

showdown | fixed bed/end washrooms

B&B

...that's bed and bathroom, the two priorities of what is possibly the most fashionable layout of 2011. Here we look at Auto-Trail's brand-new take on the fixed bed Dakota alongside its striking – and equally new – end washroom/French bed rival from Dethleffs

COMPARED FIXEDBEDSWITH FULL-WIDTHEND WASHROOMS

AT A GLANCE

AUTO-TRAIL FRONTIER DAKOTA

BASED ON Fiat Ducato 40 Heavy

FROM £55,625

The Dakota name makes a comeback in Auto-Trail's flagship Frontier line-up for 2011 with a new layout that places a bigger washroom behind the nearside French bed



AT A GLANCE

DETHLEFFS ESPRIT T7090

BASED ON Fiat Ducato Al-Ko

FROM £56,628

Not a new layout but the Esprit has been updated for 2011 with bold new colour schemes, including this Laguna Blue. And unlike the Auto-Trail, the Dethleffs works as a four-berth



ON THE OUTSIDE ★★★★★

Dakota is far from a new name for Auto-Trail, but it has been completely reinvented for the 2011 season. The silver cab (featured here) lends this motorhome a classy edge and leaves the white box brigade looking drab on site, but you'll have to pay for the privilege. It's part of the Platinum Pack, along with the metallic side skirts and bumper, graphite-effect high-level locker doors and a limited edition umbrella - for just £599 extra. All except the broly are pretty much essential when you're spending this amount of money on a motorhome - you want it to look the part after all.

Alloy wheels are part of the general Frontier range specification, as is the TV aerial and the choice of a Hi-line or Lo-line lutan - or the new Super Lo-line (see our exclusive Comanche test on page 22). Although there's very little difference in height, this Dakota features the traditional Lo-line option which offers up-front storage cupboards rather than the Hi-line's double bed or the Super Lo's sunroof and sleeker lines.

Elsewhere on the exterior, the waste pipe is easily reachable behind the offside rear wheel, and there's a large cupboard within the offside skirts that has some wet storage, together with the battery compartment and the mains attachment. On the rear panel is a reversing camera (optional), ladder, a branded spare wheel carrier and two boomerang light clusters. The nearside offers an access door to the under-bed storage area, a gas barbecue point and a gas locker, opened using a lever marked 'LPG' behind the passenger seat.

ON THE ROAD ★★★★★

Our test Dakota was fabulous to drive, despite the bulbous overcab, as it sports the upgraded 3-litre engine and Comfort-Matic robotised gearbox. It's an expensive option (£3234), but an important one.

The driver has lots of other toys too - including cruise control and air-con - and there are armrests for each of the cab seats. A smart silver surround circumnavigates the dash vents, and cab blinds are fitted for the windscreen and side windows. The entertainment system is part of the £999 Media Pack, which includes a 15-inch drop-down colour TV in the cab ceiling, operated via the dash-mounted system of seven-inch touchscreen radio/CD/DVD-player. There's also an integral digital receiver, SD card reader and auxiliary plug for an MP3-player.

ON SITE ★★★★★

The cab seats swivel to face two settees, while behind this the L-shaped kitchen runs along

our outside. The habitation door is on the British nearside, in front of the fridge and table storage cupboard. Towards the rear is the French bed, whilst an adjacent door leads to the deceptively large washroom.

The décor is pleasantly neutral, featuring browns and creams to create a pleasant ambience. The woodwork is mid-tone with a grey stripe and straight chromed handles. The kitchen's roller shuttered doors are silver, and the use of uplighters helps to make this a modern-looking motorhome. The floor is bare, but during the summer you can put down the fawn sectioned carpet that comes as standard. It press-studs securely into place.

The nearside settee is much shorter than the offside one, but neither is long enough to use as a single bed. Scatter cushions are provided, and there's a Heki rooflight above. The offside settee has swivel spotlights. A bin is fitted to the door, and beside this is a half-height mirror, grab handle and small elasticated magazine rack. A flyscreen is also in evidence, with a concertina blind to cover the non-opening window. Above the door are the heater controls and control panel.

ON THE BOIL ★★★★★

Auto-Trail kitchens have always wowed prospective purchasers. The graphite-effect L-shaped worktop contains the large circular bowl sink, with a small draining board on the left (together with a two-piece wooden cover that matches the worktop) and a black domestic-style cooker on the right. It offers three burners, an electric hotplate, grill and oven as well as a flush glass lid. There's some spare worktop space in the centre, and two 230V sockets (with safety switches) nestle beside the frosted-glass splashback.

The Daewoo microwave is fronted by a silver roller-shuttered door. The Dometic 190-litre fridge/freezer is an AES model.

ON-BOARD STORAGE ★★★★★

Any fixed bed motorhome has a large amount of storage, but this isn't a 'garage' model. You can still get loads into this under-bed storage space, accessed either from outside or by lifting up the bed base. There's more usable space beneath the lounge too, where drop-down doors in the seat bases give easy access.

In the lounge are four eye-level lockers - two of which are shelved. One of them holds the base for the Status Vision Plus TV aerial, while another is almost completely taken up by the RCD unit. The third has clips for four glasses and two bottles of wine, leaving the fourth bare. There's lots of lutan storage, with two large locker doors opening

FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £55,625

PRICE AS TESTED £60,457

NOTE: PRICES INCLUDE 20% VAT

OPTIONS FITTED 3-litre Multijet Power engine (£1848), Comfort-Matic gearbox (£1386), Media Pack (£999), Platinum Pack (£599)

BERTHS 4

TRAVEL SEATS 2

DIMENSIONS 7.60m L, 2.31m W, 3.03m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT 1.99m

MAXIMUM WEIGHT 4005kg

PAYLOAD 455kg

BEDS Nearside French bed 1.32m x 1.89m, front lounge bed 2.10m x 1.22m

FRESH WATER 100 litres (underfloor, insulated)

WASTE WATER 55 litres (underfloor)

LEISURE BATTERY 110Ah

MAINS SOCKETS 4

BASE VEHICLE

FIAT DUCATO 40 HEAVY

ENGINE 3-litre Multijet Power 157bhp (option)

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING 3 burners, electric hotplate, grill, oven, 700W microwave

FRIDGE Dometic 190-litre AES fridge/freezer

HEATING Truma Combi 4 gas/230V blown-air

BOILER Truma Combi 4 gas/230V

FOR

AMBIENT LIGHTING

HUGE SHOWER COMPARTMENT

MEDIA PACK

TRADITIONAL, HOMEY DÉCOR INSIDE

CHOICE OF OVERCAB STYLES

AGAINST

NON-POSITIVE LOCKING CUPBOARD DOORS

NO SHOWER VENT

TINY WASTE WATER TANK

BUY IF...

...YOU WANT A HOMEY, WELL-BUILT BRITISH VAN OR ARE AN AUTO-TRAIL AFICIONADO

to reveal one huge space, whilst either side are two smaller lockers.

The kitchen is generous in cupboard capacity, with a large curved-fronted cupboard below the counter, as well as another narrower cupboard with three pull-out wire baskets and two drawers. All of the kitchen cupboards are positive locked apart from the narrow one. Above the fridge is another huge shelved cupboard with a roller shutter door. The wardrobe is between the kitchen and the washroom door (behind the concertina privacy curtain). It may not be particularly wide, but there are four useful drawers beneath its half-height. There are more high-level lockers around the fixed bed and there's plenty of storage in the washroom.

ON TO BED ★★★★★

Who can complain about a fixed bed when it comes to a comfortable night's sleep? But better is that Auto-Trail expect you to watch your favourite programmes from here too, as the mounting for another flatscreen TV, as well as all the plugs and aerial sockets, are found at the foot of the bed. If you want to read there are two swivel spotlights above a soft headboard that matches the curtains.

ON THE LOO ★★★★★

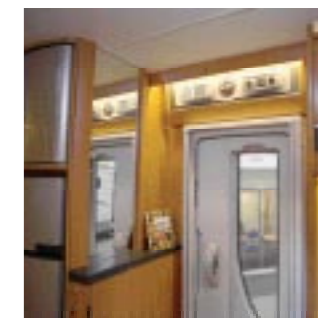
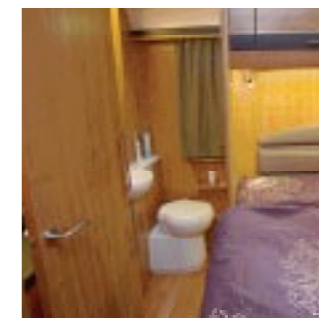
In a vanity area outside the washroom door, there's a large square mirror, accompanied by a mains socket and storage. For the main washroom, go through that solid wooden door to face a toilet and washbasin, an array of cupboards, and accessories such as a cupholder, towel rail, coat hook, and chromed toilet roll holder. The shower is just out of sight, around the corner, and it offers masses of room for you to swing the proverbial cat. There's a main roof vent and frosted glass window, but no vent in the separate shower area.

ON QUALITY ★★★★★

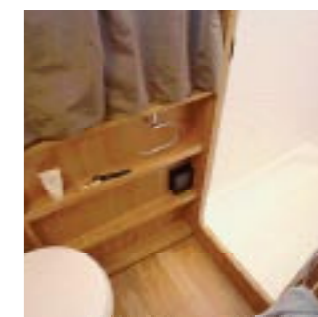
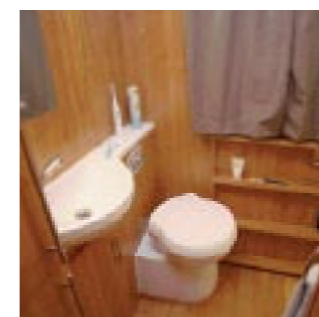
There is a strange mix of positive and non-positive locking doors here that doesn't seem to make much sense. There was an electrical fault with the vehicle battery on the test 'van, but on the whole the Dakota seemed well screwed together with the feeling of being the luxury motorhome it claims to be.

ON VALUE ★★★★★

There's lots of competition at this price bracket, but Dakota offers plenty of facilities with no obvious omissions. It's well built, looks good and drives well - but you would want to add the optional packs to make this motorhome complete.



there's lots of competition at this price bracket, but dakota offers plenty of facilities with no omissions



ON THE OUTSIDE ★★★★★

You either love or hate this Dethleffs' exterior styling, but it's great that this German company is so brave when it comes to external colours and design - someone's got to push the boundaries. Here the Laguna Blue paintwork is an option, but you can also choose one of three other new colours - Bright Sand (yellow), Cacao Grey (brown), or Milky Green - or the previously offered red, blue or dark grey cab with Titan Silver motorhome body, or even white. As tested, this is a sleek, stylish and modern vehicle, especially when coupled with those black and silver alloy wheels. It looks a decade newer than the Auto-Trail but will be too bold for some.

A large 'Esprit' badge sits atop the rear panel (along with a small window that lights up the washroom). On our offside are the habitation door, gas locker, under-bed storage locker door and a tall ski locker; it is shelved but they can be removed to create space for winter sports gear, windbreaks and the like. The mains point, water inlet and the toilet hatch are on our nearside.

ON THE ROAD ★★★★★

If you had the standard engine in the Auto-Trail these two motorhomes would be pretty similar behind the wheel. But when you drive them you'll note that the Dakota is substantially higher and it lacks the Dethleffs' Al-Ko chassis. The Heavy Fiat chassis of the Dakota is stable enough, but the Al-Ko addition on the Esprit is better still, giving a completely steady on-road experience.

The Esprit's cab doesn't come with a radio as standard, but it does have air-con, twin airbags and cruise control; the small amount of wood trim on the dash is an option.

ON SITE ★★★★★

The layout here is different to the Auto-Trail as it features a half-dinette, fixed table, and side-facing settee - although this lounge design is also available in the Dakota at extra cost. The benefits with the dinette arrangement are obvious - a little fiddling with the L-shaped sofa and you've got foot space for two extra travel seats, making it a much more flexible vehicle if you want to occasionally take others away. Otherwise, the floorplan is very similar to the Dakota, just a mirror image. The German 'van has its habitation door on the European side, though that is of little consequence.

The general ambience here is very different to the Dakota - but no less appealing. The Dakota is quite traditional

and homely, while the Esprit feels more modern and trendy - likely to appeal to a younger audience. The seats are grey, brown and cream, with pin-striped seat bases. The locker fronts have mirror-like cream-coloured panels and silver edging, which contrast nicely with the dark wood finish. But there are retro touches too, such as the chromed dials on the control panel.

Light cream curtains pull across a well-concealed track around the cab. During the day these are held back with very tidy fixed plastic tie-backs. Above is a large opening sunroof with a concertina blind. The cab carpet is removable, as is the rest of the carpet which is sectioned for ease of fitment. This carpet covers the two large underfloor storage areas (set within the Al-Ko chassis) that are accessible via the two hatches set into the floor. These make great hidey-holes for your most prized possessions.

The door has a bin fitted inside, and there's a flyscreen, as well as three shelves with fiddle rails. There's a Heki rooflight above the lounge, and spotlights are spread around the lounge. There's also some ambience lighting either side of the luton.

ON THE BOIL ★★★★★

The Dethleffs' kitchen doesn't disappoint. The Thetford AES 175-litre fridge/freezer is a typical European fitting, but on the other side of the aisle there's a fantastic ultra-modern kitchen with a three-burner hob complete with separate drainer and flush glass lids - all in one stainless-steel unit. There's also a Thetford Duplex oven and grill unit with drawer for pan storage below. Strangely, the controls for the hob are below the sink whilst the gas taps are below the hob.

There's a reasonable amount of worktop to your right as you stand at the sink, whilst behind there's a small recessed bin with its own flush-glass lid. There are two mains sockets for toaster and kettle.

ON-BOARD STORAGE ★★★★★

The Dethleffs has a head start when it comes to storage, thanks to that ski locker - although it means that you get a standard-sized shower cubicle instead of the Auto-Trail's huge compartment. Beside the ski hatch is a wider one that leads to the under-bed storage area, for other outdoor gear.

The twin-doored wardrobe is between the dressing table and the kitchen unit, and has a hanging rail and large cupboard beneath. The extra cushions for the front bed are stored here, but these could be left at home (if not needed), or stored under the bed.

FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £56,628

PRICE AS TESTED £59,744

NOTE: PRICES INCLUDE 20% VAT

OPTIONS FITTED Alloy wheels (£733), Laguna Blue bodywork (£657), Luxus Pack - high-level rear moulding, flush windows, indirect illumination, extractor hood, roof rails, Cypress Villa wood, cab blinds (£1726)

BERTHS 4

TRAVEL SEATS 4

DIMENSIONS 7.43m L, 2.33m W, 2.83m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT 1.98m

MAXIMUM WEIGHT 3700kg

PAYLOAD 473kg

BEDS Rear French bed 1.92m x 1.30m, front dinette bed 2.10m x 1.21m

FRESH WATER 125 litres (inboard)

WASTE WATER 93 litres (underfloor, insulated)

LEISURE BATTERY 95Ah

MAINS SOCKETS 3

BASE VEHICLE

FIAT DUCATO AL-KO

ENGINE 2.3-litre Multijet 130bhp

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING 3-burner hob, Duplex oven/grill

FRIDGE Thetford 175-litre AES fridge/freezer

HEATING Truma Combi 6 gas/230V blown-air

BOILER Truma Combi 6 gas/230V

FOR

LEVEL OF WINTERISATION

MORE POWERFUL COMBI 6 HEATING

AL-KO CHASSIS

SKI LOCKER

MODERN STYLING INSIDE AND OUT

CHOICE OF EXTERIOR COLOURS

UNDERFLOOR STORAGE

AGAINST

SMALLER SHOWER COMPARTMENT

THREE-BURNER HOB INSTEAD OF FOUR

NO MICROWAVE

BUY IF...

...YOU ARE LOOKING FOR A TRENDIER OPTION FROM A BRAND WITH A LONG-STANDING REPUTATION FOR BOTH QUALITY AND AFTER-SALES BACK-UP

The Auto-Trail has those large cupboards in the luton, while the Dethleffs, being a true low-profile, provides only two small side lockers fronted by silver roller-shuttered doors. Over the lounge are two large and two smaller high-level lockers - with shelves. In the kitchen there's a large cutlery drawer (with two drawers beneath), and another pull-out unit with three wire baskets inside. There's a small unit with three shelves with fiddle rails for your spices, and all the high-level lockers here are also shelved. They look great too - the central lockers two have smart frosted glass and cream doors.

ON TO BED ★★★★★

There are three high-level lockers in the bedroom, but the rear wall is left blank so that you can sit up in bed without banging your head. There are two swivel spotlights on the offside - but there isn't one for the nearside bed occupant. From within the television cupboard with its silver roller-blind door, the set can be extended so it can be seen from the lounge or the bedroom. A privacy curtain runs around the bed and there's an opening rooflight for ventilation.

ON THE LOO ★★★★★

Like the Dakota there's a small dressing table just outside the washroom door, but once inside you're faced by a separate shower, Thetford swivel cassette toilet, and a mirror-fronted cabinet with plenty of storage space for toiletries. There's another mirror above the washbasin, although this is set quite high; conversely the mirror over the dressing table is too low when sitting on the bed.

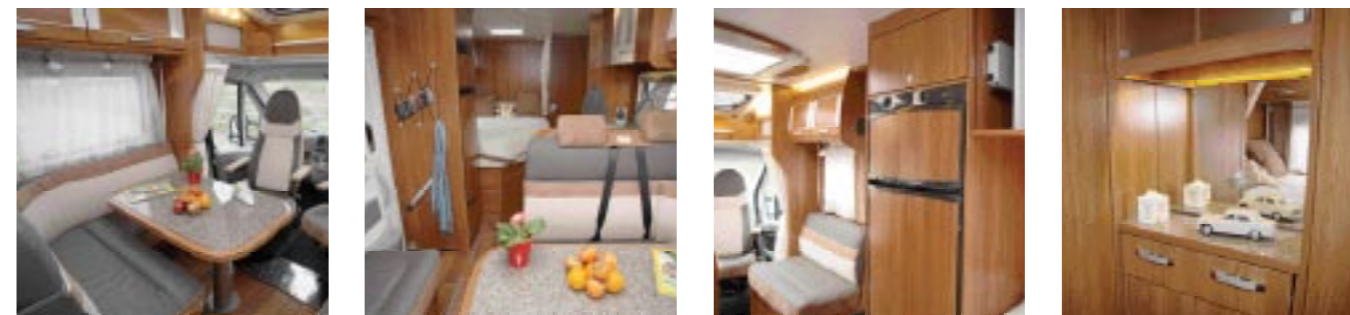
The shower may not be as large as the Auto-Trail's, but it has a two-piece Perspex door and two drain holes, as well as a height-adjustable showerhead and mixer tap. There are three hooks just inside the washroom, so towels are within reach, and there's an opening window to let out steam, along with the small roof vent.

ON QUALITY ★★★★★

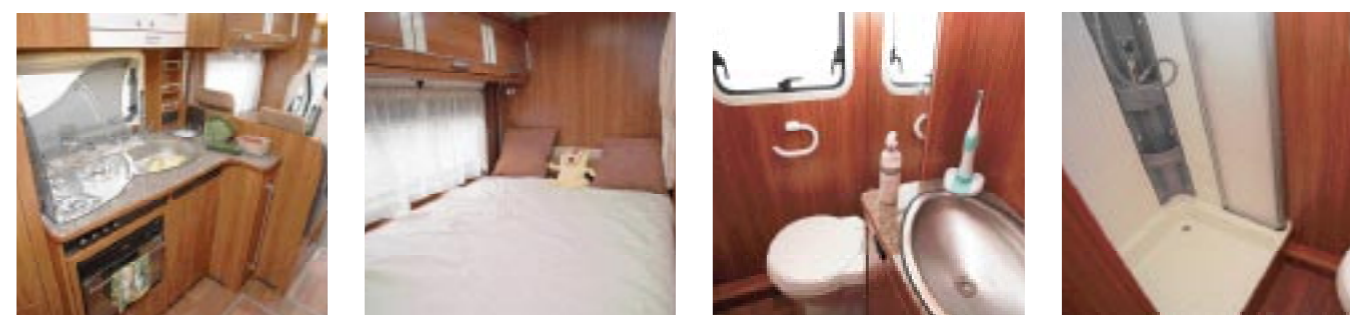
This motorhome is faultless when it comes to quality; everything is finished beautifully and has a plushness that is hard to beat.

ON VALUE ★★★★★

The Dethleffs and Auto-Trail are almost identically priced, both in their basic form and once you've added on the packs and extras that you'd probably want. They both also offer a comprehensive optional extras list, with items such as leather upholstery and, in the Esprit's case, underfloor heating.



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alternatives

Swift, like Auto-Trail, have decided that the combination of a French bed and a large end washroom is the must-have new layout of 2011, but the new Kon-Tiki 659 is not a direct rival at 8.67m long and nearly £70k. Anyone in the market for this layout should take a look at Rapido's 7099+, which comes with all-silver bodywork and a very high-spec. It has an Al-Ko chassis (and can be plated at 4250kg for a massive payload of over a tonne). Adria offer the Coral 680 ST with great build-quality and competitive pricing, but surprisingly, Chausson's attractive Welcome 76 has been dropped for this season, while Briston's huge range do include this floorpl



WHICH motorhome says

AUTO-TRAIL DAKOTA ★★★★★
 DETHLEFFS ESPRIT T7090 ★★★★★

It's extremely difficult to decide on a winner this month. Both look good, offer similar facilities, and have their own plus points.

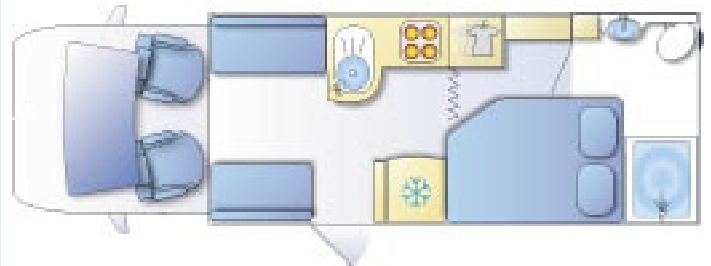
The ski locker on the Esprit is useful, but then there's an extra skirt locker on the Dakota and the larger shower. The Dethleffs lacks a microwave and the electric hotplate, but the Dethleffs has more galley drawer space and the neat split glass lids for sink/hob. Both lounges are extremely comfortable and the beds are too. The fact that more than one of the mirrors in the Dethleffs is at the wrong height for most people might annoy, but the much bolder styling is more likely to be a decisive factor.

The Auto-Trail doesn't boast that Al-Ko chassis, and its overall height is much greater, so drivers will prefer the German 'van. And if you want the half-dinette's extra travel seats they'll cost you extra on the Dakota and may mean a longer wait for delivery. We'd probably opt for the Dethleffs on its looks and driver appeal but if your tastes are more conservative you'll not be disappointed by the Dakota.

auto-trail dakota

The Dakota is part of the 10-strong collection of Frontier models that range from a relatively compact 6.81m (Cherokee) all the way up to the tag-axes measuring 8.73m (including the Comanche tested on page 22). All the Frontiers have niceties that are only options on the lower ranges, such as microwaves, alloy wheels and huge fridge/freezers. And all are now available with the Super Lo-line luton that brings the exterior up-to-date.

Test vehicle supplied by Brownhills Leisure World, Newark - Tel: 0845 605 2957



dethleffs esprit t7090

Ten years ago people went to Germany to buy 'vans in the hope of getting lower prices, but this Dethleffs is a good example of why you should buy here. You might appear to pay a high price, due to delivery costs, but standard spec is higher, including cab air-con, twin airbags, mains heating, oven and grill, carpets and additional cushions to make up the front bed. Available in a new-look A-class and low-profile body styles, all Esprit models offer fixed beds of some kind.

Test vehicle supplied by Lowdham Leisureworld, Nottingham - Tel: 0115 966 3838

