

# EXTRA EXCELLENCE

## Auto-Trail Excel 670B Sport on 2.2-litre Fiat Ducato

*This newest and biggest-of-the-range low profile adds more space and kit to a classic layout*



At the launch, Auto-Trail's Excel range was a quite shocking - and genuine - departure for the Lincolnshire-based company. Previously known for producing more traditional and upmarket 'vans - very possibly appealing to experienced motorhomers - Excel added a modern and stylish string to the firm's bow.

Well received by press and public alike - Excel's 'twang' probably seemed an even a sweeter sound to Auto-Trail when the recession started to bite. Now with a stylish-and-different entry-level range on offer, the company had become better placed to grab a bigger share of what is a depleted motorhome market. Indeed, Auto-Trail seems to be going from strength to strength, the launch of the new - Ford Transit-based - Tribute coachbuilt range an indicator of its intestinal fortitude and desire to be around in years to come.

Four Excel models are on offer: a classic front lounge (rear kitchen/washroom) layout is joined by a garage-equipped 'van and two lengthways fixed bed models (600B and 670B). It was aboard the newest and longest of these, 670B, that I hit the tarmac, heading for a rather wintry Caravan Club site at Sandringham in North Norfolk. The 670B shares basically the same layout as its smaller sibling, the 600B. However, it's around a third

of a metre longer (at 6.72m), giving more internal space and allowing the inclusion of a big, two-door fridge/freezer.

All Excels are low profile designs, and proper ones at that. No overcab bulges here, nor 'peaked-cap' protuberances, just a nicely swept-back roofline that looks very good indeed. This more aerodynamic design might even help stretch the distance between required fill-ups of motion lotion.

The test 'van had added resplendence in the form of the Sport Pack. This provides - among other desirable things - the blue metallic paint that'll help your Excel stand out from the crowd. The Sport Pack seems like stonking value for money, but I'd also add cab air-con - the only really useful thing not included in this box of goodies. As an awful poseur, I'd whack on a set of alloys too: after-market as none are listed in the Excel options department.

### PERENNIAL PULLING POWER

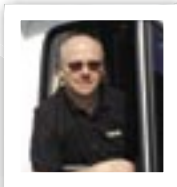
The now-familiar jutting nose of the latest Sevel-built light commercial betrays - from a distance - that Excel is lugged along by Fiat's doughty, and seemingly ever-present, Ducato. Here, it's the base model (with 100 horsepower engine) that drives the front wheels through a five-speed gearbox. Aft, the camper specific rear chassis supports: lower than the standard item (and probably a

more expensive option for Auto-Trail), it also provides a wider rear axle for better looks (less over-bodied) and handling.

Up in the cab there are pleasant surprises, as a decent radio/CD player (that also plays MP3 files on CD) and cruise control are joined by a passenger airbag, in addition to the Fiat-standard driver's item. All these goodies are fitted as standard to the base model Excel. The expected remote central locking and electric windows are present and correct, but electrically adjusted mirrors are absent. Shame this, as partner-drivers needing to regularly adjust said reflectors may not 'see the joke.'

Cab seats are adjustable every which-way, and I found them quite firm to the bottie. Also, the combination of seat-raising swivels, and the top rail of the fitted cab blinds preventing the sun visor folding all the way forward, saw me crouching slightly to see under the visor when driving into a winter day's low sun.

All the Ducato's usual good stuff was there - light controls and excellent brakes bringing pilot's pleasure in spades. To performance, and although fitted with the smallest motor, this 670B made excellent progress. The 2.2-litre motor is a willing unit, free revving and eager, it propelled the Excel at legal-limit speeds in almost all situations during the test. Only long slow hills on major roads threatened to require a change down where the more powerful



Words & pictures  
by Dave Hurrell

1 At the Caravan Club's Sandringham site in north Norfolk

2 The cab comes with passenger airbag

3 The Sport Pack of extras includes graphite-coloured worktop and Le Mans cloth

4 A twin sofa lounge gives way to a classic Continental-style rear end



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At Brancaster Staithe harbour in North Norfolk

**AT A GLANCE**

■ **PRICE FROM:** £39,995 OTR

■ **BERTHS:** 4

■ **LAYOUT:** Twin-sofa lounge, offside kitchen, rear washroom and longitudinal double bed.

■ **ECONOMY:** 28.5 mpg



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Ducato motors would not. I say threatened, as I detected just a small drop off in speed - however, I was alone in a very lightly loaded 'van: two-up and with a full complement of kit, things will probably be worse. No matter, if you have more of a need for speed, both 130 and 157 horsepower engines are on the options list - complete with six-speed cog-swappers, either manual, or automatic too, in the case of the most powerful engine option.

It's worth noting that the five-speed unit fitted to the test 'van has a lower ratio gear-set, thus 70mph is reached at 3000rpm. The optional six-speeder should see the motor spinning at around 2500 revs at the motorway limit, making for more relaxed high speed cruising. Firmly sprung, the chassis tested the conversion's mettle over some of Norfolk's more challenging road surfaces. A feeling of solidity was probably, in part, caused by the fact that Auto-Trail motorhome bodies are thicker than is the norm - greater insulation also being a benefit. Conversion noise was mainly confined to cooker rattles with none of the 'creaky stuff' that - I have found - sometimes emanates from above cab areas. Finally, do bear in mind that there are no rear belted seats in this four-berth motorhome, although a half-dinette option, with two belted seats, is available.

**FUN UP FRONT**



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## On Test Auto-Trail Excel 670B Sport on 2.2-litre Fiat Ducato

Although this 'van's layout - with its reason-to-buy fixed bed - is a Continental classic, it's the twin sofa lounge up front that'll be a big draw, and possibly a deal maker for British motorhomers. Here, the Sport Pack provides Le Mans upholstery - a cloth with a hint of charcoal and a modern pattern. I loved it. Two sofas, it's true, but of unequal lengths, so it's far easier to achieve feet-up comfort on the - longer - offside item. Not all is lost though, as each swivelled cab seat provides a comfy armchair and, when fully swivelled, allows each sofa to become a giant footstool. Thus, the 'feet-up war' between him and her should be over before it has started.

Talking of feet - legs, torsos and heads too - there's a step up into the lounge so headroom is limited. At five-ten, I could just stand comfortably under the frame of the Heki rooflight (which, digressing, is the better wind-up model). Of course, the raised lounge floor is a well-considered feature that sees the sofas at the same level as the cab seats. Neatly mounted in a moulded niche above the cab, an Avtex TV/DVD player has Freeview digital capability, and comes as part of the Sport Pack. When friends come over there's



room for five to sit in comfort - or seven who don't mind getting quite cosy.

There's no big immovable Continental-style table here - a freestander emerges from its own locker adjacent to the caravan entrance to stand between the sofas. Although you might argue that the table is a tad large for the space, I'll forgive it, as it should properly accommodate four people to eat. This is much better than some of the too small, too low items that I've had the dubious pleasure to dine at. Funnily enough, I'm sat at the very same table as I type this, while outside it's a nearly dark winter afternoon, with freezing rain sheeting down. If ever there was an demonstration of why British motorcaravanners need a comfy lounging space in their 'vans then this day is providing it!

### YES CHEF!

The main kitchen unit is much the same as those found in other Excel models - here with the 'graphite' black worktop provided by the Sport Pack. Triangular hob and sink (with hinged glass lids) occupy the corners, leaving a reasonable triangle of working surface in the centre. No drainer here, so a tray will be needed to catch suds from the washing-up. The sink features a folding tap, while the hob gets three burners and electronic ignition. Below, a neat Spinflo oven/grill is big enough to be useful: bring on the Sunday roast!

To the right of the oven is a capacious two-door cupboard - its presence, thanks to another feature that's unique to this Excel model: opposite, is a big two-door fridge/freezer. Ordinarily, the (smaller) fridge would be where the cupboard is, but the extra length of this 'van allows the inclusion of the big cooler and thus, creates the cupboard space. But there's more, as a locker below and mains socket-equipped microwave cupboard above (buy your own hot box) the fridge add yet more versatility. Aft of the kitchen, and below the wardrobe, is a stack of drawers - the top one fitted out with a cutlery tray. Finally, there's a pair of high-level lockers fitted out with crock racks, while above, a Mini Heki rooflight provides good ventilation. All in all it's a great little motorhome kitchen.

### BATH TIME

In a full marks for effort plunge, the washroom tries to pack in a full menu of features and uses one unusual idea. This bathing space offers toilet, fixed washbasin and a separate shower in what can only be described as a compact space. Entry is gained through a free-running silver tambour door that's superior in quality to many that I've slid. There's quite a step up to the toilet area, where a Thetford C250 loo offers a swivelling bowl and electric flushing. Dump-time sees its cassette on wheels, making this bloke's job less strenuous. Above the loo is a handy shelf and above that, a good-sized window - next, a shallow high-level locker.

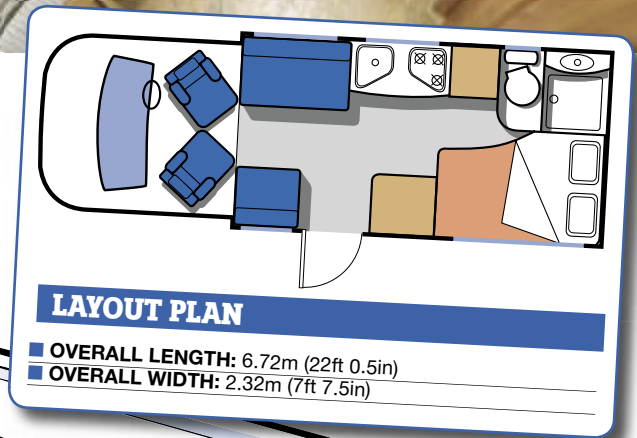
Beyond the toilet, you step down into a separate shower compartment that's enclosed by a nice rigid door. In here, the unusual feature is the washbasin, which benefits from a good-sized mirror, while a roof vent deals with steam. A wire rack will hold your gel and flannel, while the tap head pulls out: attached to a bracket above, it provides water for showering.

However, in trying to do everything - like a restaurant with a too big menu - Excel's washroom ends up doing almost everything badly. There's reduced headroom in the toilet area (thanks to the step up, don't be taller than six feet), and little room to sit on the throne. The shower area is probably comfortably big enough only for size zero, people, while getting your head down to the basin sees operations baulked by your nether regions hitting the wall (and opened shower door) behind.

I've come across washrooms like this before, and it must be said that the location alongside motorhome fixed beds always creates design problems - such is the quite narrow space available. Nevertheless, omitting the separate shower cubicle and swapping the locations of loo and washbasin (placing the toilet at the rear of the vehicle and the basin under the window) could make this washroom comfortably useable for most.

### GOOD IN BED?

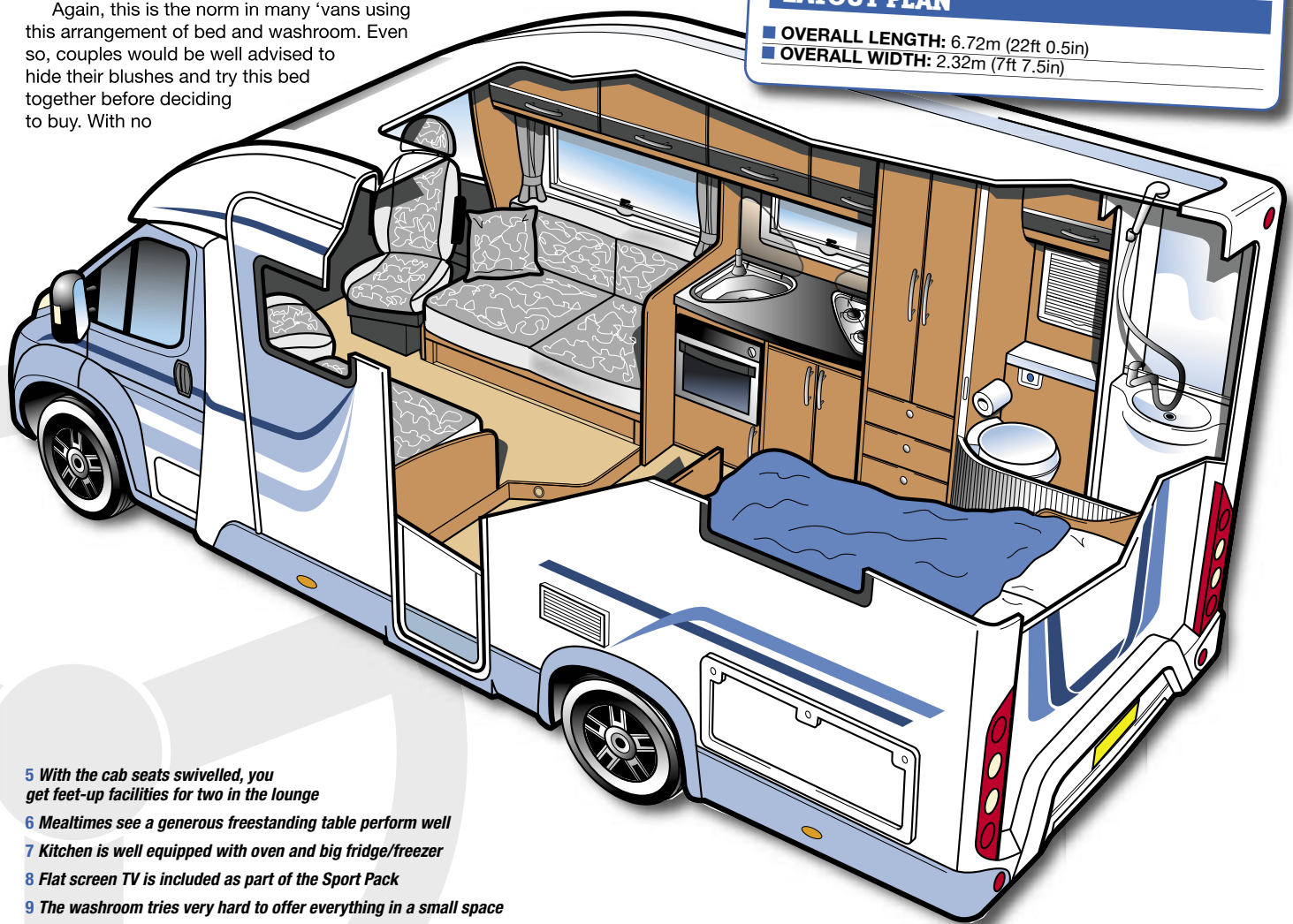
Star of the sleeping show first, and it's the rearfixed double that'll be the main reason why folks consider buying this Excel. Riding on an alloy frame with sprung wooden slats, this bed



is best described as big enough rather than generous. Six foot three inches of length means many will be comfortable here and indeed, I enjoyed several comfy nights' sleep during the test. That said, this bed is only just over three feet wide at its foot - thanks to the fact that the bed narrows on its inside to allow easy access to the washroom.

Again, this is the norm in many 'vans using this arrangement of bed and washroom. Even so, couples would be well advised to hide their blushes and try this bed together before deciding to buy. With no

rear window, and lockers at a decent height above, there's plenty of space to get propped up with a night time book or morning cuppa. Afternoon naps, of course, are easy to take, and with this layout, always a



5 With the cab seats swivelled, you get feet-up facilities for two in the lounge

6 Mealtimes see a generous freestanding table perform well

7 Kitchen is well equipped with oven and big fridge/freezer

8 Flat screen TV is included as part of the Sport Pack

9 The washroom tries very hard to offer everything in a small space

# On Test Auto-Trail Excel 670B Sport on 2.2-litre Fiat Ducato

temptation!

Up front, the lounge produces a transverse double bed that should be perfect for visitors, or folks that need - or prefer - to sleep separately. Pulling sofa bases together and dropping backrest cushions in almost completes this bed, while the end panel of the shorter sofa hinges out, and (with a drop-in support board) accepts an infill cushion to finish the job. Again, this bed is a touch narrower at one end than the other, but not by a huge amount.

Night time blackout is provided by easy-to-use and effective blinds in the cab, while all the caravan widows have high quality pleated cassette blind/flyscreen units fitted. Touring couples of average size should find the beds in this 'van easy to make and comfy to use. I found the fixed bed's mattress quite firm, the lounge bed's cushions a bit more compliant.

## HOUSING NECESSITIES

The interface between cab and overcab moulding is impressively trimmed in automotive style that includes wood-effect plastics forming a pair of book-friendly pockets - one on either side.

Some might complain that there's no full-blown overcab locker here (something that Autocruise, for instance, has re-introduced for 2010), but, as this 'van provides plenty of other storage, it's not a problem. It also means that there's no head-banging hazard above the cab, and the arrangement looks pretty good too!

Three overhead lockers grace the lounge, although one houses the electrics box (charger/distribution unit) and here, the TV aerial's mast intrudes.

Both sofas offer space for storage - each with access flaps on the front. The offside one has an external hatch too. Aft, and another advantage of this model's increased length is a good-sized wardrobe, with a useful stack of drawers below. The bedroom has three overhead lockers, plus a pair of very deep corner shelves that would seem to be the perfect repository for



magazines and the like. Most motorhome fixed beds have a large storage locker beneath and the 670B's is no exception. A big external hatch leads to an area unencumbered by heater units, tanks, electrical systems and other intrusive kit (often found in underbed lockers). Only the fresh water pump lives in here, so there's plenty of room for kit - up to and including big stuff like folding bikes.

Internal access to this space is via the bed's base, which is rear-hinged. Lifting the - unassisted - base is a bit of a challenge, as it's quite heavy, and leaning in to grab the foot and lift is awkward. Once lifted, there's a hinged pole, which drops to stand on the locker's floor and support the base.

Hmm, I'd much rather see a side-hinged bed base here, preferably one lift-assisted and supported by gas struts - a better, safer system.

Last comes payload: as this 'van is built on a 3300kg MAW chassis, there's not a huge amount. However, the figure arrived at is after allowances are made for the weight of the driver, fresh water gas and fuel. Even so, I'd rather Auto-Trail offered a 3500kg MAW chassis as an option, as another 200kg of carrying capacity would be very welcome.

## EXCEL ENERGY

Heat and hot water first, and here Excel departs from the norm, fitting Webasto's DualTop unit under the 'van. Unlike the (more common) gas-fired Truma Combi boiler, this unit runs on diesel from the vehicle's tank. Thus, as long as you have plenty of diesel in the tank, you'll always be warm and have hot water on tap. Another advantage of this unit is the fact that it can be used while you're travelling, helping to keep the whole 'van warm and - when you desire - allowing arrival on site with a full tank of hot water.

Controls are simple to use and the system kept me snug during temperatures that plunged to freezing during the day. It's back

to that short options list here too, as Webasto makes a version of the DualTop that runs on mains electricity, as well as diesel - it's also programmable. Sadly, Auto-Trail does not offer this as an option, which is a shame. Water tanks



**10** Fixed bed will be the main reason to buy, and proved good to use

**11** Lounge bed is easy to make

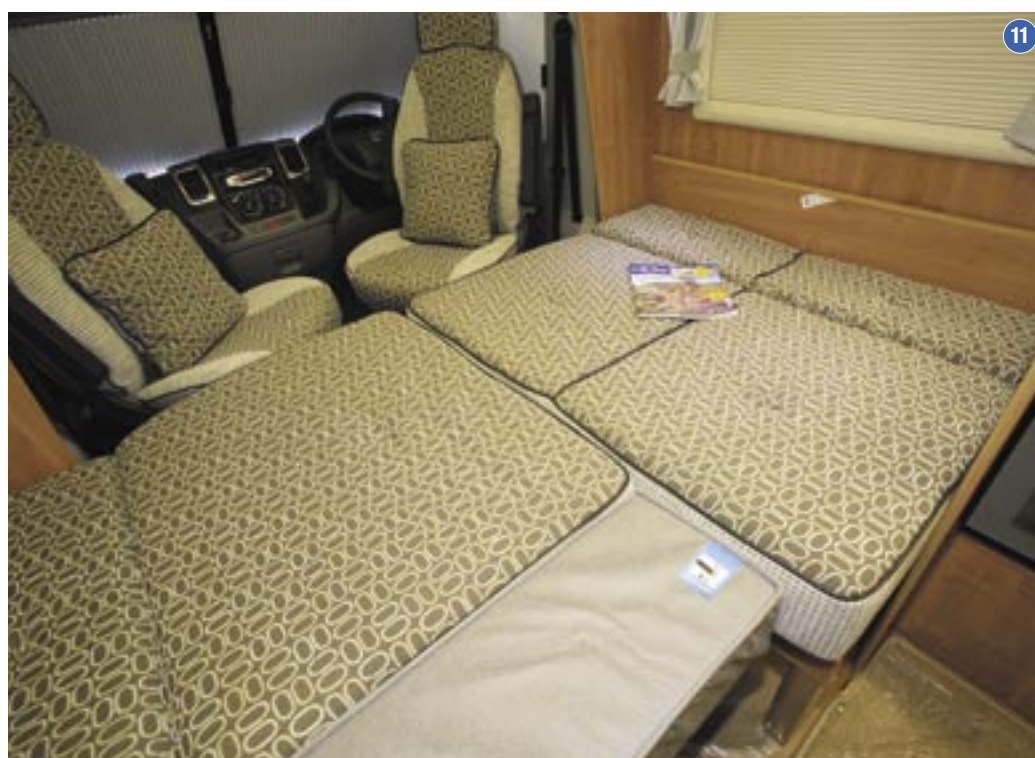
**12** A big external door gives access to the underbed area

**13** On the opposite side of the 'van there's external access to an under-sofa locker. The waste tank sports a strong drain tap

**14** Underbed locker is large, but the base lifting arrangement needs a rethink

**15** Shopping at Drove Orchards farm shop near the north Norfolk coast





are underslung - the fresh tank is, however, insulated, while the waste container features a chunky, strong, easy-to-use drain tap.

The lighting in this motorhome, with one exception, is quite superb. All LED powered

(apart from the awning light, which is low energy fluorescent), it majors on a system of diffuser-enclosed strips that work brilliantly in all areas of the interior. Adjustable spotlights are rendered in stylish stainless steel, and

### I LIKED

- Good looks
- Excellent value Sports Pack
- Willing engine
- Brit-style lounge
- Good kitchen with big fridge/freezer
- Plenty of storage space
- LED lighting
- Versatile heating system

### I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Better method of lifting and supporting bed base
- Electric mirrors

### I DISLIKED

- Washroom design

fitted in the lounge and the bedroom. The exception is the fact that there are no spots fitted on the nearside of the lounge. However, adding these should be straightforward.

### EXCELLENCE INCREASED?

Did I like the full-fat version of the Excel? The answer is yes, but with a reservation. That reservation? Trying to cram too many facilities into a small space compromises the washroom. That said, I did use all of it during the test (as is my wont, I didn't even approach the Caravan Club's excellent heated loo block) but found my expletive count rising to quite high levels. I would also like to see a better method of lifting and supporting the fixed bed's base - like the rest of my body - my back is getting no younger.

Meanwhile, the rest of the 'van performed with aplomb - lovely to drive, nicely equipped and comfy to live in, it should make a great tourer for two quite slim, and not too tall motorhomers. ■



### VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Auto-Trail VR Ltd, Trigano House, Genesis Way, Europarc, Grimsby, Lincs DN37 9TU (tel: 01472 571001; web site: [www.auto-trail.co.uk](http://www.auto-trail.co.uk))

### WE STAYED AT

The Sandringham Estate Caravan Club Site, Glucksburg Woods, Sandringham PE35 6EZ (tel: 01553 631614; web site: [www.caravanclub.co.uk](http://www.caravanclub.co.uk))

## LIVE-IN TEST DATA

## AUTO-TRAIL 670 B

### TYPE

Low profile coachbuilt

### PRICE

- **From:** £39,995 OTR
- **As tested:** £41,090 OTR

### BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Fiat Ducato Camper chassis cab
- **Berths:** 4
- **Three-point belted seats:** 2 (incl. driver)
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle & conversion

### CONSTRUCTION

GRP clad sandwich construction with GRP/ABS mouldings

### DIMENSIONS (\*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 6.72m (22ft 0.5in)\*
- **Width:** 2.32m (7ft 7.5in)\*
- **Height:** 2.79m (9ft 2in)\*
- **Wheelbase:** 3.80m (12ft 5.5in)\*
- **Rear overhang:** 1.98m (6ft 6in)
- **Max authorised weight:** 3300kg
- **Payload:** 335kg (after allowance for driver @ 75kg and 90 per cent fresh water, fuel, gas)

### INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of twin-sofa lounge, offside kitchen wardrobe, washroom, nearside fridge and longitudinal double bed. Caravan door on UK nearside

- **Insulation:** Floor 44mm, walls & roof 40mm
- **Interior height:** 1.95m (6ft 5in) max, 1.79m (5ft 10.5in) min

### THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 2.2-litre turbo-diesel producing 74kW (100bhp) @ 2900rpm
- **Transmission:** Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 28.5 mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all round
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent on coil springs. Rear: Rigid axle on leaf springs
- **Features:** Remote central locking, electric windows, Radio/CD player, trip computer,

door bins, driver and passenger airbags, cruise control, lockable central storage locker, glove compartment

### LOUNGING AND DINING

Swivelling cab seats and (unequal) inward-facing sofas served by freestanding table. Lounging for 6, dining for 4

### KITCHEN

Linear main unit includes hob and sink at corners, with some worktop between. Oven and two cupboards below, cutlery drawer in stack below wardrobe at right. Fridge located opposite on nearside, with microwave locker above, locker below

- **Sink:** Spinflo triangular stainless steel bowl with folding mixer tap and hinged glass lid
- **Cooker:** Spinflo sink-matching three-burner hob with electronic ignition and hinged glass lid. Spinflo Duplex oven/grill with electronic ignition
- **Fridge:** Thetford fridge/freezer with Smart Energy Selection. Capacity 149 litres

### WASHROOM

Alloy tambour door leads to toilet area with Thetford C250 swivel-bowl, electric-flush toilet with wheeled cassette, locker above, toilet roll holder, robe hook. Separate shower compartment houses fixed washbasin, includes bi-fold door, single-outlet tray, mirror, wire shelves, pullout tap doubles as shower head

### BEDS

- **Lounge double**
- **Length:** 2.03m (6ft 8in)
- **Width:** 1.14m (3ft 9in) min
- **Fixed rear double**
- **Length:** 1.89m (6ft 2.5in)
- **Width:** 1.20m (3ft 11in), tapers to 990mm (3ft 3in) at foot

### STORAGE

Lounge: 2 overcab pockets, 3 overhead lockers, front-accessed space under both sofas - offside has external hatch also. Bedroom: 2-door wardrobe, 2 drawers, 1 low-level locker, 3 overhead

lockers, corner shelves, large space under bed, top accessed, and with external hatch

### LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Underslung, insulated. Capacity 85 litres (18.7 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung. Capacity 55 litres (12.1 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Webasto DualTop boiler, diesel-only operation
- **Space heater:** Webasto DualTop with blown-air, diesel-only operation
- **Leisure battery:** 110 amp hr
- **Gas:** 2 x 7kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Lounge: 3 LED strips, 2 LED reading lamps on offside. Kitchen: 2 LED strips. Bedroom: 1 LED strip, 2 LED reading lamps. Washroom: 2 LED strips. Awning lamp
- **Sockets:** 230V: 3 (2 in kitchen, 1 in lounge) 12V: None
- **Control panel:** Mounted above caravan door, controls supply, lights, pump, indicates battery condition and tank levels using LEDs
- **Blinds/curtains:** Blinds to cab, Cassette blinds/flyscreens to all caravan windows, curtains to lounge and bedroom
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** Yes

### OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base vehicle:** As part of Sports Pack - Metallic blue paint, dash trim, (£1095)
- **Conversion:** As part of Sports Pack - TV aerial, Le Mans upholstery, removable carpets, graphite-effect worktops, stainless steel appliances, Flat screen TV with DVD player and Freeview tuner (price as above)
- **Other options available**
- **Base vehicle:** Cab air-conditioning (£915), 130bhp engine/six-speed gearbox upgrade (£1497), 157bhp engine with ComfortMatic auto gearbox (£3913)
- **Conversion:** Half-dinette with belted travel seats (£734), flat screen TV with DVD player and Freeview Tuner (£499)

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