

## On Test IH Motor Campers J500 on 2.3-litre Fiat Ducato





Words & pictures  
by Dave Hurrell

# PERFECT PROFILE

## IH Motor Campers J500 on 2.3-litre Fiat Ducato

*MMM's 2009 Motorhome of the Year is a low profile coachbuilt that hails from a small company that's no stranger to accolades*



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### AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £54,995 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 2
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Fiat Ducato LWB Camper chassis cab
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside longitudinal sofa wardrobe/cupboard, fixed double bed, nearside tub chair, caravan door, kitchen, washroom
- **ECONOMY:** 25.3mpg



**Y**orkshire-based IH Motor Campers is the epitome of a successful small business. Even though it's just seventeen years old, tens of awards populate its trophy cabinet - several of them recognising

excellence in customer service. Indeed, it's the fact that owners are looked after superbly well that's one of the secrets of the company's success.

IH stands for Ian Hartley - the guy who's the driving force and inspiration behind a range of motorcaravans that offers some of the best available at any price. Meanwhile, Ian's wife, Nicola helps look after front of house - it's Nicola's smiling face that you may well see if you turn up to view 'vans in the impressive showroom. Ian's design skills, and his almost fanatical attention to detail, are backed up by a team of skilled craftspeople, who build IH's ranges of high top panel van conversions and low-profile coachbuilt motorhomes. Outside, a range of used 'vans is on offer - many are IH models traded by customers who have ordered a new IH 'van. It's a testament to the popularity of this firm's

products that these trade-ins are usually snapped up in double-quick time.

The J500 represents the current pinnacle of the range and is only the second coachbuilt motorcaravan model that IH Motor Campers has produced. Even so, this is quite an achievement for a small company, as, for small companies, it's technically less demanding to fit out the interior of panel vans as motorcaravans (most small converters do just that), than design, build and graft a coachbuilt body onto a chassis cab. And that's before all the work involving design and fitting of the interior.

### CANNY CONCEPT

From the outside, J500 presents a visage that's reminiscent of a stylish, Continental, low-profile motorcaravan. Champagne-coloured sandwich construction sides are framed by strong, curvy, GRP mouldings, with an unusual rear boot lid setting this 'van apart from the herd. The windowed caravan door betrayed this 'van as a prototype - although of good quality its white paint didn't match the rest of the exterior, but this will be attended to on production models. Of course, the door

1 The J500 is the epitome of a stylish low profile 'van

2 Swivel cab seats and lounge-to-die-for give way to amidships kitchen and wardrobe



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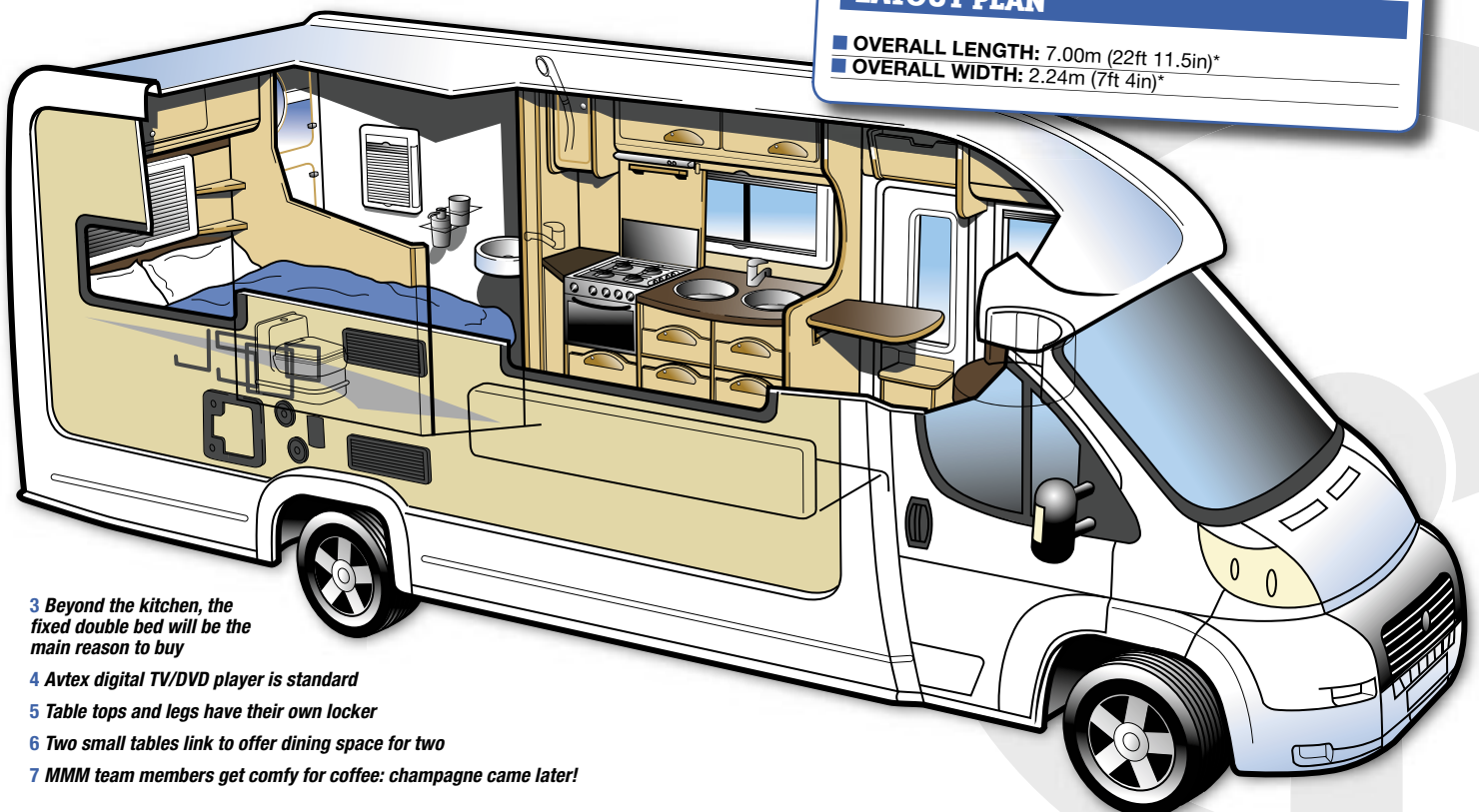
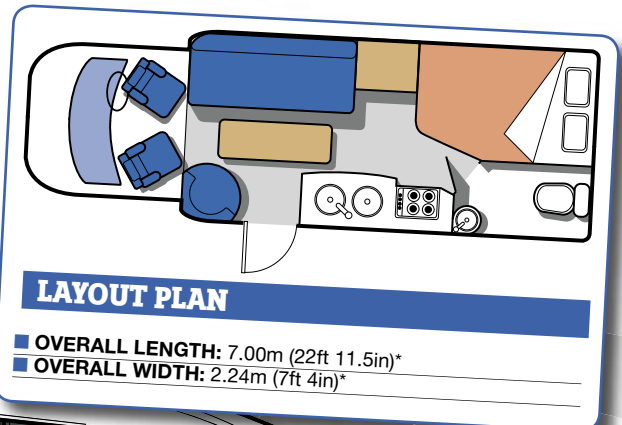
is another clue to this 'van's English origin - its location on our nearside providing safe kerbside entry and exit.

Take a peek inside most Continental low profiles and you'll discover fixed beds of one sort or another in their rears. This feature provides the flop-into-bed convenience that in part, makes them so popular. However, look further forward in most and you'll find a dinette-based area that struggles - and often fails - to provide proper, comfy lounging. The J500, however, takes that fixed-bed convenience and adds a lounge to die for, this relaxing space up front combines the best of both worlds, creating a super Sybaritic touring machine for two.

## SOLID FOUNDATIONS

As IH builds the majority of its motorcaravans on the Fiat Ducato chassis, it's no surprise that the J500 is underpinned by this ubiquitous base vehicle. Here it's the specialist (factory original equipment) Camper chassis that's used. This provides a lower rear frame and wider rear axle that between them, improve access to the interior and on-road handling. The wide axle also reduces the intrusion of wheel arches and stops

the 'van looking over-bodied, with rear wheels buried too far into the arches. Once seen as radical looking (too radical for some), the



**3** Beyond the kitchen, the fixed double bed will be the main reason to buy

**4** Avtex digital TV/DVD player is standard

**5** Table tops and legs have their own locker

**6** Two small tables link to offer dining space for two

**7** MMM team members get comfy for coffee: champagne came later!

now-familiar Ducato cab blends very well with IH's version of the low profile overcab moulding. In fact, it's unlikely that this 'van's good looks will offend even the most staid of motorcaravanners.

## GOOD PROGRESS

Sat in the cab, I discovered that my increasingly saggy old hide came into contact with upholstery of an infinitely better quality: chocolate-coloured leather looks so good on the cab seats that you may be tempted to try a taste! It's standard too. The test 'van was based on the more basic version of the Ducato, but IH had seen fit to add another desirable (optional) extra in the form of a simply super stereo. The Kenwood head unit provides a big, easy-to-see and use screen that features touch controls and plays discs, as well as providing the expected radio.

This impressive machine is connected to an even more impressive system of amplifiers and speakers scattered throughout the interior. It's worth noting that one of the MMM Team bemoaned the fact that the sound quality was much better than his hi-fi system at home! Serious music fans should put by around two grand for this extra: needless to say, I made the most of it during the test - even to the extent that a caller to my mobile told me to turn it down!

And so to the highway, where all the oft-talked-about qualities of the Ducato come to the fore. A comfy driving position, light steering, good brakes and easy gearchange meant I arrived in the New Forest (a 175-mile journey) as fresh as a daisy. This 'van felt very solid on the road, a testament to its solid construction. Conversion noise was muted too, with only a few tiny creaks and rattles evident. Because this was the first J500 built I'll forgive it, and needless to say, these little niggles will come under the steely gaze (and hearing) of motorcaravan perfectionist, Ian Hartley. With the 2.3-litre (130bhp) motor under the bonnet, this seven-metre 'van was never going to fly off the mark and petrol (diesel) heads (and probably most owners), will opt for the 3.0-litre engine which, with 157 horses on tap, will do this luxury tourer justice.

Finally, and importantly, it's important to know that this 'van offers no rear seatbelts, being unashamedly designed as a grand tourer for two.

## INSIDE INFORMATION

Swivelling cab seats take the lead, turning to face the lounge. On the nearside - and aft of the caravan entrance - stands the main kitchen unit with fridge, wardrobe and large cupboard opposite. The rear offside corner of the interior is home to a longitudinal fixed double bed, with the washroom occupying the other corner.

Woodwork is mid-coloured, with contrasting edging, although if this 'van follows in the footsteps of other IH products, customers will have a choice of finishes. Interior bling is executed in gold, with fingerplates on cupboards and drawers adorned with the IH logo. Carpets are mid-brown and removable, over 'limed wood plank' vinyl.

Saving the best 'till last, soft furnishings are adorned with lots more of that delicious chocolate leather. Look further and you discover more hide, covering various trim pieces throughout the interior.

## SITTING PRETTY

Buyers of the J500 will be seeking a 'van with a fixed bed and probably be delighted to find one with as good a lounge as this motorhome offers. The fact that this motorhome is designed for just two lucky motorhomers has allowed Ian Hartley to come up with one of the best lounges in the business - unhampered by the constraints of rear seatbelts. The swivelled cab seats join a lengthways, curved sofa that looks inviting and proves to be very comfy. Opposite on the nearside, is this lounge's wild card - a rotating tub chair that's reminiscent of those found in American RVs, albeit in a reduced-bulk form. Crank up the super stereo and tub sitters will discover, and indeed feel, the effects of the system's sub-woofer that's located in the chair's base. Half a dozen motorhomers can gather here to gossip: during the test five members of the MMM team managed to get very comfy - the offer of a glass or two champagne serving to lure them from their own 'vans.

Located on the forward end of the side of the wardrobe, a modest-looking box opens to reveal an Avtex TV/DVD player with built-in digital tuner. Open the wardrobe and you can adjust the direction and height of the roof-mounted aerial to get the best picture. A lead connected to the TV can feed sound through the stereo system, while its socket provides an input for your i-pod. The good news is that

this TV set is set at the correct height for easy viewing. The very good news is the fact that it's also a standard fitting.

Mealtimes see a pair of interestingly shaped table tops emerge from a dedicated locker, to stand in a choice of pedestal floor sockets - two in front of the sofa, one towards the cab: this means the tables can be used in the different locations, singly, or together. In front of the sofa, the tops couple to form a surface that's good for two to dine at. A single table can also be used to serve the cab seats for snacks and provide a place for drinks and the like when lounging. Both tables (and their legs) proved a bit tricky to extract from their locker, but this is a minor detail that should be tweaked on production models, leading to less bad language from owners!

## PREPARING PROVENDER

The kitchen is dominated - style-wise - by matt-finish worktop and a pair of deep stainless steel sinks. Both look very cutting edge. Further aft, the Smev stove is more conventional and a stalwart of IH conversions. Even so, this offers all that a cook might need, with four burners, grill and oven - all with most welcome electronic ignition.

The sinks are very deep, but - served by the expected swivelling mixer tap - worked well. I would have preferred a more conventional sink/drain here, and if I asked nicely, IH would probably fit one in my J500.



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**8** The kitchen features twin stainless sinks and fashion-conscious worktop

**9** The fitted cutlery is an impressive sight

**10** Super drawer storage in the kitchen is one of my favourite features

**11** The washroom displays a nautical air and an unusual shower

**12** Fixed bed stands ever ready - with a memory foam mattress

One kitchen appliance is also found across the aisle, as the fridge sits opposite in the base of the unit that contains the wardrobe, a large cupboard and the table storage locker. This unit is adequate, but not the type of mega-fridge/freezer found in many a luxury motorhome of this type. No matter, 88 litres of cooling/freezing space should be enough for our touring couple. Work surface in this kitchen is mainly semi-permanent, with a lid over the cooker, a drop-in cutting board for the sinks and a lift-up surface at the forward end that impedes the caravan door when in use. There's also a small area next to the washroom that - thanks to an adjacent mains socket - seems to be the perfect home for your electric kettle.

Kitchen storage provision provides two lockers and cupboard above, but it's the five big drawers below that get a big thumbs-up from yours truly. With plenty of space in front of the main unit, it's easy to open and use the drawers that are so much better than the cupboards that would require you to grovel to get at their contents. A nice surprise lurks in one of the drawers: a set of melamine 'crockery' is neatly fitted, although the cups and saucers and eggcups included were slightly quirky. Want your own set of Crown Derby fitted in here? I'm pretty sure IH would oblige. Finally, an even nicer surprise greets you as you explore the cupboard above the fridge. Here you'll find a slim internal drawer housing a set of cutlery - all snugly fitted, each item in its own shaped slot.

### WASHROOM WONDERS

Sensibly, the washroom eschews a separate shower compartment. The result is a very spacious room, where those of similar type with a shower compartment can be cramped

and difficult to use in all three crucial areas (washbasin, toilet and shower). The most unusual-looking part of this motorhome - the washroom has a quirky, almost nautical air, with shaped Perspex cupboard doors, round, porthole-like mirrors and chromed butterfly hinges creating the look. The round stainless steel basin looks good too. The cupboard above is spacious, but comes a little too low to allow you to get your head over the basin. There's a lack of counter top here too, but this prototype design (the first to be lived in) should get the simple mods that will solve these problems in production models. The toilet is the unsurprising Thetford C200 swivel-bowl model which, equally unsurprisingly, worked perfectly well. However, I'd prefer the bench-type model that offers a greater capacity and has its cassette conveniently-mounted on back-saving wheels.

Standout feature of this washroom is also the most intriguing, as a large showerhead protrudes from the ceiling, served by a wet-room floor with two outlets and IH logo neatly moulded in. Motorhome fashionistas will love this feature that transplants cutting-edge domestic shower style into a motorhome. There's no curtain or screen in here, so lots of mopping down is needed once douching has finished. However, this set-up is just an example of what can be achieved in this washroom: IH will customise the showering arrangements to suit customers' needs and desires - some, of course, not wanting a shower at all.

Neat details in here include a big mirror and a splash-proof toilet roll holder that, appropriately, comes from the world of boats.

#### I LIKED

- Stylish looks
- Solid construction
- Good to drive
- Superb Brit-friendly layout
- Lovely lounge
- Stylish kitchen with drawer storage
- Spacious washroom
- Comfy bed
- Boot storage

#### I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- More powerful engine
- A sink with drainer
- Bench-type toilet

#### I DISLIKED

- Bulky rubbish bin



### IN BED

The reason-to-buy fixed bed is, of course, instantly available (and the only place to sleep in this two-berth 'van). Once you feel you've consumed enough champagne and Chivas Regal, it's but a short totter to the comfort of the memory foam mattress and leather-clad headboard. This bed's a decent length too, and although the space-age mattress felt rather firm, it proved very comfy indeed. It's worth noting that the large cupboard on the offside overhangs the foot of the bed - however, I found that it didn't get in the way at all. Sitting up in bed is a little tricky as there's a rear window present: again, ask nicely and your J500 could probably be had with no window here and a taller headboard. Note that the window is flanked by useful shelves that supported my specs and glass of water with ease.

### IN STORE NOW

Star of the storing show is the rear boot, where a strong double-skinned GRP lid is held closed by chrome plated marine quality latches that are oh-so-much better than the average motorhome locker catch. The lid, once released, rises on gas struts to reveal a large storage locker, plus access to the toilet cassette. There's loads of room in here for chairs and other outdoor kit. There should also be enough space in here for a pair of folding bikes. The prototype test 'van had its spare wheel in the boot too; easy to get at, but taking up a lot of room. Investigations revealed that there should be plenty of space for a spare wheel carrier underneath the rear.



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- perfect running quietly on mains power and low setting on chilly nights. The gas locker holds only two 7kg cylinders; so enthusiastic all-year-round motorhomers that like to get away from hook-up should budget for a bulk gas tank. Full-facility site fans' gas will, of course, last much longer when the 'van's hooked up. Talking of all-year camping, I was pleased to find a large inboard fresh water tank (mounted under the bed and protected from the cold) and chunky, easy-to-use drain valves for both fresh and waste tanks mounted at the rear offside skirt.

Lighting is comprehensive, with lots of halogen spots on hand. Latest-technology LED lamps are represented by rope 'mood' lighting mounted in a plinth above the bed and blue accent lighting in the washroom's Perspex-doored cupboard. Shame that this 'van does not include many LED lamps, but the three 110 amp hr leisure batteries fitted should mean that the lights ought to run undimmed, for many hours when away from hook-up. It's worth bearing in mind that replacement LED lamps can now be had for many of the fittings equipped with halogen bulbs.

### WINNING WAYS

The J500 is not the first IH Motor Campers 'van to win an MMM award, but it is the first to be dubbed Motorhome of the Year. It's also IH's second coachbuilt, low profile 'van aimed at offering luxury touring for two: clearly, Ian Hartley was not put off by the dedication and Herculean effort required when a very small firm decides to design and build such a motorcaravan. Indeed, it seems all this effort has been rewarded, as at time of writing, five orders had already been taken.

The last few years has seen the low profile fixed-bed motorhome become increasingly popular in the UK - a design that's probably the most popular among motorcaravanners in mainland Europe. The J500 takes the fixed bed concept and adds the kind of genuinely comfortable lounge we Brits love; something that's rarely found in products from the Continent. Based on Europe's most ubiquitous base vehicle, its high quality, luxury and individualism that helps set the J500 apart and make it a top prize winner. Then there's IH Motor Campers' reputation for excellent customer service and the fact that you should be able to have your J500 customised in a way that



Storage provision inside is copious, with a total of nine overhead lockers, a good-sized (but not that tall) wardrobe, with large shelved cupboard alongside. Under the sofa there's lots of room too, got at by lifting the individual squab cushions. A check of the interior also revealed cubbyholes, shelves, and a magazine rack. On the inside of the caravan door hangs a box designed to be a rubbish bin, but this proved to be a tad bulky. I'd prefer to see something lighter and less obtrusive here, maybe an off-the-shelf item made in lighter plastic.

### THE EQUIPMENT

Heat and hot water first, and here it's provided by the latest Truma Combi with gas and mains electric power on tap. These units are compact, reliable and reasonably quiet

#### VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

IH Motor Campers, Great North Road,  
Knottingley, West Yorkshire WF11 0BS  
(tel: 01977 677118;  
web site: [www.ihmotorhomes.com](http://www.ihmotorhomes.com))

#### WE STAYED AT

Setthorns Forest Holidays site, Wooton,  
New Milton, Hampshire BH25 5WA  
(tel: 01590 681020;  
web site: [www.forestholidays.co.uk](http://www.forestholidays.co.uk))



would rarely be possible with a 'van from a mainstream converter.

This motorhome ain't cheap, but it is very well equipped as standard and truly deserves its place in the best British motorhomes hall of fame. Couples, who wish to tour in style and be pestered for show-arounds by motorhome groups on campsites, should form an orderly queue in IH Motor Campers' showroom. ■

13 The caravan door-mounted waste bin proved to be a tad bulky

14 The boot sets this 'van apart from the herd



## LIVE-IN TEST DATA

## IH MOTOR CAMPERS J500

### TYPE:

Low profile coachbuilt

### PRICE

- From: £54,995 OTR
- As tested: £58,043 OTR

### BASICS

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

### CONSTRUCTION

GRP clad sandwich and coachbuilt construction with GRP mouldings. Caravan entrance on UK nearside

### DIMENSIONS (\*manufacturers figures)

- Length: 7.00m (22ft 11.5in)\*
- Width: 2.24m (7ft 4in)\*
- Height: 2.94m (9ft 8in)\*
- Wheelbase: 4.03m (13ft 2.5in)
- Rear overhang: 2.08m (6ft 10in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 3500kg
- Payload: TBA

### INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside longitudinal sofa wardrobe/cupboard, fixed double bed, nearside tub chair, caravan door, kitchen, washroom

- Insulation: 40mm High density Styrofoam
- Interior height: 2.02m (6ft 7.5in) max

### THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 2.3-litre turbo-diesel producing 95.5kW (130bhp) @ 3600rpm
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Fuel consumption: 25.3mpg
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round with ABS and ASR
- Suspension: Front: Independent with coil springs. Rear: Rigid axle with leaf springs
- Features: Remote central locking, driver's airbag, electric windows, trip computer, variable windscreen wiper delay, electric mirrors, adjustable steering column, central and side storage bins, pop-up map holder, 12V socket, spare wheel

### LOUNGING AND DINING

Swivelled cab seats, lengthways sofa and tub seat served by pedestal tables with a choice of locations in floor-mounted sockets

### KITCHEN

Main unit has 2 overhead lockers and cupboard above, 2 shelves and 5 drawers below, one containing fitted crockery. Lift-up worktop at forward end of unit. Cupboard opposite houses drawer with fitted cutlery

- Sink: Twin stainless steel circular bowls with drop-in wooden cutting board and chromed swivelling mixer tap. No drainer
- Cooker: Smev stainless steel unit with four-burner hob with hinged worktop lid, grill/oven with internal illumination: all with electronic ignition. Two-speed extractor hood above
- Fridge: Dometic RM 7361 three-way with manual energy selection. Capacity 88 litres

### WASHROOM

Stainless steel circular washbasin with chromed mixer tap, Thetford C200 swivel-bowl cassette toilet with electric flushing,



twin-drain wet-room floor provides showering area served by mixer tap and ceiling-mounted shower rose. 4 cupboards, 3 mirrors, soap dispenser, tooth mug, towel rail, toilet roll holder

### BED

Fixed rear double

- Length: 1.95m (6ft 5in)
- Width: 1.27m (4ft 2in) max

### STORAGE

Lounge: Space in sofa base, 5 overhead lockers, 3 shelves, magazine rack, 2 cubbyholes. Amidships: Single-door wardrobe with side-to-side hanging rail, large cupboard with 3 shelves. Bedroom: 2 overhead lockers, 4 shelves. External: Rear-located boot with lockable top-hinged access door

### LIFE SUPPORT

- Fresh water: Inboard. 136 litres (29.9 gallons)
- Waste water: Underslung. 115 litres (16.7 gallons)
- Water/space heating: Truma Combi 4 Boiler with blown-air, gas-mains operation
- Leisure battery: 3 x 110 amp hr
- Gas: 2x 7kg cylinders
- Lighting: Cab area: 2 halogen downlighters. Lounge: 5 halogen downlighters. Kitchen: 5 halogen downlighters. Washroom: 3 halogen downlighters, 2 blue LED cupboard lights. Bedroom: Concealed LED mood lighting, 3 halogen downlighters, adjustable halogen twin-lamp reading light, awning light
- Sockets: 230V: 2 (in kitchen and lounge). 12V: 1 (in wardrobe, feeds TV)
- Control panel: Mounted above sofa, displays/controls clock, external/internal temperature, vehicle/leisure battery Voltage, fresh water level (per cent), fresh water pump, lighting
- Blinds/curtains: Pleated blinds to all windows/rooflights and cab. Flyscreens to all caravan windows and rooflights. No curtains fitted
- Badged as NCC EN1646 Compliant: No

### OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: Front and rear mud flaps (£58), alloy wheels (£995),
  - Conversion: Premium Audio pack (£1995)
- Other options
- Base: Passenger airbag (£211), air-conditioning (£934), cruise control (£170), extra power battery (£55), ComfortMatic auto gearbox; only available with 157bhp engine (£1675), 157bhp engine upgrade (£1500), 'walnut' dash trim (£205)
  - Conversion: Mains-operated air-conditioning (£1525), safe (£55), carbon monoxide alarm (£75), exterior gas point (£195), extra sockets (£65), external aerial socket (£88), extra spotlights (£55), Gaslow refillable gas system (£495), awning (£620), alarm (£695), 80W solar panel (£595)

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