Rhinomax Defender Review

Larger off-road hybrid caravan covers remote area rivals

When it comes to compact remote area travel, Rhinomax now has all popular market bases covered.

With the release of its new 15ft 4in Outback Defender Hybrid, the Maroochydore, Qld-based off-road specialist has matched the latest offerings from Australian Off Road (Matrix Pop Top and Quantum Plus), Northcoast Campers (Titanium), various MDC models and most recently, Mountain Trail with its new LXV in terms of size and key features.

However, typical of Rhinomax, the Defender is a quality newcomer that does many things either better, or cheaper, than its main competition.

Stretched for comfort

In a nutshell, the Outback Defender is a stretched version of Rhinomax's popular 14ft 3in Discovery that launched the company's transition from soft and hard-floor camper builder to hybrid specialist back in 2014.

In the interim, Rhinomax stopped production of its campers and launched its new 10ft 3in Scorpion micro-hybrid to a fertile market, but it soon came clear to the company's founders, Andy Dean and Steve Punton, that there was an unsatisfied demand for a Discovery with a bit more room and comfort. In short, an alternative to a fully-featured caravan.

By bringing the shower inside and combining it with a cassette toilet in a rear quarter bathroom, adding more lounge space and adding additional exterior storage, Rhinomax has now ticked that box.

The next step (although not yet) will be a larger, more caravan-like full height model, but first the company needs to relocate from its cosy, but relatively crowded current factory. First things first.

On the right track

I've been a fan of the way that Rhinomax does things since I first reviewed the Discovery. Its expatriated British founders came together with different engineering backgrounds, but brought a fresh vision to the rapidly-expanding hybrid section of the off-road market.

While not as 'pretty' in its interior detail as, for example, its Australian Off Road and Mountain Trail equivalents, or as 'industrial' as Track Trailer's Topaz (incidentally, long-overdue for a major upgrade), the Rhinomax models are built as well as any in this very competitive market.

A story Punton likes to tell is that when they launched the Discovery at a price about 10-15 per cent less than its immediate rivals, they thought customers were knocking their door down because of its price. Only years later did they discover that price was secondary in most of their customers' buying decisions; they simply loved the product!

Got the Rhino look

From the outside, the Defender is clearly identifiable as a member of the Rhinomax family with its 30mm thick high density, white Insulated fibreglass composite body panels and distinctive decals, along with logo and laser cut-outs in the aluminium body edges, front and rear.

Apart from its slightly smaller footprint and black and grey (instead of red, black and grey) stripes, the most obvious difference is that it lacks its smaller brother's rear 'hump' that houses the Discovery's drop-down shower tent, with twin spare wheels instead mounted on the windowless back panel.

However, it shares the same 150mm x 50mm continuous drawbar and main chassis that run from tip to tail, while rugged Cruisemaster independent trailing arm suspension (similar to that

fitted to all Rhinomax Hybrids) inspires further confidence that the Defender will last the distance off-road, as does the 5-year chassis and 2-year body panel and suspension warranty that applies to all Rhinomax models.

As well as its full size internal ensuite, the Defender distinguishes itself from its smaller Discovery brother by incorporating push button electric roof opening, a large external gourmet kitchen and a huge wind-out awning that extends fully 2.5 metres.

For my money, a 12v power lift for the pop-top is a no-brainer, as if they are shopping the Defender against a caravan, many older buyers no longer look forward to doing pop-top press ups as part of their daily exercise.

This isn't an issue with a bare roof pop-top, but if you're potentially a remote area caravan buyer, you'll probably want at least 300W of solar panels on the roof and perhaps an air conditioner, and that means stiffer struts to get the encumbered roof up and down.

Quick and easy

Quick and easy set-up is the name of the game with the Defender: drop down the stabiliser legs, wind out the awning and slide out the kitchen. With its automatic push button roof opening you'll be set up with a glass of wine in your hand in minutes.

If you've exhausted the Defender's two 120Ah AGM batteries, there's a manual over-ride.

However, it's the Defender's slide-out kitchen that's the star of the show here. Sliding out under the awning on the left hand side, it comes with a top of the range 3-burner stove, stainless sink with hot/cold mixer tap plus a large stainless bench and plenty of storage including a host of individual pantry/utensil drawers.

An interesting feature of this kitchen is that its supporting sliding rails extend the full width of the van, so no additional stabilising legs need to be fitted to support it when it is fully extended.

Like AOR's Quantum, there's no interior cooking facility, but Rhinomax can fit one as an option if you wish, or you could simply strike up a two-burner portable cooker on those chilly mornings to make a cuppa if you wish.

Extra storage

The extra length of the Defender is put to good use outside with added storage space, which Rhinomax claim to be the largest in its class.

In addition to the monster, square and unencumbered and galvanised steel-lined full tunnel front boot, there's more storage space in the front locker on the left hand side, while even with the kitchen fully locked away, while the Defender's two 120Ah AGM batteries and other major electrical components can be accessed easily via separate rearward locker.

Just when you thought you've found it all, open the cavernous new boot on the draw-bar and there's even more. Compartments on either side are set-up to store twin 4.5kg gas bottles, while between them is a rectangular galvanised locker to carry the likes of hoses, tools, ground-matting and so on.

A handy wood tray sits on top of this front storage box, or you could specify a bike rack in its place if you wish.

Feels roomy inside

The first thing you notice when entering the Defender is the huge sense of space, and Rhinomax claims through clever design they have created the largest internal space of any hybrid within the 15ft hybrid sector.

With a preferable north-south queen size bed, a comfortable four-seater lounge and large internal ensuite (toilet and shower) the Defender is sure to appeal to those wanting to experience the Outback without leaving the comforts of home behind.

Step into a Defender on a hot day and it immediately becomes evident how much cooler it is on the inside.

The Defender combines a relatively light tare weight (1720kg) with a low-ball weight (120kg) to give one of the largest payloads (780kg) within the 15ft hybrid sector.

This coupled with a 4WD width of under two metres, means the Defender will follow in the tracks of your tow vehicle.

WE LIKED:
>> Off-road ability and specs
>> Clever use of space
>> Internal shower/toilet

NOT SO MUCH:
>> Fridge optional
>> No lithium-compatible battery system (now available)

RHINOMAX OUTBACK DEFENDER
Travel length: 6500mm
Body length: 4600mm
External body width: 1970mm
Travel height: 2400mm
Tare weight: 1750kg
ATM: 2500kg
Ball weight: 130kg
Body: Insulated fibreglass composite body panels and pop-top
Chassis: Hot dipped galvanised steel 150mm x 50mm with DO35 coupling
Suspension: Vehicle Components Cruisemaster XT independent trailing arms and coil springs with twin shockers per wheel
Brakes: 12-inch electric
Wheels: 17in alloy with 265/70R17 off-road tyres
Fresh water: 1 x 125L; 1 x 85L; 1 x 85L grey water tank
Battery: 2 x 120Ah deep cycle AGM; 600W inverter
Solar: 2 x 160W roof-mounted panels
Gas: 2 x 4.5kg
Hot water: Gas unit
Cooking: External 3-burner Thetford kitchen with stainless steel sink and pantry drawer
Fridge: Optional (external portable fridge)
Shower: External rear hot/cold shower
Lighting: LED throughout
Options fitted: None
Price $87,000
Supplied by: Rhinomax Campers, Maroochydore , Qld

Words & photos – Michael Browning