



JEWEL PURPOSE

Devon Sapphire on 2.2 CDI Mercedes-Benz Sprinter

A unique high top offers a slim profile outside with a carefully crafted interior that aims to provide luxury for two

County Durham-based Devon Conversions has a reputation for producing value-for-money motorcaravans that work well. Value for money, however, is just one aspect of the firm's products and it continues to remain successful, even in the heat of the current market. Lately, interesting new designs coming from the Ferryhill factory have included a clever high top VW T5-based layout (Sundowner, see MMM January 2007, Head-to-Head test) with 'virtual' washroom and a spacious, user-friendly, touring for two model based on the award-winning Renault Master – the Provence.

As a very welcome addition to Devon's versatile range of rising roof and high top 'vans, the Sapphire adds a new string to the company's well-known motorcaravan bow. Taking full advantage of the latest Sprinter high roof panel van, the Sapphire is Devon's only Mercedes-based motorcaravan. It's also the biggest and the most expensive model Devon has ever made, coming in at nearly six metres long and well over £40K. If you hanker after a panel van conversion with a longitudinal fixed bed, you'll also find that the Sapphire is currently the only production model of this type on offer.

THE GEM'S SETTING

Devon supremo, Peter Gowland, has a job that many of us motorcaravanners would give their eye-teeth for. You may (as do I) sit thinking about how you'd build your dream 'van: Peter does the same kind of thing; the only difference is that he has a factory full of craftspeople waiting to do his bidding! The new long wheelbase Merc Sprinter was the inspiration for a fixed longitudinal bed design as its relatively narrow body makes transverse beds unrealistic. However, its long load bed does allow the installation of a layout more often seen in low-

profile coachbuilt motorhomes. A swivelling cab passenger seat joins an offside L-shaped sofa that nestles against the equally L-shaped kitchen. Behind this is a fixed double bed with washroom alongside. Designed as a luxury two-berth tourer, the Sapphire features leather upholstery as standard, but retains its Devon identity with the simply styled furniture that's a feature of the company's products.

BASE METAL

This test provided me with my first drive of the new Sprinter – something I was looking forward to as my own (Rapido) 'van is old-model Sprinter-based.

Unlike the radically-styled new Fiat Ducato, the latest from Mercedes takes a more evolutionary approach appearing, if anything, more conservative than its predecessor. As with the previous incarnation, rear-wheel drive is retained, while upfront a new range of engines drives through an equally new six-speed gearbox.

Six engines are available, with the first four all being 2.2-litre, four-cylinder turbo-diesels offering outputs of 88bhp, 109bhp, 129bhp and 150bhp. This broad range of power choice from one cubic capacity of motor demonstrates just how far modern diesel technology has come in relation to electronic control and output.

The two biggest engine options are both V6 units – a 3.0-litre turbo-diesel offers 184bhp, while the range-topping three-and-a-half-litre petrol beast provides a white-van-man dream, 258



AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £43,296 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 2
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Mercedes-Benz Sprinter LWB panel van
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling passenger seat ahead of L-shaped offside sofa and L-shaped kitchen, nearside wardrobe. Offside-located longitudinal fixed double bed with washroom alongside
- **ECONOMY:** 28.7mpg overall



Words and pictures by Dave Hurrell





FAR LEFT: View forward sees the front lounge ahead of L-shaped kitchen with wardrobe opposite.

LEFT: In the rear, a fixed longitudinal double bed is alongside the nearside corner washroom opposite.

horses. The test 'van came equipped with the more modest 109 horsepower motor, but Devon also offers (as well as the 150bhp four-cylinder unit) the V6 derv-drinker. If you really must get down to the Med' in record time, this motor's 184 horses will see you do it in style. However, all that extra urge is gonna cost you dear (just a-meal-and-few-drinks under five grand).

SPRINTING AWAY

The view from the driving seat is of a Teutonically tough landscape of high quality plastics and capable-looking kit, seen from an excellent-and-comfortable driving position. One-touch electric windows and big bins adorn the doors, while outside, the mirrors - fashionably - incorporate indicator repeaters, but here lacked electric operation. Two-driver motorhoming teams would be well advised to pay the extra £223 for mirror heating and remote operation as manual adjustment - especially of the nearside unit - will be a pain to achieve each time you

swap drivers.

The centre of the dash is dominated by the radio/CD player, which has a big easy-to-use display and simple controls. Sound quality was impressive from both sources, although this unit did the awful 'turning itself off after a few minutes' trick - a feature I thought was confined to the previous Fiat Ducato/Peugeot Boxer generation.

The quality of switches and controls is generally much improved over the old model while the heater remains just as impressive as in my 'van. Driver's airbag, remote central locking, ABS, ASR and a laptop-sized compartment in the dash are all standard. I would have preferred to see a passenger airbag fitted as standard too (in a vehicle that's going to transport two people for most of the time), but the options list will get you same for a rather steep £465. Cab air-conditioning would also be on my wish list and this seems good value (at £995), especially as it includes an uprated alternator, pollen filter,



outside temperature indicator and auto heater control.

Inserting the nifty electronic key into the dash releases the solenoid-operated steering lock and, with a twist, fires up the Merc's systems. Not a quick starter, the engine displayed a brittle quality when cold - stalling at the drop of an only slightly too fast clutch foot. That clutch, however, now has a lovely light action so much better than last year's model. The gearchange, too, is much lighter and all six ratios could be slotted in with pleasure. Taut, but comfortable, describes ride and handling well, while this 'van displays the kind on-road poise that makes it very good to drive as a motorcaravan; Mercedes' target, demon delivery driver, should also find it easy to steer even when he's holding mobile to ear! Once warm, the 109 horsepower engine acquitted itself very well. So well, in fact, that (until I'd checked the specification) I thought it to be the 130bhp unit. The six gear ratios are very well spaced but lacked the high (overdrive-

style) top that's the very useful feature of Fiat Ducato-based 'vans. So, why would you buy a Sapphire when there are so many six-metre-long, fixed-bed low profile coachbuilt 'vans around for (in some cases) far less dosh? Aside from the obvious charms of the Sprinter, one of the other reasons is width. At just 1.99 metres (6ft 6.5in) wide, this 'van is over a foot (320mm) narrower than some coachbuilts, giving far more of a 'go anywhere' capability.

THE BLUE ROOM

The cab passenger seat swivels (none too easily) to join the L-shaped sofa in providing lounging and dining capability. All (including the driver's seat) is upholstered in leather and this created a feeling (and smell) of luxury. The sofa is quite modest in size and Devon seems to have recognised this as an infill squab fits at the forward end (once you've slid the driver's seat right forward) to increase this seat's size. This area is just about right for two to relax in, but the swivelled passenger seat comes higher

than the sofa and generates the dreaded 'dangling legs' syndrome normally associated with Ducato-based 'vans.

A footrest is the answer here and I know this is correct as fellow MMM team member Di Johnson's (Ducato-based) Murvi Morello is so equipped. A lidded box, covered in matching carpet, provides useful extra storage and bridges the gap between cab and living area floor levels.

Mealtimes see a substantial freestanding table set up in front of the sofa and dining here is again spot-on just for two, so dinner parties will need to be outdoor affairs. The table has dedicated stowage in the underbed locker, accessed through a tambour door at its front side. Extracting the table from its lair had me grunting and swearing, such was its difficulty and, needless to say, those with bad backs need not apply! An easier to get at location (maybe in a slot twixt lounge and kitchen) for the table seems to be required here, or tray-based dining may well become the norm for Sapphire owners.



I LIKED

- Superb quality base vehicle
- Narrow body width
- Easy to use radio/CD player
- Good kitchen
- Comfy fixed bed
- Practical washroom storage

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A big Heki rooflight
- Quieter fridge
- Better-sited table storage

I DISLIKED

- The position of the gas locker
- Too-high swivelled passenger seat

LEFT: The bed's fold-down headboard creates even more space in the kitchen.



SHINY CHEFS

The L-shaped galley is a very practical space with a clever little trick up its sleeve. That Holy Grail of motorcaravan kitchens, worktop, is to be had here in spades, with plenty of space along the side area for peeling and chopping. Both the three-burner hob and drainerless sink have hinged glass lids but it's unlikely they'll be needed such is the space on offer. The kitchen's clever little trick creates, if not more worktop, more 'space to place' ingredients and the like as the adjacent double bed's headboard hinges down. Courtesy of a 'hole' in the wall that

separates bedroom from kitchen (and the fact that the back of the headboard has a matching worktop finish), you can use the lowered unit as a secondary place for ingredients, serving dishes and the like. All you must do is move your pillows away from the head of the bed so that this surface lies flat.

This kind of idea tickles my motorhoming taste buds and is a feature of other Devon 'vans: a surprising idea that's simple, but practical and effective.

The rest of the kitchen is more conventional with a Smev oven/grill and cupboards below,

with extractor hood and lockers above. The fridge is of modest capacity and is a compressor model running on 12V only. It was not too noisy in operation on its own, but what appeared to be an extra cooling fan did make it quite intrusive noise-wise when switched on. As the fridge is quite near the head of the bed I'd look into the possibility of specifying a near-silent, conventional three-way fridge in this motorcaravan. Last but not least is a good-sized cutlery/utensil drawer - this simple, but useful item - like worktop - is often absent from even larger motorhomes.



ABOVE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Latest Sprinter's cab is classy and comfortable. Inset: A new electronic key fires up the Merc's systems.

Standard leather upholstery graces the compact front lounge.

Good-sized freestanding table provides for two people.

LEFT FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: The bed's fold-down headboard creates even more space in the kitchen.

Galley is well equipped and offers plenty of worktop.

Compact washroom takes full advantage of a drop-down basin and is well equipped.



SPARKLING CLEAN

A space saving, silver tambour door slides back to reveal the compact washroom, located in the nearside rear corner. Unremarkable, but easy to use, sums up this space - as a swivel-bowl loo is overshadowed by a drop-down washbasin. Above this there's a Devon-built twin mirror-doored cabinet that's so much better than the bought-in slippery plastic versions often found in washrooms of this type. Inside, substantial fiddled shelves provide plenty of storage for cosmetics.

The test van's basin mixer tap was the pullout variety, doubling as a showerhead; Devon tells me production models will have a separate shower mixer/riser rail fitted. The drop-down basin is an unfashionable piece of motorcaravan equipment but I like 'em; they work fine and save space - important in a washroom as compact as this one.

The floor is, unsurprisingly, a shower tray, but what is surprising is its mounting. It's set into a solid timber block, making it feel very solid indeed. This is a good thing as, over the years, I've heard tales of more flimsy shower tray floors failing after only a short period of time. This washroom is equipped ready to go with soap dish, toothbrush/glass dock, towel ring and toilet roll holder. These things are modestly priced and easy to fit, but many manufacturers

don't include them: Devon, however, shows better attention to detail.

An opening clear window with cassette blind/flyscreen completes the scene in here and the washroom worked well during the test. However, if you're of larger frame, you may find things a bit tight, especially at shoulder height. This is, in part, due to the Sprinter's tumblehome - where other base vehicles are squarer-shaped, the Merc has more curved sides leading to less width higher up.

The Sapphire's washroom may be small, but just outside the door is a vanity facility that offers extra personal grooming space. A slim counter top features a cupboard below, plus an angled, high-level mirror that gives a good view, even of the shorter among us. This space works well as there's a room divider curtain adjacent and a high-level mains socket perfect for a hairdryer. My flowing locks (I wish) dry naturally in about 15 seconds, but Suzanne found this feature perfect, citing the fact that many motorhomes only have mains sockets in the kitchen where no mirror is to be found.

SAPPHIRE SLUMBERS

As much as its other appointments are attractive, it'll be the fixed rear double bed that sells this 'van. This bed narrows towards

the rear so sleeping heads to the front (as the design intends) is best. It's a fair climb to get in and a tad tricky to get out of, so Sapphire owners will need to be reasonably sprightly to enjoy using this berth. This is especially true for the sleeper nearest the wall. That said this bed was very comfy with a thick mattress on a slatted base. The aforementioned drop-down headboard is padded on the bedside and makes everything very comfortable. With privacy curtaining closed, a cosy en suite is created and long lie-ins are a distinct possibility - one partner can rise, wash, dress and deliver breakfast in bed (or take the dog out) while the other snoozes.

JEWEL BOX

Modestly sized overhead lockers populate the interior - the fact that they're too shallow to take a dinner plate gives an idea of their capacity. No overcab locker is fitted, which makes it easier to move (bruised bounce-free) from cab to living area. A cupboard and through-top-accessed space under the sofa provide more room for clothing and kit in the lounge.

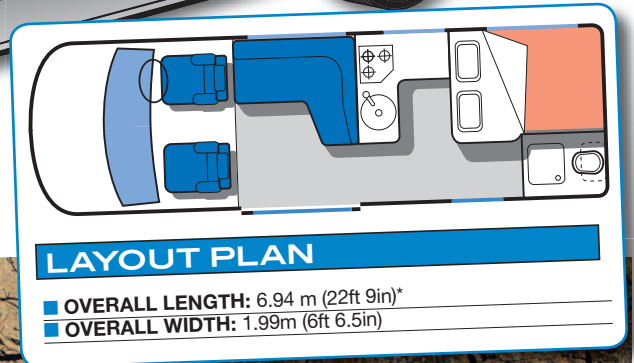
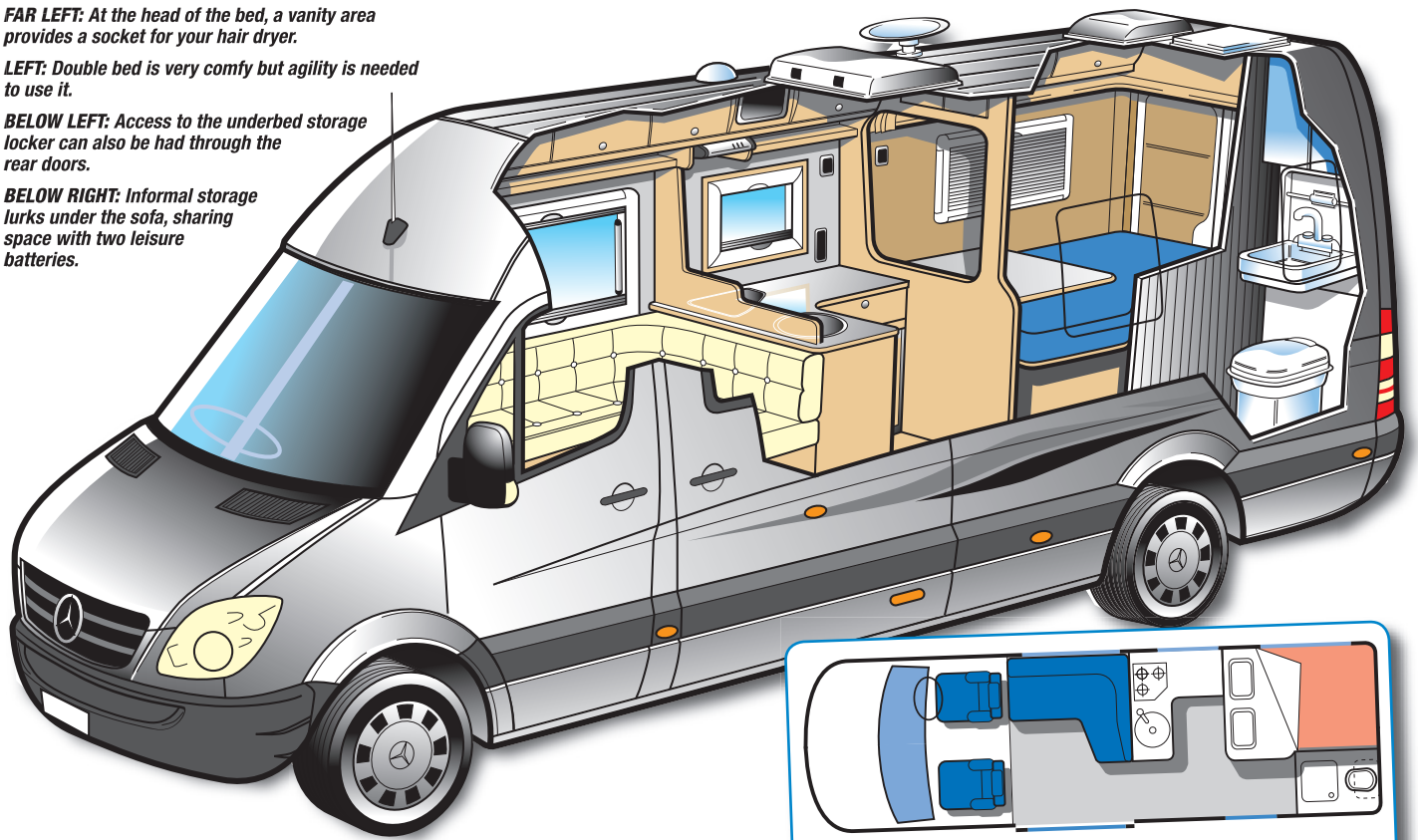
The wardrobe is located opposite the kitchen on the nearside and by necessity (in this narrow 'van) it's a slim affair with a front-to-back hanging rail. There's not much room for

FAR LEFT: At the head of the bed, a vanity area provides a socket for your hair dryer.

LEFT: Double bed is very comfy but agility is needed to use it.

BELOW LEFT: Access to the underbed storage locker can also be had through the rear doors.

BELOW RIGHT: Informal storage lurks under the sofa, sharing space with two leisure batteries.





LEFT: Above the slim wardrobe lurks a small, standard-fit LCD television.

taffeta and top-notch tailoring in here, but coats and fleeces for two should fit. The bottom of this piece of furniture also offers a deep space with shoe storage potential.

The storeroom's sparkler is the underbed locker in the rear. Accessed from within through the aforementioned tambour door at the head of the bed, it can also be got at from outside by opening the twin rear doors. This locker is long and deep, but unfortunately compromised by the presence of the gas locker towards the rear on the offside. If possible, I'd junk this intrusive gas box in favour of a bulk tank mounted under the vehicle. This would make the underbed storage far more generous and user-friendly. Needless to say, holiday kit such as tables, chairs and outdoor cooking kit will still fit in here OK.

SAPPHIRE'S SERVICE SECTOR

An inboard fresh water tank feeds an easy-access pressurising pump and creates a plumbing system that gives good flow to both taps. The tank and pump are mounted in the under-bed locker but, as they're at the front,

they don't compromise storage space too much. This location, of course, should keep them frost-free and help make the Sapphire a viable all-year-round motorcaravan.

Hot water and space heating is courtesy of Truma's ubiquitous Combi unit. Unfortunately it's not the EH model which offers space heat and warm water using both gas and mains electricity. If I was buying a Sapphire, I'd look into the possibility of including the Combi EH, such is its versatility and gas-saving qualities. This heater's low setting on hook-up keeps winter chills away and used in this fashion it's very quiet too.

WE STAYED AT

Lidalia Caravan Club site, Old Station Yard, Moss Road, Newcastleton TD9 0RU (tel: 01387 375819; web site: www.caravanclub.co.uk)

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Devon Conversions, Mainsforth Road, Ferryhill, County Durham DL17 9DE (tel: 01740 652232; web site: www.devonconversions.com)



I was very pleased to see twin, high quality leisure batteries fitted, both neatly installed under the sofa in designed-for-the-purpose, plastic boxes. Although a power-hungry (12V) compressor fridge is fitted, the 220 amp hrs of juice on offer from the two batteries should make it possible to spend some quality time away from hook-up.

Lighting is a mix of fluorescents and spots with (another first-time experience for me) LED units in the bedroom and washroom. Very low power consumption is the upside of these units: a rather dim and cold light the downside.

Natural lighting includes the usual double-glazed acrylic windows and a couple of Hekis (Midi in the kitchen, Mini in the bedroom) - I'd have liked a big Heki (II or III) above the lounge. Aside from the washroom, the cassette blinds are all of the superior pleated variety, which look great, are very effective and easy to use. Last is the treat hiding in a locker above the wardrobe. Open it and out pops a little flat-screen TV - again fitted as standard, complete with aerial and amplifier.

A PURPOSEFUL JEWEL?

Devon has taken a big step in deciding to build the Sapphire. As the only production panel van conversion with a fixed longitudinal bed, this

motorcaravan is unique in the marketplace and will probably find its own niche rather than taking the UK motorcaravanning world by storm.

Without doubt, the qualities of the latest Mercedes Sprinter and its slim profile make the Sapphire more attractive than a six-metre low profile coachbuilt offering the same layout and facilities. A few days travelling with this 'van saw it provide comfortable accommodation for two, although the size/design constraints of bed and washroom will probably mean that the Sapphire's ideal couple will be of average height and build with reasonable physical fitness.

Grinning madly and swearing profusely are two of the benchmarks that I (involuntarily) use when testing motorcaravans - the Sapphire had me grinning behind the wheel, when using the kitchen and smiling sweetly as I climbed aboard the ever-ready double. High-octane profanity only occurred once, and that was while trying to extract the dining table from its remote lair under the bed. I did mutter a bit on discovering the obtrusive location of the gas locker, but as I said, I believe an underfloor bulk tank might solve that little problem.

Price is a factor also, but when you consider that there are plenty of panel van conversions out there that break the £40k barrier this relatively high figure becomes more sharply

focused. The Sapphire is well equipped in standard form, while driving enthusiasts should love the excellent cab comfort and the new Sprinter's on-road poise. Long (in panel van terms) it may be, but it's that slim width that many will find attractive - offering as it does, bigger 'van accommodation with the ability to explore 'narrower' regions all over Europe. □

MMM LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

- High top

PRICE

- From: £43,296 OTR
- As tested: £43,995 OTR

BASICS

- Vehicle: Mercedes-Benz Sprinter
- Berths: 2
- Three-point belted seats: 2 (including driver)
- Warranty: Three years base vehicle and conversion

CONSTRUCTION

LWB factory high roof panel van with side-sliding and blind twin rear doors

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- Length: 6.94m (22ft 9in)*
- Width: 1.99m (6ft 6.5in)
- Height: 2.74m (9ft 0in)*
- Wheelbase: 4.32m (14ft 2in)
- Rear overhang: 1.59m (5ft 2.5in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 3500kg*
- Payload: 740kg* (without essential habitation equipment)

INSIDE STORY

Swivelling passenger seat ahead of L-shaped offside sofa and L-shaped kitchen, nearside wardrobe. Offside-located longitudinal fixed double bed with washroom alongside

- Insulation: Thinsulate high performance insulation used throughout
- Interior height: 1.93m (6ft 4in)

THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 2.2-litre turbo-diesel producing 80kW (109bhp) @1600 - 2500 rpm
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, rear-wheel drive
- Fuel consumption: 28.7mpg overall
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round
- Suspension: Front: independent. Rear: rigid axle

- Features: Remote central-locking, electric windows, driver's airbag, radio/CD player, ABS, ASR, twin door bins, dashtop storage locker, height-adjustable driver's seat

LOUNGING & DINING

L-shaped sofa and swivelled passenger seat offers lounging for four and dining for two from freestanding table

KITCHEN

L-shaped unit features work surface to right of hob, plus further 'dumping' surface formed by adjacent bed's headboard, which drops down. Two lockers and one cupboard overhead, two lockers and cutlery drawer below, two-speed extractor hood above hob

- Sink: Circular stainless steel unit with fold-down mixer tap and hinged glass lid. No drainer
- Cooker: Cramer three-burner hob and Smev oven/grill unit, both with electronic ignition
- Fridge: Waeco Coolmatic 12V compressor type. Capacity 65 litres

WASHROOM

Enclosed by sliding tambour door. Swivel-bowl, electric-flush cassette toilet, drop-down basin with tap/pull-out showerhead, shower tray floor with enclosing nylon curtain, built-in mirror-door cabinet with two fiddled shelves. Vanity unit with cupboard beneath and mirror above outside washroom adjacent to bed

BEDS

Rear fixed longitudinal double

- Length: 1.91m (6ft 3in)
- Width: 1.25m (4ft 1in)

STORAGE

Overhead lockers: two in lounge, three in bedroom, all with fiddled shelf beneath. Under sofa: top-accessed storage area and single-door cupboard. Wardrobe: opposite kitchen on nearside, single front-to-back hanging rail and deep unshelved base. Underbed: Area accessed through rear external doors and tambour door adjacent to washroom

LIFE SUPPORT

- Fresh water: Inboard. Capacity 100 litres (22 gallons)

- Waste water: Capacity 60 litres (13.2 gallons)

- Water heater: Truma Combi boiler, gas/ mains operation

- Space heater: Truma Combi, gas only operation with blown-air

- Leisure battery: Two x 110 amp hr

- Gas: Capacity two x 7kg cylinders

- Lighting: Lounge: two twin-tube fluorescents, two adjustable halogen spots. Kitchen: two halogen downlighters, one adjustable halogen spots. Bedroom: four multi-LED downlighters, one multi-LED strip light. Washroom: three multi-LED downlighters. Underbed storage area: one twin-tube fluorescent light

- Sockets: 230V: two (in kitchen and lounge), 12V: two (above foot of bed and in TV locker)

- Control panel: Main unit located above kitchen with controls/circuit breakers for mains and 12V functions. Second unit above kitchen worktop indicates fresh water reserves - push button to read ascending LED display

- Blinds/curtains: Pleated cassette blind/flyscreens to all caravan windows, internal insulating/blackout screens to cab

- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base vehicle: Metallic paint (£699)

- Conversion: None

Other options

- Base: 130bhp engine (£1081), 150bhp engine (£2162), 180bhp engine (£4970), automatic transmission (£1170), air-conditioning (£995), passenger airbag (£465), CD changer (£570), cruise control (£200), electrically-operated side door (£699), 100-litre fuel tank (£241), alloy wheels (£658), towbar (£388), electrically-operated/heated mirrors (£223)

- Conversion: None

E&OE