

TEST REPORT EXTRA



DRIVING DOWN TO RIO

Nu Venture Motor Homes Rio Sand on Fiat Scudo 2.0JTD

Life's a beach for Di Johnson, as she tries a mini coachbuilt with car-like qualities

'Horses for courses' is, maybe, a hackneyed expression, but, nonetheless, its relevance to the Rio Sand is unequivocal. Whilst some of us like to drive off for our holidays in the front of a chateau on wheels, others would choose the motorhome version of a small, but well-equipped, cottage.

P&P Car & Camper Sales (at Gosport in Hampshire) asked me to try out the Fiat Scudo-based Nu Venture Rio Sand. This mini coachbuilt is designed for two, with a central rear door leading to a kitchen on the nearside and an 'emergency toilet compartment' (as the makers describe it) on the other.

Forward, towards the cab, is a dinette on the offside and a settee opposite. It's a motorcaravan that fits the requirements of a dual-use vehicle admirably. The proprietor of P&P, John Day, admitted he was surprised by the broad spectrum of customers to whom Nu Venture Motor Homes' range of mini coachbuilt motorhomes appeals.

The advantages of owning a motorcaravan, which can serve as everyday transport and holiday home, are both financial and emotional. The cost savings of running a single vehicle are obvious: a single portion of depreciation, tax and insurance. The emotional advantages are not quite so clear. Driving around in what could be your home engenders a feeling of total freedom. When you are visiting your local library, for instance, you could, on a whim, change your mind, pick

up some supplies and head for the coast. Perhaps the mountains would be preferable or even across the water... You might not wish to 'go foreign', but the point is you could if

you so desired. If owning a picnic wagon is your delight, this 'van fits the bill. The only limit is your imagination.

Quite a large number of P&P's customers



Looking to the rear, we see the rear right-hand-corner kitchen with toilet compartment opposite – and the central entrance door.

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An offside dinette for two and long settee on the nearside are made cosy by the warm russet upholstery.

are people who have been down the 'ever larger white box' route, and are now going back to a smaller vehicle that can be driven anywhere.

Nu Venture Motor Homes (of Wigan, Lancashire), who produce the 'van, have been in the business for more than ten years. They consider themselves to be a company whose main aim is to keep a close eye on their quality of build and service. Another main contender in the small coachbuilt market is Romahome, who produce mini-motorhomes based on the Citroen Berlingo.

It's versatile but is it cool?

The outside appearance of this 'van would not be its selling point. It's just a white box decorated with artwork, parts of which I like, and others I'm not so sure of. The blue flourish diagonally along the side looks good, but the combination of turquoise, orange, brown and yellow used in the Rio Sand logo looks a bit garish. Never mind, the logo is fairly insignificant, so it's of little importance.

Storage for gas is well thought out. In accordance with the latest code of practice, the gas regulator is attached to the 'van

rather than the bottle. A single restraining strap is supplied and a locating chock for the base of the cylinder. However, there is plenty of room for two 7kg cylinders (but you'll need an extra strap). The openings for the cassette toilet and its water filler are on the offside. The electric hook-up point is situated beside them. On the nearside can be found the freshwater inlet. I was pleased to see the waste water outlet was easily accessible and wasn't tucked away too far under the 'van.

The adjustable motorhome

The driving environment is also well thought out. A comfortably upholstered and height-adjustable driver's seat with armrest made a good first impression. Continuing on this theme of adjustability, the steering column angle can also be altered. People of all shapes and sizes should be able to find a driving position that suits them. The remote, interior adjustment of the wing mirrors is another welcome refinement. The dashboard-mounted gearstick frees up access to the rear and makes it much easier to get into the living area. Caught in a heavy British downpour, we both blessed the designer whose clever idea brought about this arrangement as we retreated to the back for a coffee before swapping drivers.

The driving environment fitted me like a glove but Peter, my husband, is a good foot taller than I am. I expected some moans about the Scudo not being built for people like him. Not a bit of it. In fact, he settled into the driving seat with the minimum of fuss. He was able to push his seat back to a length and rake angle that left him with plenty of arm and legroom. This is because the board retaining the dinette cushion behind the driver's seat is only held in position with a turnbuckle. The cab ceiling and the top of the windscreen of the Scudo are quite high,



The Scudo cab, with its dash-mounted gearchange. A height adjustable steering wheel is a boon for different sizes of driver.

allowing the taller driver a better view of the road. There was no 'head in the roof' feel in this 'van. The net result was two impressed (and comfortable) drivers.

Sand cruising

Cor! I had forgotten how easy it is to drive around town in a vehicle with such a tight turning circle. All the controls fell to hand; the gearbox performed without fuss; and the handbrake (on the right-hand side) was within reach. Most modern motorcaravans are agreeable to drive, but this 'van is easier than most. The windows in the back door allow some rearwards visibility and facilitate parking.

The quiet, refined JTD engine, and lack of squeaks and rattles from grill and hob, made it all too easy to forget that I was driving a motorcaravan. It's claimed that the Scudo will achieve up to 50mpg, given a sympathetic driving style. This economy might attract buyers who really only want a car, but who are attracted to the thought of being able to get away for the odd night.

Somewhere for your bucket and spade

Both passenger and driver doors have a high-level storage area (just right for pens and sunglasses) together with the usual larger, lower pocket. Also built into both doors were receptacles for drinks cans or water bottles. Even the handle for shutting the door doubles as a place to put some small change. All these little details can make a big difference to the vehicle's usability in a holiday environment. Knowing where a pound or Euro coin can always be found has benefits that far exceed the cost of manufacturing a handle that doubles as a container.

In the ceiling of the cab is a deep shelf that runs the entire width of the vehicle above the visors. For any sort of holiday, most travellers like to carry a plentiful supply of paperbacks and guide books to read. I think this shelf could swallow more than enough books, and there would still be room enough for that most awkward of objects, the large spiral-bound atlas. Usefully, the top of the dashboard (on the passenger side) levels out to an almost flat surface. This allows the navigator to spread out maps, and show the driver just where he went wrong. Quite an important detail, and I'm



Two-burner hob, fridge, cutlery drawer; it's all there for the cook. No draining board but, if the hob cover is lowered, a tray could be used for that purpose.

sure he agrees with me. Yeah, right!

Life's a beach

Whilst it's easy to scramble into the rear from the cab, a more graceful entry can be achieved through the back door. To aid your ascent there is a manually-operated drop-down step. However, we both felt that a more substantial unit with two treads would have almost universal appeal. The manufacturers have wisely installed an audible warning if the engine is started before folding the step away, preventing the driver 'modifying' pedestrians when reversing. The rear door is of the 'stable' variety, which has long been a favourite of mine. This preference originated from fond memories of caravan holidays 'when I were a gal'. I remember leaning out over the stable door first thing in the morning, breathing in all that fresh, dawn air

A combination of dark russet and gold patterned upholstery, gold curtains, and beech woodwork, adds up to a modern but

warm ambience. Not cutting-edge design but cosy and welcoming for those cold, rainy days when staying in the 'van is the sensible option. The plain russet carpet on the floor of the living area would tolerate a certain amount of abuse. Since it is removable, you will have the choice of leaving it behind in the summer (or winter, if you are the hardy, minimalist sort). The black cab carpet is also easily removable to expose serviceable, rubberised flooring. The manufacturers have thus given the customer the ability to make their own minds up about the contentious issue of carpet. Many of the motorcaravanners I talk to prefer to holiday without any carpet adorning their floors. Carpets are more difficult to clean, after all. The rest would not dream of buying anything that does not boast wall-to-wall shag-pile. So what is the poor manufacturer to do? Make the carpets removable, of course, and keep everyone happy. Customers can also choose from an extensive range of soft furnishing colours.

Sand-wiches?

On the nearside, as you enter through the back door, is the kitchen area. Beneath a lift-up worktop lies a two-burner hob (with electronic ignition), which sits over a grill. Beneath the grill is a 60-litre, three-way refrigerator. Beneath another lift-up worktop, beside the hob, is the amber-coloured enamelled sink with a cold water tap. Single-handed washing-up would need some ingenuity to achieve. A small washing-up bowl or perhaps a tray with a small dish rack would solve the problem.

With both the hob and sink in use there would be no available worktop. Nu Venture have thought of this and placed a lift-up worktop to the right of the sink area. A cutlery drawer, behind a dropdown flap beneath the hob and sink, is big enough for the basic tools of the kitchen and table.

Under that is a cupboard that could house saucepans and provisions. At the bottom of this cupboard lie the clearly marked gas isolation taps for the cooker and refrigerator. Above the hob is a further storage cupboard with an attractive fiddle-railed shelf. I'm never sure about how useful such shelves are, but they do add to the 'look'. The salt and pepper, and the odd jar of spice, have to be found a home - but I do worry what might happen to these in the case of an accident



The gas locker has room for two 7kg cylinders, with the new-style fixed regulator.



This is rather too big a stretch, even for my 6-foot-plus husband.

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The toilet cupboard has a small cabinet for your toiletries, but remember, you will not be able to shut the door behind you for a 'call of nature'.



A curtain runs across the 'van enabling the person using the toilet, or having a wash at the sink, to have some privacy.

and I would only use the shelf when pitched.

Beach bathing

There aren't any 'toilet' facilities. Well, hardly. Naively, I expected to be able to shut the toilet door behind me when I entered the compartment. I should have read the brochure first. It does say that the toilet is for 'emergency' use. The organisation of the toilet, whilst quirky, is still preferable to the 'pot in a cupboard' solution that many small campers resort to. The door to the toilet compartment hides the toilet, not the user.

A curtain rail runs from the toilet across to the kitchen side of the 'van. This allows the user a degree of privacy from another occupant. Additionally, it also provides a

retreat for someone wishing to use the kitchen sink as a washbasin. A small bathroom cabinet with mirrored, sliding doors is positioned above the toilet for this purpose. This is a reasonable compromise and I'm sure that using the curtain would become second nature, and soon we may hear of some intrepid souls venturing to Outer Mongolia for six months in this vehicle.

As I am reasonably small, I speculated as to whether or not I could get in the toilet compartment and shut the door behind me - the difficulty being there is no knob to pull the door shut and no room for your feet. I can testify that it can be achieved if you are determined, but otherwise you will have to resort to the curtain.

Relaxing in the Sand

The long settee on the nearside is six feet in length. It is great for the lounging in feet-up position for one lucky occupant. You will have to take turns if two share the vehicle. The dinette seats opposite could be utilised to achieve the feet-up goal, but not quite so comfortably.

Above the settee are two reasonably-sized lockers, with a fiddle-rail shelf at the front end. The shelf is as deep as the cupboards, so it contributes to the useful storage space. Not taking the high-level cupboards to the very end of the 'van breaks up what can become a claustrophobic effect, caused by wall-to-wall wood at standing eye level. The clear central aisle furnishes the 'van with a



The long settee is ideal for feet-up lounging.



The gas-fired Truma blown-air heater is under the forward-facing dinette seat.

good amount of unobstructed space to move about in and creates (in a vehicle of less than 17ft) a surprisingly spacious feel. P&P market the Rio Sand with a number of extras within their price and have wisely included a Heki rooflight. What a difference it makes, letting light flood into the interior.

Above the cab is a pair of side-hinged doors giving access to the storage area. There is plenty of room for bedding in this space and it's very easy to get at. I think that other converters could take a leaf from Nu Venture's book in this respect.

Between the dinette and the toilet compartment is a wardrobe and, whilst this could not be described as generous, it's not a bad size for a mini coachbuilt.

Bistro dining

Dining is for two if you stick to using the table. Informal dining (with trays or finger food) could see the Rio Sand with a complement of five. A small table is set on a pedestal between the two single seats, thus forming a useful dinette arrangement. The purchase of a tripod stand would enable the Sand's owners to dine outside in the sunshine, or under the stars, if the mood takes them.

The seats in the dinette protested with loud creaks whenever we sat on them. I'm not that heavy, so I pulled up the cushions to look at their construction. Slatted wood (over a storage area) supports the upholstery, and I could see no particular reason for the noise. Beeswax polish or talcum powder might quieten things down a bit. The seat cushions in the dinette would benefit from a little more support. They felt too soft, though, when it's time to hit the hay, this might be a positive attribute.

Sleeping in the Sand

When it's time to retire, you get a choice of two singles or a double. There is a demand for single beds in motorcaravans. It allows two blokes to head off for a fishing trip, jazz festival or surfing weekend, without any embarrassment about the sleeping



Storage under the settee can be accessed via these drop-down flaps.



Two single beds or a large double make this 'van adaptable.



No problem fitting Peter's six-foot-plus frame into the double bed.

arrangements. For us ladies, shopping trips to London or Paris, or perhaps a walking holiday, would make for great girlie trips away.

It's marginally quicker to make up two, six-foot singles than the double. The two singles require only that you remove the table stand and place the tabletop on a ledge between the two seats. Slide the two seat cushions onto

the table and lower the backrests into the gaps at either end. Perhaps I should mention that it is best to remove the backrest between the rearward-facing dining seat and the driving seat. You don't have to but it makes squeezing in the cushions easier. The dinette bed is the narrower of the two singles at just two feet wide. The settee measures a wider 2ft 6in.



Two can eat in comfort, but five could be entertained buffet-style.



The tabletop becomes part of the nearside bed.

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After the settee back cushions have been found a home, you are ready to hit the hay. Under the settee is a huge storage space.

Making the double bed involves pulling some slats across the 'van to hook onto a slot on the edge of the dinette seats. It took a little fiddling to assure ourselves that they would stay in the slot and were strong enough - but they made up into a good-sized double. My husband found that there was plenty of room

to position his (over six-foot) frame, leaving more than enough room for me.

Beach-life in Rio

If you don't mind not having a dedicated shower room, and pulling a curtain to use the toilet doesn't bother you, there are some pretty hefty compensations in owning the Rio Sand. A fun to drive, easy to park, economical, adaptable, motorhome; it sounds

almost a contradiction, doesn't it? The tight turning circle, slick gearbox, adjustable driving position and really rather good amounts of storage space, make up for other shortcomings.

Nu Venture Motor Homes is successfully exploiting a growing niche in the market and the Rio Sand could well be the perfect solution to the need for car-like transport that is also a capable holiday home. □



In brief

Base vehicle: Fiat Scudo platform cab
Engine type: 2.0-litre JTD common-rail turbo-diesel
Output: 81kW (109 bhp) @ 4,000rpm
Gearbox and drive: Five-speed manual gearbox, fascia-mounted gear lever, front-wheel drive
Make and model: Nu Venture Motor Homes Rio Sand
Body type and construction: Sides and roof: insulated sandwich coachbuilt construction with aluminium exterior skin. GRP front, rear and lower side skirts
Conversion NCC badged as EN1646 compliant: No
Electrical equipment: 230 volt hook-up, 85 amp hr leisure battery, split-charge relay power management system
Lighting: 4 strip lights, 4 adjustable spotlights
Cooking facilities: Smev enamelled 2-burner hob and grill with electronic ignition, enamelled sink
Refrigerator: Electrolux 3-way, with electronic ignition, capacity 60 litres
Water heater: None fitted

Space heater: Truma Trumatic E2400 blown-air unit
Fresh water tank: Underfloor mounted, 86.5 litres (19 gallons)
Waste water tank: Underfloor mounted, 29.5 litres (6 gallons)
Gas locker capacity: 2 x 7kg cylinders
Rear restraints: None fitted
Additional features: Roof ventilator, rear high marker lights, high-level brake light, foldaway step with warning, Heki rooflight, smoke alarm, fresh and waste water level indicators, internally adjustable mirrors, security window etching

Dimensions (data supplied by manufacturer)

Overall length: 5.15m (16ft 11in)
Overall width: 1.92m (6ft 4in)
Overall height: 2.49m (8ft 2in)
Interior height: 1.83m (6ft 0in)
Bed dimensions: Two singles 1.83m x 0.76m (6ft 0in x 2ft 6in) and 1.83 x 0.61m (6ft 0in x 2ft 0in), or one double: 1.85m x 1.83m (6ft 1in x 6ft 0in)
Max authorised weight: 2335kg
Load capacity: 370kg

Price (all prices include VAT)

Standard model (as tested): £23,995 (on the road, including one year's road tax, number plates, delivery, mains hook-up cable and gas bottle)

Warranty: Base vehicle 3 years, conversion 1 year

Optional Extras

Base vehicle options: None listed but all manufacturer's options are available to special order

Caravan options: Fire extinguisher (£25.50), TV aerial (£195), side wind-out awning (£295), drive-away awning (£595), category 1 alarm (£550)

Vehicle kindly supplied for evaluation by:

P&P Car and Camper Sales, 224 Forton Road, Gosport, Hampshire PO12 3HW (tel: 023-9258 1325; web site: www.motorhome.free-online.co.uk) and converted by Nu Venture Motor Homes, Wigan (tel: 01942 494090).