



Words & pictures  
by Dave Hurrell

# EXCEL SENSE

## Auto-Trail Excel 600D on 2.2-litre Fiat Ducato

*Compact, and with an unusual layout, one of the latest motorhomes from Grimsby cuts a low profile dash*



**G**rimby-based, Auto-Trail has - over the years - built a reputation for producing high quality motorhomes on Fiat and Mercedes chassis, and of being at the higher end of the market. A loyal customer base and thriving owners' club has helped to give the company an edge, while investment in a purpose-built factory has brought efficiencies that have helped the business go from strength

to strength. These days, the credit-crunch and rising fuel prices are seeing manufacturers diversifying: keen to grab as much of a - very possibly dwindling - market share as possible. As panel van conversions and compact low profile coachbuilts come to the fore, compact and keenly-priced is fast becoming an umbrella that converters are unfurling as protection from the seeping drizzle of leaner times.

Enter the Auto-Trail Excel range of compact low profile coachbuilts. There are four models

on offer (three of them under six metres long) and all are sleek and goodlooking - based on the ubiquitous Fiat Ducato. Ever eager to try the latest 'vans, I got the chance to spend a short time with one of the most interesting of the quartet. With conventional fixed bed, garage and bunk-equipped layouts, the other three models should prove popular. However, the front lounge and rear dinette layout of the 600D intrigued me: on paper it looked slightly strange - wacky even - so I just had to try it out.



- 1 The Sport options pack provides stylish blue paint
- 2 Furniture is well built
- 3 Twin-sofa layout gives way to rear-located kitchen, washroom and single dinette

**DIVINE DESIGN?**

The Excel is thoroughly Continental in style, with the convenience of a UK nearside-located caravan door marking this 'van out as a British creation. The test 'van benefited from the optional Sport Pack, so was dressed in good-looking metallic blue paint.

Step through the door and you're greeted by that quirky layout: up front, swivelling cab seats and two (unequal) sofas make the lounge. Behind the sofa on the offside stands a compact kitchen with an equally bijou corner washroom finishing off this side of the 'van. To the right of the door (on the nearside) is the quirky bit: a two-person Pullman dinette plus wardrobe/drawer unit. It's Auto-Trail's unit-based approach to the design of the Excel that - in part - sees this idea given breath, as in two other layouts



1



2



3

the same space is occupied by a fixed double bed or a pair of bunks. Decor retains Auto-Trail identity as curved locker doors have coloured inserts - worktops matching - and the furniture is solidly made. The understated charcoal upholstery that's part of the Sport Pack is not a pattern I would choose from a sample swatch, but in practice looks rather good - classy, modern and easy on the eye.

**DUCATO EXCELS**

Much has been written about the latest Fiat Ducato - a motorhome base that's as good on the road as it is ubiquitous. The comfy cab includes cruise control, radio/CD player and importantly, a passenger airbag as standard. This is in addition to Fiat's standard driver's airbag and is to be applauded, big-time. Teetering on the edge of my soapbox, I re-state my belief that all motorcaravan manufacturers should routinely provide passenger airbags, especially when you consider that this option only costs a couple of hundred quid or so. Remote central locking and

electric windows are fitted, but not electrically adjustable mirrors. These are something that I believe should be present, as with two drivers on board constant readjustment is often necessary. Those who have their fingers pressed firmly on the motorcaravanning world's pulse will be pleased to learn that this 'van reversed without drama, shudder, or judder.

The 600D's standard engine is the baby of the range, 2.2-litre 100 horsepower unit and in a 'van this small and light it's plenty powerful enough. However, if you want a six-speed gearbox you'll have to opt for the 2.3-litre, 130bhp engine. Automatic (two-pedal motoring) fans will be forced to choose the 157 horsepower engine, as this is the only option if you want Fiat's auto-changing Comfortmatic cog box. Petrol (diesel) heads will be pleased to learn that this motor will also make the 600D fly: hang a tea tray out of each side window and it would probably take off!

Driving the 'van produced few surprises, comfort is assured and this lightweight

## On Test Auto-Trail Excel 600 D



motorhome - with its short rear overhang and wide-track rear axle - handled like a roller skate. The 100 horsepower engine is a willing unit and motorway speeds are easy to maintain. Higher speeds will see the engine sounding a tad busy, so long-haul autoroute fans may feel the need to go for the 130bhp motor with its - taller-g geared - six-speed box.

### RELAX

The only downside to the lounge is the unequal length of the sofas. In the his and hers war, only one person gets a proper feet-up settee, but no matter, the swivelled cab seats should be great places to relax with your pins up on the adjacent sofa. The Sport Pack provides a drop-down TV screen above the cab that's fed by DVD and Freeview derived signals (via a fitted directional aerial), while

removable carpet makes the whole area feel a touch more cosy than the standard bare vinyl.

### EAT

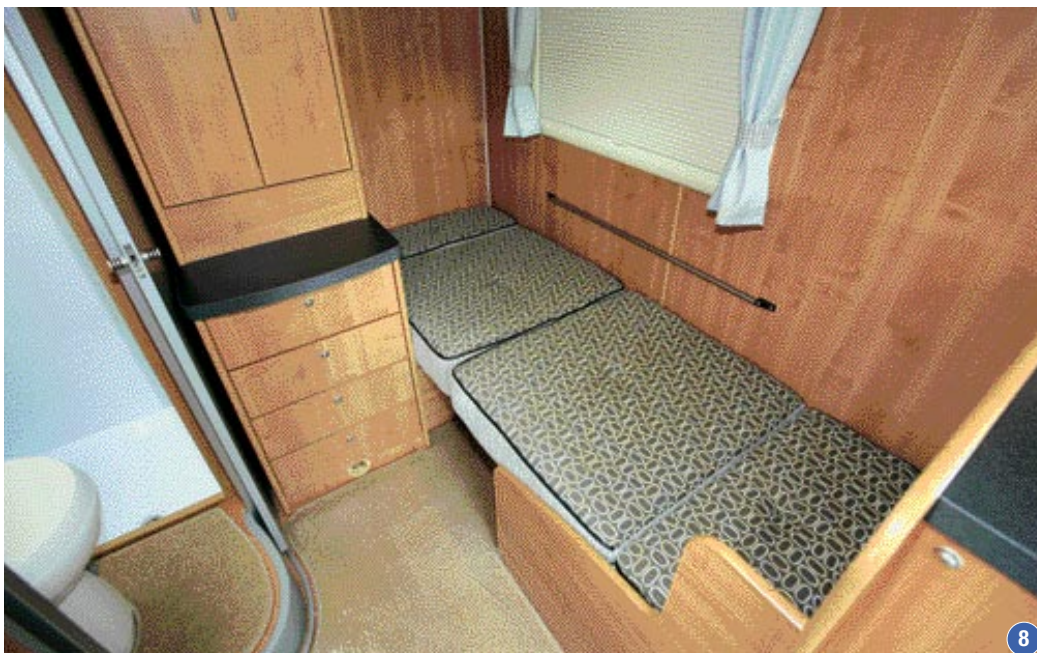
A TV chef might say: good quality ingredients, simply prepared are the secret of success. The same applies to the dining arrangements here, as two classic eateries are present, one instantly available, one convenient and easy to set up. With just the two of you aboard, the cosy Pullman dinette in the rear should be perfect: it even has an adjacent shelf (in front of the wardrobe) for your cornflakes' packet. The backrest of the rearward-facing dinette seat is home to a conveniently located locker for the freestanding dining table. This unfolds to stand between the sofas and offer generous amounts of space for that candlelit dinner. Of course, this table will also work

well for alfresco dining, so you can cross that outdoor table off your accessory shopping list.

### COOK

The cook's domain packs all the kit into a compact space. Cleverly, triangular-shaped sink and hob leave a (triangular) slab of worktop in between, albeit at the expense of a draining board. Down below there's a decent 77-litre fridge and a Spinflo oven/grill unit. A window, plus adjacent rooflight, provides plentiful amounts of light and ventilation. The one thing this galley lacks is storage space: a cupboard below, with rather lacklustre internal cutlery drawer, plus two overhead lockers, is the sum total. Thankfully, other lockers, plus a stack of drawers below the wardrobe provide store-what-you-will space nearby.

### WASH





Many compact corner washrooms (and this is one) suffer, as space in front of the toilet and washbasin is inadequate, thanks in part, to the proximity of the front corner-chopping doorway. The Excel goes some way to solving this problem by locating the washbasin inside the separate shower compartment - the basin's tap head pulling out to become showerhead. There's a good-sized mirror in here too and with plastic walls and shower tray at your feet you'll be able to enjoy washes as splashy as you want to make them. Above the loo, an overhead locker is big enough for toothpaste, smellies and the bucket of moisturiser that - these days - I'm never without.

The Toilet is the latest (C250) model from Thetford and once enthroned you'll discover that space is, indeed tight. Facing outwards

is fine with the door open (potentially perfect for night-time use), but with the door closed you must swivel the toilet's bowl so you face into the shower compartment. Because the shower tray is lower than the washroom floor I could see some kind of duckboard in the shower would be a good idea - equalising floor levels and making using the loo more comfy. If I was of more generous proportions, I would spend plenty of time getting to know this washroom (and pretending to use it) before a placed my order.

**SLEEP**

This 'van is a three berth, but without any rear seatbelts. However, those who wish to travel with a 'little darling' can specify a half-dinette in the lounge. This replaces the offside sofa and offers two three-point belted travel seats.

Beds here consist of a transverse double in the lounge and a longitudinal single in the dinette. The single is simplicity itself to make: simply lower the table to fill the gap between the seats, slide the cushions, allow the backrests to drop in and the job's done. The resulting bed is not too long or wide, but proved comfortable thanks to sensibly designed flat cushions. It will, of course, be perfect for that little darling.

The lounge bed is more complicated to make as pullout sofa bases are joined by one infill cushion and bits and bobs to create an unequal-width bed with quite a few joins. My brief repose upon this bed reported reasonable comfort, but I reserve judgement not having slept a night in it.

Finally, it struck me that this 'van could suit couples or friends who sleep separately.

**STORE**

Outside the kitchen and washroom, overcab shelves and overcab lockers are present and correct in the lounge and over the rear dinette. Obvious star of the storage show is the practical two-door wardrobe with stack of drawers below.

There's also plenty of room under all the

**I LIKED**

- Compact size
- Low profile good looks
- Great to drive
- Versatile layout
- Always-available dinette
- Comfy lounge
- Wardrobe and drawers
- High levels of equipment as standard
- Plenty of underseat storage

**I WOULD HAVE LIKED**

- More kitchen storage
- Better cutlery drawer
- Duckboard in shower
- Inboard fresh water tank

**I DISLIKED**

- Fiddly double bed makeup



4 The rear dinette seems quirky, but is very convenient

5 Candle-lit dinners in the lounge are a real possibility

6 Compact galley is well-equipped, but lacks storage room

7 The washroom uses some good ideas to make use of space

8 The dinette bed is easy to make and comfy

9 I found the lounge double bed a fiddle to construct

10 A hatch offers external access to underseat storage

# On Test Auto-Trail Excel 600 D

## VEHICLE LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

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seating with a handy exterior hatch leading to the offside sofa's space. In conclusion, plenty of room for a couple's touring kit, including tables, chairs and barbecues.

One of the Excel design briefs was to ensure good payload on chassis that come in under 3500kg MAW. Built on a 3300kg chassis, the 600D fulfils that brief with an excellent 620kg payload, quoted after the weight of driver and fuel.

## SUPPORT

Well-equipped sums up this motorhome well, with star billing going to the Webasto DualTop diesel-fired heating system. This relatively new unit is quieter and less power hungry than similar systems and has many advantages. It uses fuel from the vehicle's tank and in so doing helps preserve reserves of gas. The DualTop can also be used while on the road, thus helping to keep the interior warm in winter and/or allowing you to arrive on site with a tank of hot water ready for use. A choice of two hot water temperatures and

an antifreeze mode that prevents the water in the boiler from freezing, add versatility. A sensibly sized 110 amp hr leisure battery helps keep things working, while all LED lighting is comprehensive, very impressive and reduces power consumption by around 70 per cent over conventional halogen lamps. At the windows, pleated cassette blinds, while cab blinds are standard fit items too. Outside, an integral wind-out awning is another standard-fit item that impresses. Tanks are, unlike most of this 'van's Continental cousins, underslung and quite small, but adequate for a motorcaravan of this size. Do bear in mind though, that winter use would likely demand the fitting of insulation and heaters, or both.

Compact and aimed at providing value for money this 'van may be, but it's still built with the thick, GRP-clad walls (40mm) and roof (44mm) that are used on all other Auto-Trails.

## CONCLUSION

The new Auto-Trail Excel 600D seems to have hit its motorhome nail squarely on the head, fulfilling the design brief well.

Good looking, easy to drive and very well equipped, the 600D is a nice little package. Downsides include vulnerable underslung tanks, a somewhat jigsaw-like double bed and a lack of storage space in the kitchen. The washroom too, is compact, but its usability will be down to the size of your frame.

Although quirky, the 600D's layout proves to be versatile, offering instant dining for two, a comfy lounge and a choice of sleeping arrangements. I had only a small amount of time with this motorhome, but I liked it a lot. Finally, the 600D's mid-£30k price seems to match well with the market: a compact motorhome that should compete well with others of the ilk and a the ever-increasing host of panel van conversions. ■

## TEST EXTRA SPECIFICATION

- **Price from:** £35,999 OTR
- **Price as tested:** £37,094 OTR
- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato standard chassis cab with wide track rear axle, 2.2-litre turbo-diesel producing 100bhp, five-speed gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Warranty:** Three years base vehicle and conversion
- **Layout:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of twin-sofa lounge, offside kitchen and washroom, nearside caravan door free-standing table storage, two-person Pullman dinette. Wardrobe/drawer unit located at centre rear.
- **Dimensions:** Length: 5.99m (19ft 8in), width: 2.32m (7ft 7in), height: 2.79m (9ft 2in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3300kg
- **Payload:** 620kg
- **Belted seats:** Two (including driver)
- **Beds:** Lounge double: 2.02m x 1.22m (6ft 7.5in x 4ft 0in), dinette single: 1.83m x 700mm (6ft 0in x 2ft 3.5in)
- **Other features:** Kitchen: Stainless steel triangular sink with hinged glass lid, stainless steel triangular three-burner hob with hinged glass lid, no ignition, oven/grill unit with electronic ignition, Dometic three-way 77-litre fridge Washroom: Thetford C250 cassette toilet with electric flush and wheeled cassette, locker above,

EXCEL

separate shower compartment contains fixed washbasin, pull-out tap doubles as shower head

- **Heating:** Webasto DualTop diesel-fired boiler produces stored hot water and blow-air space heating (can be used while travelling)
- **Water tanks:** Fresh water: underslung 85 litres (18.7 gallons), Waste water: underslung 55 litres (13 gallons)
- **Gas:** Two 7kg cylinders
- **Optional extras fitted to test vehicle:** Sport Pack consists of metallic blue paint, TV/Freeview/DVD player, Status 530 aerial, Le Mans upholstery and curtains, Graphite worktops and locker door inserts, Graphite dash trim, removable carpets (£1095)
- **Other options available:** Cab air-conditioning (£849), 130bhp engine upgrade (£1530), 157bhp engine with ComfortMatic auto gearbox (£3998), Half dinette (in place of offside sofa) with two belted travel seats (£750)

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