

Words & pictures  
by Dave Hurrell

# THE HIGH LIFE

## Danbury Family 4 on 2.5-litre Renault Master

*A taller than usual high top also aims high, trying to provide full four-berth accommodation within a panel van*



**D**anbury is a name well known to motorcaravanners old and young as the then Essex-based firm introduced a Volkswagen-based camper as far back as 1964. These days, wannabe surfers, born-again beach bums and even celebrities flock to the Danbury brand's current home at Yate near Bristol. All are keen to get their hands on one of Danbury Motorcaravans' brand-new, but classic, (Brazilian-built with water cooled motor) T2 Volkswagen campers (see MMM February 2008 Test Report Extra).

In addition to continuing the story of an icon, Danbury has developed motorcaravan

conversions on other vehicles, including the latest VW T5 and - the subject of this month's test - the Renault Master.

### FOR THE FAMILY

Based on Renault's long wheelbase Master with an extra high roof, the Family 4 boasts masses of internal space and headroom that extends to an impressive 2.10 metres (6ft 10.5in). Internal layout offers seating/dining areas at both ends, with kitchen and washroom located amidships. Four berths in three beds (two singles and a double) and four three-point belted travel seats, are the prerequisites that give this 'van the ability to provide practical and safe accommodation for four people.

### TOUGH TRUCK

Renault's Master is no longer at the cutting edge of light commercial vehicle technology (it's due for replacement in around two years time), but its 2.5-litre turbo-diesel engine meets the latest (Euro 4) emissions regulations and comes in several power outputs. A six-speed gearbox with easy dash-mounted lever also meets current driver expectations. The rest of the vehicle is very nicely screwed together - independent front suspension with inboard springs offers good handling and comfort, while front-wheel drive and a rear beam axle conspire to allow a low (lower than the cab) rear floor.

In the cab, multi-adjustable seats are



**AT A GLANCE**

- **PRICE FROM:** £34,999 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Renault Master long wheelbase extra high roof panel van
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of two forward-facing single seats with dinette on offside. Nearside kitchen, offside washroom and wardrobe. Rear-located transverse lounge with two inward-facing sofas
- **ECONOMY:** 26.7mpg overall



1 Truck-like Renault cab is, like the rest of the base vehicle, well built

2 Two forward-facing belted seats in the rear help make this a viable four-berth motorcaravan

comfortable and here trimmed in the optional Burgundy-coloured leather. The Master's dash is a rather uninspiring slab of plastic, but offers a good range of kit, here including two airbags, trip computer and radio/CD player with steering column-mounted controls. Electric windows and mirrors, remote central locking and alarm complete the cab kit count nicely.

The first thing you notice once installed in the pilot's seat is the rather upright driving position and larger-than-usual steering wheel. Truck-like best describes the Master's ergonomics, as it's driving demeanour is much less car-like than Fiat's Ducato and Ford's Transit - currently, two of the most popular

motorcaravan base vehicles. The test 'van was fitted with a list of extras, some of which would be better off fitted as standard.

Passenger airbag, electric windows and mirrors add over 600 quid to the cost of the basic Family 4: shame they're not standard. Other items fitted - more worthy of being options - were cab air-conditioning 120 horsepower engine and Quickshift6 automatic gearbox.

In spite of the recent introduction of Fiat's ComfortMatic auto-changing manual gearbox (giving two-pedal, clutchless motoring), this correspondent's experience is that it's been unable to eclipse Renault's - much older - Quickshift6 auto-changing box of cogs. The

Quickshift6 is simply brilliant: tap the lever sideways to select auto or manual changing of the ratios, tap the lever forward to select first, squeeze the throttle and takeoff is smooth and relaxed. Once underway, the gearbox - living up to its name - swaps ratios swiftly and smoothly. A sideways tap of the lever selects manual operation - great for overtaking and hill climbing; you simply tap the lever forwards to change up, backwards to change down. In spite of this, the system still changes down as you slow and halt and shifts up a gear if you over rev the motor.

The rest of the Master performs well, with comfortable ride and good handling: the wheel-at-each-corner design means you have

## On Test Danbury Family 4



no worry about rear overhang - just remember to turn in a little later than you would when driving a vehicle with a shorter wheelbase. Brakes are superb, but the steering - in spite of that rather large wheel - is a tad heavy.

### FAMILY LOUNGE/DINER

Light wood furniture is partnered with grey-coloured, curved overhead lockers that have the look of cousins found in many a Boeing. Wall linings were a combination of black and brown needle felt that look a bit muddled; however, I'm informed that production models will use just one colour.

A lack of curtains, aside from the one at the rear doors, lends a utilitarian feel that's nonetheless practical to use, as cassette blind/flyscreens do an effective job of providing privacy and bug defence. No curtains in the cab either as internal silver insulating/blackout screens are provided. I'd go for a set of cab blinds if this 'van were mine, but the screens are preferable to

curtains that when drawn are bunched up and can be a bulky nuisance next to the cab seatbelts.

Seating and dining areas are twofold: cab seats swivel easily to face the single seats directly behind, providing sitting and dining opportunities. In the rear, the twin-sofa lounge also offers seating and dining facilities.

Four can get seated up front in rather upright fashion on the single seats. Here, it's the cab pews that are the best and most comfortable seats. On the offside, the floor is raised to compensate for the difference in levels between cab and living area, which is considerable. There's no raised floor on the nearside, but a lidded drawer emerges from beneath the rear seat to provide a footrest and prevent your lower appendages dangling in mid air. Even so, and given the huge headroom on offer, I'd have preferred to see the whole front-end floor raised, with a step down into the kitchen.

Meanwhile, on the offside, a dinette is

completed by a wall-mounted table with a single leg. The table is convenient to use and leaves the rear free for lounging. There's no doubt about it, in the world of dining tables, size matters: this one proved to be only big enough for one lonely road tester to dine at and is possibly the smallest motorcaravan dining table I've ever come across. It did strike me, however, that were you travelling with very little sprogs, two of 'em - and their equally little plates - could enjoy meals here.

Aside from the ability to transport and sleep four people, it'll be the rear lounge that sells this motorcaravan. Folks that like lounges tend to be chauvinistic where location is concerned - front or rear layouts have their devotees, all with very good arguments why their preferred layout is best. In van conversions front lounges (my own preference) allow you to sit, glass in hand and gaze out of the side sliding door. The rear lounge tends to be a bit cosier in bad weather, and more convivial, as facing sofas are great for





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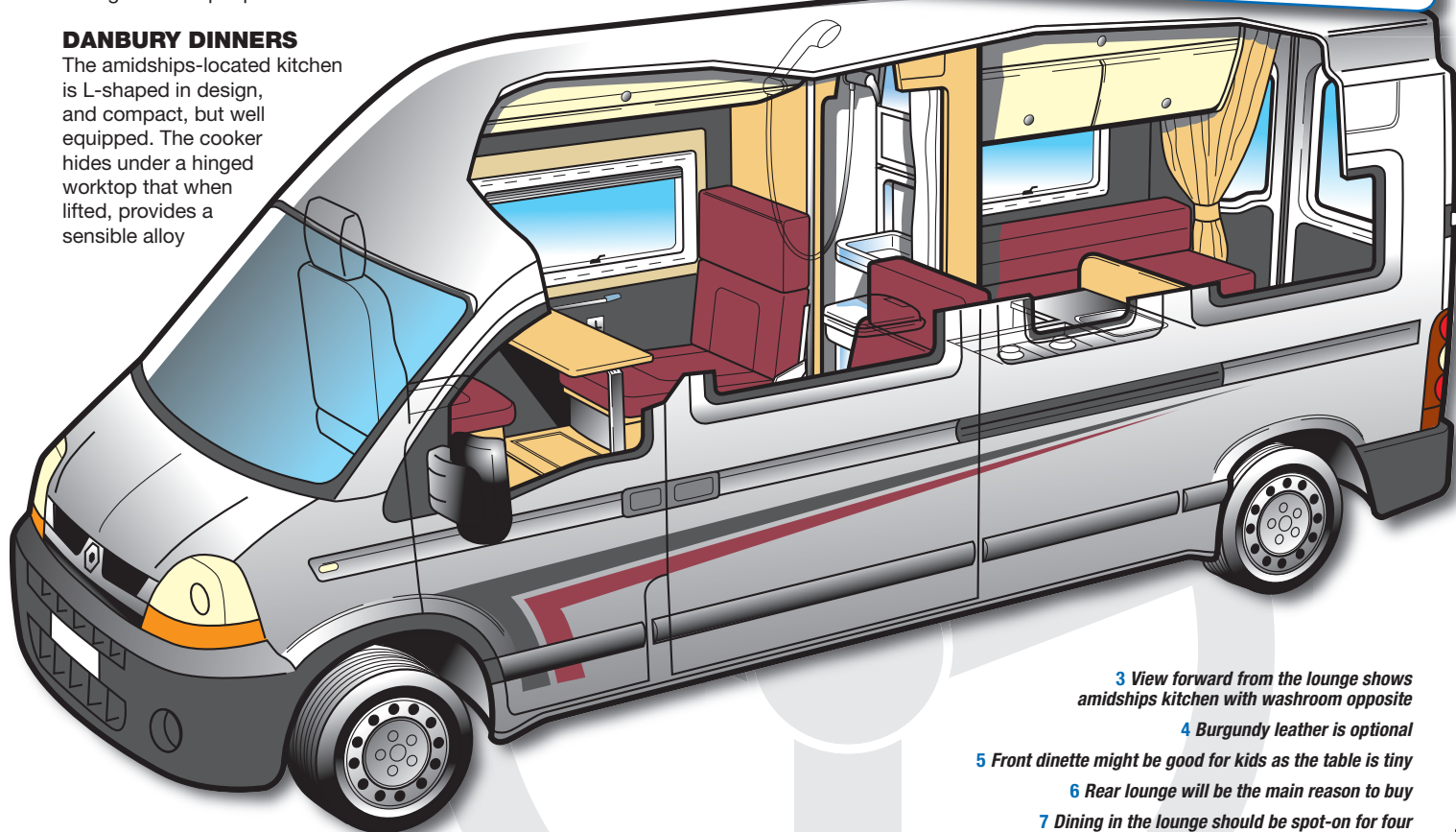
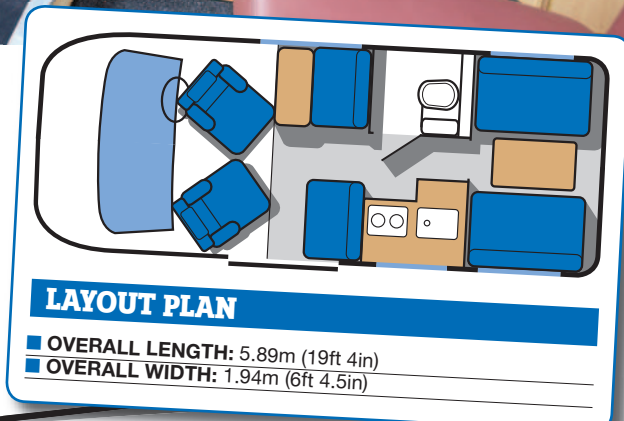
socialising. It's also worth remembering that in good weather (when you're spending most of your time relaxing outside), the rear lounge can be left made up as a bed as it's out of the way in the rear. Dining in this lounge area, is taken care of by a single-leg, floor socket-mounted table - the top of which is stowed flat under the nearside sofa. Its leg, however, is a bit more difficult to get at, being clipped to the inside of a very high locker located above the washroom.

Once erected, this table proved to be big enough for four people to dine at in comfort.

**DANBURY DINNERS**

The amidships-located kitchen is L-shaped in design, and compact, but well equipped. The cooker hides under a hinged worktop that when lifted, provides a sensible alloy

clad splashback/heatshield that protects the adjacent window. Only two burners are on offer, but there's a separate grill and oven below that more than make up for this. Sadly, no electronic ignition is fitted, so one of those long-nosed gas lighters will be a desirable piece of kit - especially when lighting oven and grill. The sink sacrifices a drainer to



3 View forward from the lounge shows amidships kitchen with washroom opposite

4 Burgundy leather is optional

5 Front dinette might be good for kids as the table is tiny

6 Rear lounge will be the main reason to buy

7 Dining in the lounge should be spot-on for four

## On Test Danbury Family 4

provide a good slab of worktop in front and sports a hinged glass lid to extend it. Below this, a decent-sized drawer is fine for cutlery.

Another step down brings you to the - rather small - fridge. This is a 12V compressor-operated model that uses no gas - just switch on and forget. A stylish silver cabinet and internal lamp mean this cooler is easy on the eye and easy to use. However it did prove to be somewhat noisy - thanks, in part to its fitted cooling fan. If you're a light sleeper it may disturb you. Below the fridge is another good-sized drawer: unfortunately, the removable carpet fitted prevented it from opening - a problem, I'm sure, that Danbury will rectify.

Below the cooker, a good-sized cupboard is occupied by the leisure battery. I'd like to see this unit located elsewhere, freeing up a space that cries out to accept your pans and other *batterie de cuisine*.

There's more storage above as two lockers (the lower with two doors) are mounted one above the other. These are capacious, but have no shelves and proved difficult to access thanks to their lofty position. Lastly, a slot twixt cooker and sink hides a - thoughtful-touch - pullout tea towel rail, while above, a 12V suck/blow roof fan is a great addition, providing effective ventilation for this kitchen, and indeed, the rest of the interior.

### WEE WASHROOM

Opposite the kitchen, the washroom is compact and bijou, but still sets out to offer a good range of facilities. As usual, the toilet is courtesy of Thetford - its C200 swivel-bowl model features electric flushing, but lacks the wheeled cassette fitted to latest models.



The toilet servicing hatch opens into the 'van's aisle - something that is less than ideal, although it bothers me not. I'm told it's the presence of strengthening steelwork in the 'van's side wall opposite that precludes an external servicing hatch. The toilet also proved to be mounted a touch high for me to use it

comfortably and indeed, it is raised, as - for some strange reason - the shower tray floor extends under its base.

Above the loo, a drop-down basin provides perfectly adequate washing facilities in this small space. There's no window in here, but two lights above do a great job of



**8** Transverse lounge bed proved very comfy

**9** Single beds are easily constructed, but not very long

**10** The lounge bed base is strong, but fiddly to make

**11** The galley features a good cooker and slab of worktop

**12** Bijou washroom

advantages of a permanent bedded 'van.

Of course, when the wind's howling on that wet weekend in the Lakes you can convert it back to an equally desirable comfy lounge.

### STORE IN 4

This 'van has lots of storage space starting, at the rear, with a pair of drawers that slide into the ends of the sofas. As these are concealed when the rear doors are closed, they provide difficult-to-find space - maybe to store valuables when you're away from the 'van. Of course, they'll also be good for your hook-up lead and hose too; easy to get at when you're busy getting pitched.

Moving forward, there's a good bit of room

#### I LIKED

- Well engineered base vehicle
- Quickshift6 auto gearbox
- Driver and passenger airbags
- Lack of bulky cab curtains
- Versatile layout
- Full cooker
- Diesel-fired heating system
- Easy-make single beds
- Comfy lounge bed
- LED lighting

#### I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Front area floor raised
- Bigger front dining table
- Lower set toilet
- Storage locker and shelf in washroom
- Re-located leisure battery
- Reading lamps

#### I DISLIKED

- Noisy fridge
- Poorly designed gas locker
- Difficult access to high-level lockers
- Tiny waste tank drain
- Weenie wardrobe

Sadly, there's absolutely no washroom storage on offer, not even a shelf, wash-time will see you balancing your 'essentials' on the loo's lid. Needless to say, this is not a little room for those who are any more than little themselves.

### DANBURY DORM

Up front, bedtime sees two singles made in a trice. Danbury's seat/bed mechanism may not be the prettiest around (it's due for a cosmetic makeover), but it is strongly engineered and works very well indeed. A quick tug and the seats flatten, their squabs meeting the bases of the swivelled cab seats and (with the addition of a couple of infill cushions) making a pair of flat, comfy beds. These aren't too long though (longest 5ft 11in), but couples, or friends who sleep separately can sleep here and leave the lounge free. The thought crossed my mind that these are perfect grandchild beds.

In the rear, the lounge makes a transverse double that again, is not too long, but plenty wide. Making this bed is a tad complex as three spars bridge the aisle and vented plywood sections fold out from under each sofa. backrests drop in to complete the mattress. The resulting bed is very strong and proved comfy, as I slept here like a log, even though the adjacent fridge's 'buzz 'n' blow' woke me from time to time. The problem of bedding storage is solved by a large overcab locker that should be plenty big enough to swallow your duvets, sleeping bags and pillows. As previously mentioned, in good weather - and when you can spend most time lounging outdoors - you could leave the lounge bed made up, giving the desirable

illuminating your face as you peer into the two fitted mirrors. There's a separate shower mixer, hose, head and wall bracket that could do with repositioning to free up shoulder room. The door-mounted towel ring, too, needs to move as once it was occupied by my bath towel things got a bit too tight for my shoulders.



# On Test Danbury Family 4

- top accessed - under the nearside sofa where I would keep my tools, jack and family-sized can of WD40.

On the offside, and immediately to the rear of the washroom, is the wardrobe. This is, quite frankly, a tiny unit - its laughably-slim dimensions would be just about big enough for a couple of coats, were it not for the fact that some of the washroom's plumbing intrudes. You might be able to (carefully) slide a couple of outdoor chairs in here, but as a wardrobe proper it does not get the job.

Up front, there are a couple of handy pockets on the offside and space under both rear seats. The previously mentioned footrest drawer provides yet more room for smaller items. There is lots of space in the remaining high-level lockers in front and rear, as these take advantage of this motorcaravan's big headroom.

Sadly, headroom proves to be an enemy to access, as the lockers are difficult to see into and get at. I found myself feeling around inside - like a (fat) cat with its paw in a hole feeling for a mouse. I'm five-foot-ten tall and had difficulty, so unless you go camping with a

basketball player, these storage spaces will be a guaranteed source of frustration. Given the fact that these lockers are fundamental to the design of this extra high roofed motorcaravan, the solution to the problem would seem to be to provide a method of access. You could, of course, purchase a portable step, but I would love to see Danbury provide a - maybe folding step - solution that comes as standard with the 'van.

## 4 KIT

Star of Family 4's kit count is its heating system. Webasto's DualTop boiler is the latest diesel-fired system to hit the streets and boasts lower noise and power consumption than rivals. Running on diesel drawn from the vehicle's tank, the boiler is mounted under the offside forward-facing rear seat. The unit's control panel (mounted on the face of the overcab locker) is very easy to use, allowing you to select just hot water (at two alternative temperatures) or blown-air heating and hot water. This system is also safe to use while travelling, so keeping the interior warm and arriving on site with a tank of hot water is easy. Thanks to a variable power burner and stepless blown-air fan, this unit can find optimum heat output and fan speed to keep the interior at the right temperature. This all helps to keep noise and power consumption to a minimum. However, on start up from cold (and when the unit is operating on full power) it is noisier than the equivalent gas-powered unit. One thing sadly missing is a hot air outlet into the washroom - strange, as the heater abuts the washroom wall.

The 110 amp hr leisure battery would be fine under normal circumstances, but with two roof fans, 12V-only fridge and diesel-fired heating (which uses more power than the equivalent gas-fired system) fitted, I'd add another battery: this will be especially necessary if you plan to spend time camping away from hook-up.

The fresh water tank is mounted inboard and the underslung waste water tank is insulated, so winter camping should not be a problem. It's the waste water tank's drain that needs improving, as it's so small as to be infuriating. The tank took an age to drain, and had there been a queue at the dump point, I might have feared for my personal safety - waiting motorhomers would have had plenty of time to form a vigilante group and light the torches!

Lighting takes advantage of LED technology, with a mix of downlighters and multi-LED strips illuminating the interior very well indeed. The only things missing were decent, individually-switched reading lamps at front and rear. As LED units use only a fraction of the power of conventional units, they'll make a welcome power saving contribution when you're camping away from hook-up.

Lastly, the gas locker needs a re-design, as the regulator (with high pressure gas connection) is mounted inside the nearside sofa box (with no drop vents) where a leak of high-pressure gas could have lethal consequences, both from the point of view of poisoning of residents and explosion.

## CONCLUSION

This motorcaravan makes a brave stab at providing full-blown four-berth accommodation within the confines of a panel van. The Renault Master is a tad truck-like, but

## LIVE-IN TEST DATA

### TYPE

High top van conversion

### PRICE

- From: £34,999 OTR
- As tested: £45,127 OTR

### BASICS

- Vehicle: Renault Master long wheelbase extra high roof panel van
- Berths: 4
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (incl. driver)
- Warranty: Three years base vehicle, one year conversion,

### CONSTRUCTION

Full steel factory extra high roof body with side sliding door on UK nearside, twin side-hinged doors at rear

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

- Length: 5.89m (19ft 4in)\*
- Width: 1.99m (6ft 6.5in)
- Height: 2.79m (9ft 2in) estimated
- Wheelbase: 4.07m (13ft 2in)
- Rear overhang: 890mm (2ft 11in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 3500kg\*
- Payload: 640kg estimated

### INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of two forward-facing single seats with dinette on offside. Nearside kitchen, offside washroom and wardrobe. Rear-located transverse lounge with two inward-facing sofas

- Insulation: Floor NA, walls 25mm, roof 25mm
- Interior height: 2.10m (6ft 10.5in) max



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13 The nearside sofa base is home to the tabletop. The gas locker, found here, needs a re-design

14 Webasto diesel-fired heating worked well

15 The LED lighting - fitted throughout - worked very well

very well built, cheap to service and enjoyable to drive. Those needing two-pedal motoring need look no further than the Quickshift 6 - an automatic gearbox that's so good that even auto-hating me could live with one.

The layout works well, with front and rear living areas adding versatility and allowing four to properly live aboard. Detail improvements needed include a redesigned gas system, more effective lighting and bigger waste tank drain valve, while the wardrobe is so small and cluttered by plumbing that it needs to be redesigned or ignored. The high-level lockers too, are difficult to access and need a supplied-as-standard solution. This 'van may well suit a couple who desiring a panel van conversion - and liking a rear lounge - wish to take kids away with them, as the single beds and seatbelts up front are things rarely found in rear lounge-equipped high top motorcaravans. ■

### VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Danbury Motorcaravans,  
Great Western Business Park,  
Armstrong Way, Yate, Bristol BS37 5NG  
(tel: 01454 310 000; web site:  
www.danburymotorcaravans.com)

### WE STAYED AT

Cirencester Park Caravan Club site,  
Stroud Road, Cirencester  
GL7 1UT (tel: 01285 651546;  
web site: www.caravanclub.co.uk)

## DANBURY FAMILY 4

## THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 2.5-litre turbo-diesel producing 88kW (120bhp) @ 3500rpm
- **Transmission:** Quickshift6 six-speed auto-changing manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 26.7mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all round
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent with coil springs. Rear: rigid axle with leaf springs
- **Features:** Radio/CD player with steering column-mounted controls, electric windows and mirrors, remote central locking, alarm, air-conditioning, driver and passenger airbags, twin door pockets, overcab shelves, trip computer

## LOUNGING &amp; DINING

Front offside two-person dinette formed with swivelled driver's seat, offside forward-facing rear seat & wall-hung, single-leg table. Swivelled pass. seat and nearside rear seat provide additional seating. Rear lounge consists of twin inward-facing sofas with room to seat four people. Single-leg table mounts in floor socket, table top stows under nearside sofa, table leg in over-washroom locker

## KITCHEN

L-shaped design. Cupboard and two drawers below, three (in two tiers) un-shelved lockers above, hinged worktop over cooker, worktop in front of sink, pull-out tea towel rail

- **Sink:** Square stainless steel unit with hinged glass lid and folding mixer tap, no drainer
- **Cooker:** LP Voyager 250 with two-burner hob, grill and oven, no ignition
- **Fridge:** Waeco Coolmatic CR50 12V compressor type with fan-assisted dynamic ventilation. Capacity 50 litres

## WASHROOM

Theford C-200 swivel-bowl electric-flush cassette toilet, drop-down washbasin with single-lever mixer tap, separate single-lever shower mixer with shower head on wall bracket, two mirrors, toilet roll holder, towel ring, shower tray floor with one outlet, 12V extractor fan above

## BEDS

Nearside front single

- **Length:** 1.77m (5ft 9.5in)
- **Width:** 590mm (1ft 11in)

Offside front single

- **Length:** 1.74m (5ft 8.5in)
- **Width:** 590mm (1ft 11in)

Rear double

- **Length:** 1.80m (5ft 11in)
- **Width:** 1.41m (4ft 7.5in)

## STORAGE

Front area: Upper and lower pockets on offside, drawer under nearside rear seat, underfloor compartment on offside, space under both seats, overhead locker on nearside, overcab locker.

Lounge: Four (two-tier) overhead lockers, space under nearside sofa, drawer in rear end of each sofa. Very small wardrobe at rear of washroom, locker above washroom

## LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Inboard. Capacity 72 litres (15.8 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung. Capacity 72 litres (15.8 gallons)
- **Water and space heater:** Webasto DualTop diesel-fired only system with storage water boiler and blown-air space heating
- **Leisure battery:** 110 amp hr

- **Gas:** Capacity 1 x 4.5kg cylinder
- **Lighting:** Front area: Four LED downlighters. Kitchen: One multi-LED strip. Washroom: One halogen downlight as part of extractor fan, one circular dome lamp. Lounge: Twin-tube fluorescent to ceiling, multi-LED strip to each side. Outside: Multi-LED strip above side sliding door
- **Sockets:** 230V: 4 (dinette, kitchen, double in lounge), 12V: 2 (dinette, lounge)
- **Control panel:** Mounted above side sliding door, controls lights, water pump, LCD displays inside/outside air temp, vehicle/leisure battery levels, fresh water tank level
- **Blinds/curtains:** Internal insulating/blackout screens to cab, cassette blinds/flyscreens to front area, kitchen, lounge, unlined curtain to rear doors' windows
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No

## OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base:** Metallic paint (£395), 120bhp engine (£1295), Quickshift6 auto-changing gearbox (£949), passenger airbag (£259), air-con (£825), electric windows and mirrors (£359)
- **Conversion:** Webasto heating system (£999), awning (£599), leather upholstery (£2250), flat screen TV/DVD player (£899), shower (£599)

Other options

- **Base:** Parking sensors (£235), colour matched bumpers (£299)
- **Conversion:** Non standard cloth (£799), free-standing awning (£399), roof vents from (£699)

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