

touring test | swift kon-tiki 659

the length of luxury

for a touring couple it could be the ultimate home-from-home, giving them their own luxury apartment on wheels

As well as offering the height of luxury for a touring couple, the tag-axle Kon-Tiki 659 is pretty lengthy, at 8.67 metres. So, what better than one of our lengthy touring tests, to assess the long and short of it?



WITH its permanent double bed layout, featuring full-width rear washroom, well-equipped kitchen and large lounge, the Kon-Tiki 659 is probably most people's idea of a dream motorhome. For a touring couple it could be the ultimate home-from-home, giving them their own luxury apartment on wheels. Although technically a four-berth, since the front dinette converts into a double bed, it's fair to say that the 659 is really aimed at couples, plus the two cab seats are the only ones that have belts for travelling.

On paper there are just two potential stumbling blocks, one being the amount of cash needed to live the dream in the first place. At a shade over £70,000, it's going to be out of reach as a new motorhome for many folk. The second potential problem is the sheer length of the thing. At well over eight metres, this tag-axle monster is going to eat several spaces in a supermarket carpark, assuming you feel confident enough to manoeuvre it there in the first place!

Keen to see just how easy it would be to live with, I set off for a week's tour of the far

south-eastern tip of the UK, exploring the area between Hastings and Ramsgate. How well would the Kon-Tiki cope with the tight lanes? Would it be easy to park on a campsite? Is it well-enough built and equipped to justify the price tag? I was keen to find out.

drive time

My first stop, after collecting the Kon-Tiki, was to park-up on my parents' driveway, to load up all my kit for the trip. They have a large house, with a double garage and a fairly wide driveway leading up to it, but the

lengthy Kon-Tiki only just fitted, taking up all the space from the public path right up to the garage door. So, here's lesson one if you're thinking of buying a motorhome like this - measure your driveway first!

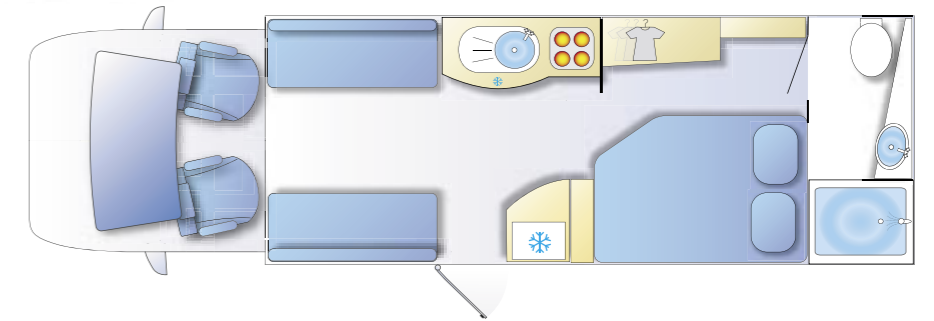
Reversing off the driveway was also a bit tricky but, once underway on main roads, the length wasn't such an issue. I just had to be careful on tight corners, checking that both sets of rear wheels weren't going to cut the corner and mount the pavement.

With no rear window to offer some through-the-'van rear visibility, Swift have fitted a rear view camera system, which clips onto the redundant rear-view mirror in the cab. This was a real help when pulling out of my parents' driveway, with the door mirrors offering that extra bit of guidance - plus my dad also decided to stand behind the 'van and wave like a maniac in case I took out the cherry tree!

Being over 6ft tall, I found the driver's seat was a bit too high for me, even once I had adjusted it as low as it would go (there's adjustment up and down for both the front and back of the seat squab). This is a problem I normally face in motorhomes that have been fitted with swivelling mechanisms in their seat bases, which add a few extra inches in seat height. For most it probably won't be an issue, but it's worth sitting in the cab of any motorhome with swivel seating and checking if the driving position is okay for you.

Having said this, I soon got used to my elevated position, with my eyeline at the top of the windscreen, and drove along in relative comfort. Two things struck me almost immediately about the vehicle's driving characteristics. The first was a bit of a shock. I pulled out on to a roundabout, at only modest speed, but was greeted by

this month's layout
fixed bed, end washroom



the sound of screeching front tyres, making me sound like Bodie driving his Capri in The Professionals. The combination of a fairly hefty vehicle, plus a very torquey 3-litre turbo-diesel engine, means that the driven front wheels really have their work cut out. If the front wheels will spin on dry tarmac, you don't even want to think about parking this vehicle on a wet grassy pitch - you'll never get off it! I soon got used to driving the vehicle on the road, though, and there were no more wheelspin moments at roundabouts.

The other surprise was the rather harsh ride once on the move; I felt every little bump and imperfection in the road. I can only assume the tag-axle makes for a slightly harder-sprung rear end. To be fair, it's not much of a problem and is more than made up for by the stability and roadholding. The tag-axle means that the Kon-Tiki is less easily blown off-line by passing trucks, making for safer motorway progress, plus it also helps to give the vehicle a huge payload capacity.

Like all Fiat Ducatos or Peugeot Boxers, the cab isn't the quietest place in the world, and you'll need to turn the radio up at speed, but I think we're all well used to that by now.

this type of fixed bed layout is back in vogue this season

FOR

- HIGH-QUALITY CONSTRUCTION
- WELL-PLANNED INTERIOR
- HIGH SPECIFICATION ON-ROAD STABILITY
- LARGE WASHROOM
- SPACIOUS SHOWER
- WELL-EQUIPPED KITCHEN
- PLENTY OF MAINS SOCKETS AND SPOTLAMPS

AGAINST

- LONG TO DRIVE
- HEAVY FOR A WET PITCH
- NO EXTERIOR ACCESS TO THE UNDER-BED STORAGE
- AWKWARD MAIN TABLE STORAGE
- FIXED BED NOT COMFORTABLE FOR THOSE OVER 6FT TALL
- NO SPECIFIC STORAGE FOR BOTTLES AND GLASSES





FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £70,179

PRICE AS TESTED
£71,961

BERTHS 4

TRAVEL SEATS (INC DRIVER) 2

DIMENSIONS 8.67m L,
2.35m W, 3.09m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT
1.95m

MAXIMUM WEIGHT
5000kg

PAYLOAD 915kg

BEDS Rear double
1.93m x 1.35m
(tapering to 1.10m wide
at foot of bed); front
dinette-derived double
2.10m x 1.38m

FRESH WATER 120
litres (underfloor,
insulated and heated)

WASTE WATER 100
litres (underfloor, heated)

LEISURE BATTERY
2 x 95Ah

MAINS SOCKETS 7,
including 2 in cab area

BASE VEHICLE

**FIAT DUCATO WITH
AL-KO TAG-AXLE
LOW-LINE CHASSIS**

ENGINE 3-litre 160
Multijet Power 157bhp
MPG 22.9

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING Thetford
cooker with dual-fuel
hob (800W electric
hotplate and three gas
burners with electronic
ignition) plus separate
oven and grill

FRIDGE Thetford
112-litre AES three-way
fridge, plus separate
40-litre electric-only
top-access 'chest'
freezer

GAS 2 x 7kg

BOILER Dual-fuel
(gas/electric) 6kW
Truma Combi boiler
with en-route operation

pitching-up

My base for this trip was the Caravan Club's Black Horse Farm site, near Folkestone. Open all year round, this is a popular stop-over site with those who are either about to head off to the continent, or who have just got back to the UK. It's a fairly compact site, but well located for exploring all the attractions in this part of the world.

The pitches here are mainly hardstanding and my Kon-Tiki filled its pitch from front to back, so I parked on a diagonal to give a bit of space. It was quite cold, so my first task after hooking-up and putting the kettle on was to start the heating. The 659 is fitted with Truma's gas/electric Combi system, which heats the water and provides blown-air from the same unit. There are several vents for the blown-air system, including one in the rear washroom. I found that the vents at the rear of the vehicle, close to the Combi unit (under the rear bed) gave a good flow of hot air, but the vent under the nearside dinette seating only gave a fairly feeble flow of warm air. However, Swift have taken the unusual step of fitting one blown-air outlet just above the side entrance door, as you enter the vehicle. I guess this is designed to act the same way that heating systems do in most shops, blowing hot air at you as you enter. It actually works very well and it's this vent which heats up the front of the vehicle, more than the under-seat outlet.

I soon became warm and toasty and used the heating on its mains electric setting for most of my stay, to save on gas. Incidentally, this heating system can also be used when you're on the move. With no belted seats for rear passengers to sit and feel cold in, though, this is about arriving with a warm vehicle, rather than defrosting the kids.

The Kon-Tiki boasts a very practical storage locker under the offside front dinette seating, accessed via an external locker door. A section of this extends under the main floor, thanks to the low-line Al-Ko chassis, making it a good place to store longer items such as the winding arm for the standard Fiamma roll-out awning.

I was hoping for a similarly useful storage locker under the rear double bed, but the only access to this storage space is by lifting up the bed base on its gas struts. Most of the space is taken up by the Truma heater, plus the main table also stores in here. It's a slightly awkward space to store the table and a purpose-built locker would have been better. However, the small round table, which sits on a rotating leg behind the driver's seat, is probably good enough if just two of you are using the vehicle, so you may not need to use the main table very often.

lounging and dining

Both cab seats are fitted on swivel bases, so the best lounge set-up is to use these seats



Most motorhomers come down to the Folkestone area for a brief stop-over on their way to France. However, this far south-eastern corner of the country boasts some fascinating local attractions. The beach at Dungeness is like something out of a surrealist painting, with a nuclear power station humming away at one end, then a series of wooden huts dotted along the vast stretch of shingle, many of them built around old railway carriages. You'll also find charming old towns like Sandwich, where time seems to have stood still.



One of the last places in the UK where fishing boats launch off the beach, Hastings has a charming old centre with restaurants and pubs.

1st stop



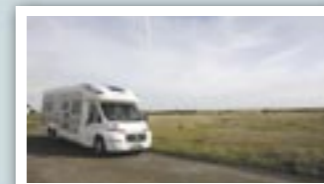
Hythe is a charming old town with a long maritime history. Park your motorhome for free along either side of the river that leads into town.

2nd stop



The Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch railway has tiny carriages that carry passengers from Hythe to Dungeness beach. It doesn't operate in the winter.

3rd stop



Dungeness has a vast shingle beach, home to numerous old wooden huts and boasting a nature reserve, so be sure to bring your binoculars.

4th stop



Sandwich is an ancient town with quaint buildings. It's hard to park a 'van in the centre, so look for a roadside space along the road into town.

5th stop



facing the rear, where they combine with the twin inward-facing settees to provide enough space for up to eight people to sit. Alternatively, if there's just two of you, why not sit in the cab seats and stretch your legs out along the settees. A very thoughtful touch is the inclusion of a spotlight and mains socket on both sides of the cab. This means that anyone sitting in a cab seat has light to read a book by, plus there's somewhere to plug in a laptop.

If you want to watch a film there's a Sargent DVD-player with a fold-down screen mounted between the cab seats, which can be watched by anyone sitting on the settees. If you want to use a larger flatscreen TV, Swift have included a neat fixing bracket for this, which slides down from the small section of partition wall unit between the foot of the bed and the lounge. So, you could then watch TV in bed, or from the comfort of the lounge seating.

When it comes to dining, you've got the choice of either using the small round table, or pulling the main table out from its under-bed storage position. The large curved sunroof at the front allows plenty of light to flood in during the day and adds an al-fresco feel to your dining experience - you can also open-up this rooflight to let in fresh air if you want. At night, why not



invite fellow campers round for a moonlit supper - inside!

masterchef

If you're someone who likes to cook in the 'van, rather than spend your holiday money in expensive restaurants, the Kon-Tiki has one of the best kitchens you'll find in any motorhome. Facilities include a full cooker, with oven and grill, plus one electric hotplate



QUALITY COUNTS



The Kon-Tiki scores very well when it comes to build-quality, starting from the ground up. The tag-axle Al-Ko chassis offers stable and dependable handling, with a low centre of gravity. Staying underneath, facilities such as the plumbing and waste tanks are also of a very high quality, making for a motorhome that can be used all-year round.

Inside, the Kon-Tiki uses high-quality fittings and equipment, such as the tough and secure entrance door which works on the central locking system. Items such as the chest freezer also point to a quality motorhome that's got everything you need for a long-distance touring holiday.

Move on to the roof and you've got tough GRP mouldings to keep off the worst of the weather (the side walls are marine-grade aluminium), plus the curved front rooflight is a superb feature that really improves the living experience.

and three gas burners. There's also a large three-way Thetford fridge, plus, unusually, a small chest freezer. I've never seen one of these in a motorhome before and hadn't packed any frozen foods. However, I found the 'chest' nature of this freezer also made it a great place to store wine and water bottles, stopping them from rolling around when on the move.

Kitchen storage has also been well planned, with a cutlery drawer and two slide-out metal drawers fitted between the fridge and cooker. Above, there's a roof locker with elastic straps to secure crockery, plus another large locker and a built-in microwave oven. I stored most of my canned foods in the metal drawers, packing them tight to stop movement when travelling, then used the roof lockers for cereals, tea and coffee. A drinks cabinet, to store bottles and wine glasses would have been useful.

time for bed

The main reason people choose this type of layout is, of course, for the permanent rear bed, to avoid the hassle of making this up each night. The Swift scores well here, with a firm mattress, a pair of spotlights for bedtime reading, plus even a small shelf for your mugs of Ovaltine. At 6ft 2in tall I found it a bit too short for me, with my toes sticking out over the end, but for most people it will be fine.

As an alternative, the front settees have pull-out bases which meet in the central aisle to form another double bed, which uses the settee squabs and backrests for its mattress. This bed isn't as comfortable but, by using the entire width of the 'van, it manages to be longer than the permanent rear bed.



Since there's only belted seating for the driver and passenger, you won't be taking the grandchildren on holiday with you, but this extra bed might be useful if friends decide to visit you on site and stay overnight.

spacious washroom

After the permanent rear bed, this Kon-Tiki's most appealing feature is probably the large rear washroom. This occupies the whole of the rear of the vehicle and is trimmed with a light wood-effect panelling which adds a real touch of class. It's also very practical, with a large separate shower cubicle, a washbasin that has a fair amount of worktop around it, plus a swivel cassette toilet with plenty of legroom.

For me, one of the best features is the large shower cubicle, which is completely plastic-lined and provides plenty of space to move around. With a washroom like this, you don't need to use campsite facilities.

Backing up all these facilities is a very good water system. Swift seem to be one of the best manufacturers when it comes to plumbing and water tanks. Not only are

both the fresh and waste water tanks a good size, although they are underfloor they are also insulated and heated, making them fine for most UK winter use. Also, the drain-down pipes are solid plastic with a wide bore, plus the waste tank has a central plug for a full wash-out and drain-down. You really won't find much better than this.

end of the week

After a week living and touring in the Kon-Tiki 659, I feel like I've had a luxury hotel break. Once pitched-up on site, it provides everything you'll ever need for a luxurious holiday, particularly the well-equipped kitchen and large rear washroom. My test vehicle was even fitted with Dometic's roof-mounted air-conditioning system (at extra cost), but this didn't see any use during my early March break in Kent! If it were summer though, and I was heading to the south of France, then it would've been welcome.

My only real negative thought, after a week spent driving around in this motorhome, relates to the sheer size of it. This complaint would be the same with any large A-class, so

OPTIONS

BASE VEHICLE

Comfort-Matic automatic gearbox (£1629), detachable towbar (£506), Dometic B2200 roof-mounted air-conditioning* (£1782)

* fitted to test vehicle

CONVERSION

Leather upholstery (£1527)

it's not specific to the tag-axle Kon-Tiki. Once on the open road you don't notice the length too much, but on a couple of winding Kent roads I had to concentrate, to stop the back end swiping into walls on tight corners. In most towns and villages I visited, I had to park the Kon-Tiki on residential roads away from the town centre, simply because of its length. On the campsite as well, I had to drive carefully. If you're a nervous driver, don't even consider a lengthy motorhome like this.

It really makes sense to have a towbar fitted if you own a motorhome that's as long as this, so that you can pull a small car on a trailer. Then you've got a luxury holiday apartment, plus the means to explore all of the local area more easily.

The Kon-Tiki obviously isn't cheap, at over £70,000, but it does cram in a lot of equipment and you'd probably pay a lot more for a similarly-equipped and similarly-sized A-class. If you've got a retirement lump sum coming, or a fair amount of savings, you could do worse than spend it on a dream motorhome like this - after all, the money's probably not earning anything in the bank and you'll enjoy some great holidays!

WHICH motorhome says ★★★★★
Perhaps, the ultimate luxury coachbuilt for a couple; just make sure you're happy driving such a long vehicle.

INSURANCE QUOTE

Based on this motorhome being kept at a Peterborough (PE35) postcode and being driven by a married couple aged 55 with full No Claims Discount on their car, Safeguard would quote a premium of: **£704.64** with a total excess of £250. Policy automatically includes breakdown and European cover

www.safeguarduk.co.uk
0800 977 5953



RIVALS



PRICE FROM £55,625

AUTO-TRAIL FRONTIER DAKOTA

BASED ON Fiat Ducato 40 Heavy

NOTES If you like the concept of the Kon-Tiki 659 but cannot accommodate such a big beast at home, or want something a bit more manoeuvrable, then this new-for-2011 Auto-Trail could be the answer. It's layout is much the same as the Swift but it's 'only' 7.60m long, on a single-rear-axle chassis. Lounge and kitchen are smaller though.

WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE February 2011



PRICE FROM £63,720

BENTLEY OULTON

BASED ON Renault Master Al-Ko

NOTES Based on the brand-new Renault Master chassis with Al-Ko extension, we reckon the new Bentley Signature range will be great to drive and this is the biggest of the bunch, with a side fixed bed and full-width end washroom, just like the Kon-Tiki. Again, it's smaller, though, and here the double wardrobe makes the bedroom feel less spacious.

WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE May 2011 (Donington)



PRICE FROM £62,870

RAPIDO 7099+

BASED ON Fiat Ducato Al-Ko

NOTES Another upmarket motorhome in the around-7.50m-class with the back-in-vogue layout of a fixed bed against the side and a washroom right across the rear. This time, however, it's a continental 'van' - and it's the only one here with rear travel seats. From Rapido's most prestigious low-profile line-up it's a bit of a looker with all-silver bodywork.

WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE N/A