offer