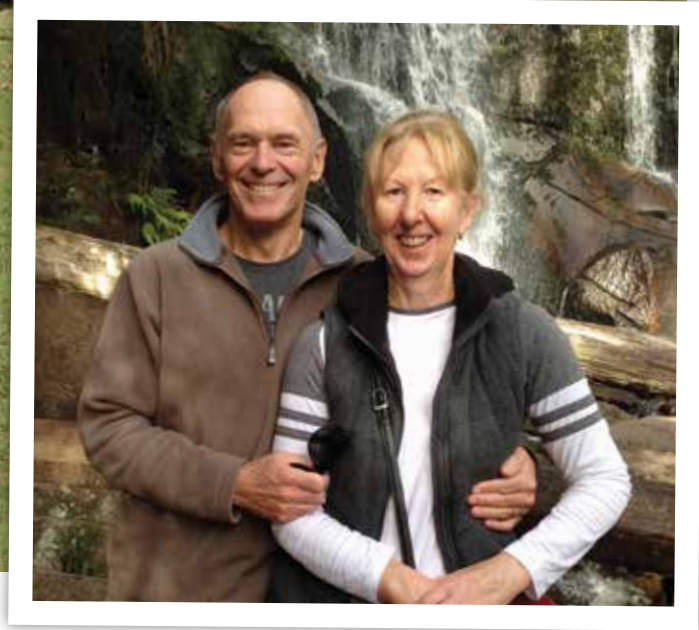




Readers
REVIEW

GEOFF DUNKIN



After his year(s) long buying process, we sit down with a new(ish) caravan owner one year in to see what he learnt.

With retirement approaching, Geoff and his wife Debbie decided they wanted a caravan to enjoy some warmer winters in, while continuing their love of camping and travelling in Australia. In a process that took a number of years, the couple finally settled on a 22-foot Grand Salute Royal Guard from Melbourne City Caravans. We caught up with Geoff to see what he learned over the process,

how he came to make his final decision, and if, after a year of ownership, he's changed his mind on anything.

ROAM: How long have you been into caravanning and camping?

GD: To be honest we've only been into caravanning for about 12 months, but we were looking at buying one for a good couple of years, doing our homework. We nearly bought one a few years ago while I was still working and thought – hang on, this is nuts. We're going to buy a caravan and only use it three or four weeks of the year. So, we did all our homework and nussed out the good models and features we wanted and what really ticked all the boxes for us. We were really prepared, so that when we did finally finish work, we were ready to go and have a look at the last two or three and make

a decision. And that's what we did with Melbourne City Caravans.

I've been camping and tenting for many years in four-wheel drive clubs, but as you mature, you look for a few more creature comforts and camping out in the rain in the mountains and that didn't really do it for us any more, so the next step was to progress to a caravan.

ROAM: What sort of travel did you do when camping?

GD: We hired a couple of camper trailers, we did trips out to Surveyor Generals Corner because my wife's brother and partner manage aboriginal missions out that way; so we did some trips out there under permits in central Australia. In earlier years I was actively involved in the Western Port 4WD Club, and we used to go on numerous trips around Victorian alpine areas. We'd take all our gear in the car and camp and have some really fantastic times. It's been a progression. We did discuss a camper trailer, and they can be very nice, but also are very cold in the outback because the temperatures can fall to zero and it can get quite cool. After thinking about that, we decided it was caravanning that was for us.

ROAM: You said you did a lot of preparation before buying so you knew exactly what you wanted – what were the most important things?

GD: We wanted a nice layout with a shower and toilet. We don't always use the shower, but the toilet is handy to use just overnight for a quick visit. We were quite interested in having a rear or front lounge and the bedroom at the other end. And that probably knocked out half the market, because a lot of the manufacturers weren't offering that. You'd walk into the vans where the kitchen and the bedroom are together and the ensuite is at the back and that wasn't for us. The main reason being that if we're away, or as we're going to be doing shortly in Tassie where we're going to be living in the van while we build our house, having the separate areas with the dividing doors in the centre gives us two distinct living areas, so if we have people in they are not in our bedroom and if one of us wants to sit up, the other can shut the door and go to bed.

The other was being able to be self-contained. I did a lot of work with Fabio at Melbourne City Caravans and up-specced the whole van which we had some interesting discussions on, and Fab said to me, 'Do you really want to go this path – it looks like overkill?' I said, no, I've done my homework, so we doubled our solar panels from two to four, put an extra battery in, so we had extra battery reserve, we put inverters in there and during our first big trip to Queensland for six weeks, we ran the whole caravan off the battery (including toasters, microwave etc.). And we managed to do that for six weeks without plugging into power. It's really worked for us.

ROAM: When you were researching, you must have looked at a number of different vans and gone to a range of different dealers. What was the difference in the level of service you got between one and another.

GD: What we found, interestingly enough, is Melbourne City Caravans was more of a family orientated business and we weren't dealing with a dealer who was only interested in just making money (I mean everyone wants to make a dollar), but we were actually talking to the people who were owning the business and were building the caravans. But a lot of the other people, and we went to a lot of caravan shows, and you could tell the hype around them. They had all the sales people there, they had all the girls


there, they had the big setups and at the end of the day, someone's got to pay for that and we found that to a certain extent, that was reflected in the price of the caravan. I think the quality was there in nearly all of them, but how much?

We found Fabio and Cettina wonderful to deal with, I just can't praise them enough for the service they offered and the discussions we had.

ROAM: When you were looking at the different caravans you came across, was it a difference in the quality of the product or the quality of the service that swayed you on your final purchase?

GD: Most of them seem to be fairly good quality these days. I think the first attribute was that we wanted to get all the things in the caravan that we really wanted or needed. Second was how we felt about the people, and then we got down to a short-list and we said it gets down to price – "We've got the layout we want, the quality is pretty good with all of them, they are good to deal with and the warranty is great, so now, what's the price," we said to ourselves.

ROAM: As a first-time caravan buyer, is there anything you learned through the process that you think other people might like to know.

GD: I think go to at least three or four caravan shows and don't buy anything. Just go and experience as much as you can – see all the vans, speak to people. People are going to try and pressure you that they've got this special deal only at the show – don't go there! We spent a couple of years going to the shows and recommend you do your homework. A lot of people do buy caravans at shows, but it's not a five-minute investment. I mean you buy your van, you might keep it for five years, 10 years, whatever; it pays to do your homework. The wife used to have a chuckle at some of the sales people because the first thing I would do when I looked at a caravan was go straight underneath the van, and they'd ask what I was doing. She'd tell them I was looking underneath at all the structure because if the structure's no-good underneath, I'm not going to even look inside. It's like a house, if the foundation's no good, you're going to have problems with the rest of it. So, a good chassis, a good drawbar, and a good suspension set up are for us, was paramount. And the quality in all the vans is basically there, but how it's all put together. I even went to some of the chassis manufacturers on my own – G&S and some of the other people and just had a chat with them and asked to be shown around. 

MELBOURNE CITY CARAVANS

Based just north of Melbourne's urban sprawl in Somerton, Melbourne City Caravans carries the Grand Salute range of caravans. A small family-owned business, you can find out more about them at melbournecitycaravans.com.au or by calling 03 9303 7200