



VIEWING THE SEASCAPE

Avondale Seascope 5-CDX on mwb Fiat Ducato 2.8JTD

Caravan manufacturer Avondale is a relatively new name to motorcaravanners. Roger Mechan puts us in the picture

There is no getting away from the fact that building a new motorhome from scratch and launching it onto the domestic market requires

a degree of planning and faith - and a belief that the 20 per cent year-on-year increase in new motorhome registrations will continue.



The exterior curves and dips of the Seascope seem to epitomize the essence of today's 'touchy feely' society.

It helps if you have been producing caravans for over thirty years and are able to secure the services of one of the top designers and one of the top engineers in the industry. Add to these two men the experience and expertise of Richard Holdsworth at the planning stage and you should end up with something pretty special. Avondale is the company in question and I was about to find out if the Seascope 5-CDX could punch a hole for itself in the competitive mid-length coachbuilt sector.

The view from the shore

I read somewhere once that the use of curves in designing anything will give that object a soft, non-aggressive and, dare I say, feminine appearance. Looking back, vehicle designs of the 70s were angular and macho, reflecting perhaps the hard edge of the society of those times. Today we are a more touchy-feely society and the exterior curves and dips of the Seascope seem to epitomize the essence of this. From the channelled swoop of the roof to the graceful rounding of the rear panel, whatever angle this vehicle is viewed from it is about as attractive as a three-piece GRP motorcaravan can get. The Fiat cab helps; its contoured features meld perfectly with the coachbuilt body and together they make a

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The rear-mounted ladder gives access to matching roof bars.



▲ This outside locker is a useful space for wet and dirty items such as levelling blocks, electric cable and walking shoes.

► Looking to the rear we see a rear kitchen and washroom forming part of this popular layout.



complete unit that would sit well on anyone's drive.

Like all motorcaravans, the Seascape does not escape having holes cut in it. On the nearside next to the cab door is a gas locker that will take two 7kg bottles. Further along,

two fridge vents sit alongside the one-piece GRP caravan door. Whilst the door as it stands does help to preserve the symmetry of the construction, for preference I would have a window in this door, or the option of a stable door. I like as much light as possible to

flood into my motorcaravans.

The rear panel is sculpted, with recessed window and number plate sections. Lights are located towards the rear edges of the vehicle which greatly improve the appearance of what, on some 'vans, can look like the design results of a badly-chaired committee. Repeater tail and stop lights are located under the roofline. On the rear offside a ladder gives access to a set of roof bars.

The offside has a small but useful wet locker in the skirt, directly under the vent for the Truma gas/electric water heater. Further along is the 230V inlet connector, followed by the cassette toilet with its high-line filler for the flushing tank. Also on this rear offside is the waste water tank, which has a quick release dump valve. A good idea, except that on the test vehicle the valve was difficult to open. The handle one had to pull butted onto the bottom of the vehicle's skirt, making it difficult to catch hold of and resulting in skinned fingers.

Driving forces

There are four engine choices. Three diesel models (2.0-litre, 2.3-litre, and 2.8-litre), and a 2.0-litre petrol engine. All are Fiat Ducato. Our test vehicle was the 2.8JTD and, even with only 3800 miles on the clock, it still gave more than enough top gear speed and low down torque to cope with most driving conditions. The updated Fiat cab boasts driver's airbag, electric windows and wing mirrors, CD player, and driver and passenger door pockets. The door pockets make up for the lack of space in the glovebox. If you like keys you're in luck; five are needed to get at everything.



▲ The idea of a quick-release dump valve for the grey waste is a good one, except this handle was a difficult to operate.

► A little taken off the top of this backrest would allow the driver's seat to recline a tad more. The fire extinguisher was difficult to remove from behind the driver's seat and would become even more so in the confusion of a real fire.





The forward view shows dinette (with free-standing table) and sofa in hardwearing green fabric.



Television watchers will get a totally unobstructed view of their favourite programme.

Motorcaravan manufacturers must tear their hair out sometimes. They spend months of planning and thousands of pounds in an attempt to produce a quality caravan to bolt onto a standard van chassis, only to have some scribe like me complaining about the noise generated by the wind coming through the gaps that appear between the cab doors and window pillars. It doesn't seem to happen on all Fiats, but it did on this one. Depending on the strength of the wind outside, any conversation on a motorway above 60 mph was difficult, and at 70 mph nigh on impossible.

There was some noise coming from the back. I strapped the Rattle Finder General into the rear seats and she detected noisy blinds, rattles from loose-fitting wardrobe and bathroom doors, and a glass cover over the cooker that banged alarmingly when you went over a bump. Minor matters easily fixed, but incredibly irritating if they're not.

I found the driving position difficult as the dining seat backrest prevented the driver's seat squab from reclining to a position that made for comfort when behind the wheel. A few inches chopped off the top of this backrest would allow for a greater angle of recline and hence more room to angle long legs onto the pedals. A free-standing table is stored behind the passenger seat and causes the same reclining problem.

The caravan carpet extended into the cab area but was not removable. The area under the heel of the accelerator/brake foot already showed an indentation that could wear rapidly into a hole if over-mats were not used.

One other point worthy of note in the cab

was the position of the fire extinguisher. This was clipped to the dining seat backrest, behind the driver's seat. Avondale's handbook states the extinguisher 'should be sited by the main exit door'. I agree with them. The most likely place for a fire is in the kitchen at the rear and you don't want to be diving into the front of your 'van to search for a fire extinguisher that is hard to locate and difficult to extract from its mountings.

Interior matters

Access from the cab to the caravan is made simple thanks to the generous section Avondale have cut from the overcab bed. If you bang your head getting in and out of here you could be doing it deliberately.

The second way in, of course, is through the caravan door. You have to pull out the manual step, then clean the dirt off your hands before entering. I would have liked an electric step as standard and, sadly, there's not one on the options list either.

Once inside you are faced with a familiar but extremely popular layout. On the nearside, after the Dometic 77-litre fridge, is a longitudinal sofa. At the front is an overcab bed for one, or a cavernous storage area (however you choose to use it). The offside offers a dinette, wardrobe, and a washroom located in the corner. The kitchen runs across the rear of the 'van.

Three high-level storage lockers run along each side of the lounge, with two more at the rear above the cooker and sink. Over the fridge is a television cabinet with sliding doors. Inside is an extending swivel platform and all the necessary 230V, 12V and TV aerial

points. If you want a Status omni-directional aerial fitted add another £175 to the purchase price. The cabinet did protrude a little into the caravan, this, if it was feasible, would look less overpowering with a few inches trimmed from it. The addition of a couple of small magnets on the door edges would have prevented them from opening en-route. Complementing the sockets in the cabinet were two further switched 230V sockets located in the lounge.

Natural light streams in through two enormous side windows, a Heki roof light and two smaller roof lights. The small roof lights were located in the kitchen and overcab bed area. I liked the side windows. They enhanced the feeling of interior space, and gazing out from them was like looking at a panoramic photograph. Perhaps it's their size that made them rattle. Artificial illumination came from two ceiling-mounted fluorescent lights and five reading lights (one in the overcab bed and four in the lounge). There is an opening rear window for venting cooking smells and steam from the kitchen, but the absence of a window in the one-piece caravan door made this area feel a little austere when the door was closed.

Our 'van was clothed in green, from the removable caravan carpet to the attractive hardwearing covering of the lounge seats, and along the carpeted walls to the cab seat covers. A combination of wood-effect finish and natural wood made up the cabinetwork, which displayed subtle beech tones. The overall ambience was fresh, natural and sumptuous, particularly in the lounge area.

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The end kitchen has all the facilities necessary, although more work surface would not come amiss. Perhaps a slide-out section coming from under the fridge top would suffice.



The overcab bed is accessed via a folding ladder. I found this area a little austere and lacking in style.



The Dometic three-way fridge has sufficient room to cater for all needs. The shiny work surface is attractive, but (judging by the score marks in it already) may not be a practical long-term proposition.

Kitchen matters

A Caprice 2020 domestic-style cooker slotted neatly into place alongside the washroom. Unfortunately, unless the 'van was perfectly level, the lively cooker lid (the one that bounced around when we were driving) had a tendency to drop down when in use. I think we might have got a duff one there! Electronic ignition was the order of the day for the four gas burners, the oven and the grill. Save for the glass top, the cooker slept quietly during every journey.

Alongside the cooker, a hinged glass cover protects a stainless steel sink and drainer, which is serviced by a mixer tap. Beneath the sink, behind a drop-down flap, is a space for paper towels and the like, together with a dedicated cutlery tray. Under this ensemble is a large floor cupboard with shelf and double doors. The kitchen area is functional but lacked work surface. The glass cover over the sink did not appear to be the type that doubled as a chopping board, and the top of the fridge (other than using the free-standing table) was the only other surface within easy reach of the kitchen. I would like to have seen a pull-out extension fitted under the fridge work surface. I also have my doubts about the durability of the smooth laminated surface on the table and fridge top. The surface of the latter was already becoming scored and I think a less slippery (albeit less attractive) surface would be a better option.

From eating to lounging

Once the meal is ready you have to have somewhere to eat it and the free-standing table gives a choice of inside or out. If the weather dictates inside then the dinette will seat four. A fifth person can eat off the end of the table whilst sitting on the large sofa seat. If you were the friendly type you could continue your party inside if the weather plays up. Four can sit in the dinette area, four on the sofa, and one in the swivel passenger seat. If you like a little solitude then there is more than enough space for two to wallow around in comfort. Despite its height in the cabinet, the television is far enough from your viewing position to prevent any cricked necks, and you can turn the dinette area into another sofa to stop any arguments over who gets what.



During those sweltering summer nights two singles may be preferable to using the double. I found both singles very comfortable with plenty of mattress width and length.

Bedtime stories

To their credit, Avondale have not tried to turn the Seascape into a four-berth by cramming two into the overcab bed, even though this area has sufficient headroom. In truth, I think these spaces, unless you have small children, are only suitable for one.

I have to say that the overcab area had a DIY look about it and wasn't my favourite feature of the 'van. The angular ceiling, front and sides came in sections with nothing to conceal the joins. The sections were covered with a dark felt-like material and the area was a complete contrast to the smooth lines of the rest of the 'van. This bed needs lightening and rounding off to take away its box-like appearance; two opening side windows would help a lot.

The 'real' beds are different. There is a choice of two singles, made from the dinette seats and the sofa, or one gigantic double made by joining the two together. It took me around thirty seconds to make the single beds and half that again to make the large double. It would have been quicker if the latches that release the seat squabs had been easier to operate. These latches have to be pushed up and I found that a fair degree of force was needed to release them. I would think anyone with arthritis would find it difficult. There must be latches that are easier to operate and look less utilitarian. Once up and running, the deep-buttoned seat cushions made a comfortable surface on which to rest a weary body. Incidentally, the underneath of the sofa, and one of the dinette seats, was given over to unencumbered storage, and there was partial storage under the other dinette seat.

A quick wash and brush up?

Full marks to Avondale for the bathroom. A swivel tap hovers over a deep basin, below which is a double floor cupboard. Above the basin is a tall corner cupboard and on the rear wall, above the Thetford swivel toilet, a third cupboard with a towel rail incorporated. It's a pity one of the cupboards did not have a shelf which would have doubled its useable space.

A separate showerhead and mixer tap, shower curtain and double plugholes in the shower tray, come as standard. The washroom window opens to let smells - and



Good storage and plenty of space are the strengths of this bathroom. A shelf in one of the cupboards would have been useful, but overall this was a well thought out and pleasant area.



This huge double bed is comfortable and, latches excepted, very simple and quick to make.

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the showerhead - out. The only thing missing is a mat to protect the shower floor.

And finally

Avondale has produced, in the Seascape, a motorcaravan the interior design of which many will recognise and want. The settee and dinette configuration is a classic setup providing users with a versatile, comfortable and sociable use of available space. Avondale has fitted this into a 'van coming in under the magical 20ft length, whilst maintaining a feeling of spaciousness.

While the washroom is well thought out, the kitchen, though adequate, lacks work space, and I have my doubts about the plastic shiny work surface above the fridge and on the table. The main beds are comfortable, a good size and, save for the release handles, easy and quick to make up. I didn't like the overcab bed area, but you may well think differently.

Avondale has a justified reputation for building quality caravans and no doubt the minor faults I found in the test 'van, such as ill-fitting doors and carpet coverings

unsticking, will come as much of a surprise to them as it did to me. These matters aside, they have a good product on their hands and I was not the only one who liked the layout, vibrant colours and the luxurious lounge/diner. A number of my motorcaravanning friends did too. Competitors will be watching closely to see what impact the Seascape will have on their sales. Having such a powerful new kid on the block can only be good for customers, even if Avondale has been at it for thirty-odd years. □

In brief

Base vehicle: Fiat Ducato MWB chassis cab

Engine type: 2.8-litre direct-injection common-rail turbo-diesel

Output: 94kW (127bhp) @3600rpm

Gearbox and final drive: Five-speed manual with dash-mounted gearchange, front-wheel drive

Make and model: Avondale Seascape 5-CDX

Body type and construction: Bonded sandwich construction, GRP body and side panels, one-piece GRP roof

Electrical equipment: Mains inlet with ELCB unit and 75 amp hr leisure battery. 12V socket and TV socket, three 230V switched sockets

Lighting: Two ceiling-mounted fluorescents and four reading lamps in lounge, one reading lamp in overcab, halogen downlighting in washroom

Cooking facilities: Caprice domestic-style cooker, 4-burner hob and grill with thermostatic oven

Refrigerator: Dometic three-way Powerfridge, 77-litre capacity with electronic ignition and full-width freezer

Water heater: Truma Ultrastore gas/mains water heater

Space heater: Truma 3002 electronic ignition with optional blown-air system

Fresh water tank: 50 litres (11 gallons)

Waste water tank: 50 litres (11 gallons)

Gas locker capacity: 2 x 7kg cylinders

Rear restraints: Two three-point belts to forward-facing dinette seat

Additional features: Large Heki rooflight, exterior storage locker, roof rack and access ladder, rear corner steadies, remote central cab locking, engine immobiliser, driver's airbag, in-dash radio/CD player, electronic data tag card, VIN etched windows, cutlery tray, crockery mset

Dimensions

Overall length: 5.855m (19ft 2.5in)

Overall width: 2.245m (7ft 4in)

Overall height: 2.950m (9ft 8in)

Bed dimensions:

Two singles 1840 x 720mm (6ft 1in x 2ft 4in) and 1800 x 925mm (5ft 11in x 3ft 0in) or double 1800 x 2080mm. (5ft 11in x 6ft 10in)

Overcab single 1880 x 940mm (6ft 2in x 3ft 1in)

Max authorised weight: 3400kg

Load capacity: 502kg

Price (all prices include VAT)

As tested: £35,395

Warranty: Three years Fiat and Avondale body seals. One year appliances

Optional extras

Base vehicle options: Engine options: 2.0JTD (£34,395), 2.3JTD (£34,895), 2.3JTD Maxi chassis (£35,695), 2.8JTD Maxi chassis (£35,995), ABS (£450), ASR (2.8JTD only) (£75), front passenger airbag (£220), air-conditioning (£540), alarm (£240), cruise control (£150)

Caravan options: Bike rack (£195), water tank winterization kit (£195), Omnivent fan (£275), Blizzard 230V air-conditioning (£1150), Omnistor awning (£560), Status TV aerial (£175)

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