

HEAVEN'S ABOVE!

Wheelhome Skamper on 1.3-litre Fiat Fiorino

Wheelhome's MMM Award winning, rising roof, mini marvel offers big surprises upstairs



Lilliputian, that's what I was going to call the Skamper. Stretching the tape to just 3.86m, this really is a proper micro-camper. However, once its clever - Sky sleeper - rising roof is deployed, the interior is very light, airy and roomy. Perhaps it's not so Lilliputian then?

WHO'S WHO, AND WHAT'S WHAT

MMM Award-winning, Essex-based, Wheelhome has been building 'wheeled homes' for decades, though these days the firm specialises in garage-able campervans.

Wheelhome's principals use the products too, so understand how tightly focused and practical the design has to remain. Wheelhome has no dealer network - selling directly to the public.

The Skamper is the latest design and the first on the Fiat Fiorino. The name Skamper is not born of a typing error, but a contraction of the words 'sky' (as in Sky Sleeper) and 'camper.'

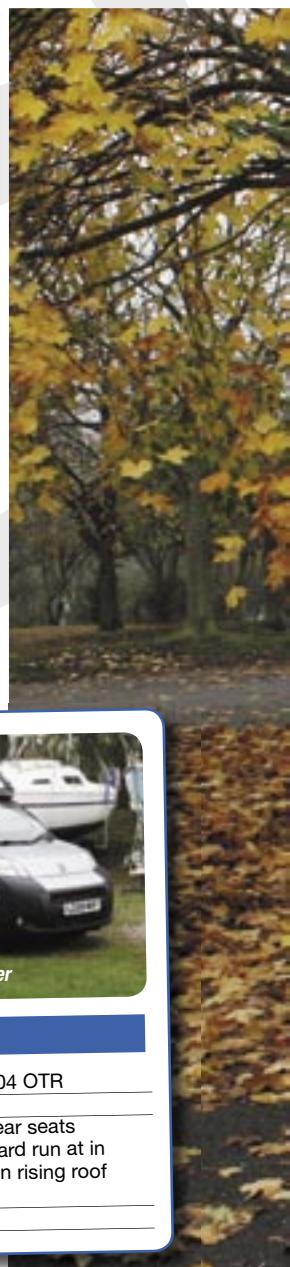
Fiat's Fiorino has been around in the UK since 1977. Earliest versions had the 127 snout, later ones the Uno nose. Both had an oversized box body plonked on the back. It offered a lot of storage in a small footprint, but made no attempt at integration with the cab. The latest incarnation is a joint development with Citroën



Words & pictures
by Jonathan Lloyd

1 General view of interior shows seats in camping mode and cabinet run across the rear of the vehicle

2 Well-designed cab places all controls within easy reach. Very good radio/CD/MP3 player is standard



Skamper at Rutland Water

AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £25,904 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 2
- **LAYOUT:** Reversed rear seats and transverse cupboard run at in rear. Two single beds in rising roof extensions
- **ECONOMY:** 47mpg

(Nemo) and Peugeot (Bipper) and for the first time Fiorino has a fluid and integrated look.

I was the first to test the prototype Skamper on behalf of MMM. Production models will differ slightly, so I'll try to remember to point out changes as we go.

MODUS OPERANDI

The depths of winter, in windy Rutland, is not the best time of year to put a summer camper van through its paces. That it acquitted itself so well endorses the converter's claim that, providing a hook-up is available, Skampering can be a three-season activity.

Skamper quickly converts from transportation to living mode. Firstly, the front seats have to be slid forward and their backrests angled towards the fascia. Next the rear-facing seats are unclipped and lowered into the spaces vacated by the front seats. Time taken so far, around 20 seconds. Undo some exterior clips and the roof rises - electrically - at the touch of a button. Now slide out the roof's side trays and secure with over-centre clips. Job done. Time, around a minute: incredible.



MICRO MOTORING

A decade ago many would have been pouring scorn on anything powered by such a modestly sized Derv-drinker. Today, however, they are as fast as a similar-sized petrol engine and accelerate as quickly. Almost all are turbocharged, intercooled and with common-rail fuel injection.

Even so, it has taken the latest batch of developments to make smaller diesel engines as civilised as their petrol-powered cousins - well, *almost* as civilised. They still don't rev quite as freely and have more of a bark at tickover, and when under load. Modern diesels don't smell like they used to though, and the 'trucker's breakfast' (puffs of blue/black smoke on start-up) has largely gone the way of bread and dripping for tea...

Is it me or has everyone forgotten how to round figures up or down? This 1.3-litre motor - at 1248cc - is, by my reckoning, closer to 1.2 than 1.3 litres. Really, it's a one-and-a-quarter-litre unit. Don't worry, I'm unzipping my anorak now, and promise to stop being so pedantic. Even if it doesn't qualify for rounding up to 1.3 litres, it ain't short of much else.

Although Rutland, and my native Fenland, are not mountainous, I did feel that the Fiorino was as nimble as a mountain goat. Great fun to drive, it was very responsive and stuck to the road like glue. Of course, the wheel-at-each-corner format helped, and the supple Pirelli Cinturato boots blessed it with a car-like ride.

The engine proved well muted and - as it wasn't spinning very fast at motorway cruising speeds - progress was eerily quiet. We've met Fiat's ComfortMatic transmission before, but never when it has been mated to such a modestly sized engine. Briefly, ComfortMatic is a six-speed manual gearbox with automatic gear changing and clutch control, so the driver only has two pedals to operate.

On the road it performed very well and balked at all my attempts to fool it into doing something wrong. The unit just beeped severely, and the message 'operation not admissible' flashed in the instrument nacelle. It didn't go as far as ordering me to stand in the naughty corner, though I did feel suitably reprimanded! Seriously, when you attempt to change gear too early - as well as telling the

driver off - it selects the most appropriate ratio to maintain safe progress.

A new-ish feature is an Eco button, which alters the shift pattern for maximum economy and minimum emissions.

This engine/transmission duo performed very well, and after I'd finished playing with the ComfortMatic in manual mode, I just shoved it into automatic and let it get on with the job. Interestingly, it appeared to suffer from a greater delay than the ComfortMatic-equipped Ducato, when attempting a quick get-away by burying the loud pedal in the Axminster. This was longer from a rolling start than from a standing one - say, when approaching a busy city roundabout. The delay was nowhere near as heart-stoppingly long as on the old Mercedes Sprintshift, but it was definitely there. Gear changes themselves were also slightly slower than on ComfortMatic Ducatos.

I quickly adapted my driving style to suit and wouldn't ever buy a manual version. I'm minded to accept Fiat's assertion that ComfortMatic-equipped Fiorino's are more economical than manual ones.

Speaking of economy, the question most

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frequently asked by the constant stream of admirers (of the 'van, not me) was, 'what difference does the bulk of the rising roof make to economy and performance?'

It's probably a small difference, but without trying an unconverted Fiorino, and driving over the same course with the same crosswinds, it is impossible to make an objective comparison. What can be said is that my achieved fuel consumption figures were very close to the published ones for a standard van. Although one would wish it to be as economical as possible, for the sake of both planet and purse, it's almost pointless knowing what that difference was, as one can't buy a Skamper motorcaravan without a Sky View roof fitted.

Mixed motoring, including some press-on miles, produced a touring figure of 47mpg. Despite strong crosswinds, the 'van consistently managed an indicated 60mpg at 56mph, and 52mpg at 70mph, on gradient-free East Anglian roads. Few motorcaravans can come close to that.



LOAD LUGGING

Wheelhome is firmly of the opinion that to base a micro-camper on such a competent little load lugger (of both folk and 'stuff'), and not be able to use it for same is illogical. Thus, the rear-facing campervan seats can be reversed by discarding the seat boxes and re-locating them as forward facing rear passenger seats. These are complete with three-point inertia-reel belts attached to the Fiat's tested mounting points.

Four belted seats, two sliding rear passenger doors - what's not to like? Well, only the fact that there were no rear headrests on this prototype. These are in the pipeline though, and will be mounted on a transverse bar, not on the seats themselves or the cupboards behind.

The reason for this is because support for the rear seat backrests will also be required if and when the rear cupboards are removed completely. Likely this use will be when other members of the family cotton on to the fact that you haven't just bought a fully equipped micro-camper van (and a comfy multi-door people mover), but also a van to transport their 'stuff' FOC! The far rear cabinetwork is actually in three separate sections, so one can just remove the minimum number to allow a load to be accommodated.

LIVING

The Sky Sleeper roof is Wheelhome's own design and its own GRP moulding. Though this one was perfectly acceptable as it was, production models will be out-sourced to a GRP specialist who will ensure that the exterior finish is to automotive standards. The sharp-eyed will be able to see four security catches on the rear of the roof: production models will only have two and they'll be neater.

Cleverly, the rear roof fabric is actually in three sections to allow folding and unfolding

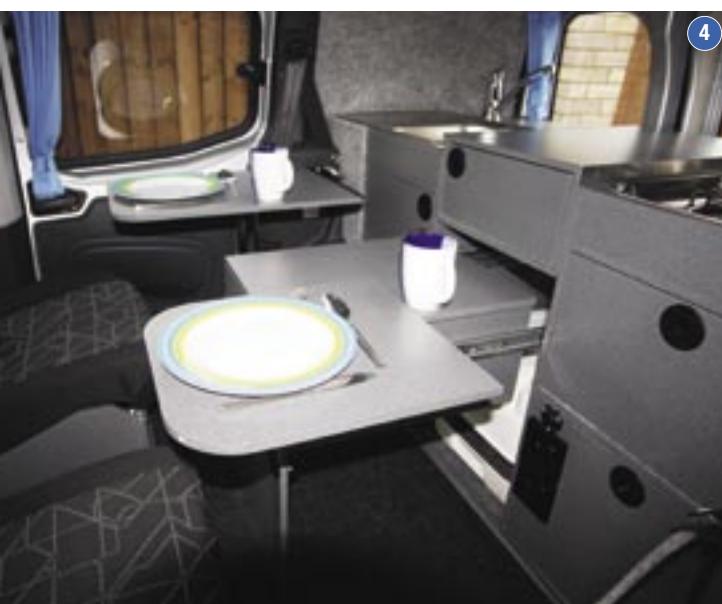
3 Micro motorcaravanning doesn't mean too much compromise for the cook. Slid out, top-opening cooler box is located on the left

4 Dining mode features two individual tables

5 Comfort station mode. The Porta Potti remains accessible at night

6 Three generations of Lloyds ready for the off

7 Skamper at Chesterton in Cambridgeshire



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without strain. These sections are held together by magnetic strips. The roof canvas has a clear-glazed panel in the rear and a zipped semi-circular mesh ventilator on each side.

The rear camping seats are actually modified Fiat items mounted on Wheelhome's own seat boxes. Adjusting the angle of the front seat backrest also adjusts the backrest of the camping seat behind it.

There's oodles of legroom and, of course, both occupants have their own sliding access door and adjacent window. Two very comfy pews with a good view out.

'Tis surprising, but true, that all the residential facilities are contained in a single full-width run of cupboards across the back. Designed and constructed in-house (using Wheelhome's signature speckled grey laminate-covered lightweight board), it's hard to see how a gram more functionality could have been built in. The unit itself features bottom and side-hinged doors and two sections that slide out on runners. Black ring-pull-style handles operate positive-locking catches - hopefully ensuring that the contents do not become unwelcome missiles in the event of a road accident.

All bare metal is covered with warm-to-the-touch, light grey insulating fabric. A removable whipped-edge carpet (with the Wheelhome legend) and double-thickness light blue curtains completed the transition from load bay to cosy camper.

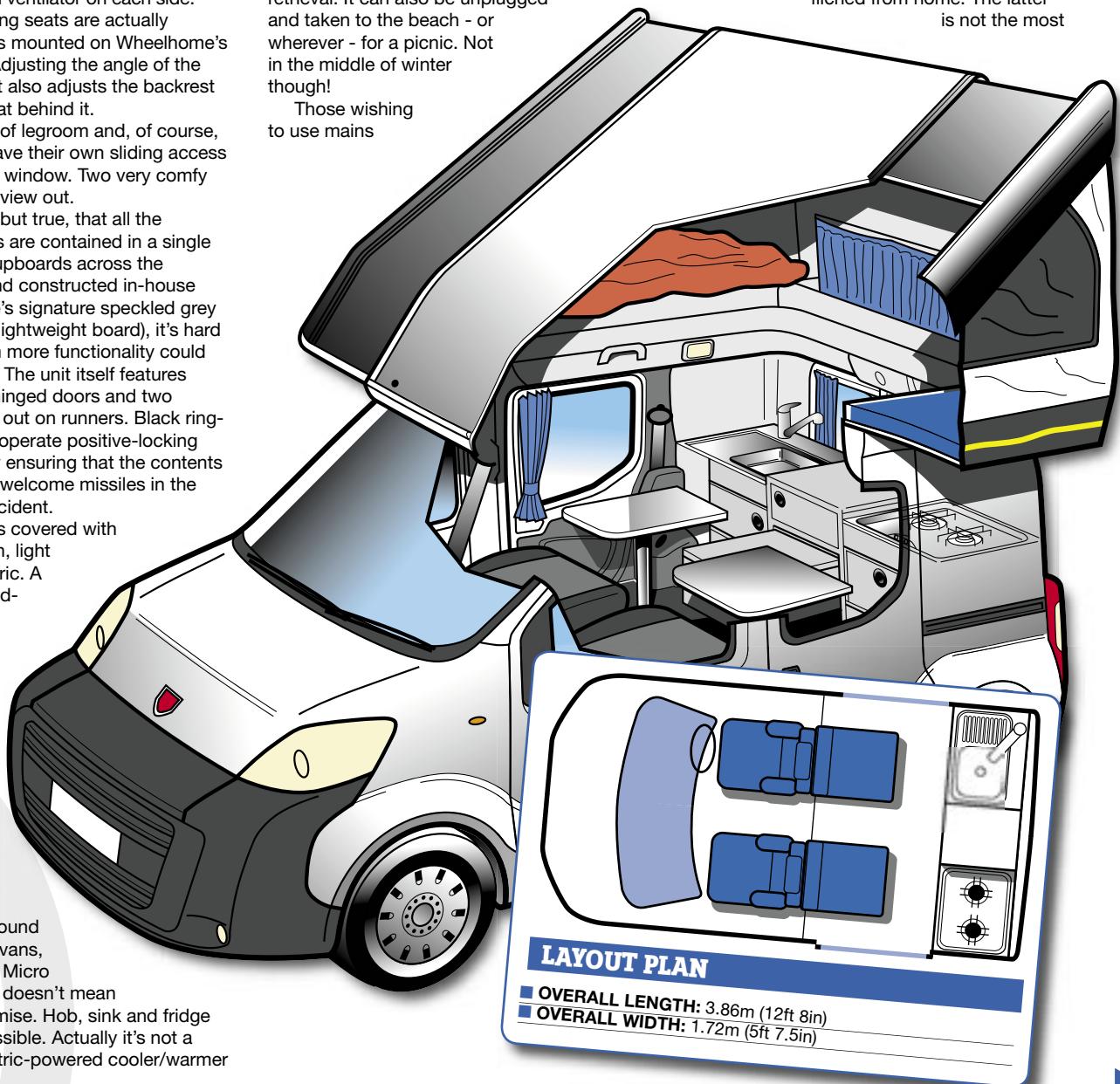
COOKING

Cook enjoys the same sort of equipment that's found in most motorcaravans, regardless of size. Micro motorcaravanning doesn't mean having to compromise. Hob, sink and fridge are all easily accessible. Actually it's not a fridge, but an electric-powered cooler/warmer

from Waeco's TropiCool range. It's also a top loader, so will keep the coolth in when opened and also offers easy storage and retrieval. It can also be unplugged and taken to the beach - or wherever - for a picnic. Not in the middle of winter though!

Those wishing to use mains

equipment in the kitchen have two switched 13A sockets on hand. Perfect for me; one for the electric kettle and one for a fan heater filched from home. The latter is not the most



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compact model available, so looms a bit large in the photographs. Models are available that are half the size, though the micro motorcaravan owners' favourite - the 500W Mighty Atom (not much bigger than cook's box of matches) - has now been discontinued.

Most will place a chopping board on the central worktop, used as a food preparation area. Natural light proved plentiful, while a fluorescent lamp provides task lighting at night.

Two individual tables can be deployed. The offside one utilises the sink cover as the tabletop, which attaches (eccentrically) to an island leg. The nearside pivots out from the top of the central base unit. In order for this to be any use, the cupboard front has to be slid right out. This then reveals the Porta Potti. I, for one, didn't fancy eating my meals looking at the throne, so shut the cupboard and managed with a tray - a useful bit of kit in any motorcaravan, but especially so in a micro-camper such as this.

SLEEPING

Both beds are at high level, but because the Fiorino is not that tall in the first place, oxygen and crampsons will not be required. In



fact, getting into bed was remarkably easy, even for those of us challenged at the BMI (Body Mass Index) interface. No wobbly uncomfortable ladder to ascend. Instead a seat squab, the slide-out central unit and worktop provided three easy steps to bed.

It was great that the 'ground floor' living area remained completely uncompromised at bedtime. Practically, this means that both occupants don't have to retire at the same time and the bed(s) can be left made up during the day if staying on site.

Unless you're a masochist, you'll sleep feet forward and head towards the rear. Foot room might be a bit restricted for tall campers, but most of us shouldn't find it a problem. A handy adjacent ledge was used as a nightstand on which to put specs, book and the essential early morning cuppa. Speaking of which, I couldn't quite make the tea without getting out of the nearside bed, though I did manage to light the gas under my kettle without leaving my sleeping bag. I'd abandoned the electric kettle after my first night away, when I had to go home to get an additional lens for my camera. It seemed illogical to take two when storage space was at a premium.

The mattress itself was very comfortable and heated. The heating elements are underneath the mattresses and fixed to the side trays, prompting me to wonder about their efficiency. I suppose it might have taken the chill off, but it was going to have to work hard to get through the thickness of the mattress, my sleeping bag and the polar grade sleeping 'track suit' I had on. Each bed's heating element is on a timer and the system is akin to those used in heated car seats. Perhaps it needed to have been left on longer? Anyway, having 'self-medicated' with a few snifters of Scottish chill-chaser, I slept like a log.

Expecting to wake each morning to a high-tide sea of condensation, it was pleasantly surprising to find it limited to the single-glazed glass 'van windows and the black central panel in the rearmost roof canvas. Obviously

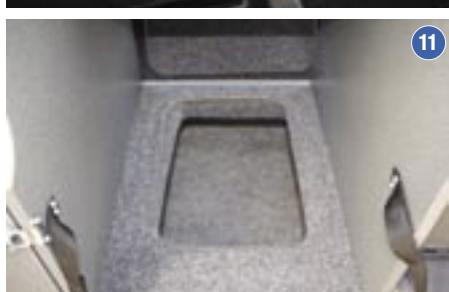
Skamper wasn't designed for staying overnight in the depths of winter, but I really was as snug as a bug in a rug. I would have no hesitation staying in Hotel Wheelhome for the odd winter's night, if I found myself over-beered at a friend's, or just didn't fancy the trip home in bad weather.

Each bunk's occupant has a twin fluorescent light to read by and, as our Skamper had a separate leisure battery and charger, there were no worries about falling asleep with the light on and flattening the vehicle battery.

STORING

Clothes storage is probably best achieved courtesy of the rear seat boxes. There is no hanging wardrobe as such, and one wouldn't expect one. That said a zip-up suit/dress carrier could easily be laid somewhere or hung up - 'rep-style' - if attending a posh do.

Two bulky sleeping bags might prove tricky



8 The nearside single roof bed ready for boarding

9 Set up for a cozy night, despite the winter weather. Fan heater, drinking chocolate and Scottish chill-chaser

10 Rear-facing seat bases hold a surprising amount of clobber

11 The spare wheel well accommodates extra kit

12 The business end. Gas cylinder locker, water porter and cool box

13 Wheelhome's ingenious Sky-Sleeper rising roof lifts and extends sideways on both sides

ANORAK'S CORNER

The folks at Wheelhome were surprised to learn that they were not the first with a 'big top' Fiorino-based motorcaravan. This Dutch registered creation was photographed in 1983 in Spain. I believe the seriously wide roof pod was actually manufactured in Sweden. Must have been awful to drive in anything except the slightest of breezes Stand by for take-off!



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to store, but I was camping solo, so it wasn't a problem. In fact, the other bed's mattress could have been left at home, thereby creating even more storage space. I guess most will opt for putting sleeping bags in stuff sacks and tucking them away in the rear passenger foot wells when travelling. It didn't look possible to store them on the bed and then close the roof, though I didn't actually try it.

As supplied by me, the hot water system was the most reliable yet devised. Thermally efficient, cheap to buy, cheap to run, easy to operate and simple to drain down in winter. I'm referring, of course, to my kettle, either the one to go on the hob or a lecky one.

Before closing this section, I'd better just say for the benefit of new recruits, that although the roof fabric is mildew resistant, it's always a smart move to make sure that both the inside and outside is wiped dry before lowering the top. Another essential bit of kit: an old towel!

WHY SKAMPER?

In a word; 'versatility.' Why have a car and a camper van when Skamper can fulfil both roles? Its two main rivals, Romahome's R10 and Danbury's Dynamic are both one-berth,

I LIKED

- Fun to drive and fun to camp in
- Extra room created by clever Sky-Sleeper roof
- Fuel efficiency
- ComfortMatic auto transmission
- Four forward-facing belted travel seats

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- On board waste tank
- More effective bed heaters

I DISLIKED

- Giving it back

whereas the Skamper will accommodate two adults, so should automatically be the choice for couples.

This little 'van is likely to catch the eye of those who hadn't thought about a motorcaravan before. Perfect as a hospitality unit for hobbyists and music festival goers, Skamper should also find favour among walkers, birders, landscape painters, steam ralliers and outdoor sports enthusiasts (and their reluctant spectators).



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OH, BY THE WAY

Currently under development is an awning, which will attach to the Sky Sleeper roof. Production models will also come with metal rear seat boxes which should be more resistant to submarining than the prototype's wooden ones.

I would have liked a small inboard waste tank on the options list so one can be independent without having to put a container

outside on the ground. This would work well when wild camping, or making a brew in a lay-by, for example. It need only contain around five litres, and could be placed inside the (empty) spare wheel well, still leaving valuable storage space.

Finally, Get four porkers like me on board, and you may exceed the payload, so do be aware, and leave the furniture behind at home on such occasions.

CONCLUSION

It is comparatively easy to build a good big motorcaravan, but it takes real skill, expertise and ingenuity to build a good little 'un. The Skamper is an expert at everything it is supposed to do.

Subjectively, if it makes hardened cynics like me drive with a broad grin, it's definitely a happy little camper van, and perfect for a happy camper or two. ■



VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Wheelhome, Tips Cross Garage,
Blackmore Road, Hook End,
Brentwood, Essex CM15 0DX
(tel: 01277 822208; web site:
www.wheelhome.co.uk)

WE STAYED AT

Ferry Meadows Caravan Club Site,
Ham Lane, Peterborough PE2 5UU
(tel: 01733 233 526; web site:
www.caravanclub.co.uk)

LIVE-IN TEST DATA**TYPE**

Rising roof van conversion

PRICE (All prices incl. VAT @ 17.5 per cent)

- From: £25,904 OTR
- As tested: £27,474 OTR

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Fiat Fiorino Combi
- **Berths:** 2
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (including driver)
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle, 8 years anti-perforation, 1 year conversion

CONSTRUCTION

Steel-bodied van with front-hinged electrically-operated GRP rising roof with side extensions (all motorcaravan furniture is removable). Rear sliding doors on both sides

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- Length: 3.86m (12ft 8in)*
- Width: 1.72m (5ft 7.5in)*
- Height: 1.93m (6ft 4in)* roof lowered
- Wheelbase: 2.51m (8ft 3in)*
- Rear overhang: 600mm (1ft 11.5in)
- Max authorised weight: 1700kg
- Payload: 245kg

INSIDE STORY

Conversion consists of reversed rear seats and transverse cupboard run at rear. Two single beds in rising roof extensions

- **Insulation:** Warm-to-touch interior trim, closed cell mats under mattresses
- **Interior height:** 2.20m (7ft 2.5in), roof raised

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 1.3-litre (Euro IV) turbo-diesel producing 55kW (75bhp) @ 4000rpm
- **Transmission:** Six-speed ComfortMatic automated manual gearbox, front-wheel drive



- **Fuel consumption:** 47mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted front discs, rear drums
- **Suspension:** Front: coils on McPherson struts. Rear: torsion beam
- **Features:** ABS, electric mirrors and windows, armrest on cab seats, radio/CD player, headlamp height adjustment, driver and passenger door bins, height-adjustable top seatbelt mounts, remote central locking, electronic engine immobiliser and intruder alarm, reversing sensors, heated rear windows, wash/wipe on larger window

LOUNGING AND DINING

Two individual rearward-facing seats, individual tables

KITCHEN

Full width unit at far rear

- **Sink:** Stainless steel bowl, draining surface. Pumped cold-water supply
- **Cooker:** SMEV stainless steel two-burner hob with push-button ignition
- **Fridge:** Waeco TropiCool top-loading electric cool box. Capacity 14 litres

WASHROOM

None fitted, but (extra-cost) free-standing Porta Potti toilet stows in dedicated cupboard

BEDS

Two singles in rising roof

- **Length:** 1.88m (6ft 2in)
- **Width:** 610mm (2ft 0in)

STORAGE

6 cupboards in kitchen, 2 rear seat boxes, trimmed spare wheel well

WHEELHOME SKAMPER**LIFE SUPPORT**

- **Fresh water:** Inboard water porter. Capacity 12 litres (2.64 gallons)
- **Waste water:** None fitted
- **Water heater:** None fitted
- **Space heater:** None fitted
- **Leisure battery:** 100 amp hr
- **Gas:** 1 x Campingaz 907 (2.75kg) cylinder, 1 X Campingaz 901 (400g) cylinder
- **Lighting:** 3 twin-tube fluorescent lamps
- **Sockets:** 230V: 2 (on kitchen unit) 12V: 2 (1 in kitchen, 1 at far rear to power cool box)
- **Control panel:** On rear-facing kitchen base unit and accessed via nearside rear door
- **Blinds/curtains:** Double thickness curtains (with matching tiebacks) to side and rear windows. Privacy cover to clear roof window attached by hook-and-loop fastener
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base vehicle:** Metallic paint, (£386), side sliding door on offside (£263), ComfortMatic auto gearbox (£711) heated beds (£128),
- **Conversion:** Porta Potti 335 toilet (£82)
- Other options available**
- **Base vehicle:** Spare wheel in lieu of under-floor storage compartment (£52), alarm system (£219)
- **Conversion:** Mains hook-up cable (£28), additional Fresh water porter (£12)



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