

ON TOUR WITH A...

...Wingamm Oasi 540N

Words by Di Johnson, pictures by Pete Johnson

Di Johnson visits a sometimes-ignored area of England in the company of a small Italian



A monocoque construction motorhome, with a drop-down longitudinal double bed and an additional single, has buckets of appeal. The usual question with some 'vans offering drop-down beds (A-class) is where the dickens d'ya park 'em? The Wingamm is a parking warden's tease. They spot this motorhome and think: 'This'll help keep my figures up, it's bound to be over the line'. Ha! They'd be wrong. The pretty little Wingamm will fit neatly into a normal parking space; it's just 5.42m (17ft 9.5in) long.

The three-metre (9ft 10in) wheelbase equates to amazingly easy manoeuvring; just

right for negotiating the awkward-and-tight corners so beloved of our beautiful English villages. The inhabitants of one particular village must have wondered what the heck was going on, as we drove around in circles (not quite doing doughnuts) proving to ourselves the Oasi's pirouetting ability.

The Oasi offers an L-shaped lounge, a rear nearside washroom, with wardrobe alongside, and a kitchen running down the offside from the cab. There are two fully-belted, forward-facing seats in the rear. Exterior storage can be absent in small motorhomes, but this is not the case in this Wingamm, which is blessed with two outside lockers. The 'van provided for our scrutiny and enjoyment had

the optional 2.3-litre, 130bhp engine fitted. Chuckle, chuckle, there was no lack of oomph under the bonnet as we set off for the tour!

DOVER CASTLE

How often do we scurry past beautiful countryside and intriguing attractions on our way to the ferry ports? We picked the Wingamm up from Bill Pitts (the importer and kind provider of the 'van), who is based in Birchington, near Margate. The proximity to Dover could not be ignored. At last, a chance to see Dover Castle, which is usually just glimpsed in our mad dash for the ferry.

There's heaps to keep the kids amused, and mums and dads too. The castle has 2000



1

1 *The Peace & Plenty at Playden is a quintessential English pub*

2 *Why not stay a while near Dover? There's a great view of the ferry port from the town's castle*

3 *Take a peep through the telescope in the re-creation of a fisherman's lookout hut at Samphire Hoe*

4 *Vice Admiral Ramsay masterminded the evacuation of 338,000 troops from Dunkirk*



The Wingamm's compact size makes parking easy

TOURING TRIVIA

WE STAYED AT

■ Canterbury Camping and Caravanning Club Site, Bekesbourne Lane, Canterbury, Kent, CT3 4AB (tel: 01227 463216; web site: campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

WE VISITED

■ Dover Castle, Dover, Kent, CT16 1HU (tel: 01304 211067; web site: www.english-heritage.org.uk (follow 'properties' link and location map chooser))

■ Samphire Hoe. Signposted from A20, west of Dover (tel: 01304 225 649; web site: www.kentattractions.co.uk/Samphire.htm)

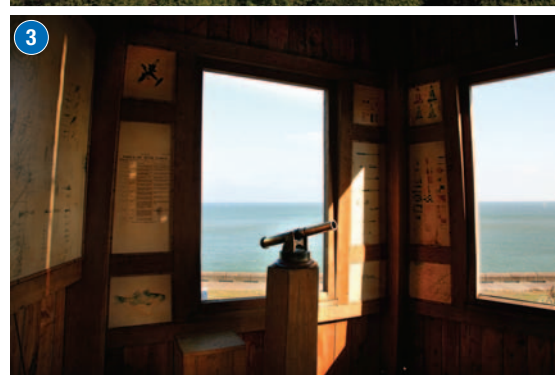
■ Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway. (tel: 01797 362 353; web site: www.rhdr.org.uk)

PUB

■ Peace & Plenty, Peasmarsh Road, Playden, TN31 7UL (tel: 01797 280342)



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years of history behind it and a collection of colourful ghosts to scare your pants off. You can take an atmospheric tour around the labyrinth of tunnels which house the command centre and underground hospital used in World War Two.

A statue of Vice Admiral Ramsay, who masterminded the evacuation of 338,000 troops from Dunkirk, stares pensively out to sea from his lofty vantage point. These days, he watches over the vast numbers of ferries plying the English Channel. The castle is worth a visit for the views alone. Various big guns will interest military enthusiasts, while there's the 'NAAFI' restaurant for hungry sightseers. Parking for the disabled is near the top of the castle.

SAMPHIRE HOE

When they dug the Channel Tunnel they had to dump vast quantities of spoil (chalk and marl); 4.9-million cubic metres to be exact. They were inspired to create a new haven for wildlife and walkers with a new piece of land that's been formed at the foot of the Dover cliffs.

The 30-hectare site was named in a competition and has become a haven for walkers, fishermen, birdwatchers and wildlife. Initially, 31 types of plant seeds were sown, but the wildflower count is now up to 180 different types of flowers. The bird count is currently 130 and the butterfly score is 24; not bad in such a short space of time.

Here, you can take a look through the

telescope inside the re-creation of a fisherman's lookout hut before you take your walk.

Things to look out for are the Early Spider Orchid (which looks a bit like a Bee Orchid), wild cabbage and carrot, and birds such as Stonechat, Meadow-pipit and Whitethroat. An Osprey has also been sighted, but you'd be very lucky indeed to spot it.

PEACE AND PLenty AT PLAYDEN

We always have to have a pub in our articles; it's one of the advantages of living in Britain. On this trip, we both nominated the Peace and Plenty at Playden, which is on the A268 just north of Rye. It's everyone's idea of what an English pub should look like, drenched in flowers outside,



and with a veritable library-full of wood panelling inside. It also features great service and food. Altogether a sweet little hostelry.

RYE

The hilltop town of Rye is surrounded by the Rother, Brede and Tillingham rivers. Its rivers give it the sense of being an island, which to some extent it is, sitting high above the surrounding marshlands and sea.

Importantly for us motorhome owners, there are nine car parks ringing Rye. They are all only a short walking distance from the town. Narrow streets, some of them cobbled, aren't motorhome friendly. They're not car friendly either but it doesn't stop folk from taking their four-wheel drive tanks through the centre. Rye would, it seems, benefit from being pedestrianised.

Picturesque medieval streets combine with a unique collection of independently owned shops and boutiques for your delectation. This is a town that hasn't suffered a takeover by the usual big-chain suspects.

Small boutiques provide a choice of clothes not normally available.

Meanwhile, delicatessens to-die-for were too tempting for me to resist. We bought a morello cherry pie topped with almonds and it proved to be as tasty as it looked. There are potteries and art galleries here too - in fact, something for everyone in Rye.

The Ypres Tower, which is to the south of the town, has an independent museum which tells the story of Rye's long and fascinating history. Nearby, the 12th Century church of St Mary's boasts unusual features such as the 'Quarter Boys' (I'll keep you guessing) and its tower offers panoramic views of the surrounding countryside and sea. A white-painted windmill, close to the railway to the north west, is worth a visit.

At the heritage centre you can pick up 'audio wands' that will give you a personal guided tour of the cobbled streets. If you have bikes with you, there are two new traffic-free routes to explore. They are also suitable for wheelchair users and families with buggies.

Nearby, Rye Harbour is an area of saltmarsh, sand, shingle and pools where you can find some very special wildlife. Footpaths lead to four bird-watching hides.

ROMNEY, HYTHE & DYMCHURCH RAILWAY

What is it about steam railways? They always grab at our hearts. A steam engine has to be managed carefully, nurtured even. It's almost a living thing. Also, they just look so fantastic. I love them.

The Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch railway was once known as the world's smallest public railway. Its founder Captain Howey, and designer and builder Henry Greenly, created a gem.

I can't imagine a better way to view the Romney Marshes or drop in on the seaside

towns and villages between Hythe and Dungeness. Interestingly, Edith Nesbit, author of *The Railway Children*, once lived in a cottage alongside the station at St Mary's Bay. If you've got a dog or bike, they'll be welcome aboard for a small extra charge.

A LITTLE OASI

When we explored the countryside around Canterbury it was blowing great guns and we found the Oasi required minor course corrections to keep it on track. Of course, this might be expected in a 'van with a short footprint and a heavy bed mechanism stored at head height.

I found the ride was firm when trudging along cruddy back roads. When we returned to better surfaces, it improved. A





6

longer wheelbase would give a smoother ride, but then you'd lose the impressive manoeuvrability.

The engine is just the sweetest thing. The 130bhp Fiat Ducato is a treat to drive in urban traffic - well, anywhere really. Everything is silky smooth. Control is refined with not a trace of any of the coarse behaviour that might be expected from a commercial van. Roundabouts, car parks, motorways, they're all grist to the modern mill for this new drive train.

LOUNGING ABOUT

L-shaped lounges in motorhomes always get my vote; the Oasi got off to a good start with a nearside version. It also has a removable cushion and a hinged panel to turn the short forward-facing part of the pew into two fully-belted travel seats.

Feet-up lounging, an essential requirement for me in any motorhome, is achievable for two. Both cab seats in the Oasi can be swivelled, enabling cosy social seating for six people. The drop-down bed has one disadvantage; you don't have the benefit of sun streaming in from the big roof window when the bed's stowed. As there are two large windows in the lounge this is not too noticeable.

The seating in the lounge is fairly upright, making the two scatter cushions invaluable for some lumbar support. Upholstery is of the soft Dralon sort, with subtle squares on a dark biscuit-coloured background. The cab is curtained with heavyweight material in matching colour and the floor is covered by a serviceable vinyl in silver grey.

DINING AT THE OASI

The table (astutely chosen by Theresa Valentine, Bill Pitts' sales manager) is the sensible free-standing sort that can be used inside, or for dining alfresco. It has T-bar legs that fold away neatly, enabling the lounge to be reclaimed after a meal. It makes such a difference to a motorhome's interior when you can stash the table away - it feels twice the size when unencumbered.

When you're ready to serve your latest

culinary delight, retrieve the table from its home (behind the driver's seat) and in seconds it's set up and ready for use. As it's free-standing you can move it to allow diners to sit down; so much better than those great big lumpy fixed tables found in some other 'vans. You can squeeze four in to dine, but three would be more comfortable.

CREATIVE COOKING

We like to cook, and in far too many Continental 'vans, serious culinary activity seems to be the last thing they're designed for. So, it produced a warm glow when I clapped eyes on the Oasi's kitchen. The Wingamm has more worktop than you could dream of in a 'van this size; pale grey with a substantial, beautifully engineered, curved edging in brushed aluminium.

Immediately inside the offside entry door is a large, round stainless steel sink and smart chrome mixer tap. Beneath is a curved cupboard door. The curve of this door facilitates your smooth entry into the Wingamm and gives you wide access to the cupboard's space.

A full 600mm (1ft 11.5in) of worktop depth helps make cooking, or even assembling

dishes, a pleasure rather than a chore. This is helped by the sensible layout of the working area. An inset Smev three-burner hob (with spark ignition) over an 80-litre Dometic fridge (with full-width freezer compartment) lies in the centre of the kitchen. You'll need a tray to take washed pots though, as there's no drainer. There's worktop either side of the hob, which makes for a contented cook.

Four substantial-and-deep drawers between the fridge and cupboard are capable of gobbling up masses of gear. There's nothing remotely flimsy in the Wingamm. The last part of the run of worktop is the biggest - 730mm (2ft 5in) of clear space. It sits over a Smev oven/grill with storage below that.

5 All this in a 17ft 9in 'van? It feels so spacious

6 Good social seating, well-lit by a circle of lights, and an adaptable table

7 Oasi 540N at Dover Castle

8 Sweet little shops and homes characterise Rye

9 Delicatessens to die for were too tempting to resist

10 What is it about steam railways that grabs at our hearts?

WE LIKED

- Drop-down bed
- Manoeuvrability
- Exterior styling
- Masses of worktop
- Good-sized fridge
- Spacious interior
- All-round feeling of sturdy construction
- Table that can be used inside and out
- Driving with the new Fiat Ducato and 2.3-litre engine

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A dedicated draining board
- Bound-edge, removable carpets

WE DISLIKED

- The waste bin, which obstructs the caravan doorway
- The stiff catches on the swivel seats
- Television rattle when on the move



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On Test Wingamm Oasi 540N

Yours truly could actually reach the thing for a change - no daft high-level oven here! When Bill Pitts asked for an oven to be fitted, Wingamm suggested that all the offside should be given over to kitchen and worktop to help accommodate it. Well done, say !!

This part of the kitchen is immediately behind the driver's seat and my (quite tall) husband, Pete, assured me that there was no conflict with the seat travel when it was his turn to drive. An (opening) window lights the work area and a strip-light over the hob illuminates late-night cooking.

A run of three overhead lockers gives you somewhere to stash the cornflakes and corrie. It's protected by another of those delectable and curvaceous aluminium strips on its bottom edge.

Under the run of overhead lockers, a flat screen TV on a drop-down swivelling bracket is fitted. This proved to be in a good position, opposite the L-shaped settee. A small shelf beneath can hold the remote.

SNOOZING AWAY

This is *really* complicated. First ensure that the headrests have been removed from the cab seats. Then you reach up and pull the bed down; err - that's it! You can leave your bedding in position, which means you have all the advantages of a fixed bed without it clogging up the interior of the 'van.

A ladder is provided (and can be stored on the bed) which hooks onto the edge of the bed, but if there's no occupant in the single that makes up below, you can slide straight down onto the settee. You can't sit bolt upright to read, but we managed comfortably enough. I'd prefer a thicker mattress, but I say that about all 'vans. Pete says I'm just a wimp!

To make up the single bed on the settee requires the removal of the backrests, which can be stored in the cab, and the retrieval of the bedding from beneath the forward-facing section of the settee. There's plenty of room there for sleeping bags and pillows.

WASHING IN A WINGAMM

No two ways about it, this Oasi offers an amazingly-spacious and well-equipped washroom for a 'van this size. The colours may not be my choice (very pale mushroom and mid blue), but the space was very welcome. An integral circular shower utilises a curtain to keep the rest of the washroom dry, and it comes with its own separate showerhead on a chrome riser rail.

The washroom lists a generous corner basin with cupboard storage under, plenty of hooks, towel rails, inserts (with bar restraints for wash bags or big shampoo bottles) and a loo roll holder. It also has one of my favourite features - a clear, opening window. A big mirror, a blown-air heating outlet and plenty of lighting make this a washroom for the discerning.

Just inside the caravan entrance is a curved door to a capacious wardrobe fitted with a set of shelves. The cupboard below houses the Truma Combi water and space heater.

LIFE SUPPORT AND STORE

A generous space behind the drop-down rear bumper and a nearside locker provide for all your external storage. Due to its length, the rear locker can gobble up long things like skis and windbreaks. Water tanks are underslung, but insulated and heated, while the gas locker (located on the offside) will accept two 11kg cylinders.

Five halogens, installed in the bed base, light the middle of the interior and fluorescent strips under the overhead lockers illuminate the sides. Lighting is good throughout, but I found the LED lights located in the upper storey a bit too soft for my eyes when trying to read. To complete the equipment list there are two halogen spots on bendy stalks positioned on top of the high lockers, one 12V and three 230V sockets, and a pair of rear speakers. Outside, near the caravan door, is a 230V Continental-type socket, aerial and satellite input points.



11

VERDICT

What a little cracker. If bed-making is not your thing, this 'van will definitely suit you. Also, its short footprint is pertinent when parking space is limited. Monocoque construction makes it strong, weatherproof and more easily repaired than other styles of manufacture. I think Bill Pitts has found a winner from Italy. The Oasi 540N deserves to do well in the British market, offering as it does some unique features in a superbly-built package that's easy to live with and drive.

MOTORHOME KINDLY LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

Wayfarers Estates Ltd, The Street,
St Nicholas at Wade, Kent, CT7 0NP
(tel: 01843 845 888;
e-mail: bill@wayfarers-estates.com;
web site: www.wingamm.com)

11 Chairs and long objects can find space in the across-the-rear locker

12 A bed that lifts up-and-away (with all its bedding) has huge advantages in a compact motorhome

13 The very spacious washroom offers lots of storage and niches



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SPECIFICATION

WINGAMM OASI 540N

- **Price:** From £38,556 OTR
- **As tested:** £45,320 OTR
- **Description:** Three-berth GRP monocoque construction coachbuilt, with swivel cab seats ahead of offside kitchen and nearside L-shaped settee. Nearside rear corner washroom, offside rear caravan door and wardrobe
- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato Camper Chassis cab with 2.3-litre turbo-diesel engine producing 130bhp, six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Warranty:** Two years base vehicle, two years conversion
- **Dimensions and weights:** Length 5.42m (17ft 9.5in); width 2.25m (7ft 4.5in); height 2.91m (9ft 6.5in). Max authorised weight 3500kg; payload 510kg (after weight of driver, full fuel, full fresh water, 6kg and 13kg gas cylinders)

- **Belted seats:** Four (including driver)
- **Beds:** Drop-down longitudinal double 1.97m x 1.34m (6ft 5.5in x 4ft 5in), max headroom 800mm (2ft 7.5in); lounge single 1.90m x 720mm (6ft 3in x 2 ft 4.5in)
- **Kitchen:** Smev three-burner spark ignition hob, Smev oven-grill, circular stainless steel sink and swivelling mixer tap (no drainer), Dometic RM7361L 88-litre fridge
- **Washroom:** Acrylic wall panels and shower tray floor with single-drain, showerhead and riser, shower curtain on curved track, corner washbasin with mixer tap, Thetford swivel-bowl electric-flush cassette toilet
- **Heating:** Trumatic C4002 provides blown-air and hot water. Gas-only operation
- **Tanks:** Fresh water 100 litres (22 gallons); waste water 90 litres (19.8 gallons). Both

- underslung, insulated and heated
- **Gas:** Two 11kg cylinders
- **Optional extras fitted to test vehicle:** Right-hand drive (£1876), upgrade to 130bhp engine (£1780), cab air-conditioning (£920), cruise control (£187), rear loudspeakers (£112), TV and aerial (£650), external 230/12V and TV aerial sockets (£150), external gas and water sockets (£150), Smev 30-litre oven/grill (£839), spare wheel cover (£100)
- **Other options available:** Silver metallic paint (£1782), engine upgrade to 157bhp (£3182), upgrade to Truma Combi EH gas-mains heating (£500), reversing camera (£579), towbar (£1150), front fog lights (£125), two-bike rack (£178), roll-out awning (£527), CD changer (£360), Smev 20-litre oven/grill (£591)

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