

TRUE BLUE

Bentley Cobalt on 2.0-litre Renault Traffic

This slim and unusual low profile is from a new manufacturer, but one with a wealth of experience



The launch of a whole new brand and family of British motorhomes is a rare event, particularly when a base vehicle other than the ubiquitous Fiat Ducato is used. It's especially exciting when you know that

the designers are the vastly experienced and respected triumvirate of Gordon and Richard Bentley and John Cockburn who were, until the Swift Group takeover, the leading executives within Autocruise. We were, therefore, delighted to test the new Bentley Cobalt, one of the Artisan range of three low profile coachbuilts based on the Renault Traffic.

We travelled over to Mexborough, near Doncaster, to collect the prototype from the Bentley Motorhomes factory. It was a hive of creative activity: not only were production Cobalt, Indigo and Ochre 'vans under

construction, but work was proceeding apace on three more new coachbuilts, based on Renault's latest Master.

When I was at the new Master's launch last year, I'd also driven a Traffic and been much impressed. I wondered why few firms in the UK converted them: a car-like driving position, sprightly and economical engines and, most of all, a narrower base vehicle with vertical sides. All seemed to cry out for converters' attention.

Artisans have sleek, but boxy coachbuilt bodies (which blend well with the idiosyncratic Traffic nose), improving the Renault's looks by hiding the strange 'domed head' of the panel van. You can quickly differentiate the three models by the side decal colours: our test Cobalt sported - naturally - a stripe of that shade with the Indigo and Ochre following suit. All are just 6.20 metres (20ft 4in) in length and a modest 2.07 metres (6ft 9.5in) wide.

The Cobalt boasts a rear washroom layout, the Indigo a traditional rear kitchen and corner washroom and the Ochre a rear lounge.

Artisan models are based on the Traffic's platform cab (a chassis with a flat steel floor at the rear). An anodised aluminium frame helps support sandwich construction panels, which are clad in 2mm thick GRP. This provides a resilient and very smooth finish to the body. The test 'van sported the (optional) silver cab, but we preferred the standard all-white finish.

INSIDE STORY

Entrance is through a high-quality Hartal door (with window, blind and flyscreen) and via a sturdy, electrically-operated step, which retracts automatically when the engine starts. Doors (including the caravan door) have remote central locking, though the test 'van's was playing up intermittently.



Live-in Test report



Words and pictures by Andrew and Rona Bromley

vinyl and in the cab, sensible black (rubbery plastic) flooring. Sakura woodwork is a warm mid-brown, with curved overhead cupboard doors highlighted by a cream band and silver strip. Onyx upholstery in a brown/beige/cream abstract pattern, contrasts with grey monogrammed scatter cushions and armrests. Work surfaces are slate-effect. It's all modern, but tastefully restrained.

DRIVING DEPARTMENT

Though you see Renault Trafics everywhere, I suspect many motorhomers will be unfamiliar with the specification and cockpit. It's clearly a 'smaller' light commercial vehicle - comparable in many ways to the VW Transporter.

Both cab seats have considerable vertical adjustment, just don't pull the seat-front lever whilst driving, as you can be deposited (very) suddenly down near the floor! The modestly-sized steering wheel has enormous adjustment for reach, but none for rake, so at its closest to the driver, it might be too high for comfort. The handbrake is traditionally placed, between the seats, while a slick (six-speed) gear stick is dash-mounted.

The A-pillars are narrow, so visibility through the steeply-raked screen should be excellent for most. However, the wipers leave considerable areas unswept, particularly on the nearside. The



door mirrors would be adequate for a panel van, but Cobalt's wider rear body means rearward vision was badly compromised.

Bentley was aware of this and hoping to source longer-stalked mirrors. Instruments are clear, though we didn't like the bar-style fuel gauge. However, the trip computer screen is clear and informative. A major feature is the centrally mounted Tom Tom satnav/radio display, which has Bluetooth connectivity for phone use. There are plenty of cubbyholes in the two-tone grey fascia, and production 'vans will have twin airbags rather than the one here.

Overall, it's a comfortable cockpit, and less overtly van-style than some competitors.



AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £44,165 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 2
- **ECONOMY:** 27mpg
- **LAYOUT:** Fixed cab seats ahead of twin inward-facing settees, kitchen on offside, fridge/freezer opposite, washroom across rear

1 The Cobalt on Rosgill Moor in Cumbria

2 Car-like cab features useful and standard Tom Tom satnav

3 Classic layout offers a cosy front lounge

4 A well constructed and finished interior. Washroom stands across the rear



Standing in the doorway, the across-the-rear washroom is seen hidden behind a domestic-style door to the right, the unit containing the wardrobe (above the fridge and work surface) is to the nearside left, the kitchen opposite on the offside. Forward, are twin inward-facing settees, with a low entrance into the cab beyond.

First impressions were of a top quality finish to the interior, reinforced later as we ferretted around in the 'van's nether regions in search of any hidden shortcut or shoddiness. None was found. Put simply, this 'van was as well made as any we've inspected. Woodwork is beautifully finished, metalwork is precise, functional and discreet, while upholstery is made from quality reflex foam, robustly covered. Full marks for craftsmanship then, and we liked the décor too, though the cream carpets would quickly be removed from harm's way! Beneath, there's wood plank-effect



On Test Bentley Cobalt

ON THE ROAD

Power comes from a 2.0-litre turbo-diesel driving the front wheels and delivering 115 horsepower - sufficient to propel Cobalt to quite illegal velocities. Gearing is high, particularly in top, with the engine turning over at only 2,175rpm at an indicated 70mph. It's actually happier, smoother and more responsive at around 2,500rpm (equating to 80mph, allegedly!). In top, there can be an irritating resonance at the most useful speed of 55mph-65mph. I found the braking response a little slow for comfort, while handling was fairly soft, with some body lean on corners and a tendency to move around in crosswinds. In short, to me it felt just like a Renault Trafic!

One major strength is the smooth, coordinated action of throttle and clutch. Setting off brings none of the alarming stutter of some rival designs, which can leave you stalled and stranded at junctions. No, the Trafic has throttle response like an old-fashioned non-turbo diesel - a compliment indeed. This can be judged to perfection in low speed manoeuvring, and it reversed sweetly up steep hills at tickover, without throttle and just lightly balanced on the clutch. This greatly increased driving ease and pleasure. Additionally, the relatively narrow body means the Cobalt can be threaded safely down country lanes, which would be out of bounds to more portly motorhomes.

The Cobalt, being smaller and lighter than some rivals, has another advantage: I achieved 27mpg overall, and that included high-speed driving in a gale over the Pennines, so I'd expect 30mpg when touring in less extreme circumstances.

Interior noise can be a bugbear with some coachbuilts - unsurprisingly, given the quality of construction, this prototype was whisper-quiet, though potholes brought harshness from the rear (air) suspension. Production 'vans will feature heavy-duty coil springs instead.



LIVING SPACE

The comfy inward-facing settees are sufficiently large for feet-up lounging and, as standard, have knee-rolls on the cushion-fronts, although flat cushions are available when ordering.

Just beneath the overcab locker is a narrow, horizontal cupboard holding the freestanding table, which is just the correct size, height and weight, and has easily-folding legs. Four could dine around it in comfort - inside, or al-fresco.

The lounge has single adjustable reading lights on both sides at the front, but others at the rear to facilitate reading in bed would be good. A domed ceiling light and over-locker 'mood' strips provide additional artificial illumination. During daylight hours, a top-

hinged window (nearside) and sliding window (offside), supported by a Heki rooflight, give plenty of natural light. A locking Avtex TV is hidden in a cupboard above the nearside rear of the lounge. Unlocked, it drops neatly into view and we received excellent reception via the Teleco Teleplus aerial.

Production Cobalts will have the option of swivelling cab seats (the test vehicle's were fixed), and this will give further lounging options, though access to the cab is somewhat limited by the headroom of 1.23 metres (4ft 3in). Once in, you're fine.

KITCHEN

To my resident 'Fanny Craddock', a kitchen is only attractive if it's practical. Here, she found style and function: a stainless steel sink and drainer (hooray!) and adequate work surface on the main kitchen unit. More is opposite, around the wardrobe, with a useful lift-up section by the door. The Caprice cooker has separate grill and oven (though Fanny doubts the necessity of this, preferring a combi oven/grill, plus decent pan cupboard) and a hob with four rings (three gas and one electric), all under a glass lid. The rings are rather too close together to accommodate family-sized pans - three burners, more widely spaced, might be better. There's a Dometic extractor fan above (with integral lights), a further swivelling LED light fitting under an overhead cupboard and 'mood' lighting-strip above.

The Dometic fridge has an 85-litre capacity. This (RMS8401) model was new to us: a stylishly-curved front inevitably leads to variable-width door shelves inside ('inefficient use of space', sniffed Fanny), and it has easily-operated manual energy selection. Unusually, the freezer compartment is removable.

There's plenty of kitchen storage, though the two overhead lockers could do with being a tad deeper - the easier to stack crockery. A large under-sink cupboard is flanked by three shelves behind a door; the top shelf could be made much deeper, utilising space under the drainer. Alongside the fridge is a vertical set of four narrow drawers and a little cubby. The top drawer is set up for cutlery, though it's rather small.

We felt that one of the two power points,





Live-in Test report



5 Supper time at the excellent free-standing table. It's the right size, height and weight

6 An excellent picture on the Avtex TV with sadly, a typically unpromising weather forecast

7 The practical kitchen met with the chef's approval

8 Good work-surface area around wardrobe, with lift-up flap and twin sockets

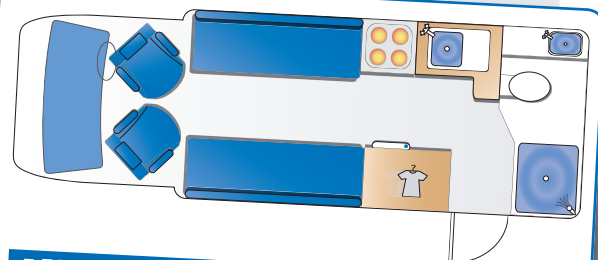
located by the entrance door, could have been more usefully sited over the main kitchen unit, while the rubbish bin affixed to the door narrows the entrance somewhat. We'd prefer it to be removable. Overall, a practical kitchen, which was a pleasure to use.

WASHROOM

To many, a washroom stretched across the width of the motorhome, with separate shower, is the height of luxury. Bentley's design has a generous, rectangular shower cubicle in the nearside rear corner, behind folding translucent doors. The shower tray has two drain holes and a mat, and the walls are a sturdy tile-effect boarding - smooth and easily cleaned. Shower head, riser bar and accessories basket are all chromed, and there's a skylight and two

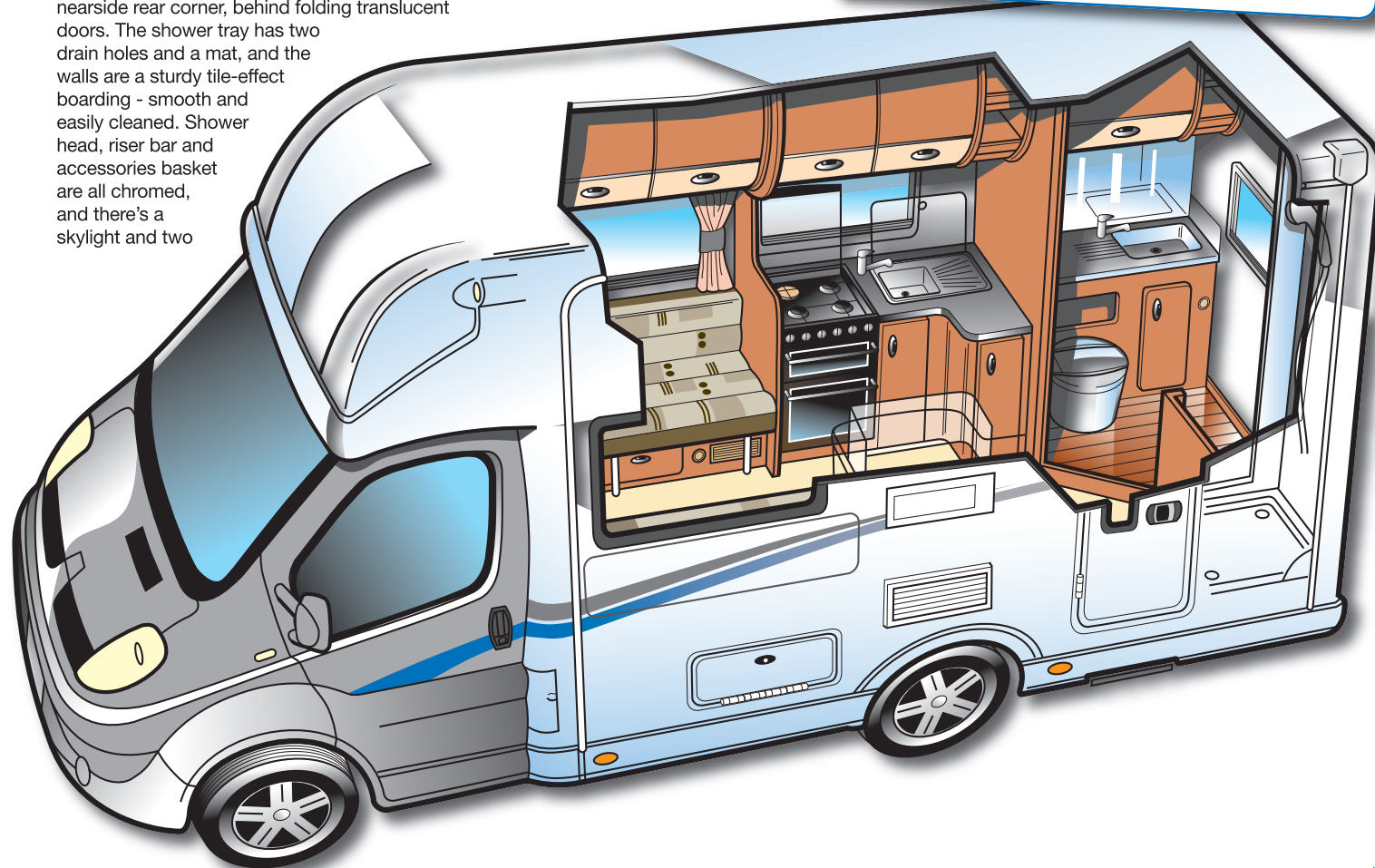
LED lamps.

In the rear wall there's a window - clear, but with a blind - which could give an element of through vision for the driver, if the washroom door were fixable in the open position. This modification is under consideration. On the offside is the vanity unit, which has a useful cupboard below and a big, rectangular plastic washbasin with a draining surface.



LAYOUT PLAN

■ OVERALL LENGTH: 6.20m (20ft 4in)
■ OVERALL WIDTH: 2.07m (6ft 9.5in)



On Test Bentley Cobalt

However, the van's tail is slightly raised, which rather negated the draining effect. A low-mounted mirror is topped by a shelved locker and two corner shelves. Immediately in front of the vanity unit is a Dometic CT3110 ceramic-bowl toilet. This proved too high for comfortable sitting, at 510mm (1ft 8in), it's 80 - 90mm higher than many domestic toilets. Too much height, I'm told, by an expert in matters alimentary, may lead to 'inefficient evacuation'. Also, it draws water from the main tank (some distance away) and the flush proved rather feeble. It does have a wide bowl though, and its height may well be favoured by gentlemen!

Aside from our concerns about the toilet, the washroom is efficient and well-designed. Those wanting this layout should not be disappointed.

SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

We've always favoured the traditional front settee layout for quick and easy bed making, especially if there are alternative longitudinal or transverse arrangements: not all pitches are dead level, and it's never comfy sleeping on a slope, so it helps if you can switch around. Cobalt offers two longitudinal singles or a



transverse double. In this prototype, singles were formed by pulling out the settee bases slightly, allowing the backrests to drop into the gap and fitting cushions (stowed above the cab) on storage boxes located behind the cab seats (which are pushed forward as far as they'll go). If optional swivel seats are fitted, we understand the seat squabs will form the foot of each bed; extra cushions will be unnecessary. As usual with this design, the cab bulkheads intrude slightly, but in practice, a good night's sleep was enjoyed.

To form the transverse double bed, the settee seat cushions must be turned so the knee-rolls are nearest the side walls. The beautifully made aluminium bed bases, with sprung slats, slide smoothly out to meet each other and the settee backrests fill in the middle section of the bed. Though the resultant bed is large and fairly comfortable for sleeping, the joints between cushions are clustered around your midriff so it feels a little lumpy. Without knee-rolls, you could have had the main settee cushions in the centre, the backrests at head and foot, where they're unnoticeable.

Because the single beds extend into the cab, Bentley hasn't fitted a curtain behind the cab seats. The Traffic's cab roof doesn't easily lend itself to fitting a curtain round the front of the cockpit, and Remis doesn't yet offer concertina blinds for the cab. Instead, Cobalt has three insulated screens, which attach by poppers around the doors and windscreen. They aren't easy to fit - you need to be flexible and athletic! Back in the bedroom, the excellent (and silent on the road) Horrex blinds do a good job keeping out intrusive campsite lights or morning sunshine.

STORAGE

The Renault Traffic is a lightweight commercial vehicle, but by increasing gross vehicle weight to 3,250kg, and using modern construction methods and materials throughout, Bentley claims a decent payload of 509kg - pretty good, considering a heavy spare wheel is fitted.

There's plenty of storage space in which to pack this half-tonne load - starting with the co-driver in the passenger seat! Under the settees are two lockers with access via drop-

down fronts in the aisle - from outside through lockable doors or, most usefully, by raising the seat bases, which are on strong gas struts. Both lockers have reduced capacity, the freshwater tank being fitted within the nearside, the Truma heater in the offside. Nonetheless, both are of useful sizes.

Overhead lounge storage comprises two shelved lockers on each side and another - with two doors - over the cab (inside are two small cubbies, but they are a stretch to reach). The positive cupboard latches work well and two lipped shelves (in each front corner of the lounge) contain extra speakers.

The wardrobe is a practical size, with hanging drop of 950mm (3ft 1.5in) and four internal side pockets. The aerial and other TV gubbins live here, but aren't obstructive. Production models will feature a cocktail cabinet - fitted on the wardrobe wall (outside, of course!).

With useful storage space in kitchen and washroom, we feel couples will have sufficient payload and storage for normal holiday use. Bikes can travel on an (optional) external rack.

KITTED OUT

Bentley has set out its stall, manufacturing practical, but luxurious motorhomes. As you'd expect, the Cobalt has been loaded with desirable equipment and innovations.

The company is justly proud of its multi-function EOS (Energy Optimisation System) - the control panel for which is sited adjacent to the caravan door. As well as all normal control panel functions, it tells how much electricity you're using, and how many hours at that rate the (115 amp hr) battery will last. If hooked up to the mains it says, 'forever'. The system checks mains polarity, will warn if you inadvertently start the engine while still hooked up and can even be used for emergency starting of the engine (by calling on the leisure battery if the vehicle battery is flat). Very impressive and easy to use, all it lacks is internal lighting for the buttons, or a nearby light source (we used a torch).

The leisure battery was located in the offside box behind the driver's seat, but the Traffic's vehicle battery is stored (easily



accessible internally) under the cab floor. There's room for the leisure battery there too, so that's where it'll be on production models.

Lighting shouldn't drain the batteries as the lights are LEDs throughout. There's also a 12V socket within the wardrobe, enabling TV operation without mains connection.

Fresh water is fed into the inboard tank using a Whale system that utilises a special

connector, hose and tap attachment that fills the tank, but also allows permanent connection to a tap.

At Wild Rose Park, where we stayed, we had a super pitch, which meant the 'van was connected to our own tap overnight. However, we were surprised to find that the feed hadn't automatically switched itself off when the tank was full and had been overflowing all night! Fortunately, the pitch was very well drained.

We prefer old-fashioned water fillers, used in conjunction with a water carrier for top-ups. It would also be useful to have an external drain tap for the freshwater tank - currently it drains out via the boiler.

Heating, both space and water, is by Truma's Combi 4E, using gas or electricity or a mixture of both. In cold weather it worked a treat and Bentley has replaced the boiler's irritating, automatic (low temperature) dump

valve with a manual version. This'll work fine as long as you remember to drain the water or turn the heating on in cold conditions.

It's fair to say there isn't much missing from the specification. An awning, solar panel (wiring is ready and waiting) and cruise control are on the options list, but the standard Cobalt is pretty well equipped.

CONCLUSION

Bentley is likely to make its mark with the Artisan range. A novel base vehicle, a package that's both compact and roomy, superlative standards of finish in a well-appointed body and a price which is competitive. There are three alternative layouts in the range, so many people should find one to suit. With its exciting new range on the bigger Renault Master and seven dealers already in place, the future at Bentley Motorhomes looks bright. ■

WE LIKED

- High quality construction and finish
- Narrow body
- Excellent throttle/clutch control
- Stainless steel sink and drainer
- Spare wheel

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- More reading lights
- A light inside caravan door
- Settee cushions without knee-rolls
- Cab curtains

WE DISLIKED

- Short-stemmed door mirrors
- Toilet seat height
- Fresh water filling system



9 The single beds could do with reading lights at their heads

10 Shower cubicle has two drains and sturdy, wipe-clean walls

11 Washroom is well equipped, but the toilet proved to be a tad high

12 The double bed is a decent size, but we had issues with the cushions' knee-rolls

13 High-level storage in the lounge. The table fits below the overcab locker

14 Under-sofa lockers have three-way access

LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

Low profile coachbuilt

PRICE

- From: £44,165 OTR
- As tested: £46,091 OTR

BASICS

- Vehicle: Renault Trafic platform cab
- Berths: 2
- Three-point seated belts: 2 (incl. driver)
- Warranty: 3 years base vehicle, 2 years conversion, 5 years water ingress

CONSTRUCTION

GRP clad sandwich construction on aluminium frame, GRP mouldings. Caravan entrance on UK nearside

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- Length: 6.20m (20ft 4in)*
- Width: 2.07m (6ft 9.5in)*
- Height: 2.73m (8ft 11.5in)*
- Wheelbase: 3.50m (11ft 6in)
- Rear overhang: 1.84m (6ft 0.5in)
- Gross vehicle weight: 3,250kg
- Payload: 509kg (after allowance for weight of driver @ 75kg, 90 per cent fuel, freshwater, one gas cylinder)

INSIDE STORY

Fixed cab seats (swivels optional) ahead of twin settees (converting to lengthways single beds or transverse double), offside kitchen unit, fridge opposite (beneath work-surface and wardrobe), washroom across the rear

- Insulation: Floor 30mm, walls 25mm, roof 30mm
- Interior Height: 1.94m (6ft 4.5in) max

THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 2.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 84kW (115bhp) @ 3,500rpm
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Fuel consumption: 27mpg
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round with ABS and EBD
- Suspension: Front: independent on coil springs. Rear: rigid axle on coil springs



- Features: Driver and passenger airbags, radio/CD player with integrated Tom Tom satnav and Bluetooth, deadlocks, Thatcham (Cat1) immobiliser/alarm, remote central locking (including caravan door), spare wheel

LOUNGING & DINING

Seating for four on twin inward-facing settees, light weight free-standing table provides dining for four

KITCHEN

Main unit contains cooker (extractor hood above), sink, two overhead lockers, two open shelves alongside, cupboard under sink, three shelves alongside. Fridge located opposite with work-surface (with drop-down extension), four shelves

- Sink: Stainless steel unit has drainer, glass lid, swivelling mixer tap
- Cooker: Spinflo Caprice stove with separate grill, oven, pan cupboard, hob has three gas burners, all with electronic ignition and one mains hotplate
- Fridge: Dometic three-way with removable freezer compartment, manual energy selection. Capacity 85 litres.

WASHROOM

Rectangular plastic washbasin set into work surface/drain, chromed mixer tap, cupboard and cubby below, mirror above, overhead shelved locker, two shelves. Dometic CT 3110 electric-flush toilet with ceramic-lined bowl, waste cassette on wheels. Separate shower cubicle with folding door, twin-drain tray, chromed riser bar, showerhead, hose, accessories basket

BEDS

- Lounge transverse double
- Length: 2.00m (6ft 7in)
- Width: 1.42m (4ft 8in)
- Alternative longitudinal singles
- Length: Nearside: 1.93m (6ft 4in); offside: 1.83m (6ft 0in)
- Width: Both 660mm (2ft 2in) max

BENTLEY COBALT

STORAGE

Overcab locker, four overhead lockers in lounge, space under both sofas with internal and external access doors. Wardrobe with four internal cubby shelves

LIFE SUPPORT

- Fresh water: Inboard, capacity 80 litres (17.6 gallons)
- Waste water: Underslung, capacity 77 litres (17 gallons)
- Water and space Heater: Truma Combi boiler with blown-air, gas-mains operation
- Leisure battery: 115 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity 2 x 7kg cylinders
- Lighting: All LED. Central ceiling dome, two reading lights in lounge, over-locker strip 'mood' lighting all round, three lights in kitchen, one flexible light and over-locker mood light in washroom, two lights in shower cubicle, awning light.
- Sockets: 230V: 3 (one in offside settee base, two above worktop adjacent to caravan door). 12V: 1 (in wardrobe)
- Control panel: ESO (Energy Optimisation System) includes water level, vehicle and leisure battery levels, 'Bentley Button' estimates battery life on current usage, emergency start facility, mains polarity check
- Blinds/curtains: Removable internal screens to cab, cassette pleated blinds/flyscreens to windows (including caravan door), curtains to lounge windows
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No (we are told that production vehicles should be)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle:

- Base: Bentley Elite Pack - colour-coded bumper, front fog lights, cab air-con, electric mirrors and windows (£1,224), metallic paint to cab (£396), cruise control (£306)
 - Conversion: None
- Other options available:
- Base: Quickshift6 automatic gearbox (£1,020)
 - Conversion: Prostor 3.5-metre awning (£650), two-bike rack (£295), swivelling cab seats (£595)



VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

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