

COUNTRY SEAT

Bessacarr E520 on 2.3-litre Fiat Ducato



British-built and proud of it, this low profile offer loads of relaxing space in the country of your choice



Words & pictures by Dave Hurrell



This month's Live-in Test focuses firmly on the pleasures of lounging, and that's just as well, because truly terrible weather during the test kept me pretty much trapped indoors. This gave plenty of

time to get a good view and feel of this 'van's spacious relaxing space. Proper motorhome lounges (those with just sofas, not dinettes with side seats) are divided by location, with fans dedicated to each arrangement. Front lounges usually take advantage of swivelling cab seats, increasing their potential population and offering a pair of armchairs in the process. The rear-located lounge - as here - gains separate room status, windows on three sides and, I would suggest, is likely to appeal to trailer caravanners making the move to motorcaravanning, as it replicates the feel found in many a tourer. One of the disadvantages of this layout, is that the washroom usually ends up located hard up against the cab reducing the usability of this area when on site and sometimes

compromising the comfort of taller drivers. Indeed, the cab usually plays little part in providing on-site accommodation.

Unashamedly designed for just two people, the Bessacarr E520 majors on lounging space with big aft-located sofas providing cosy accommodation for a motorcaravanning couple and plenty of space for entertaining. The lounge will be the absolute reason to buy this 'van, while outside, its low profile body lends a dash of Continental style and decent aerodynamics. This styling includes silver trim, a good quality caravan door with window, roof bars, restrained graphics, and a neatly faired-in wind-out awning. The nose is nicely finished with a silver grille surround and Bessacarr badge replacing the Fiat item normally found here.

FIAT'S FUNCTION

Even if it is slightly tarnished by recent transmission problems (vibration and juddering during reversing, sometimes leading to gearbox failure) Fiat's Ducato remains the most converted vehicle, both in the UK and on the Continent. The good news is that a fix for the

1 Unusually for this layout, both cab seats swivel

2 Main meals see a freestanding table between the sofas



AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £43,467 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 2
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Fiat Ducato LWB
Camper chassis cab
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside washroom, fridge and wardrobe, nearside kitchen. Twin-sofa lounge in rear
- **ECONOMY:** 24.8mpg



gearbox is arriving, or so we are assured, and the rest of this vehicle is just about perfect as a motorhome motivator. This is in part due to a superb 2.3-litre diesel engine (and even better 3.0-litre, 157bhp motor) that produces lots of power and torque, but also because this Bessie rides on Fiat's special Camper chassis.

The only specialist (original equipment) unit of its type available, the Camper chassis is lower at the rear, with a wider track rear axle that means wheel arches are less intrusive inside the 'van, and makes for improved handling. These vehicles also come with the cab fully prepared to accept a body. No electric saw-wielding operative to hack out metal is needed before the motorhome component is grafted on, as the cab is supplied with roof cutaway and all is painted (rust proofed) and importantly, crash tested.

The Ducato cab is well equipped in standard form and here it benefited from Bessacarr's Elegance pack: an extra £975 provides air-conditioning, cruise control, a reversing camera and a portable satellite navigation system that includes mapping

for all of western Europe. The satnav's screen doubles as monitor for the reversing camera and is linked to the (decent) radio/CD player, muting its sound when spoken route instructions are delivered. I only had a short time fiddling with this unit, but was slightly alarmed to discover that it did not recognise the Humber bridge or warn me that a toll was payable to cross it: my own Tom Tom does both, and did so straight out of the box.

Considering the cab is a long way from the main seating area, I was slightly puzzled to find that the cab seats were fitted with swivels. The passenger pew could provide a seat for a tired cook perhaps, but the driver's seat, once turned, is of little use as the bulk of the washroom - directly behind - compromises it too much. It was good to discover that in spite of the washroom looming to the rear, it is still possible to slide the driver's seat all the way back - taller drivers should have no trouble achieving a comfortable position behind the wheel. Seat height is fine too, as the aforementioned Camper chassis provides factory-fitted swivels, with seat bases at the correct level.

Much has been written about the merits of the latest Ducato's performance on the road and here, things were much the same: excellent performance from the 2.3-litre engine, with an easy-shifting six-speed gearbox, light steering/clutch and good brakes made for a very enjoyable drive. Less enjoyable was the din coming from the rear when on the road. I tracked this down to the kitchen, which made rattling and crashing noises over even the smallest of bumps and uneven surfaces. Unfortunately, this 'van produced some of the worst on-road conversion noise I've experienced for a long time, thanks to the kitchen unit. Shame really, as the rest of the 'van stayed commendably hushed. Finally, and although this 'van is a pure two berth, it's worth mentioning that the E520 has no rear seatbelts fitted: if you need, at any time, to carry more than one passenger, then this 'van ain't for you.

INTERIOR DESIGN

Bessacarr's designers have done a great job with the interior, arriving at a scheme that should offend neither the modernist nor those

On Test Bessacarr E520

with an eye that appreciates a more traditional look. The combination of different shades of brown, geometric patterned upholstery and modern-looking silver-trimmed furniture was put to the ultimate test during dark days and absolutely appalling weather. Thankfully, things stayed cosy at all times, helped by big windows and a rooflight above, plus good electric lighting. Upfront, the (non-opening) sunroof over the cab - that I initially thought superfluous - did a very good job of illuminating an area somewhat compromised by the bulk of the adjacent washroom.

Back to the lounge, and here our two motorhomers will find sybaritic relaxation, with feet-up opportunities and a long sofa each. Only the slightly low backrests compromised things a touch, but I still found an easy, comfy position on either sofa. The wardrobe sits just forward of the lounge on the offside and here I found a TV bracket and the relevant sockets. There was, I discovered, a nice flat screen TV hiding in said wardrobe. Greedily, I attached the set to its bracket, anticipating an evening's entertainment while the wind howled outside. I can report that the TV is at the perfect viewing height, but sadly, I saw no Simpsons, or re-runs of NCIS: the guys at Bessacarr had forgotten to fit an aerial, it seemed! I later discovered that an outside socket is fitted, allowing you to plug in your own antenna/dish, or connect to the site's TV service. No matter, the ceiling-mounted rear speakers in the lounge (connected to the cab's Radio/CD player) provided a very pleasant evening's entertainment, thanks to the BBC.

Whether it's a snack, work, games, or full-blown dining, the lounge gives you a choice of surfaces to use. The first is located atop the chest of drawers that - trailer caravan-style - sits between the sofas at the rear. A pullout

- with flip-over top - creates a surface perfect for snacks and work - even enough space for two to dine informally. For more complex meals, and when more folks want to eat, a freestanding table emerges from the wardrobe to stand between the sofas. The flip-over table (or just the closed top of the chest) is then available as a buffet. Entertaining should prove, err... entertaining too, as six folks can easily be accommodated, eight if they're very close friends. I think it's safe to say that motorhome lounge fans will not be disappointed by the E520's class-leading relaxing space.

COOKING AND ALL THAT

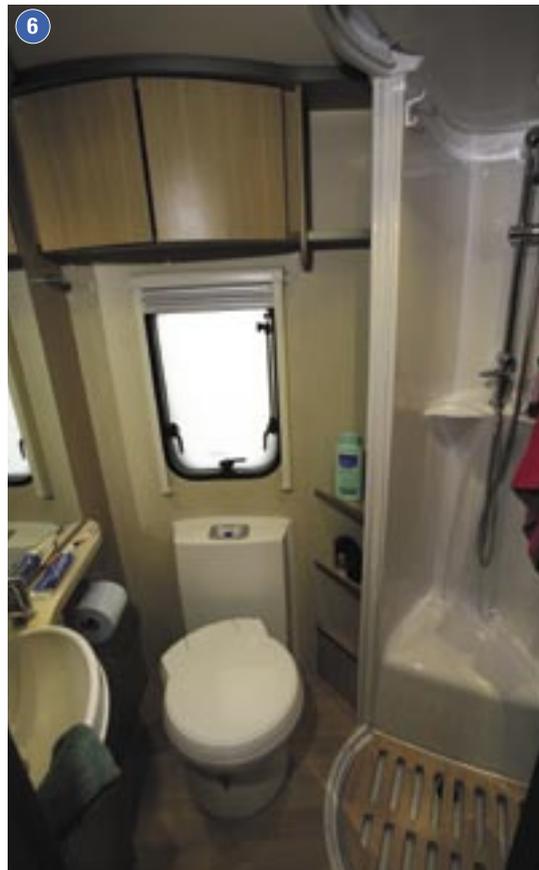
The main kitchen unit is located on the nearside, directly aft of the caravan door. In fine British style, it provides a three-quarter-height cooker that offers a hob, separate grill and oven, all with electronic ignition. The hob features three gas burners and one electric hotplate, adding a gas-saving device that'll make the most of mains hook-up. Above, a microwave oven also helps make the most of 230V power, but great care will be needed when extracting containers of hot liquid from its interior.

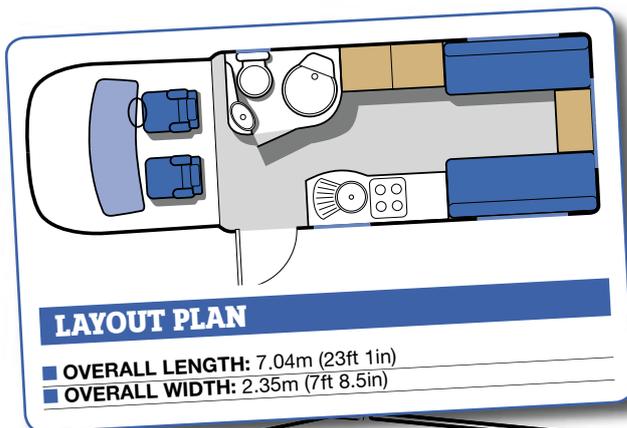
Opposite (sandwiched between washroom and wardrobe), one of Thetford's finest coolers stands ready to accept chilled and frozen foods. Indeed, its 175-litre capacity should ensure that more than enough beef and burgundy can be carried to satisfy the needs of two gourmand motorhomers. Thetford's (SES) Smart Energy Selection system provides a switch-on-and-forget facility to make sure everything's cool all the time.

Commendably, there's worktop at both ends of this kitchen, with a removable drainer and drop-in cutting board enhancing the round stainless steel sink's talents. Neither cooker hood nor extractor fan is present,



but a mini Heki rooflight and adjacent window should do well at removing steam and the smell of beef wellington. A couple of lockers above, three below and a decent cutlery drawer tries to offer copious amount of storage space and almost succeeds. Unfortunately, the biggest cupboard opens to reveal that most of its room is taken up by the gas locker. I've seen another Swift group product where the largest





of the kitchen cupboards was used to house the Truma Boiler: maybe the designer habitually hides all sort of inappropriate things in his kitchen cupboards at home? I really do wish he'd break the habit! Seriously though, this is a fine, well-equipped galley: apart from that annoying lack of space in its biggest cupboard.

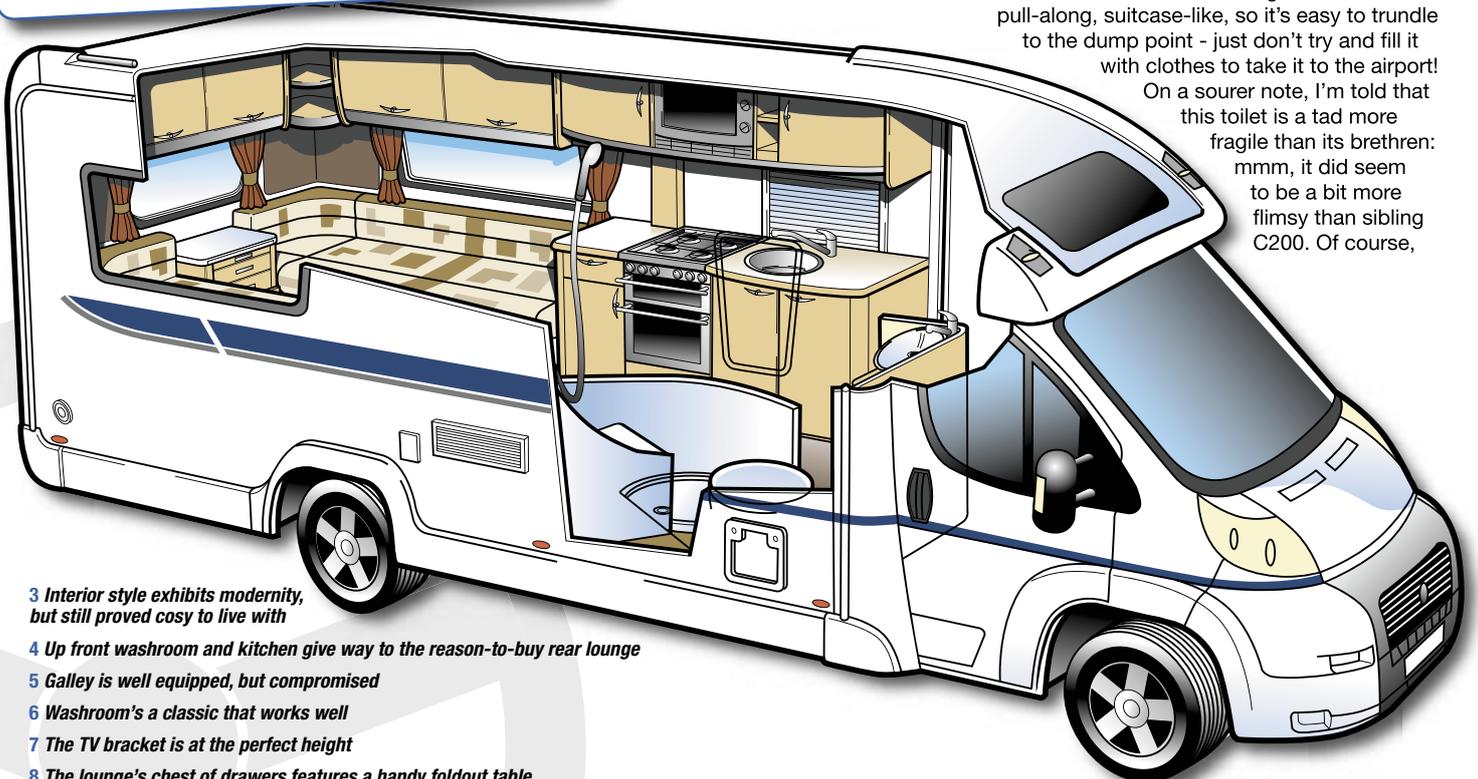
A SWIFT WASH

Fans of Swift Group products (this Bessacarr is one) will greet the washroom as an old friend.

Outside, it presents nice, curvy walls and a domestic style door/handle combination. Inside, you discover vanity basin, counter top, lockers and semicircular shower cubicle of a type that have been around, almost unchanged, for quite a while now. The reason? Well, it's just because they work well, although I've never been a fan of the shower's - slightly rough - plywood duckboard.

There's a decent mirror and some useful shelves in here too, while the new kid on the Swift washroom block is Thetford's C250 loo. Aside from the usual swivel bowl and electric flushing this canny potty mounts its waste tank on wheels. An extending handle makes it pull-along, suitcase-like, so it's easy to trundle to the dump point - just don't try and fill it with clothes to take it to the airport!

On a sourer note, I'm told that this toilet is a tad more fragile than its brethren: mmm, it did seem to be a bit more flimsy than sibling C200. Of course,



- 3 Interior style exhibits modernity, but still proved cosy to live with
- 4 Up front washroom and kitchen give way to the reason-to-buy rear lounge
- 5 Galley is well equipped, but compromised
- 6 Washroom's a classic that works well
- 7 The TV bracket is at the perfect height
- 8 The lounge's chest of drawers features a handy foldout table



only time and tides of tinkles will tell of its toughness, or otherwise...

All in all a washroom firmly located in the 'very good' category.

BESSY FOR BEDS

When the time comes to retire for the night, a choice of a big double or two single beds gives welcome versatility. The single beds are the easiest to make - simply remove the backrests, stash them in the cab and you're ready to jump into your sleeping bags and enjoy a comfy night's rest. These beds could be seen as his and hers, as the offside bed/sofa is less than six feet long,

the nearside over. At the heads, the chest of drawers provides the perfect bedside cabinet.

The double bed is constructed in the time-honoured fashion by pulling out the - alloy-framed - sofa bases and dropping in backrests, plus a slim infill. Thanks to the shorter sofa, the resultant bed is offset, but still comfy and plenty big enough for two. You still get the bedside cabinet - now located halfway down one side, but still quite convenient to use.

CARRYING ON

First a word about payload: on the 3500kg chassis, and bearing in mind that no chassis upgrade is listed, the E520 offers a maximum user payload of 350kg. This includes an allowance for the weight of the driver and 90 per cent fuel, water and gas. Add motorhome number two, full tanks and any fitted accessories and you'll soon use up another 100kg-plus. Although the remaining carrying capacity should be adequate, it's would be a very good idea to have the fully loaded 'van weighed at a public weighbridge. Also, remember that the fitting of other heavy kit (satellite systems, solar panels, etc) will eat further into payload and could result in overloading. One way to solve this problem would be to travel with little or no fresh water in the tank, gaining up to around 80kg of payload.

Space for putting things away includes a good range of overhead lockers, while the wardrobe boasts twin doors and an internal shelf, in addition to the expected side-to-side hanging rail. The chest of drawers in the lounge is a great repository for all those bits and bobs that you want close to hand. Gas struts help sofa bases lift to reveal loads of room. The offside base should take your bedding, while opposite there's an external hatch that makes this sofa box the place for outdoors furniture and other kit. plus wedges, hook-up lead and toolbox.

HEAT AND LIGHT

Tanks first, and both are underslung, so all-year motorhomers will be wise to pay an extra 112 quid for the Winter Pack. This provides

you with winter covers for the fridge vents, but more importantly, 12V heaters for both fresh and waste water tanks. Capacity is good, but with a separate shower to serve that's just as well. Heating and hot water is provided by the latest Truma Combi boiler: here giving up to 6kW of heat and providing 2kW of selectable mains electric power. The previously mentioned rough and chilly weather gave the opportunity to test this unit in anger and I can report that it worked a treat. This was especially so running at low setting on mains power, when the chill at night was easily kept at bay.

Lighting is very well catered for with plenty of LED-equipped fittings, saving power. These run much cooler than the equivalent halogen lamps, which can and do get hot enough to burn fingers or, with reading lamps, even the top of my (sparsely upholstered) head!

Technophobes will be pleased to discover that the control panel is easy to use, while the mains circuit breakers, 12V fuses and switches for heater and battery charger are supremely easy to get at, located on a panel just inside and at the base of the wardrobe. Blinds in the living area are of the latest pull-down variety and (thankfully) don't let much light in at the bottom when closed. Blind and flyscreen are linked together, allowing the blind to let light in at the bottom (to shade the sun), or at the top - letting in light, but maintaining privacy. Also nice to see, curtains in the lounge are both full, and fully lined.

The test 'van came fitted with the aforementioned Elegance Pack of accessories. This provides cab air, cruise control, reversing camera and the portable satellite navigation unit, all for under a grand. This seems like a bargain too good to miss; remember though, it'll also add to the overall weight of the vehicle.

LOUNGING LIFE

No doubt about it, if you're in the market for a motorhome with a decent lounge, you'll have more choice among the 'vans made on this side of the Channel. Bessacarr's E520 offers stylish continental looks outside and Brit-friendly rear lounge-based comfort inside.





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Of course, you could choose a 'van with its lounge up front, but the rear lounge design has many advantages, including the feeling of being in a separate room and great view out through big windows on three sides of the space. The E520's lounge is up there with the best of the breed. If you want the ultimate in all-round longing, an extra £97 will see the chest of drawers replaced with seating, adding a rear section, U-shaped advantages and an enhanced view out of the rear window.

Further forward, the kitchen is very well equipped, with worktop space served by an excellent full cooker and big fridge/freezer. Downsides found here include the biggest cupboard almost filled by the gas locker and a high-set microwave oven that will need to be used with care. While we're in this area, it's worth re-emphasising the serious amount of conversion noise coming from here when on the road.

The washroom is a Swift Group classic and should be great to use - enhanced by Thetford's loo with easy-for-dumping wheeled cassette.

The beds are good too: easy to make, the singles are very convenient, the double comfy and cosy. If living in this 'van is comfortable and convenient, then driving it is comfortable and easy.

The comfy seating and good driving position combine with the powerful engine and easy controls to make long journeys pretty much stress free.

Finally, there's payload. With carrying capacity well under half a tonne (500kg) this motorhome will need to be loaded (and checked) very carefully, bearing in mind that any extras added (including such things as

I LIKED

- Great driving base with desirable
- Camper chassis
- Big comfy lounge
- Versatile dining arrangements
- Well-equipped kitchen
- Classic washroom
- Toilet cassette on wheels
- Versatile comfy beds
- Big under-sofa lockers
- Dual fuel heating

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Kitchen cupboard without intrusive gas locker
- Swivel removed from driver's seat

I DISLIKED

- Excessive on-road conversion noise

9 *Twin single beds are quick to make*

10 *Transverse double bed proved comfy*

11 *Hanging clothes in the wardrobe share space with the table*

12 *Sofa bases rise to reveal lots of stowage space*



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engine upgrade and cab air-conditioning) will impact on payload.

I enjoyed my time in the E520's cosy lounge - an experience hard-tested by the kind of horrible weather that makes this layout very attractive to British motorcaravanners. Finally, if you like the E520's style, but fancy a front-located lounge, sister-model, E540 offers just that. This model is the same length and price as the E520. ■



LIVE-IN TEST DATA

BESSACARR E520

TYPE: Low profile coachbuilt

- **From:** £43,467 OTR
- **As tested:** £44,442 OTR

BASICS

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

CONSTRUCTION

Alloy clad sandwich construction, with ABS/GRP mouldings. Caravan entrance on UK nearside

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturers figures)

- **Length:** 7.04m (23ft 1in)*
- **Width:** 2.35m (7ft 8.5in)*
- **Height:** 2.77m (9ft 1in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 4.04m (13ft 3in)
- **Rear overhang:** 1.95m (6ft 4.5in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3500kg
- **Payload:** 350kg (after allowance for driver (75kg), 90 per cent fuel, fresh water, gas)

INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside washroom, fridge and wardrobe, nearside kitchen. Twin-sofa lounge in rear

- **Insulation:** Floor 70mm, walls 32mm, roof 34mm
- **Interior height:** 1.97m (6ft 5.5in) max

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 2.3-litre turbo-diesel producing 95.5kW (130bhp) @ 3600rpm
- **Transmission:** Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 24.8mpg
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all round with ABS and ASR
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent with coil springs. Rear: rigid axle with leaf springs
- **Features:** Driver's airbag, electric windows and mirrors, Blaupunkt satellite navigation system linked to radio/CD player, cab air-conditioning, two swivelling reading lights, overcab sunroof, trip computer, variable windscreen wiper delay, adjustable steering column, central locker, door bins, pop-up map holder, 12V socket

LOUNGING AND DINING

Swivelled cab seats, two inward-facing sofas divided by chest of drawers with flip-top occasional table. Freestanding dining table emerges from dedicated stowage in wardrobe to stand between sofas

KITCHEN

Nearside-located main unit includes two cupboards and two shelves above, two cupboards (one containing pull-out wire baskets), one locker and cutlery drawer below. Fridge housing opposite, includes deep lockers above and below

- **Sink:** Circular stainless steel unit with chromed swivelling mixer tap, removable drainer and drop-in chopping board/lid
- **Cooker:** Stoves DF 500 with three gas burners, one electric hotplate, grill and oven, all with electronic ignition. Sharp 800W microwave oven with five power settings and rotary timer control
- **Fridge:** Thetford N175 three-way fridge/freezer with Smart Energy Selection (SES). Capacity 175 litres

WASHROOM

Outward-opening door with domestic-style handle encloses room. Oval plastic vanity basin with swivelling chromed mixer tap set into counter top, shelved cupboard and three shelves below, two-door locker and shelf above, large mirror. Thetford C250 swivel-bowl cassette toilet with electric flushing and wheeled cassette. Drum-shaped separate shower with rigid sliding screen, mixer tap, riser rail, showerhead and wooden duckboard in single-outlet tray

BEDS

- **Transverse lounge double**
- **Length:** 2.11m (6ft 11in) max
- **Width:** 1.33m (4ft 4.5in)
- **Alternative lengthways nearside single**
- **Length:** 1.89m (6ft 2.5in)
- **Width:** 710mm (2ft 4in)
- **Alternative lengthways offside single**
- **Length:** 1.79m (5ft 10.5in)
- **Width:** 710mm (2ft 4in)

STORAGE

Lounge: Space under both sofas with access via lifting sofa bases assisted by gas struts. Six

overhead lockers; five shelved, one fitted to hold crockery. Four shelves. Two-door wardrobe with low-level shelf and side-to-side hanging rail

LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Underslung. 90 litres (19.8 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung. 68 litres (15 gallons)
- **Water/space heating:** Truma Combi Boiler with blown-air, gas-mains operation
- **Leisure battery:** 110 amp hr
- **Gas:** 2x 7kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Cab area: 2 halogen reading lamps, Kitchen: 2 LED downlighters, 1 fluorescent strip task light. Washroom: 3 LED downlighters. Lounge: 1 Halogen ceiling-mounted light, 4 adjustable LED reading lights. LED downlighter inside caravan door, LED strip awning light, LED step light
- **Sockets:** 230V: 3 (2 in kitchen, 1 in lounge). 12V: 1 (in lounge)
- **Control panel:** Mounted above caravan door. Rotary knob controls clock/date, internal temperature via LCD. Multi-LED indicators tell of vehicle/leisure battery Voltage, fresh/waste water levels. Push-button controls for on/off, water pump, lighting, tank heaters (if fitted)
- **Blinds/curtains:** Pleated blinds to all windows/rooflights, flyscreens to all caravan windows/rooflights except overcab sunroof (non-opening), concertina flyscreen to caravan door, fully-lined curtains to lounge windows
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 Compliant:** Yes

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base:** Elegance Pack consisting of cab air-con, cruise control, colour reversing camera, portable sat nav system (£975)
- **Conversion:** None fitted
- **Other options**
- **Base:** Upgrade to 157bhp engine with ComfortMatic automatic transmission (£3327), towbar (£464)
- **Conversion:** Roof rack & ladder (£440), wrap-around seating instead of chest of drawers (£97), Winter Pack consisting of fresh & waste water tank heaters, fridge vent covers (£112)

E&OE

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

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WE STAYED AT

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