



STATE OF THE ARTO

Niesmann + Bischoff Arto 74R on 3.0-litre Fiat Ducato

MMM's most venerable road tester was working in Germany when the original Arto was launched more than a decade ago. Now he assesses the very latest model



It used to be one of my favourite trick quiz questions to set at club rallies: spell Niesmann + Bischoff. Even if contestants managed to negotiate this spelling minefield, most erroneously used & as the conjunction and not +.

Travelworld RV has recently become the official UK importer and main agent for N+B. The brand has been so professionally marketed by Ross Edwards and his team, that far more folk are now aware of the correct spelling. Shame! I must now think of something else devious to ask quizzers. A potted history of this prestigious German motorhome manufacturer follows...

It all started back in 1955 when camping

car enthusiasts Elfriede and Hugo Niesmann started selling motorcaravans. Within five years their business had expanded considerably and they retailed many leading makes. After several changes of location, the ever-growing business moved to Koblenz and by 1980 was employing a team of coachbuilders to repair and modify customers' motorcaravans. 1981 saw the launch of the first motorcaravan built in-house. The Clou 570E was not, as one might have thought, an A-class, but an overcab coachbuilt - a GRP monocoque on Volkswagen's LT. The principals quickly realised that there was a real demand for a high quality product and expanded into A-class production - launching the Clou Liner just two years later. Although

subject to a majority share buyout by Hymer in 1996, N+B's design department and production facility has remained reassuringly independent.

The Arto was first unveiled in 1998 and achieved immediate success as an entry-level A-class built to similar standards as its much more expensive stablemates. Incremental changes over the years saw the Arto lose the elegant minimalism so beloved by aesthetes - principally because it evolved into a more traditionally trimmed Liner-Class 'van'. The latest 2011 models propel the range even further upmarket by including many specification upgrades and a styling makeover. The manufacturer now calls it 'The Luxury Class.' Let's see whether the reality lives up to the hype.



Words and pictures by Jonathan Lloyd



AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £78,352 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **LAYOUT:** Drop-down transverse double bed in cab, swivelling cab seats ahead of lounge, kitchen split either side of central aisle, nearside shower room/toilet, washbasin opposite, permanent high-level transverse double bed over garage in rear
- **ECONOMY:** 23.5mpg



- 1 The interior is light and airy
- 2 The front lounge gives way to a centre kitchen with ablutions and transverse double bed in the rear
- 3 The test 'van's cab included optional 157bhp engine and sophisticated electronics. Electrically operated front blackout screen also makes a super sunshade

GRAND TOUR

From the outside, the most obvious changes from the original concept result from an attempt to soften the body's boxiness: this has been achieved by reducing the height and increasing the rake of the windscreen, adding a more curvaceous front, and 'stacking' light clusters. Coach-style mirrors are a signature feature of the Liner-Class, as well as increasing safety. Gone are the old coloured skirts and clumsy-looking awning mounting. All the body is now finished in glacial white and the cant rail is designed to accept the latest awning profile.



Entry and egress has to be through the single door, which is located on the UK offside. There are no cab doors, nor will there be in the foreseeable future. The advantages of such an arrangement include far better insulation in the cab, increased security and ease of build. Further, not having any large door apertures at the pointy end adds rigidity to the Arto's already-strong body.

An electrically-operated double step attempts to ameliorate the lofty climb aboard (which results from the inclusion of a double floor). Turn right for the forward lounge or left to enter the galley - the majority of which is on the UK nearside, but also includes a TEC Tower fridge/oven unit on the offside. The galley is just ahead of the comfort station, while a permanent high-level transverse double bed is located at the far rear and above a garage.

DRIVING

So as not to appear gender discriminatory, I won't say I felt like the king of the road. Instead, I'll go for the PC-approved, monarch of the highway. Not sure exactly why this vibe is universally felt by A-class pilots, though reflection suggests that such feelings are generated by a combination of the remote placement of the massive windscreen and the

vast amount of fresh air between the pilot and the adjacent cab side wall.

That said, the feel of the controls and the driving experience (help, now I sound like a focus group) was pure Ducato, with just two notable exceptions: an Al-Ko rear chassis (with independent torsion-bar suspension) endowed the Arto with a ride and handling so good that almost everything else felt inferior - even my much-loved Dagenham Dustbin. Also, the good view out wasn't just limited to the panoramic cab widows - a twin-lens reversing camera and coach-style mirrors covered just about every angle to the rear.

Fiat's flagship 3.0-litre (157bhp) motor powered the demo's considerable bulk around with ease, whether pootling down country roads or blasting along motorways, where eerily quiet high-speed cruising may endanger one's licence - a beady eye must be kept on the speedometer. Standard motive power is the 130bhp unit and before you ask, the answer is yes - the standard power unit should be more than adequate, though I'd advise against buying one so equipped. Why? Two reasons really: one, if you want auto transmission (a very good idea) it's only available with the 3.0-litre; and two the 'van'll probably be easier to resell come changeover time.

I find the handbrake (or, more correctly, the hand-operated parking brake) on Al-Ko-extended Ducatos requires a far heftier pull than on standard models. It's not that the hold-steady braking performance is poor, but that an unreasonable amount of effort has to be put into applying it. I actually put this one on so hard to stop it rolling back on a fairly modest incline, that I had to use two hands to release it - and all this despite the recent consumption of a Yorkie bar!

Taking frequently voiced claims of 40mpg for the 3.0-litre Fiat with a pinch of salt. I would respectfully suggest that my unremarkable, but measured, figure of 23.5mpg is more accurate than the computer thingy's 29mpg readout.

Spectacularly incompetent navigating by yours truly gave rise to an unscheduled bit of (judder-free) inclined reversing, though I'm not sure whether a one-in-eight gradient can be classified as a steep hill or not!

MAIN SALON

The airy triple-aspect room at the front worked well for dining, but just failed to endear itself as a lounge. Basically, this area consists of the two swivelled cab seats and two settees - an L-shaped one on the nearside and a short inward-facing one on the offside. The table extended, twiddled and went up and down on its typically Teutonic, heavy-duty central leg. Easy to adjust and sensibly sized, I found it excellent. Interestingly, the (disarmingly honest) senior staff at Travelworld said that the table is really the only bit of Arto kit that prospective and actual purchasers have frequently criticised: 'it's not British old boy' - or rather, it's not removable. To address this, Travelworld is hoping to offer a small removable table on a single leg. Actually, they were 99% sure that it will be a no-cost option, though it hadn't formally been agreed at the time of writing.

It was disappointing to note the colour variation between the faux leather fabric used on the Captain's seats and the adjacent settees. Unfortunately, a miss is as good as a mile and a completely contrasting colour might have been better. I have been assured that this fault will be corrected.

Enough of that, my real moan concerned



the settees: the L-shaped one failed to provide me with any lumbar support at all, preferring to leave a sizeable gap between the squab cushion and the backrest. The inward facing one was better, though managed to grab defeat from the jaws of victory by only having a squab cushion half the thickness of its opposite number. In the interests of fairness I should say that nearly all my visitors didn't share my opinion.

No doubting the stratospherically high comfort level of those ergonomically correct Isringhausen SKA cab seats, though. And there's more: apart from being (almost) infinitely adjustable, they also raised effortlessly from driving height to lounging height.

Paradoxically, two of the most impressive things about Arto lounging were not immediately apparent. The first was the heating. The demo model had the extra-cost Alde wet system. For the non-technical, this is a mini version of the central heating system found in most homes and uses

circulating water to heat strategically placed radiators. It was brilliant; not just because individual radiators could be turned off and on, nor because its timer could have been programmed with more variations than Enigma, but because (unlike in our own cheapo coachbuilt) there was no temperature gradient. No more frozen assets at the cab end, or oven temperatures round the bed: bliss, just bliss.

The second impressive item was the fully automatic Oyster TV/radio satellite system. Press to turn on and that's all you need to do. The roof-mounted dish did its self-seeking thing, and in less time than it took to pour another G&T, it had locked on perfectly. An evening of channel hopping awaited us. We listen to the 'wireless' (Light, Home and Third, obviously) far more than we watch the idiot's lantern, so it was great to have such a wide choice of radio stations, including those traditionally out of (terrestrial) range.

We're not finished yet, as the 19-inch flat-screen monitor resides in a cleverly illuminated entertainment module below a smoked glass door, which hides the control panel. And a range of different coloured LED mood lighting is available at the touch of a button.

ARTO OF CUISINE

There's warp-factor improvement here over the last Arto kitchen I tested. Although the so-called working triangle (the relative positioning of the stove, sink and fridge) involved traversing the central aisle, the compact galley proved logically laid-out. Fully paid-up members of the Disorganised Cooks' Club will appreciate the moulded worktop/sink combo: smart, wipe-clean and with a lip to keep spillages confined (and hopefully, prevent dribbles down the base unit), it arrives complete with a draining surface and a chopping board (with dedicated storage for travel). A vertically arranged larder slides out and enables all canned and packet goodies to be



4 The lounge/diner looks great, but proved less than perfect

5 Much improved galley is mostly on the nearside and features a slide-out larder, plus moulded worktop and sink. Drawers are all soft close

6 The oven part of the Tec Tower lost points for poor location and performance



Live-in Test report



seen at a glance. No more five-years-out-of-date tins of beans lurking at the back of a cupboard!

I think what impressed me most about the kitchen was how everything felt to the touch - in particular, the soft self-closing drawers with arthritis-friendly handles. A waste bin and adjacent turbo-fan-equipped rooflight were useful additions. In short - the galley's ambience was pure, upmarket apartment. Class.

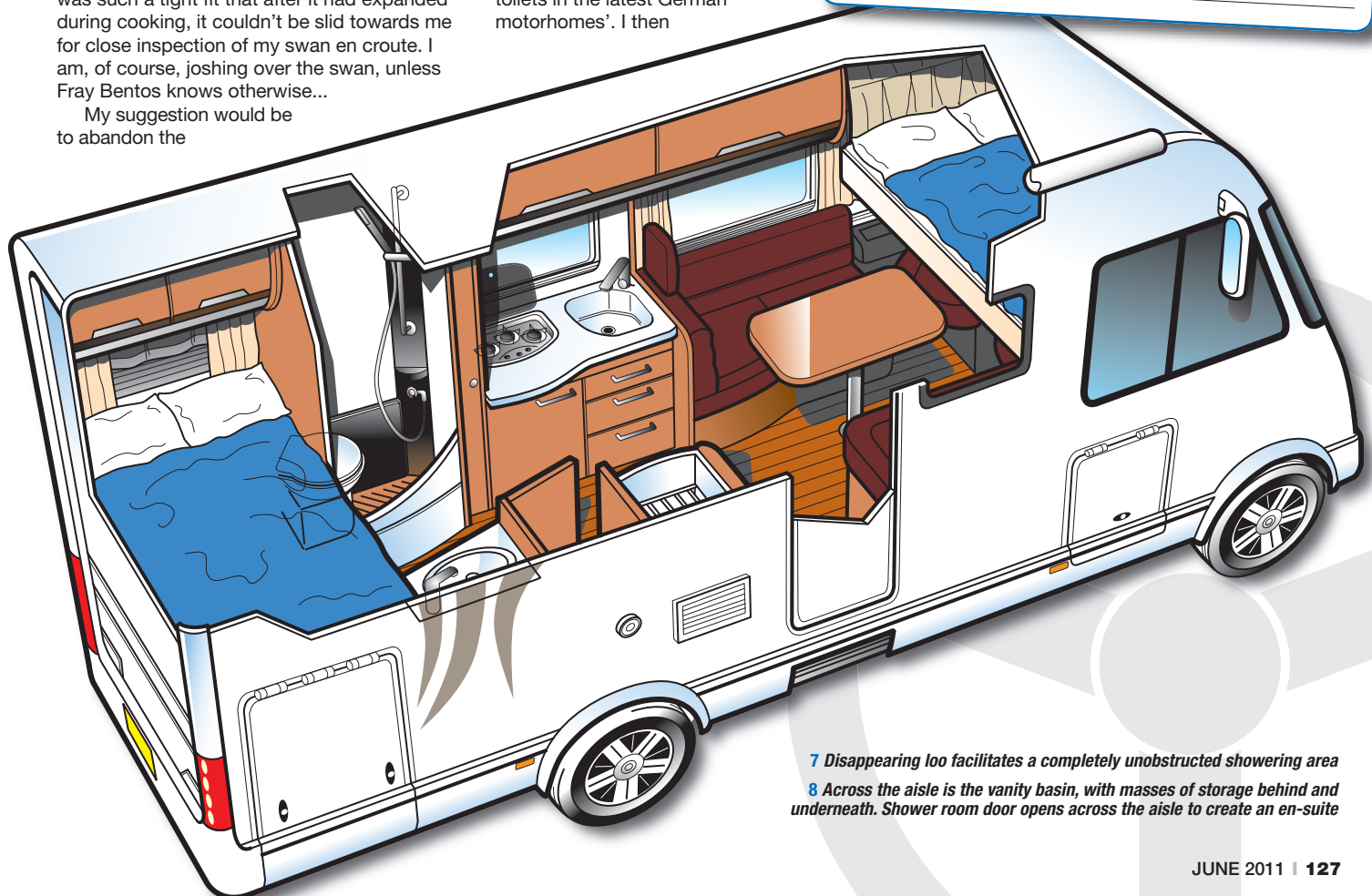
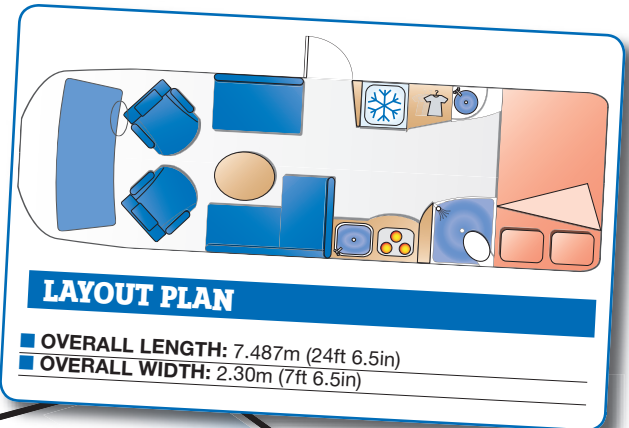
So it's all joy then? Um... No... The TEC Tower fridge/oven combo is a good stab at providing a Brit-friendly kitchen for us Bulldog Drummond-like pie-fanciers, but ultimately it falls short. The oven is too high above the floor, while the combined shelf/roasting tin was such a tight fit that after it had expanded during cooking, it couldn't be slid towards me for close inspection of my swan en croute. I am, of course, joshing over the swan, unless Fray Bentos knows otherwise...

My suggestion would be to abandon the

TEC Tower and go for a separate oven/grill, fitted in the space below the hob. I can't believe N+B hasn't thought of this, so there might be a technical reason why it isn't possible.

COMFORT STATION

It's confession time, and I beg forgiveness. When a less-experienced fellow journalist was looking at this very washroom, there was no loo visible. I couldn't resist: 'elf and safety', I solemnly averred, 'forbids the fitting of toilets in the latest German motorhomes'. I then



7 Disappearing loo facilitates a completely unobstructed showering area
8 Across the aisle is the vanity basin, with masses of storage behind and underneath. Shower room door opens across the aisle to create an en-suite

On Test Niesmann + Bischoff Arto 74R

stared meaningfully at the washbasin...and he believed me.

Actually, I did let on, eventually, explaining that the now-you-see-it, now-you-don't loo design is a great piece of lateral thinking. The swivel-bowl, electric-flush comfort station pedestal is actually pivoted so that it disappears into the garage, thus enabling the showering space to be completely unobstructed. Clever.

Luxurious, is how I'd describe showering on board. Plenty of hot water was available - though to be fair, my hair washing didn't present the boiler's capacity with much of a challenge!

The inset vanity washbasin is across the central aisle and exactly opposite the shower room. The mirror proved well enough illuminated and there's a mass of storage space for toiletries, makeup, spare loo rolls and the like. I did notice a lack of robe hooks and towel rail. It's handy having the wardrobe adjacent to the sink though.

ARTFUL SLUMBERS

Two doubles are available, both are transverse, at high-level, and both can be left made up. However, only the rear one is completely

I LIKED

- Travelworld's preparation of the vehicle
- Life expectancy
- Construction methods
- Driving environment
- Availability of ComfortMatic transmission
- Alde heating system
- Wonderfully comfortable cab seats
- 'Disappearing' loo
- Slide-out ladder

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A grill
- Tie-down cleats in garage
- Further development of lounge settees
- More power sockets
- Window at the foot of the bed, not its head

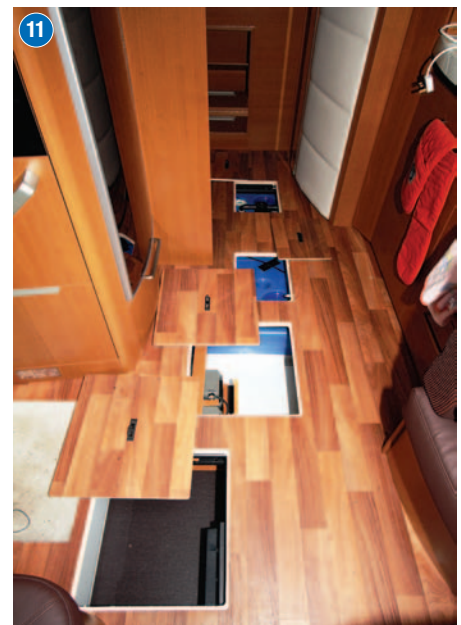
I DISLIKED

- Amount of effort required to apply the handbrake effectively
- No spare wheel (optional)



permanent and instantly available. The forward bed drops down from the cab (after the captain's seats have been swivelled and reclined) and it must have taken all of 30 seconds to deploy. Most will opt to sleep in the permanent rear, but I tried both beds and found precious little to choose between them when I was fully recumbent. Each is of a generous size and has sufficient manoeuvring headroom, though the in-cab bed was more suitable for me: I usually read in bed and couldn't sit up in the rear one without my cranium making unwelcome contact with high-level lockers immediately above the pillows. Also, I'd have put the window at the foot of the bed, where it could be left ajar for ventilation without causing a stiff neck. A proper headboard to lean against could then be included at the head end.

No questioning the sleeping comfort though. A good night's kip is assured as Travelworld specifies the Frolexus under-mattress suspension system and optimum grade of mattress foam. All this is possible, and practical, because the beds do not have to do double duty as seating areas during the day. Simple!



STORAGE

The garage will probably be a major factor in any purchase process. And very tidy it is too, with an access door on each side and plenty of room within. It sounds obvious, but many forget that one should never ever buy a garage-equipped motorhome without making sure that whatever you want to put in it will fit and actually go through the - maybe slightly smaller - garage door aperture. Don't just measure, but try loading it. In common with many, this one's gas struts and lock mechanism intrude. A sticker in the garage - sensibly - warned against overloading, but didn't actually give a load limit. This information wasn't in the technical specs either. Is it me?

The (heated) space in the double floor is home to the water tanks, plumbing, electrical cables, leisure batteries and whatever you decide to stow in the various storage areas (accessed through inspection covers in the floor). It wasn't clear how these would be accessed if the carpet had been in situ. Occasionally? With difficulty?

COMPREHENSIVE KIT

The specification, as requested by Travelworld, can properly be described as comprehensive, and this so for all UK stock models. I calculated that Travelworld's GB pack represents a substantial saving on buying these items individually. I wouldn't dream of owning an Arto not so equipped.

These facts are something to bear in mind if you are thinking of buying via personal import. Remember, as with everything in life, one wants the best value, not merely the cheapest.

BUILT TO LAST

N+B uses aluminium interior cladding, as opposed to wood or board, which makes for a far stronger structure and one that is more resistant to damage from moisture (condensation), water ingress and temperature inversions. Add to this the strength from the profiled aluminium internal and external cant rails, and what is created is an immensely strong box with no thermal breaks. It also has the ability



Live-in Test report



to stand up to very demanding strength tests even before the furniture is added. It seems that the Arto is, indeed, built to last.

NEARLY THERE

Evolutionary Arto was my considered judgement on the range. Some of the new takes on established ideas, such as the swing-away toilet worked well. Others would benefit from further development. An interesting idea that was being tried on this demo 'van was something called a flexible multi-functional comfort seat. In principal, this is a fully crash-tested, forward-facing travel seat, which folds away into the inward-facing settee squab. It's brilliantly engineered, but (sadly) not very comfortable. In travel mode the non-adjustable backrest was far too upright, and in settee mode the squab cushion was half the thickness of its neighbour. It also used a grade of foam not sufficiently resilient to prevent my

ample posterior contacting the plywood base. I would also query its *raison d'être*: why not just put an additional captain's chair there? After all, the entire underseat storage area is lost with the new arrangement anyway. That said it was still great to see some new ideas in action.

CONCLUSION

Not perfect, but a mightily impressive A-class motorhome. Not cheap, but good value for the money and a great long-term investment. Plenty of other layouts are available if this particular one isn't suitable. The Lloyd tribe's personal favourite is the Arto 74E, which has twin longitudinal single beds above the rear garage..

AND FINALLY...

My next devious quiz question? What was the full name of the company who originally produced the Clou Liner?

At the time, and amazingly, it was the 'snappily' titled, Niesmann-Bischoff-Clou-Produktionsgesellschaft mbH. Thank goodness they decided to shorten it! ■



VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Travelworld RV, Halesfield 14, Telford, Shropshire TF7 4QR (tel: 0844-8804937; web: www.motorhomes.co.uk)

WE STAYED AT

Cannock Chase Camping and Caravanning Club Site, Old Youth Hostel, Wandon, Rugeley, Staffordshire WS15 1QW (tel: 01889-582166; web: www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

9 & 10 Fold-up travel seat is an innovative feature

11 In-floor stowage space can be got at from inside

12 Drop down bed proved spacious and comfy, and could be stowed away made up

13 Rear double bed suffered from a vulnerable window and too-low lockers at its head

14 A decent-sized garage, but no indication of its maximum weight capacity



LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

A-class coachbuilt

PRICE

- From: £78,352 OTR
- As tested: £96,538 OTR

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Fiat Ducato Al-Ko low-line chassis-cowl
- **Berths:** 4
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (incl. driver)
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle and conversion

CONSTRUCTION

Sandwich construction, alloy clad on inner and outer faces with alloy box frame, double floor, GRP mouldings. Caravan door (the only entrance) on UK offside

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 7.487m (24ft 6.5in)*
- **Width:** 2.30m (7ft 6.5in)*
- **Height:** 2.95m (9ft 8in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 4.00m (13ft 1.5in)*
- **Rear overhang:** 2.40m (7ft 10.5in)
- **Gross vehicle weight:** 4,500kg
- **Payload:** 706kg (after deductions for weight of habitation allowance, GB pack, awning, Alde heating system, engine upgrade)

INSIDE STORY

Drop-down transverse double bed in cab, swivelling cab seats ahead of lounge, kitchen split either side of central aisle, nearside shower room/toilet, washbasin opposite, permanent high-level transverse double bed over garage in rear

- **Insulation:** 30mm all round, double-floor cavity provides heated air gap, plywood sub-floor
- **Interior height:** 1.98m (6ft 6in) max

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 3.0-litre turbo-diesel, producing 115.5kW (157bhp) @ 3,500rpm
- **Transmission:** Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 23.5mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all round
- **Suspension:** Front: independent on coil springs. Rear: independent on torsion bar
- **Features:** ABS, driver's airbag, trip computer, captain's seats, headlamp height adjustment, electrically-adjusted (heated) coach-style exterior mirrors, dash trim, cab

ARTO NIESMANN+BISCHOFF

air-conditioning, cruise control, radio/DVD/CD player/navigation system, rear view cameras

LOUNGING AND DINING

L-shaped sofa and inward-facing side seat, fully-adjustable permanently-mounted extendable table with room for five to dine

KITCHEN

Main unit on nearside with two overhead lockers, three drawers, slide-out larder, TEC Tower fridge/oven unit opposite, extractor fan mounted in rooflight.

- **Sink:** GRP one-piece surface containing asymmetrical bowl, cover/chopping board, draining surface, hob. Chromed mixer tap
- **Cooker:** Smev stainless steel electronic-ignition three-burner hob. Oven at high level as part of TEC Tower unit. No grill.
- **Fridge:** As part of TEC Tower unit, three-way fridge-freezer with automatic energy selection (AES). Capacity 160 litres

WASHROOM

Shower includes moulded lining, duckboard floor, rigid folding screen and pivoting hinge-away electric-flush cassette toilet with swivelling bowl and wheeled holding tank. Vanity basin, with mirrored cupboard above and storage below, across the aisle. All becomes en-suite to rear bed as door closes across central aisle

BEDS

- **Drop-down double**
- **Length:** 1.88m (6ft 2in)
- **Width:** 1.23m (4ft 0.5in)
- **Headroom:** 740mm (2ft 5in) max
- **Rear permanent double**
- **Length:** 2.00m. (6ft 7in)
- **Width:** 1.35m (4ft 5in)
- **Headroom:** 960mm (3ft 2in) max

STORAGE

Large garage with two exterior-access doors. Six high-level lockers in rear bedroom, shoe storage and magazine locker. Wardrobe can be full or half-height, with shelf below. Various shelves

LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Inboard, capacity 150 litres (33 gallons)

NIESMANN + BISCHOFF ARTO 74R

- **Waste water:** Inboard, capacity 120 litres (26.4 gallons)
- **Space and water heater:** Alde 3010 boiler with radiators. gas-mains operation
- **Leisure battery:** 2 x 80 amp hr
- **Gas:** Capacity 2 x 11kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** All LED. Drop-down bed: twin-lens lamp. Lounge: 8 downlighters, 2 reading lamps, 2 flexi-stalk lights, over-locker mood lighting + adjustable colour display in media unit. Bedroom: indirect lighting, 2 downlighters, 2 flexi-stalk lights. Washroom: 2 downlighters over washbasin, 2 downlighters in shower cubicle. Awning light.
- **Sockets:** 230V: 2 (in kitchen, above rear bed). 12V: 1 (in kitchen)
- **Control panel:** Mounted adjacent to entrance door and behind smoked glass flap, LED display multi-function digital read-out
- **Blinds/curtains:** Cab: electrically-operated aluminium tambour front screen, pleated fabric side window blinds. Lounge: cassette pleated blind/ flyscreens throughout main area. Additional plissé privacy curtains, trimmed reveals
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base vehicle:** 157bhp engine upgrade (£1,724), as part of GB Pack - dash trim, cab air-conditioning, cruise control, wide angle electric mirrors (£6,548), as part of Multimedia Pack - radio preparation, radio/DVD/CD player/navigation system/rear view cameras (£4,300)
 - **Conversion:** As part of GB Pack - external storage drawer, flyscreen door, carpets, tie-downs in garage (£ see above), as part of Multimedia pack - TV and Satellite system (£ see above), Comfort Pack - rooflight, electric visors, cab side window blinds, TEC Tower fridge/oven, Froli bed springs, double glazed cab windows (£3,008), 5.0m awning (£890), Alde heating system upgrade (£1,716)
- Other options:
- **Base vehicle:** ComfortMatic automatic transmission with 157bhp engine (£3,005), alloy wheels (£711), tow bar (£854)
 - **Conversion:** Additional leisure battery (£154), leather upholstery (£2,076 - £2,794), 2 x 85W solar panels (£1,588)

