

FILLED WITH FUN

Wheelhome Vikenze on 1.3-litre Fiat Fiorino

This latest quart-in-a-pint-pot camper is good for a laugh, especially when it's at the pumps



Words & pictures by Jonathan Lloyd



Apologies if you think I should have written 'litre in a demi-litre pot,' but I've always been more Bulldog Drummond than eager Europhile - imperial measure to the fore. At least I avoided the old chestnut, 'size matters' - though here it does. Wheelhome has been quietly and conscientiously ploughing its own mini motorhome-making furrow for decades now. While many other converters have been building ever longer, and heavier, wheeled 'mansions', this firm has remained tightly focussed on garage-able pop-top motorcaravans that are also serious fully-equipped camping vehicles and not merely picnic providers.

FUN WITH FIAT

These days, motorists are subjected to ever more restrictive legislation and spiralling running costs, and many feel that the joy has gone out of motoring. Well, I've news for them: get behind the wheel of one of these little Fiat-based Wheelhomes and it'll put a smile on your face. Not only are they purse-positive and wallet-friendly, they are full of *joie de vivre*. A very competent, but bog standard, combi van with a heavy slab of GRP (the rising roof) at the highest and least advantageous place for handling isn't an obvious recipe for a high level of driver satisfaction. But yes, Vikenze cornered well; yes, it accelerated in a spirited fashion; yes, the little turbocharged diesel motor spun willingly; and yes, the gear ratios proved to be perfectly chosen.

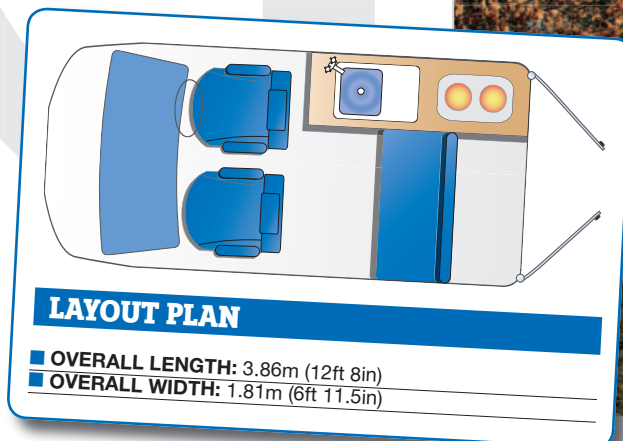
Mature reflection has led me to deduce that as impressive as the tick list is, it was the fact that it's a fully equipped motorhome that drove this well that turned it into such a fun factory.

The 'van was so convenient and practical in the city environment that I found no difference at all driving the Vikenze than driving any other urban Euro-capsule. First class over-the-shoulder views, plus an - almost - unimpeded view rearwards (via the rear windows), made parking a doddle. Urban jousting was further aided by the short overall length and tight (for a front-wheel drive vehicle) turning circle. It was a bracing spring morning when I collected the Vikenze, so it was reassuring to find that the standard-fit rear wash/wipe and window heating quickly dealt with the frost outside and condensation inside.

Back in the 1980s, the original Fiat Fiorino was a very commercial and basic affair, and all aboard were in no doubt that they were travelling in a 'bread' van. Nothing could be further from the truth with the current incarnation. Presumably, it's a direct result of opting - from the outset - to design a common floorpan and drive train for both the mini people carrier (Qubo) and the Fiorino panel van.

Speaking of people carriers, Vikenze arrives with a good complement of travel seats -

- 1 Fun to drive, the little Fiat is great around town
- 2 The very latest Euro V compliant motor gives frugality and cheap road tax
- 3 Two rear travel seats give full-blown car credentials
- 4 A place for everything. Across the rear are portable thermo-electric cooler, underseat and gas storage
- 5 Roof-mounted storage tray is surprisingly useful





the rear providing a forward-facing double travel seat, complete with head restraints and three-point belts. The side sliding door provided easy entry and egress and as far as I could judge, rear seat passengers should have a good view out. Us Lloyds are built for comfort rather than speed, and it would have been possible to exceed the payload by just all of us being aboard. This is one reason why I would have liked the kitchen furniture to be removable. Testing the 'van as Billy-no-mates meant that though excessive, my avoidupois did not cause overloading. There was company too, as I enthusiastically (though spectacularly tunelessly) sung along with the rather good and easy-to-use radio/CD player.

All current-shape Fiorinos I've driven have been either silver or black, which is probably why I hadn't clocked the vast amount of untrimmed painted metal inside - around the door cards and along the door caps. Silver or black painted metal blends reasonably well with the dark grey colouring of the fascia, but orange does not. Shame, as it was the only fly in this gorgeous orange ointment. Of course, once you notice something and it irritates you, there is no known cure, short of driving with your eyes shut. Judging by some of my fellow road-users' antics, this has become a driving style favoured by many!

FRUGAL FIORINO

With diesel costing in excess of £1.40 a litre, mpg may well now be of greater importance than mph. Salt, a large pinch of, is frequently required when assessing the integrity of quoted fuel consumption figures. That said, Fiorinos motivated by my lead-filled right foot usually return around 50mpg even when fully laden. This is good, but a long way from the 70mpg others claim to achieve.

The test vehicle was one of the first of the Euro 5 compliant versions. Tweaks and general emission belt tightening has made a previously incredibly clean engine even better. In part, this has been achieved by standard-fit stop-start technology. Clever really, it shuts off the engine after a short time idling to preserve fuel and not dismiss as being of limited advantage. As a minority vehicle it may only have a limited effect, but if most vehicles driving in cities were so equipped, the improvement in air quality might be considerable.

Whitehall Mandarins have agreed that the



I LIKED

- Innovative design
- Toilet accessible at all times
- Fun to drive and a doddle to park
- Low running costs
- Gorgeous colour (no cost option)
- Comfy over-sized bed

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Removable kitchen unit
- Trimmed door caps

I DISLIKED

- No on-board waste tank

Fiorino is a 'non-smoker,' so the first year's RFL (road tax) is free and subsequently, will only cost 30 of our British pounds per annum.

Economy is about more than mpg though, it is the whole-life costs that are also very important. Let's have a look at the old scoreboard then: good on fuel, cheap road tax, cheaper to insure... And there's more, multi-drop delivery operators report that Fiorinos are inexpensive to service, light on tyres (that do not cost an arm and a leg anyway) and very reliable. Don't forget that, with a motorcaravan as handy-dandy as this and with automatic transmission available, there might be no need to run a second car. Vikenze will go anywhere one might (reasonably) want a car to.

VIKENZIAN DAYS

One of the Vikenze's most important features is that in camping mode all the kit can be accessed and used without having to push the roof up - great if you just want a quick cuppa or an emergency 'comfort' stop. That said, the front-hinged, fabric-sided rising roof is electrically operated, so takes less effort to deploy. Once up, it provides standing room for even the most lofty, and with three large half-moon vents/windows, allows natural light to flood in.

Converting from road mode to camping cottage is accomplished by sliding the cab seats forward on their runners and then moving their backrests forward. On the test model, the



6



7



cab passenger seat backrest moved forward electrically where it was manual operation for the driver's. The cab seat shifting allows the (previously up-ended) rearward facing seat squab to sit on the floor and its backrest to be raised. On-site seating can be arranged as an L-shaped settee, or as two facing units with a less cluttered floor. Each was comfy when both dining and lounging. The island leg-equipped table proved stable in use - big enough, but light in weight and easy to store.

A two-burner hob, plus stainless steel sink (with drainer and pumped cold water supply), are located along the outside wall, while the pleasingly efficient thermo-electric cooler box nestles between the forward-facing rear seat squab and the kitchen base unit. Of course, it could have been stored anywhere where the lead would have allowed it (including in an awning), or be unplugged and taken on a picnic.

Wheelhome fits mains hook-up facilities to all its conversions, so the purchase of a cheap compact 230V fan heater should allow comfy three-season camping. However, if you intend camping away from hook-up in cold weather, you'll need the extra cost (£1,172) Webasto diesel-fired, blown-air space heater.

New finishes and trim to the cabinetwork

looked great and purchasers have the choice of either the brown soft furnishing fabric of the test vehicle or an attention grabbing terracotta-coloured one. The latter would be great with some of the exterior colours, but might be a bit much with this bright orange coachwork.

The most rearward seat base provides a voluminous 'holdall' for camping clobber and what-have-you, plus further storage is available in the spare wheel well. Cross Wheelhome's palm with silver - to the value of £118 - and you can have a spare wheel and tyre in lieu of the compressor/can of goo repair kit. But of course, you'll lose the use of the well as storage space. An Adventure Pack is also available (£1,275), which adds the spare wheel, traction control, privacy glass, an engine upgrade to 95bhp and 50kg more payload.

VIKENZIAN NIGHTS

A six-foot-five (2ft 2in wide) bed in a 'van this compact is quite an achievement. Further, to design one that is both flat and comfortable

6 Car quickly converts to camper once on site

7 A two-burner hob, plus stainless steel sink with drainer completes the kitchen



takes real ingenuity. This one though, is all of the above, plus the fitted Porta Potti toilet can be accessed and used with the bed in use. Now that is real genius, and is probably the Vikenze's unique selling point.

A second sleeping berth is available at extra cost, and stretches the tape to a worthy, 6ft 0in x 2ft 3.25in. It's up in the nearside roof, and a sleeping bag can be left out - stowed flat on top of the mattress. Adjacent (and fitted in both models), is the clothes store, which is basically a full-length covered tray: this proved to be much more practical than it sounds.

Generous curtains are not traditionally lined, but are made from two thicknesses of fabric. These should keep you reasonably

snug and prevent the early morning sun waking you up prematurely.

VOTE VIKENZE

Wheelhome's Vikenze is a motorcaravan that's very compact, but not cramped. Perfect accommodation for landscape painters, photographers, walkers, twitchers, festival goers, night fisherfolk, et al.

It can also be a 'bijou country cottage' and a 'spare bedroom.' It's also sufficiently commodious to use on supermarket sorties, or on the school run - even fast enough for a bank robbery or two!

CONCLUSION

Why buy a car when you can have a Wheelhome Vikenze that has the same footprint? This cute little quart-in-a-pint-pot camper should spell fun, fun, fun - especially for the young at heart solo motorcaravanner. ■

8 The bed is flat and nicely long

9 Cleverly, the sink unit swivels to reveal the used-in-situ toilet

TEST EXTRA SPECIFICATION

- **Price:** £26,150 OTR
- **As tested:** £26,580 OTR
- **The vehicle:** Fiat Fiorino Combi; 1.3-litre 75bhp Euro V turbo-diesel engine; six-speed manual gearbox; front-wheel drive
- **Warranty:** Three years base vehicle, eight years anti-perforation, one year conversion
- **Dimensions and weights:** Length: 3.86m (12ft 8in); width: 1.81m (5ft 11.5in); height: 1.89m (6ft 2.5in); gross vehicle weight: 1,700kg; payload: 260kg
- **Belted seats:** 4 (including driver)
- **Beds:** Lounge single: 1.95m x 665mm (6ft 5in x 2ft 2in)
- **Water and space heating:** None fitted
- **Tanks:** Fresh water 10 litres (2.2 gallons); no waste water tank fitted
- **Gas:** 1 x 2.75kg and 1 x 400g cylinder (Campingaz 907 and 901)
- **Options fitted to test vehicle:** Colour matching to rising roof (£185), Porta Potti 335 toilet (£103), 14-litre Waeco cooler - upgrade from 7-litre (£142)
- **Other options available:** Automatic transmission (£990), Adventure Pack upgrade (not available with automatic) - 95bhp engine and traction control (£1,275), cab air-conditioning (£455), spare wheel - in lieu of under floor storage compartment - (£118), privacy glass (£235), metallic paint (£410)



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