



AN INTERESTING HOBBY

Hobby T550FS on 2.0TDCi Ford Transit

With a layout strictly for two, this compact low profile is big on berth control, as Dave and Fiona Batten-Hill discovered



Rear light clusters.

Hobby's lightweight (and shortest) contenders include two four-berth models with overcab beds and a lone two-berth, the T550FS. What these machines have in common is a 5.76-metre overall length, which is 18 feet 11 inches in the Queen's English. In this context, lightweight refers to the vehicles' ranking in the range; the mass in running order actually runs from the FS model's 2868kg to the overcab T550 AKSC's 2924kg (the AK refers to alkovent, the German for luton overcab).

The Hobby T550FS is not so much a low profile as a luton-less coachbuilt and is billed by its maker as being partly integrated. Low profile or not, packing all the bells and whistles, even for just two people, into under six metres can be a tall order. We got the chance to see how Hobby has fared in fulfilling this order when we examined the T550FS.

BODY POLITIC

The underpinnings of the Hobby T550FS are familiar enough. In this instance, Ford's Transit FT350L is equipped with the 125 bhp version of the two-litre common-rail diesel and it puts its power down via a five-speed manual gearbox, complete with floor change.

Hobby has relieved the archetypal white Transit's blandness with some trick colour-keying, not to mention graphics themed to the conversion's

exterior, but these pale into insignificance when compared to the 550's overcab mouldings. The front-on view is subtle, even if the overcab has a moulded-in 'widow's peak'. By contrast, the cab's quarter mouldings are practically licensed to thrill. What could have been ordinary to the point of tediousness is actually quite adventurous. The overcab moulding incorporates three flutes, which may or may not stiffen the structure; in any event, they serve to save it from mediocrity.

On the left-hand side, the standard fuel filler flap lives in a deeply-sculpted recess. These bold mouldings and the combination of silver, metallic blue and white finishes combine to make the 550 a head turner.

At the opposite extremity, the Hobby's tail treatment warrants much the same description. Proving that the mildly rounded white box look is by no means inevitable, the 550's swoopy tail is, arguably, even more of an attention grabber than is the front end.

The rear three-quarter view might have reminded us of Herman Munster's head but there's no denying its novelty. Add to that fifteen active lights, including the number plate lamps, plus two reflectors, mouldings that are curvaceous and chunky at one and the same time (not to mention a silver-bordered blue colour scheme) - and you have a rear elevation that says anything but caravan.

However, the side views could hardly say





ON TEST: HOBBY T550FS ON 2.0TDCI FORD TRANSIT



The view forward underlines the Hobby's modest overall length and shows the half dinette on the left with galley opposite.



The view towards the tail shows that a great deal has been packed into the Hobby 550. The stylish, silver tambour door opposite the fixed double bed conceals the capable washroom.





The abwasser drain - and the waste water tank - are vulnerably low.



The dinette table is substantial and consequently firm. A holding mechanism for travel would have been useful.

I can live without an electric step, but no warning buzzer? A serious omission. **Inset:** Neat as a new bin. This useful addition inside the entry door accepts a standard liner.



anything but short. Yes, the 550's T prefix stands more for 'truncated' than teilintegrierte (semi integrated - German for low profile). Whether this works or not depends on your viewpoint. But my own viewpoint calls into doubt the wisdom of applying swoopy graphics, in deeply contrasting black-bordered blue, to a short-but-tall mainly white side elevation; svelte it isn't.

The expected hardware penetrates the 550's stubby walls. A brace of locker doors, one leading to gas cylinders, the other to the underbed, adorn the left side, while the right side has the inevitable Thetford toilet service hatch, a central entry door and a trio of horizontal vents (two for the fridge, one serving a combination oven).

Add a smattering - a sextet in fact - of double-glazed acrylic windows, places for mains electricity and fresh water to enter, and a spot for the heating's exhaust to exit and you get the picture... almost.

The waste water drain, helpfully labelled abwasser, droops untidily from below the left side skirt, quite unlike its counterpart on the brochure photograph - that one's neatly clipped up behind the skirt.

Apart from looking like a disorderly afterthought, the pipe and the tank it drains both look very vulnerable to damage.

HOBBY LOBBY

The way into the 550 is via a manual step, which is not difficult to use (except when exiting of course) and, importantly, it lacks an ignition-actuated warning buzzer. At the summit of this brief climb is a small doormat. This suggests foresight on someone's behalf but hindsight suggests that recessing the mat into a deep,

plastic moulding was a bad idea. Still, you only trip over it once...

Inside, a clever, tambour-doored TV cabinet faces the door. More accurately described as tambour-walled, this allows a TV to point rearwards towards the fixed bed (that occupies more than the left rear corner), or forward, towards cab seats that can swivel. Behind the cab, a pair of travel seats plays host to a freestanding table, which can be pulled out to the right; flipping up and locking its extension gives more than enough dining space for four.

HOBBY COOKS

Opposite this half-dinette is the kitchen, which may not entirely deserve the name but deserves praise for its compactness. Topped by a trio of curved cabinet doors, each having a downlighter above, the kitchen has a worktop area rendered modest through being occupied by a stainless steel sink and a three-burner Smev hob (sans spark ignition).

Glass covers help to make up for the lack of worktop space, though they can't compensate for the absence of even an add-on draining board.

Down below, the kitchen has a 97-litre, three-way refrigerator that lives next door to a neat, Smev combination oven/grill. The positioning of this unit seems initially suspect but the travel sofa opposite spells sit-down cooking - about which, I imagine, few would complain. And above the oven/grill, the biggest cutlery drawer I've ever seen could carry the gear to prepare, serve (and offer knives, forks and spoons) to many more than the Hobby's potential four diners.

Two more lights are to be found over the hob and sink. Cleverly, there is a glass heat shield to protect the woodwork forward of the hob. Oddly, there's a

plastic hook above the heat shield, ideally placed to be melted by the hob, always assuming anything hanging from it hadn't already been set ablaze.

The kitchen's equipment is completed by a useful waste bin, mounted inside the entry door. Able to take a standard, small bin bag, this has a flip-up lid for use and a flip-forward body for



The TV locker features a plinth and its tambour walls retract fully for a good view from lounge or bed.





The compact kitchen fulfils all the usual requirements, albeit sans drainer.

The double-skinned bulkhead twist lounge and bed features a convenient magazine rack.▷



emptying. Above, an equally convenient curved receptacle (moulded in a light blue to match the bin and to contrast with the door's white liner) will accept many a homeless accoutrement. That said, care would be needed to avoid exceeding the strength of the plastic by overloading.

KIT BAGGED

Opposite the entry door, the pelmet above the dinette window has two adjustable spotlights and a recessed flexible tube light. Above, a trio of mildly curved doors leads to three lockers. The side bulkhead, forward of the table, carries a trimmed, buttoned pad finished in the same restrained, striated blue pattern as the cab seat covers, like the side pad under the dinette window and a similar pad on the leading face of the wardrobe. This last carries a pair of reassuringly sturdy, silver-finished metal coat hooks.

The travel seat's upholstery is rather less restrained, circles and squares in contrasting shades of blue having crept in, along with light orange dots. These echo the colour of ornate lined curtains with swagged silver sections and functional nets. The trim material looks and feels tough and its colour is even picked up in a simple, ovoid control panel that

lives above the entry door. This chrome-rimmed unit carries a handful of push-button switches, which give control of the lighting and water pump, along with LED readouts of the state of the water tanks and batteries – no PhD in electronics is required to figure out what does what.

Out of sight, beneath the travel seats, but conveniently within reach for maintenance, is a 100-litre fresh water tank, flanked by the ironmongery that forms strong points for the seatbelts. The bulkhead that is the travel seat's backrest is double skinned; its central infills have been thoughtfully recessed to give a magazine rack, which constitutes a feature in itself. Up-top, an electric Heki rooflight adds three further, tungsten downlighters to the available illumination. On the floor, a vinyl covering makes a convincing pretence of being light, woodblock flooring.

Like the cab blinds, which were notable by their absence, removable carpets remain a cost option.

The theme of mildly curved locker doors continues above the cab, where the teiltintegrierte's six lockers occupy what would be an alkovent's bed space. Four of these span the cab's upper works; two more, complete with fiddle rails at their lower edges, sit above the doors and each has a positive

latch. But for the middle two, the lockers behind the doors are individual, meaning there's plenty of space for any number of small items. Bedding, perforce, has to live on, or under, the bed.

A TAIL STORY

First sight shows that the 550's fixed bed dominates its trailing half. A small corner cutaway clearly makes the bed useable and with two adjustable spotlights and five lockers above, it's self-contained and cosy. Complete with a bespoke, silver-hued, frilly-edged mattress cover, it wants for nothing but a shelf or two to accept nocturnal refreshments.

Underneath, with access facilitated by the split mattress, is a sizeable storage locker (with above-mentioned external access door). The leading section of this locker is suitably partitioned to carry the familiar black bulk of a Truma Combi boiler.

The beech-slatted bed base is at the right height and the mattress is both supportive and comfortable.

THE LION, THE WC AND THE WARDROBE...

... which would have worked had the Hobby been Peugeot-based. But with suitable apologies to CS Lewis, we can continue by examining the wardrobe.

Though not leading to a magical fantasyland, this had its surprises, not least in an automatically switched, illuminated hanging rail. Running fore and aft, this is an intelligent way of simplifying both construction and function. Adequate, rather than hugely capacious, the wardrobe offers a convenient high-level shelf, with a small but practical return edge, the better to stop items falling out.

At its foot, the wardrobe has a diminutive yet useable cupboard, complete with its own, positive-latching door - an ideal spot for, say, shoes.

Considering the fixed bed subjugated the other elements in the rear of this compact 'van, it seemed unlikely that a useable washroom could be squeezed into the right rear corner. What lay behind the full-height, curved tambour door was a revelation.

The tiny space within contains a curvilinear, white moulding, housing a usefully sized washbasin with a swivel tap incorporating a pullout showerhead. The room may lack a docking point for the showerhead but it has three open shelves with contents retaining rails, and a two-doored cabinet containing two further shelves



A good-sized fridge, plus oven/grill by Smev, are welcome additions in the bijou galley. Inset: The massive cutlery drawer could serve a far bigger 'van, or a small restaurant for that matter!



(and concealing the showerhead's flexible pipe). The ubiquitous Thetford electric flush WC is incorporated into the moulding and shares floor space with a single-drain shower tray that has grippy squiggles moulded into its floor.

The washroom's leading corner is equipped with mirrors to its side and forward faces, while no less than four frosted halogen downlighters, switched together, illuminate the area. Various grey marbled finishes characterise the room, whose tambour door's slats are echoed in a silver-finished, ridged metallic side panel around a blindless, translucent opening window.

The washroom would receive full marks but for the WC being raised on a plinth moulded into the shower tray. In a word, or three, it's too high.

THE INSIDE STORY

The overall effect of the interior, if it needs to be put in a single word, is cheerful. The tone of the wood finishes is dark enough to appear rich but not so dark as to appear gloomy. A complex, machine-finished trim running between the upper cupboards and the roof, everywhere save for in the cab, is particularly pleasing. Similarly, the use of modernistic, satin silver finishes to the various latches, lamps, rails and hooks is picked up in the curtaining and bedspread, but is not so overt as to be brash. The bold tints of the curtaining complement the subtler browns of the kitchen worktop and table, while the blue trim cools the interior down a little, visually speaking.

The notion of packing all this equipment into such a relatively small conversion could attract accusations of overcrowding. In truth, the T550FS's interior is cramped. To call it cluttered would be



uncharitable, but calling it spacious would be naïve. Losing so many square feet to a fixed bed could be seen as detracting from the 550.

However, there are those for whom a fixed bed is the height of luxury - you pay your money...

DRIVEN BY YOU?

Less commonly encountered than its Fiat and Peugeot competitors, the Transit is nevertheless a respected base vehicle. In the process of testing the 550, we found the swivel cab seats useful,



Though small, the washroom is perfectly formed - or as near as makes no difference. Unfortunately, the loo's a bit high.



The underbed locker provides a usefully large storage area, as well as a home for the Truma Combi boiler.



although the selection of a gear and subsequent disengaging of the handbrake was necessary to prevent a clash between the latter and the driver's seat during swivelling. Getting this out of sequence could well have occasioned a clash of a much more serious nature...

With the seats facing the right way, entering the driver's seat particularly was made a little awkward by the floor-mounted gearlever. Once installed, we found the seats comfortable and apparently supportive, even despite the lack of an adjustable lumbar support. That said, the seats initially felt very soft; experience suggests that extended driving could become uncomfortable, for want of sufficient support.

The driver's side height adjustment was useful, making it easy to tailor a good driving position. We had an airbag apiece and a spot of plastic tree gave the dash a touch of class. Within the dash mouldings lay comprehensive instrumentation, including LCD panels displaying the time, and the trip and overall mileages. With the second figure reading a paltry 58 miles, it was clear that the motor would need careful treatment.

In practice, the 125 bhp version of the two-litre engine was rewardingly gutsy. The ride was smooth and the power train quiet. Surprisingly, the Hobby's on-road behaviour lacked the choppiness expected of so short a vehicle as the lengthy wheelbase (implied by the minimal tail overhang) came into play.

During manoeuvring, forward vision was commendably panoramic, and excellent mirrors - complete with a wide-angle view from their lower third - made for good rear vision. This was fortunate, given that the combination of the travel seat's high backrest and the offset of the rear window completely blocked through vision.

As the engine revs and road speed increased, the 550's demeanour held further surprises. Tender mileage notwithstanding, the TDCi pulled lustily. Moreover, it typified that oxymoron, a high-revving diesel. Moving up through the gearbox revealed substantial chasms between the upper ratios - but in the final analysis, 28 mph per 1000 rpm represents highly respectable gearing, especially for a two-litre.

As the miles progressed it became increasingly apparent that the Hobby offered an undemanding drive. Lighter than those of a Fiat or a Peugeot,



The cab's appointments are laid out logically, but the seats are a touch soft.

Inset: The negative clearance situation between the driver's seat and handbrake. The Hobby has to be put in gear and handbrake released before this pew can be swivelled.

in terms of both structure and operation, the controls were easy to use. The gearshift suffered only minimally from being floor-mounted and the fifty or so test miles covered passed with neither discomfort nor drama.

After darkness fell, the presence of orange marker lights on the extremities of the front indicator pods was strangely reassuring. On dipped beam, the headlamps were entirely capable.

However, while main beam had a stunning range, selecting it left a gloomy patch immediately in front of the vehicle. Following drivers clearly obeyed the commands of the serried taillights, but there was a disappointment. The inclusion of two sizeable reversing lights seemed to bode well, particularly when many larger motorhomes have an inadequately small, single reverse lamp. In use, the rearward illumination was poor, being both patchy and weak.

HOBBY HORSE

Since Fiona and I prefer low-profile motorcaravans more clearly warranting that description, the 550

was not to our taste.

Similarly, in equipping something that must, by definition, be mobile with a vulnerable waste water drainpipe and a manual external entrance step that could easily be left extended (to damage itself and/or someone or something in the immediate vicinity), the Hobby had its shortcomings.

But, as a package, it has a great deal going for it.

Incorporating, for 2006, an exclusive UK pack that comprises the 125 bhp engine, right-hand drive, an oven/grill, Truma 6002EH electric/gas heating, flame retardant furnishings, wood-effect dash trim, a manual Heki rooflight, and UK mains sockets, is no bad move.

The 550's modest overall length makes it much easier to manoeuvre - and park - than many a rival. The implication is that it will sell, particularly to nomadic couples.

In this context, the pricing is competitive. Does this mean we're likely to see the 550's pert profile more and more frequently on British tarmac? □





IN BRIEF

- **Base vehicle:** Ford Transit T350L chassis cab
- **Engine:** 2.0-litre 92kW (125 bhp) four-cylinder TDCi turbo-diesel
- **Gearbox and drive:** Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Make and model:** Hobby T550FS
- **Body type and construction:** Sandwich construction low-profile coachbuilt. GRP conversion mouldings throughout
- **Conversion NCC badged as EN1646 compliant:** No
- **Electrical equipment:** Mains hook-up, electrical distribution box with RCD/MCBs, 80 amp hr leisure battery and charger
- **Lighting:** Three tungsten lights in Heki rooflight surround, three frosted halogen downlighters above kitchen lockers, two clear halogen downlighters above hob/sink, two adjustable spotlights above fixed bed, two adjustable spotlights and concealed flexible tube light above dinette, automatically-switched combination tube light/hanging rail in wardrobe, four frosted halogen downlighters in washroom
- **Cooking facilities:** Smev three-burner hob under opaque glass cover, Smev combination oven/grill with rotisserie and interior illumination
- **Refrigerator:** Dometic 7401 three-way with full-width freezer compartment, capacity 97 litres
- **Water heater:** Truma Combi C6002EH, gas/230V operation
- **Space heater:** Truma Combi C6002EH, gas/230V operation
- **Fresh water tank:** Inboard, 100 litres (22 gallons)
- **Waste water tank:** Outboard, 90 litres (19.8 gallons)
- **Gas locker capacity:** Two 7kg cylinders
- **Rear restraints:** Two forward-facing seats with three-point inertia-reel seatbelts
- **Additional features:** ABS/ASR, driver

and passenger airbags, cab central locking, immobiliser, swivelling cab seats, height-adjustable driver's seat with inboard armrest, 'wood'-trimmed dash, dash-top document cubby, headlight height adjustment, front mud flaps, rear corner steadies, Heki rooflight, 'Vienna' upholstery, pleated blind/flyscreen combinations, integrated washroom shower tray floor with non-slip surface, three open washroom cubbies with retaining rails, under-basin cupboard with integrated toilet roll holder, electric flush Thetford swivel cassette toilet, chrome-plated swivel tap/pullout shower head, shower curtain, chrome plated towel rail, tambour doored TV locker with turntable

DIMENSIONS

- (*data supplied by manufacturer)
- **Overall length:** 5.76m (18ft 11in)*
 - **Overall width:** 2.29m (7ft 6in)*
 - **Overall height:** 2.76m (8ft 9.5in)*
 - **Interior height:** 1.95m (6ft 5in)*
 - **Bed dimensions:** Rear fixed double: 1.94m x

1.25m max (6ft 4.5in x 4ft 1in)*

- **Max authorised weight:** 3500kg*
- **Load capacity:** 632kg*

PRICE (All prices include VAT)

- **Standard model (as tested):** £34,750
- **Warranty:** Two years base vehicle and conversion, five years water ingress

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- **Base vehicle options:** Rear mud flaps (£60)
- **Caravan options:** Pleated cab blinds (£370), roof rack and ladder (£425), awning light (£135), removable carpets (£150), external shower point (£140), external gas point (£160) Hobby T550FS kindly supplied for evaluation by: Brownhills Leisure World, A1/A46 Junction, Newark, Nottinghamshire NG24 2EA (tel: 0800 374941; web site: www.brownhills.co.uk

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