

EN FRANÇAIS PER FAVORE

Chausson Allegro 93 on Fiat Ducato 160 Multijet



Our Chausson Allegro proved a steep learning curve, but great fun for Chris and Jenny Burrows whose last motorhoming trip was back in the 1970s

Pitched at Upper Clovelly in North Devon



After over 40 years of continuous, if varied, employment, 64 can be a very daunting age. As state pension time approaches at train-wreck speed it may not be clear whether the light at the end of the

tunnel is malign or benign, but one thing's for sure, you are going to find out very soon.

On the positive side, my occupational pension was promising to yield a very useful tax-free lump sum, so when we were offered the chance to do an extended trial of a modern motorhome, of course, we jumped at it.

We have been avid campers since the 1960s and covered the whole range from minimalist two-person tents in the back of a Morgan Four-Four to multi-mega-domes in people carriers with four children. Destinations included most of Europe, from Spain to Hungary and further afield in the USA and Mexico.

In fairness we were not complete virgins in this area because in 1975 we were asked to promote the sale of white-water rafts in the USA. River running with paying passengers was becoming big business and the only sensible way to reach the far-flung clientele in their riverside bases was by RV, so we could be completely self-contained when necessary.

We hired a truly enormous Pace Arrow RV - 30ft long, 9ft wide with a 7.0-litre petrol engine and she still puffed a bit on steep hills.

Suffice to say that driving was a breeze on American roads but the 'Wasatch Cannonball', as she became known, did four miles to the American gallon. However, if we remember rightly, the going rate for 'gas' was then about 9p per litre.

THE FAST SLIPPER

Thirty years on and it was going to be a wonderful opportunity to see how things have progressed in terms of layout and especially economy, both in space and fuel consumption. Most important of all, could we negotiate



The dash-mounted, manual gear change presented a challenge

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Britain's skinny B-roads and byways without becoming gibbering wrecks or cringing in fear every time we had to reverse in a tight spot?

Needless to say, when the day came, we hadn't done any of the sensible things, like visiting the web site or reading the owner's manual. All we knew was that we would be picking up a Chausson Allegro 93 and even the name raised a few eyebrows.

Chausson – French for slippers, something I'd already been ribbed about at work, along with pipes, newspapers and 'feet up'.

Allegro – Italian for fast but with very disturbing automotive connotations for a British motorist in the 1970s.

93 – English for, well, 93, but exactly the number of days left till my 65th birthday.

Our first sight of the 'van rekindled our interest with quite a jolt. We've seen motorhomes on the M6; big, square boxy things with huge foreheads, a bit like the *Incredible Hulk* and still linked to the same gene pool as the old Wasatch Cannonball of some 30 years ago. Here was something long, low and sleek, pleasing to the eye, which did look as though it might be quick as well as pretty.

Entering the 'flight deck' is simple because there is no gearlever in the way. 'Crickey, where's the gear shift? Ah, there it is, the joystick on the dashboard. Good heavens, its got six forward gears and we are used to an automatic!'

After a very brief induction tour we were handed the keys and told to have a good holiday. So, first stop home to load up and collect Mikka (our six-year-old Japanese Akita bitch). Then out onto the open road, well maybe that's a bit strong, we were in Lincolnshire at the time. Onto the A1 and Jenny had to remind me 'Warp 6 Mr Sulu' more than once. At this point we christened her the Starship Enterprise.

REVERSE PROCEDURE

She was very willing indeed, pulling strongly uphill still accelerating through 70 and into the naughty zone. I think 93 must be a top speed indication. Thank heavens for cruise control.



Her laden weight is 3500kg, but the 3.0-litre turbo-diesel makes very light of it. Arriving home triggered the first serious test; there was nothing for it but to reverse in off the road. This manoeuvre turned out to be amazingly easy and she came round in one sweep. The large wing mirrors are excellent and even though

there is a lengthy overhang at the back we always felt in reasonable control. Additional confidence was given by multiple parking sensors warning of anything near the rear end.

Now it was decision time, where to go and what to do? I had lived in Cornwall just after the war, but hadn't stayed long enough to form any lasting memories. Jenny had never been there in her life. We felt that ten days coast-hopping would be a pleasant adventure and provide a firm basis for a revealing trial.

In terms of holiday activities we are still very much doers rather than watchers, so plenty of room for holiday toys is quite important. Because there is a fixed double bed there is a good-sized cargo bay, which is accessed internally by lifting the bed and externally through a lockable hatch. We managed to fit in our 2/3 person inflatable canoe (not your average forecourt frightener but a top-of-the-range Eurocraft Expedition - complete with paddles, wet suits, buoyancy aids, pump and throw bag). Added to this was walking gear, picnic table, chairs and a folding bicycle.

Our food and copious changes of clothing disappeared completely into the plethora of internal storage places. We counted 47, not including the oven or sink, but we might have missed one.

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE

Our plan was to leave home late and head south until we had had enough, but certainly the south side of Birmingham. We reached Strensham Service Station on the M5 in less than three hours, only to look out of the side door to see a veritable river of water running from under our vehicle. Pressing the digital readout button





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cylindrical cubicle, which is definitely redolent of 'beam me up Scotty'. She came through with flying colours, delivering plenty of volume with good temperature control. It is fairly close quarters in there but still gained star rating from Jenny who is tighter than Michelin or Relais Routier on things like that.

After Clovelly we moved on to Stoke Barton Farm just south of Hartland Point and technically still in Devon. Another beautiful spot made even better by the campsite's offerings of clotted cream teas and homemade pasties. So to bed (and a very comfortable bed it is too, we love the adjustable back rests). In the morning we walked the coast path to Hartland Quay. What a spectacular country we live in and we haven't seen a fraction of it yet.

Mikka took to motorhoming like a duck to water and revelled in the fact that the space between the front seats allowed her to be near her pack (Jenny and me). She can either stretch out on the floor and snooze or sit up and see out. There is also the added bonus that on occasions when she is left in charge she makes a very impressive security officer!

RALLY START

Our next move was to Port Gaverne with a brief stop in Boscastle on the way. By now the lanes were so narrow that the mirrors were brushing the hedgerows on both sides. The campsite we found for the night was probably the most basic we have stayed on so far; there were no hook-ups but everything on board worked brilliantly.

The weather was going downhill and overnight rain had already made some campsites very wet and slippery, including ours. We walked into Port Isaac for dinner with assurances of 'don't worry the tractor will get you off in the morning' ringing in our ears. After a wet and windy night, the wheels had definitely sunk a little further but 'driving on eggshells' and starting in second gear she came off under her own steam in fine style and with only a light coating of authentic rally mud!

Our plans for the following day went out

gave a depressingly blow-by-blow account of our losses, as a 100-litre full fresh water tank became eight litres before our very eyes.

It turned out that there was a Chausson main dealer, Highbridge Caravan Centre, very near to Junction 26 on the M5 where Steve immediately lifted up the bed and pulled up a red button on the floor. Apparently there is a fiendishly clever frost protection device in the water system which senses temperature drop and below 5 degrees and dumps all the water. However, it also seems to be susceptible to strong vibrations and we did remember going over a particularly savage pothole. After that we were extremely careful when crossing sleeping policemen.

The very nice man at Highbridge refilled our water tank and sent us on our way rejoicing. It was two days later when the trusty gauge said the tank was getting a bit low that we realised we didn't actually have our own hosepipe and the tap at the campsite didn't have one either. Still, a quick visit to a garden centre solved that one.

CLEAN ME UP, SCOTTY

We felt really on holiday when we arrived in Upper Clovelly (Green Dyke Farm) and pitched in a quiet corner with electric hook-up surrounded by wild flowers and birdsong. It was a lovely evening (little did we know it would be the only one) so we got out the barbecue and had steak with our home grown vegetables and a bottle of Bordeaux Superieur.

The integrated power system worked beautifully, running the full-size fridge/freezer and providing seemingly endless hot water as if by magic. We decided to give the 'Enterprise' a serious test and showered one after the other complete with hair wash in the gleaming little



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1 Clovelly village is a highlight of North Devon

2 The cargo hold under the bed is suited to our active holiday lifestyle

3 All this kit disappeared inside

4 The 'beam me up' shower cubicle was a star

5 Mikka took to motorhoming like a duck to water

6 Near Hartland point, North Devon

of the window as the weather took another savage turn for the worse, so plan B was invoked and we visited the Eden Project. Wow, what a brilliant thing to do to an old clay pit – well worth the detour.

It was at this point we wondered if there was something wrong with us, or our



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vehicle. People waved at us, that is, people in motorhomes. Then it dawned on us, we were being welcomed into the fellowship of campervans, how nice!

Getting back on track we headed for Padstow, only to find that our preferred campsite at Dennis Cove was already full (and it's only the end of June). We backtracked and found a pleasant, if somewhat exposed, site but with hardstanding and hook-ups. We cooked dinner and turned in, sleeping like tops, to wake up in the morning and look out on scenes of camping carnage, as several large family tents had been utterly destroyed. We didn't hear a thing, Enterprise was rock steady and we hadn't even put the rear steadies down.

BEDDED BLISS

My one criticism of the bed is that the missing corner can catch you out, especially if you are 6ft or over and tend to sleep on your back. My solution was to change the habit of a wedded lifetime and put 'the wife' on that side. That actually worked perfectly and brought a whole new perspective to our marriage!

Although we didn't know it, our next project was going to be precision parking in Padstow. On leaving the campsite we gave a lift to a couple of other motorhomers who were full of compliments for the SS Enterprise, including her layout, her upholstery and in particular how quiet she was, something that had not occurred to us as we had had nothing to compare it with in recent millennia. A friendly warden directed us to a car park where we slipped into a normal car spot, albeit on the perimeter, with room for our prodigious (does my bum look big in this?) overhang to cover the grass verge. Smug and self-satisfied, we set off to tour Padstow and visited the National Lobster Hatchery where we adopted a crèche of baby lobsters on behalf of our kids – a fascinating and worthwhile visit with a definite 'feel good' factor. What we learned on our return to the car park was that skilful reversing into tight spaces on its own is not enough. It is important to plan your exit strategy right at the outset because if someone can inadvertently lock you in, believe me, they will. We vowed next time to park opposite a roadway.



REMOVING PARTS

From Padstow we elected to give Newquay a wide berth and made for St Agnes Head where we had been told of excellent camping at Beacon Farm, a site with breathtaking walks right on the doorstep. We found a superb pitch with hook-up, firm footings and great views, or at least they would be when the weather cleared.

That evening, while making dinner, we decided to get stropky with the kitchen and removed the rotating wire contraption, which had been screwed right into the middle of the very limited worktop, like an eccentric cake stand. With the weary wire 'whatnot' consigned to the cargo hold, food preparation and washing-up resumed their normal status of household chores rather than a cross between three-dimensional chess and spillikins.

While we are in whinge mode we might as well have our say about the ludicrous waste bin moulded onto the door. It clogs up the stairwell and is very difficult to clean.

After another overnight downpour the morning dawned, damp and depressing, while the weather forecast continued its downward spiral threatening to bring us up to par with the Midlands and South Yorkshire. At this juncture we decided to cut our losses and head for home, albeit by the scenic route of Abergavenny and Hay-on-Wye.

En route to the M4 bridge we had cause to reflect on our good fortune being in a motorhome: there on the southbound side was a jack-knifed caravan on its side with a small 4x4 with back wheels off the ground and a tailback of four miles and growing, while here we were cosy and warm speeding towards South Wales, reported to be the host to the last patch of blue sky this side of Iceland.

ADMIRE THE ENTERPRISE

We finally arrived home in the pouring rain exactly a week to the minute since we set off. The weather had been generally dreadful





but we'd put 1300 miles on the clock and developed a deep admiration for the SS Enterprise.

To sum up, we loved all the big things about her. The size, the speed, the general layout and all the systems and services, especially the shower which had worked faultlessly, whether or not we were hooked up to the mains or were self-contained on a remote field. The fixed bed, the sliding table and the choice of upholstery were big pluses for us.

Our niggles were few and reserved for the small things like the what-not and the waste bin. Or don't open the sink unless the tap is set to hot or you will flood the worktop. Or there's only one 240V socket and no shaver point. Or the bathroom cabinet needs higher fiddles to stop things falling out when you open the 'overhead locker'. To be fair most of these could be simply rectified at very little cost.

AYE, THERE'S THE RUB

We averaged 23mpg over the whole 1300 miles, which included some very tortuous lanes and quite a lot of low gear work. I would guess a figure between 25 and 30mpg might be achievable on long Continental runs at Warp 6!

So, we needed to ask ourselves several questions as we try to decide if we are ready to become motorhome owners. Firstly, did we like it? Yes, taken overall, we did. We certainly like this style of camper and found it a big improvement over our American memories. Secondly, could we afford the capital outlay? Probably. Thirdly, what about running costs? We are lucky enough that we could keep this size of vehicle at home, which would offset any storage charges. Fourthly, but most importantly, would we make sufficient use of it to justify the initial outlay and on-going expense? And so, there's the rub. Current commitments mean that we would struggle to spend more than a couple of weeks and a few weekends in it per

7 The interior remained cosy, even on a dark and stormy night

8 The Eden Project: a brilliant thing to do to an old clay pit

9 We removed the kitchen's chrome 'contraption'

10 The bed's chopped-off corner led to a new way of sleeping

11 The door-mounted waste bin proved difficult

12 Narrow lanes brushed our mirrors

year, at least, for the foreseeable future. Our final judgement is that at this stage in our lives it would make more sense to hire at least for the next three or four years.

So it was with sadness that we handed her back and said a big thank you to all the people at Galactic Headquarters who made our inner space trip possible. ■

DATA FILE

- **Price:** £42,910 OTR
- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato LWB Camper chassis cab
- **Engine:** 3.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 157bhp
- **Transmission:** Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Length:** 7.03m (23ft 1in)
- **Width:** 2.31m (7ft 6.5in)
- **Height:** 2.75m (9ft 0.5in)
- **Berths:** 4
- **Belted seats:** 4 (including driver)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3500kg
- **Payload:** 340kg
- **Layout:** Swivel cab seats and L-shaped lounge with facing sofa, central L-shaped kitchen, lengthways fixed bed in rear offside corner, washroom opposite
- **Fresh water:** 140 litres (30.79 gallons)
- **Waste water:** 100 litres (22 gallons)
- **Space and water heating:** Truma Combi C6002 with blown-air, gas-only operation

