



ITALIAN STALLION

Mobilvetta Top Driver P81/U on LWB Fiat Ducato 3.0-litre 160 Multijet Power

Fiat's latest and greatest motor makes for an all-Italian low profile with horsepower aplenty





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Almost £43,000 seems a lot of money to pay for nearly 23 feet (6.97m) of rear lounge, four-berth, low profile. But wait a moment; the Top Driver is married to the all-new potentially fabulous Fiat Ducato - this one with a kick like a mule. This new 160 Multijet chassis cab with a magnificent three-litre engine, six gears and much improved suspension, will encourage you to drive like a boy racer. The suspension is amazing. We really noticed the improved ride on the substandard roads that lead to all the pretty places we used as locations.

Mobilvetta's other well-known range, the Kimu, is of GRP monocoque construction and is based on the Renault. Top Drivers use more traditional sandwich construction techniques and employ the Fiat Ducato base vehicle. Mobilvettas are built in Tuscany alongside another SeA brand, Miller.

Other models in the Top Driver range include a fixed rear bed and another equipped with bunks. The U-shaped rear lounge option of the P81/U (the other model P81 features a garage in the rear), with dinette converting to a second double, has added flexibility. It's possible to leave the rear double bed made up if you spend most of your time sitting outside. If the weather's bad or you want to entertain friends, simply shove it away and spread out in the rear lounge.

On the offside, in the front of the living area, is the kitchen. The dinette is opposite, with the washroom set behind facing the fridge and wardrobe. This does rather cut the 'van in two. However, if the Mobi' is used as a family motorhome, this may be a distinct advantage. Send the teenagers to the dinette where they can view the drop-down-from-ceiling TV and you can keep the lounge as a space for grown-ups.

Like many Continental 'vans, the Mobi' has an offside caravan door which is a safety issue if it's to be a family 'van. Two three-point seat belts in the dinette, and two lap straps for the rearward facing seats, go some way to making up for this. A lot of 'vans have more berths than seatbelts; this one goes the other way.

THE RIGHT WHALE?

There's no escaping that it's a bigish white box, although the low profile overcab ensures that it is no humpback whale look-alike. There are three long grey dashes over, to add some verve, and grey skirts to break up conformity. The radical appearance of the new cab keeps the vehicle ahead of the herd or pod, in whale-speak.

The aggressive jutting chin gives the impression that the new Fiat means business. It looks as if it can't wait to get off and knows that an enthusiastic driver will appreciate the chance to show other base vehicles a clean pair of heels.

The three-piece front bumper is a sensible idea, allowing a damaged section (instead of the whole thing) to be replaced when an obstacle 'throws' itself in front of you. Front light assemblies are another bit of kit that costs a Queen's ransom to replace and these are positioned much higher and - it's to be hoped - out of harm's way. Details like these all contribute to the practicality of the new Fiat Ducato.

My one beef about the changes is that the generously sized external mirrors (which feature built-in indicators and radio aerial) are going to be expensive to replace. When you live in an area where a lot of your motoring is in narrow lanes, wing mirrors are your most vulnerable automotive appendage. I speak from bitter experience...

Due to the demands of the living area's interior layout, the three windows on the offside are three different sizes. It would look more



AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £40,995 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Fiat Ducato X250
- **LAYOUT:** Offside kitchen ahead of caravan door and fridge-freezer. Nearside Pullman dinette ahead of wardrobe and washroom. Rear U-shaped lounge
- **ECONOMY:** 30 mpg overall

'designed' (well prettier anyway) if the lounge and dinette windows were of the same size, with the central washroom window being the odd one out.

At the rear, external locker doors both sides (held open by a neat clip) give access to metal chequer-plate-lined storage. While not a garage there is, nevertheless, plenty of room for holiday comforts in this space and it has a pivoted light for loading/unloading in the dark.

A glance under the 'van solved the puzzle of where the Webasto diesel-fired space heater was fitted. Usually it's a question of starting it and following the familiar whine to source. When we tested the Mobi' it was brass-monkey weather, so the heater refusing to start was a little inconvenient. 'Understatement,' said Pete. The pipes emanating from the heater looked decidedly close to the ground - something to be aware of when manoeuvring on bumpy ground.

FIAT'S TOP DRIVER

Something struck me, and it wasn't a harpoon, when I first slid into the driving seat of the Mobi'. I was finally about to drive the new Ducato, something I've been dreaming about ever since I heard the first glowing reports. I was to be testing the three-litre, six-speed, 160 Multijet, no less. Wow! Thank you, thank you boss.



I LIKED

- Never mind liked, I loved the base vehicle
- Possibility of leaving the lounge bed made up
- Cooker hood
- Rear, under-lounge storage area

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Carpet in the rear lounge
- A draining area for the washing up
- More kitchen worktop
- A cover (chopping board?) for the sink
- A more 'Italian-style' interior design
- Larger leisure battery capacity
- More 230V sockets

I DISLIKED

- The 'sky-level' oven/grill
- The seven-cushion jigsaw necessary to make the dinette bed
- Unwieldy and heavy table in lounge
- Vulnerable and exposed external pipework leading from the Webasto diesel heater

Surely I was bound to be disappointed? But 'nah', I quickly found out that all the glowing accounts were true. Weapons-grade quality driving I'd call it. Wheee... Fiat's test drivers must have had silly grins on their faces when they first took the new Fiat for a run on the test track. They knew they had a winner on their hands, no doubt. Light, precise controls, better-spaced pedals and 157bhp of smooth, torquey motor made for a very impressive drive - I want one!

When first I settled into the driver's seat the height adjustment needed someone with more weight than me to lower its position. This is typical, and improved with use. The steering wheel can be adjusted to accomplish a remarkably car-like driving position, but I found that the offside armrest blocked easy access to both the handbrake and seat adjustment, though I soon found ways to accommodate this.

Driver and passenger seat heights proved excellent and I didn't need a box to put my feet on (unlike in the old Ducato) when in the passenger seat. Sun visors were actually useful when driving, although in this conversion there were no (seat-raising) swivels fitted.

On the model we tested (which had cab air-conditioning fitted) the heating and ventilation controls were well thought out. Only two controls are fitted, each with an outer ring and a knob in the centre. There's no confusing these controls. The outer ring adjusts temperature, the inner the fan. On the other control, ventilation position is on the outer ring, and recirculation is controlled by the knob. The air-conditioning control is a push button between the two: simple.

While manoeuvring for the photographer, I noticed the steering suddenly tightening up. Jeez! What was going on? Then I sussed. Switching the engine off, I noticed that the cab carpet had a ridge in it and, sure enough, a

bunch of threads and some carpet had become twisted around the steering column.

When I freed it and offered it up again, it was obvious that this was an accident waiting to happen. The carpet was touching the column and what made it worse was a short metal lug on the column, which was bound to snag the carpet. I removed the offending carpet to the rear storage locker.

A 'PORPOISEFUL' LOUNGE

The muted light grey/blue patterned upholstery with blue carpet and cherry wood-coloured Tecnoform-made cabinets, with silver trim, won't offend. However, with such a remarkable new base vehicle towing it, one could have wished for braver interior design. Orangey gold faux curtains with ivory crinkle nets do cosy it up a bit though.

In the U-shaped rear lounge you can choose from three ceiling lights or a couple of spots under each overhead locker. Comfortable feet-up lounging for two is possible, as there's plenty of settee length. But some scatter cushions would be great for a lengthy reading session.

Strangely, no carpet was provided in this relaxing area. I wonder if this omission was something that had been neglected in the rush to provide a right-hand-drive demonstration 'van. There's another important omission. Where are the 230V sockets? I could only find one for the TV, above the cab, and another above the sink for an electric kettle.

The lounge would be hugely improved if it stopped pretending to be a dining area. There is a dinette after all. Unfortunately (as it always seemed to be in the way), the heavy, solid collapsible H-framed table forms part of the double bed in the rear. It can be slid from side to side a bit, and can also be removed as it has an easily unscrewed clamp, which attaches it to the





floor. However, this big brute is no picnic table. The step-up to the lounge made its presence felt once or twice. It's only small but still capable of catching you out if you're thinking of something else when squeezing in around the table: it's that blinking table again!

Hidden behind the nearside back support cushions is a storage area with access via cubbyholes. Not a bad place to stash things, as thieves mightn't realise it was there. Its top makes a good shelf for resting glasses or even a mug of coffee if you've put the table out of the way.

Four overhead lockers afford storage, and there is interior access under the side settees to the big locker beneath the lounge. This is useful if you don't want to leave the 'van because it's

raining, though considered packing is required if this is to be useful. There's a blown-air heating vent inserted in the riser of the step into the lounge. I should think this would result in the heat wafting towards the kitchen - maybe not a good thing for an overheated cook.

WHALER'S GALLEY

The offside kitchen is workmanlike but, as with most Continental offerings, it's crying out for some additional worktop. However, you could sit and chop veg at the dinette table (it's too low to stand and work). Unfortunately, the round stainless steel sink has no cover or chopping board insert - something which would've improved the situation.

While there is no electronic ignition for the

ABOVE FAR LEFT: Upfront, the Pullman dinette is flanked by the main kitchen unit. The cab seats play no part in the living area. The flat screen TV drops down from the central roof pod.

ABOVE: To the rear, the fridge (with oven above) sits on the offside, while opposite is the washroom. Across the rear is a versatile U-shaped lounge.

BELOW FAR LEFT: Plenty of room for your holiday requirements in the rear storage area. It has a light and can be accessed from both sides and from the interior.

BELOW LEFT: The driving position is remarkably car-like. I found all the controls easy to use, particularly the heating and ventilation dials.

BELOW: The rear lounge is flexible. It can be left made up as a double bed if you're spending most of your time relaxing outdoors.





BELOW LEFT: The main kitchen unit lacks worktop or a sink cover, but there's a good-sized cutlery drawer and an efficient extractor hood.

BELOW MIDDLE: An invaluable flyscreen door is fitted. The typically Continental fridge-freezer/high-level oven stack proved far less practical.

BELOW RIGHT: The ambience of the washroom is good and it has a comprehensive list of kit, but there was little room to sit on the loo.

three-burner hob, an extractor hood (equipped with two lights) strongly illuminates from above. The lights ensure you can see the sauce you're stirring and the extractor fan keeps down the steam and odours. These can hang around all evening when the weather is too rough to open doors and windows.

What looks like a large double cupboard, beneath the hob, isn't quite what it seems. The gas locker invades the space within, which

means there is only shallow storage available. They've made the best of this by fitting a row of generous bottle sockets on the lower shelf. Under the sink is a useful cutlery drawer with a deep cupboard beneath.

On the other side of the caravan door (which has a fitted flyscreen) is the fridge-freezer, oven/grill stack, so beloved of Continental motorhomes. This European answer to those problematic Brits' requirement for an oven puts





FEEDING HUNGRY WHALERS

Seating in the dinette would be a little snug should the diners have ample posteriors. This situation can be remedied by removing the two shaped cushions located against the side of the 'van. Alternatively, the table and settees can be extended (utilising the two shaped cushions to infill), but this doesn't leave much of a gap to squeeze past the table.

A Heki rooflight provides natural illumination and four ceiling-mounted halogens, plus two under the overhead lockers, provide for dark evenings. To keep your tootsies warm there is a heating vent under the table.

There's no storage under the rearward-facing seat (which is equipped with lap-only seatbelts), as this is where the inboard freshwater tank is located. There is, however, space for bedding under the fully belted forward-facing seat.

WASHING OFF THE SALT

The ambience of the washroom is good. It feels spacious, with a colour palette of creams, coffee, wood, silver and chrome. There is a generous separate shower with a pair of bi-fold doors. These need careful positioning when showering if you want to avoid a damp floor. There's a lot of kit in here, all adding up to make a well-appointed washroom.

Plenty of good storage space for beautifying preparations, towel rail, soap holders, mirrors, heating vent, lights in washroom and shower, opaque window giving good natural light and even a loo-brush and holder.

One fly in the ointment is the space around the swivel-bowl toilet; there isn't enough of it. When we showed some friends around the 'van, almost the first thing they noticed was the squeeze necessary to fit onto the throne. Even petite little me found that it was tight.

Beneath the basin is a curved cupboard with a silver tambour door; this assembly is positioned between the shower and loo. It was suggested that if this were swapped with the loo there'd be more room to manoeuvre.



ABOVE: Like a DIY handyman's bench, the lounge table folds down to form part of the bed base.

FAR LEFT: The dinette is equipped with two three-point seatbelts on the forward-facing seats and two lap-only belts for the rearward-facers.

RIGHT: The foot of the lounge bed narrows slightly. Here there are some useful storage pockets with shelf above.

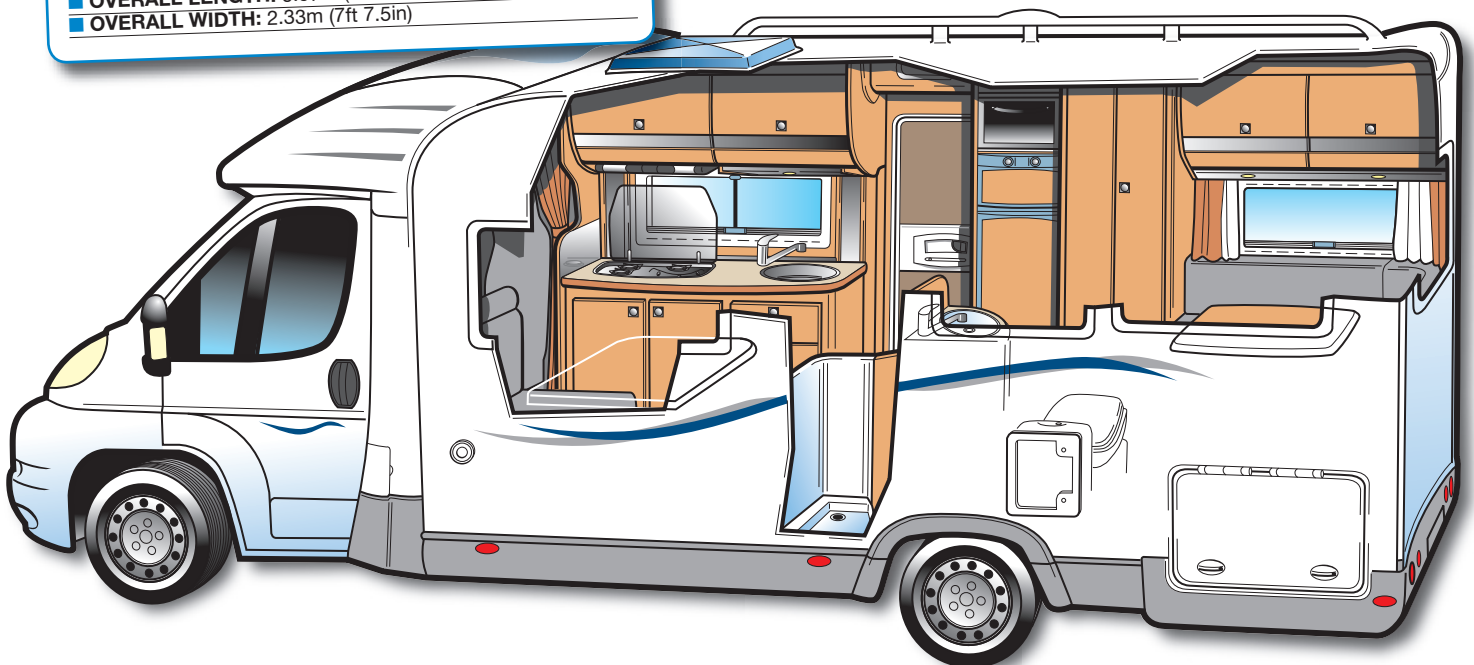
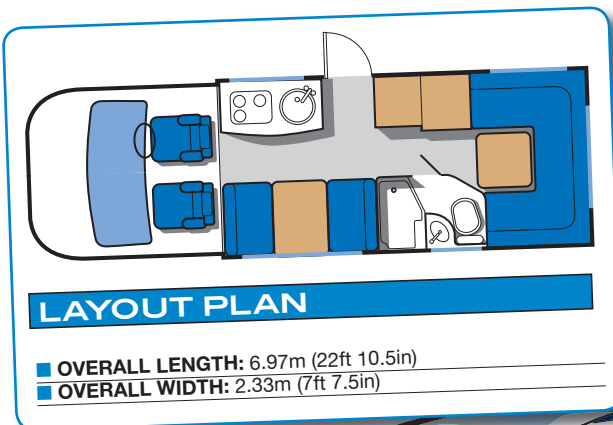
it way out of my reach as usual (the oven, that is). I'm one of those Brits, as I use an oven while travelling/holidaying, and here I would have to find a way of getting around this. 'Try putting manure in your boots,' was Pete's helpful suggestion. I think a caravan step or similar may be a better (and less anti-social) solution!

The presence of a wheelarch may be the reason this isn't possible.

INTO THE HAMMOCKS

The bed in the rear lounge of the Mobi' is the more comfortable, while making it is pretty easy. Ensuring the tabletop is centralised, you pull gently on a lever and the table folds down to the bed base level. The tabletop doesn't sit on ledges, it is self-supporting. Next, remove the corner cushions to the cab, and use the back support cushions to infill over the table. The resulting bed is of a good height and size with a comfortable mattress.

If you prefer a private space there is a curtain, which isolates the rear. I found this bed reasonably comfortable, but a little hard. I find this is the case with most motorcaravan beds and maybe why the sales of memory foam overlays are booming. This berth is also a little





narrower at one end where the aforementioned cubbyholes and shelf are very useful at night.

CABIN NUMBER TWO

The dinette converts into a short double, also by utilising its table. In order to make up the bed, remove the table extension stowed beneath and lift the table to unclip it from its wall-mounting rail. Fold its hinged leg and allow the table to rest on a lip on each seat box. Now extend the table by slackening a pair of knobs, extend it out and insert the additional table extension. Next, pull out the two seat base extensions and flip two hinged infill panels over.

Now the fun begins. There are seven cushions to find homes for. Think of it as a seven-piece

jigsaw, but maybe there is more than one solution. Anyway, be assured that there is a way of making a double bed from the cushions. To do this you must also utilise an additional cushion and this lives stashed away in the wardrobe.

HOLDS AND KIT BAG

The lounge has four overhead lockers and access to the rear storage area. The dinette has three overhead lockers and storage under the forward-facing seat, which is only marginally compromised by the seatbelt anchorage and heater ducting. Two speakers are fitted in the kitchen/dining area, so you can listen to the radio while prepping the pasta.

The big wardrobe has two doors, for easier access, a hanging rail and a light. The 230V consumer unit lives here and also the control for the Truma water heater. A shelf lines the cab ceiling, but this is only safe to use on-site as there is no restraining lip fitted. In the centre of this shelf is a locker assembly with a tambour door, which houses a drop-down TV. The forward-facing dinette seat is the only place to comfortably view the screen and I can see trouble brewing for families that like their soaps. Only one 55 amp hr leisure battery is fitted under the driver's seat and this means that mains hook-up will be essential if the television, heating and lights get a lot of use.

The control panel and Webasto diesel-fired space heater switch are positioned above the inside of the caravan door, well out of the reach of children. Unfortunately it was out of my reach too; well almost, I could just about reach it on tiptoe.

The metal chequer-plate-lined rear storage is excellent, though cycles would have to be of the folding variety to fit in.

CONCLUSION

The washroom would be great if it weren't for the narrow toilet space. If I think it's a squeeze, other larger folk will think it unsuitable altogether. Motorhomes are always a series of compromises and I can see the manufacturer's difficulty with the wheelarch issue, which

ABOVE LEFT: The dinette table stows its extension underneath. This is also used when making up the bed.

ABOVE RIGHT: Seven cushions have to be jigsaw-ed together to make up the rather short dinette bed.

BELOW LEFT: A large wardrobe with double doors is aired by the Truma water heater, located in the cupboard beneath.

dictates the design. However, it's a shame that this one fault detracts from what is otherwise a good washroom.

The low profile configuration and efficient new Fiat engine should give owners good fuel economy, while the performance is mind-blowing.

I think that some families might miss the overcab storage space that's often available in coachbuilts, but if this Mobilvetta is used by a couple, who take occasional holidays with their grandchildren, it begins to make good sense. I would happily forgo the fixed TV and get back to easy access bedding storage with an overcab locker. The valuable facility of leaving the bed made up in the lounge is a very attractive notion, especially when touring in summer. The Mobilvetta is an ideal vehicle for a couple who love driving, and who are blessed with grandchildren.

Pete, however, thought that it was a budget 'van with delusions of grandeur. It's a good job he just takes the photos! □



WE STAYED AT

On friends' private land, while touring in Devon

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Marquis Motorhomes, Lee Mill, Ivybridge, Plymouth, Devon PL21 9EE
(tel: 01752 892977; national freephone sales: 08000 2607777; web site: www.marquismotorhomes.co.uk)

MMM LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

- Low profile

PRICE

- From: £40,995 OTR
- As tested: £42,995 OTR

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Fiat Ducato X250 LWB Camper chassis cab
- **Berths:** 4
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (including driver), (2 lap-only belts on rearward-facing dinette seat)
- **Warranty:** 2 years base vehicle and conversion

CONSTRUCTION

Sandwich construction GRP-skinned coachbuilt body with plastic wheelarches, skirts and corner trims. Caravan entrance on the (UK) mid-offside

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 6.97m (22ft 10.5in)*
- **Width:** 2.33m (7ft 7.5in)* (mirrors folded)
- **Height:** 2.75m (9ft 0.5in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 4.03m (13ft 2.5in)*
- **Rear overhang:** 2.00m (6ft 6.5in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3500kg*
- **Payload:** 521kg*

INSIDE STORY

Offside kitchen ahead of caravan door, fridge/freezer and wardrobe. Nearside Pullman dinette ahead of washroom. Rear U-shaped lounge

- **Insulation:** Roof 32mm, floor 70mm, walls 32mm,
- **Interior height:** 2.00m (6ft 6.5in)

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 3.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 115.5kW (157bhp) @ 3500rpm Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 30 mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all round

- **Suspension:** Front: Independent with anti-roll bar. Rear: Rigid axle with leaf-springs and anti-roll bar

- **Features:** ABS (prevents wheel locking under braking), ASR (anti-slip regulation traction control), EBD (distributes appropriate braking force over front and rear axles), variable servo power steering, reach-adjustable steering wheel, electric mirrors and windows, two armrests on both cab seats, adjustable height on driving seat, driver and passenger airbags, radio/CD/MP3 player, headlamp height adjustment, driver and passenger door bins, height-adjustable top seatbelt mounts

LOUNGING & DINING

Dinette for up to six. Benches extend to seat three on each side, extendable table slides fore-and-aft on wall-mounted rail. Rear U-shaped lounge has adjustable (and removable) H-leg table

KITCHEN

Offside location with cutlery drawer, two-door and single door cupboards below, two unshelved lockers above. Fridge with oven mounted above in separate unit to rear of caravan door

- **Sink:** Stainless steel round bowl with long-spouted mixer tap. No drainer
- **Cooker:** Cramer three-burner hob, manual ignition, extractor hood over. Separate Smev oven/grill unit
- **Fridge:** Dometic RM7655L three-way fridge-freezer. Capacity 150 litres

WASHROOM

Thetford electric-flush cassette toilet with swivelling bowl, corner basin and mixer tap. Mirrored cabinet above window, large cupboard with tambour door under basin. Wind-up roof vent. Separate shower, enclosed with two bi-fold doors, chromed mixer tap, spray-head and riser rail

BEDS

- **Dinette double**
- **Length:** 1.75m (5ft 9in)
- **Width:** 1.27m (4ft 2in)
- **Rear lounge double**
- **Length:** 2.07m (6ft 9.5in)
- **Width:** 1.40m (4ft 7in) max

STORAGE

Overhead lockers: three above dinette, four above lounge. Two-door wardrobe, bedding storage under dinette seat, large under-lounge through-locker with internal and external access to both sides

LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Inboard. Capacity 120 litres (26 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung, Insulated. Capacity 110 litres (24 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Truma Ultrastore boiler, gas-only operation
- **Space heater:** Webasto Airtop 3500 diesel-fired, blown-air
- **Leisure battery:** 55 amp hr
- **Gas:** Capacity 2 x 11kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Halogen spots throughout. Rear lounge: Three in ceiling, four under overhead lockers. Dinette: Four in ceiling, two under overhead lockers. Kitchen: One over sink, two under extractor hood. Caravan door: One adjacent. Washroom: three in ceiling. Auto-illumination in wardrobe, pivoted light in external locker, awning light
- **Sockets:** 230V: two (in TV locker, above kitchen sink), 12V: one (in TV locker)
- **Control panel:** Mounted above caravan door, liquid crystal display, monitors/operates all caravan functions
- **Blinds/curtains:** Cassette blinds and flyscreens to all caravan windows, privacy curtain to rear lounge/bedroom, curtains to cab, external insulated cab window screens, nets to dinette and lounge, flyscreen to caravan door
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- **Fitted to test vehicle**
- **Base vehicle:** 160 Multijet 3-litre engine (£2000)
- **Conversion:** None
- **Other options**
- **Base:** None
- **Conversion:** None

E&OE

