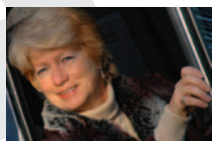




ON TOUR WITH A...

...Mirage New Life 6000U on 2.8JTD Fiat Ducato

Bucolic scenes and great pubs are just some of the highlights of a walk in the New Forest



Words by Di Johnson,
Pictures by Pete Johnson



Pitched at the Camping and Caravanning Club's Verwood site.

TOURING TRIVIA

WE STAYED AT:

- Verwood Camping and Caravanning Club Site, Sutton Hill Woodlands, Wimborne, Dorset BH21 8NQ (tel: 01202 822763; web site: www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)
- Rookesbury Park Caravan Club Site, Hundred Acres Road, Wickham, Fareham PO17 6JR (tel: 01329 834085; web site: www.caravanclub.co.uk)

OUR BORROWED BOOK WAS:

- *Mike Power's Pub Walks in the New Forest*, published by Power Publications, 1 Clayford Avenue, Ferndown, Dorset BH22 9PQ

WE SAMPLED THE FOLLOWING PUBS:

- *The Fighting Cocks at Godshill* is situated on the B3078, 1.5 miles east of Fordingbridge (tel: 01425 652462)
- *The Lamb Inn at Nomansland* is in the far north of the Forest and signed from both the B3079 and the B3078 (tel: 01794 390246)
- *The Royal Oak at Fritham* is signed from the northbound carriageway of the A31 at Stony Cross. If approaching from a northerly direction, take the B3079 and then the B3078 (tel: 023-8081 2606)

My husband Peter positively purred when he first got behind the wheel of the Mirage. He's not one given to being free with praise; he's more likely to go for the throat, metaphorically speaking. So his first comment, 'never mind the New Forest, Italy here we come,' astounded me. I've never seen him so smitten. It was, apparently, something to do with the cab configuration and the adjustable squabs of the ISRI captain's seats. Personally, I found it to be just like any other Fiat Ducato to drive; I suppose it's our sizes that make the difference.

A 6.80m (22ft 4in) Italian-built A-class with cab air-conditioning and ultra modern looks, to take on a little tour of the New Forest? Yep, I was up for that one! The Mirage is equipped with a drop-down, in-cab A-class bed, rear U-shaped lounge, (which converts into a double bed) and a nearside half-dinette and washroom. The interior is finished off with a front-end offside kitchen, while the caravan door is centrally located on the same side.

Outside, the addition of grey painted skirts and inset panels, on a nearly white A-class, lifts the wow-factor by two notches. That same grey paint, surprisingly, was flaking where it covers the silicone jointing material. However, the use of colour to break up large boring panels can be seen to work well on this 'van.

Seat belts are provided for three passengers, and the rear lounge/bedroom can be curtained off so this 'van should suit families. However, for a couple that dislike the inevitable assembly work that can accompany motorcaravanning, it would also be ideal. The separate lounge, always-available dinette, drop-down bed (with its bedding in situ), will result in lazy days with none of the usual pulling and pushing of cushions and mechanisms.

We found we couldn't leave the 'van though the cab passenger door. We could get in, with a mighty pull, but nothing would shift the door when trying to get out. As the caravan door opens onto the road when parked, things got a bit hairy on occasions. To compound this, the caravan door also needed a firm yank to open it. I'm sure that a pre-delivery inspection, for a 'proper' customer, would sort out these faults. Subsequently, I was told that this particular vehicle was a prototype for demonstration purposes and production models would be 'sorted.'

A WALK IN THE NEW FOREST

Well, a drive, a walk and a pub visit actually. We booked into the Camping and Caravanning Club's site at Verwood. This is north of Bournemouth, close to the New Forest, and is blessed with very friendly wardens. After chatting to our neighbours on site, they offered us a book on pub walks in the New Forest. What a brilliant idea.

The next day we got the feel of the Mirage, before driving along the narrower road to The Fighting Cocks at Godshill. From this pub there's a 3.5-mile walk through open forest



and farmland, ideal for the family, with lots of butterflies to identify; we saw the handsome silver-washed fritillary.

After the stroll, if you like real ale and sensibly-priced family-friendly food, then The Fighting Cocks is worth a visit. There's plenty of parking at or near the pub and a children's play area. You can also choose to sit on a sunny and flower-filled terrace along the front of the pub. Cows and ponies roam freely around the surrounding common land and you need to

There are good family walks from The Fighting Cocks at Godshill.



watch out, as foals are given to gambolling around without warning.

COOKING IN

We parked beside a pond near Fritham to feed Canada geese and cook our evening meal. Both the draining, three-burner hob (with spark ignition) and the sink are set lower than is usual; this arrangement could have been designed for little me! There's no worktop in evidence, other than the table, but the sink and hob have glass

lids, which can suffice as food prep areas.

Aircraft-style lockers overhead, a range of cupboards and a cutlery drawer provide plenty of places to store food and kit. The lockers in the Mirage are unobtrusive (small), but there are plenty of them.

Luckily, I'd brought a bowl with me, as there's no draining area for the washing up other than the waste drain-equipped hob. Ironically, and after the pleasures of the lower-set kitchen unit, using the high-level oven/grill (positioned above

the big fridge-freezer) would have required a tall step-up for me.

A TABLE FOR THREE?

Three could eat at the dinette, with the front passenger seat swivelled, but the swivelled driver's seat is out of range. The seat mechanisms kept jamming but this is not unusual and the action would probably improve with use. The side-mounted table is the sort that can easily slide along its mounting rail: an accommodating



system. Other diners could be housed around the pedestal table in the rear lounge.

In the dinette, natural light is taken care of by a large window beside the table and a big Heki rooflight. Two spots (either side of the window), a light over the kitchen and two lights in the underside of the drop-down bed, all contribute to illuminating the lounge.

Curves are a feature in this 'van. The corn-coloured removable carpet winds its way to the rear of the vehicle around curved kitchen units, curved washroom wall and wardrobe doors. This then squares off in the U-shaped rear lounge. Returning dusty from our walks I was tempted to take out the carpet and store it in the outside locker, as we didn't want to mess up this lovely indoor 'cornfield.'

The oyster-coloured leather-effect upholstery, which features throughout, was sticky in the hot weather - especially noticeable when you're wearing shorts. I resorted to using my cotton sleeping bag as a cushion. However, it does wipe clean beautifully, which was useful

for us mucky toads.

The worktop and tables are black and blue-ish granite-effect, with wood trim. All this looks good with quality fittings, but details such as the granite-effect surface in the cab curling up spoiled an otherwise solid-looking conversion. In addition, the cover on the bases of both front seats kept falling off.

LOUNGING ABOUT

The U-shaped lounge is available for relaxation after a long walk and, with excellent views through the three windows, it was superb for watching the wildlife of the New Forest. We liked the lounge so much we preferred to eat some of our meals there, particularly when parked deep in the shaded part of the woods. I should think five could be cosily entertained there. Despite all the windows I would have liked a second Heki rather than the small roof vent that is fitted.

The advantage of a separate rear lounge becomes apparent when one occupant wants

to read while the other wishes to listen to the radio or write a letter. On occasions, we found the opportunity for two-area-living invaluable.

An evening woodland stroll from the Verwood campsite is almost guaranteed to present some deer for viewing. I was singing at the top of my voice after we'd earlier seen two hinds, but it didn't deter the stag I spotted browsing under the canopy. We crept up on him and had a close encounter: thrilling, but unfortunately we had no camera to hand.

BEDDING DOWN IN AN A-CLASS

We tried the drop-down in-cab bed for our first night in the Mirage. A ladder's provided but there was no method of securing it. Pete manfully volunteered to take the innermost position. He slept like a log; he usually does. I like a soft bed and find many motorcaravan beds are hard for me. The Mirage was no exception. It should, however, be easy to add a memory foam overlay and sleep in cushioned comfort.



FAR LEFT: The main kitchen unit and half dinette occupy the Mirage front end.

LEFT: The front diner and rear lounge proved to be very versatile.

WE LIKED

- Ever-ready bed, lounge and dinette
- Lower height hob and sink
- Masses of storage
- Relatively short overall length
- High levels of winterisation
- The drop-out external step which folds up automatically when ignition is switched on
- Squab adjustment on cab seats

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Supports on the offside exterior locker doors
- A sink with drainer
- More worktop
- A second large rooflight over the lounge
- A radio/CD player that remained on when the ignition is turned off
- Speakers in the lounge

WE DISLIKED

- The high-level, out-of-reach oven
- The stiff catches on the doors
- The leather-effect upholstery



FAR LEFT: The nice low hob and sink unit suited me fine.

LEFT CENTRE: Oh dear, another too-high oven. Maybe stilts will solve the problem!

LEFT: We found the rear lounge great for relaxing eating and watching New Forest wildlife.



RIGHT: This handsome silver-washed fritillary is very much a woodland butterfly.

RIGHT CENTRE: Pete had fun studying the arachnid population at the Caravan Club's Rookesbury Park site.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A bucolic scene at The Lamb Inn at Nomansland.



The next night we tried the lounge berth. There is a special infill board for this purpose. With this in position, it's a question of jig-sawing backrest cushions into a mattress.

If you have something like an extra duvet or double sleeping bag to soften the piping edges of the cushions, it's comfortable. Again, an overlay would help.

The lounge is higher than the rest of the 'van, and there are windows on three sides. If they're open, there's a chance of a pillow falling out, but let's face it, you don't often need all the windows open in Britain. This bed is great for watching wildlife at night from as you can see what's rustling outside. I liked sleeping in the lounge but it's so much easier to pull down the overcab bed and just hop in.

THE LAMB INN, NOMANSLAND

Situated in an enviable position overlooking the village green, The Lamb Inn sits astride a county border. They say it's possible to sit in Wiltshire and watch a cricket match in Hampshire.

Closing times used to vary according to county and locals, not slow to take advantage, simply moved from one part of the pub to another and carried on supping!

There is a short but enjoyable walk here (of about 2.5 miles) through Bramshaw Wood. After the walk, some good ale and the generous meal portions at the Lamb helped prepare us for the exercise of the next day.

Loads of parking can be found at the pub and we parked in the gravelled area opposite. A herd of cows lay nearby, chewing the cud and looking positively bucolic.

THE ROYAL OAK, FRITHAM

I saved the best for last. The Royal Oak at Fritham could be my best pub ever. One of the few original pubs to be found in the Forest, it became at once my favourite. It's situated at the end of a lane in a remote part of the Forest. Nevertheless, the road was wide enough not to give us any worries about damage to the Mirage's sides or roof.

Ringwood Best was one of the real ales on offer. Best it was called, and it certainly was. The pub is ancient but the toilets are modern, which is, I'm pleased to say, the right way round! Picture postcard pretty, part thatched, and heated in winter by an open fire, it's everyone's idea of just what an English pub should be.

An extensive garden, with lots of picnic benches, makes sure that no one has to drive away disappointed; you could always sit on the grass. But the interior is worth a look for its simple charm. While we sat enjoying a ploughman's, we heard a clatter of hoofs, and eight or nine ponies and traps passed the door. They so went with the atmosphere of the place. The landlady, Eileen Taylor, said that they were part of a local driving club.

As it's a small place, the pub only serves food during the day. All the meals are cold platters, but locally home-cooked pies are available and even the cheese is made nearby. There's an enthusiastic team of switched-on



The compact washroom offered a good shower and only the stubborn shower screen annoyed.



ABOVE FROM THE TOP: *The Royal Oak, Fritham, is one of the few original pubs to be found in the New Forest.*

The simple charm of the interior of The Royal Oak at Fritham is a must for pub aficionados.

Eileen Taylor, of The Royal Oak, delivering a pint of Ringwood Best for us to share, which, we agreed, was absolutely luscious.

young people serving and 'prepping' (as they say in Ramsey's kitchen) the various salads and ploughmans (ploughmen?). It was fabulous to be made to feel so welcome.

Once again there's plenty of open land with animals roaming free in the woods and commons nearby. They were mostly good-looking New Forest ponies and foals at foot. So sweet, but so skittish, and nerve-racking if you're driving. We had no problem parking the Mirage and there's a great choice of bike rides and walks from Fritham. If it's a hot day you can simply find a shady spot nearby to park under the trees and chill out.

TAKING A SHOWER

After a hot day's walking in the Forest, the onboard shower beckoned. The washroom is compact with a corner basin and swivel toilet, plus a curved, acrylic shower screen. Light is provided by an opaque opening window and two spotlights.

Adequate high and low storage space in the washroom is provided by curved wood cupboards. Walking is a mucky business, which makes you appreciate a proper shower. The adjustable showerhead could be set low enough to avoid wetting my hair, but I struggled to get the curved door to slide along its track. With use, it might become easier.

Aside from this, showering was good, with lots of places for soap, shampoo and reasonable space inside. I used it in preference to the site's facilities.

Our second campsite was the Rookesbury Park Caravan Club Site, north of Fareham. We saw and heard the extraordinary nightjar on our first late evening walk from this site. Photography of this rare bird was impossible, so Pete contented himself with chasing arachnids (or spiders to you and me). His macro lens exaggerated their fearsomeness: argh!

STORAGE, INSULATION AND EQUIPMENT

One thing was apparent when looking over the New Life 6000U; Mirage expects you to take it somewhere cold. The quilted caravan door has no window and is thicker than usual. Doors in A-class 'vans are often downright flimsy, but here, this is certainly not the case.

The fresh water tank is inboard, under the dinette, while the waste water tank is external, but heated and insulated. The offside external

storage, also accessible from inside, has a heating duct running through it.

Two further metal external underskirt lockers, on the nearside, were tricky to access as the lifting skirts had no gas struts, or in fact any means of restraint. You'll have to use your head - literally - to prop them up while unlocking the metal locker doors beneath. I'm thinking snow chains, wedges, hoses and electric cable in here, but please, Mirage, can we have some supports?

Internal storage is more than adequate for two and sufficient for four. The lounge offers two other capacious lockers under the seats. These lockers are capable of absorbing quantities of bedding or bulky ski gear, perhaps? The Maxi chassis is augmented with an adjustable air suspension, which helps to increase its maximum authorised weight to 4000kg and this gives a healthy 740kg of payload.

On top are two roof bars. Assuming a ladder was fitted (standard on production models) this would make the perfect place for skis or surf boards. A solar panel on the roof makes a few nights wild camping more attractive. When on site, the electric operation of the (also gas-fired) water heater will save LPG. Finally, a Webasto, blown-air diesel-fired heater is fitted for space heating. This unit also saves gas and is rated for use on the move, so you won't have to freeze when travelling in winter.

NEW PHASE NEW LIFE?

The Mirage would suit quite a broad spectrum of buyers. Perhaps a couple looking for civilised travelling with the minimum of faffing about. A small family would appreciate its separate sleeping accommodation. An adventurous buyer, who intended to set off for an extended tour, would value its ability to absorb copious amounts of kit and stores.

It's a lot of money, but if you want more room than in the average camper, for whatever reason, then this A-class gives you that. The Mirage also isn't large, as A-classes go; it's only 6.80m (22ft 4in), and no wider than many coachbuilts. This meant that, with a little discretion, minor roads were not a problem for us.

It doesn't feel as spacious inside as some A-class 'vans as it's split in two somewhat by the central washroom and fridge/freezer unit. Of course, this can have advantages - two separate living areas can be good for families or folks doing different activities.

The Lamb Inn sits astride the county border.



MOTORHOME KINDLY LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:
 Marquis Berkshire, Oxford Road,
 Chieveley, Nr Newbury, Berkshire
 RG20 8RU (tel: 01635 248888;
 web site www.marquismotorhomes.co.uk)

SPECIFICATION

- **Price as tested:** £64,995 (OTR)
- **Description:** 4-berth A-class with swivel cab seats ahead of nearside half-dinette and washroom. Offside kitchen and caravan door. Wardrobes on either side, ahead of rear-located U-shaped lounge
- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato 18 Maxi chassis cowl with 2.8-litre JTD turbo-diesel engine producing 127bhp. Five-speed manual gearbox, supplementary air suspension
- **Warranty:** Base vehicle and conversion three years, water ingress five years
- **Dimensions and weights:** Length: 6.80m (22ft 3.5in), width: 2.25m (7ft 4.5in), height: 2.85m (9ft 4in). Max authorised weight: 4000kg. (Note: Check your licence before contemplating the purchase of a motorhome with a GVW over 3500kg)
- **Payload:** 753kg (including weight of driver, full fuel, full fresh water, one gas cylinder)
- **Belted seats:** Four (including driver)
- **Beds:** Rear lounge double: 2.10m x 1.40m (6ft 10.5in x 4ft 7in),

- **A-class pull-down double:** 1.85m x 1.25m (6ft 1in x 4ft 1in), max headroom 850mm (2ft 9.5in)
- **Kitchen:** Smev three-burner spark ignition hob, bow-fronted unit with square stainless steel bowl and long-spout mixer tap, drawer and cupboards below and lockers above. High-level Smev oven-grill above Dometic 140-litre RM7655L fridge-freezer to the rear of caravan door
- **Washroom:** Thetford cassette toilet with swivel bowl, corner washbasin, curved acrylic panel slides to screen the shower
- **Heating:** Truma Ultrastore gas/mains water heater, Webasto Air Top 3500 diesel-fired, blown-air space heater
- **Gas:** Two 6/7kg cylinders
- **Tanks:** Fresh water 100 litres (22 gallons) inboard, waste water 133 litres (29 gallons) underslung (insulated and heated)
- **Optional extras fitted to test vehicle:** None
- **Other options available:** Bike rack (£275), roll-out awning (£495), reversing camera (£499)



Skirt lockers offered storage and a home for the leisure battery, but the lack of any support struts for the doors made getting at it all a pain.

I now agree with Pete, the Mirage is well suited to long-distance touring, whatever the weather. Maybe next time it will be Italy! □

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