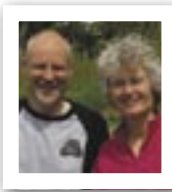
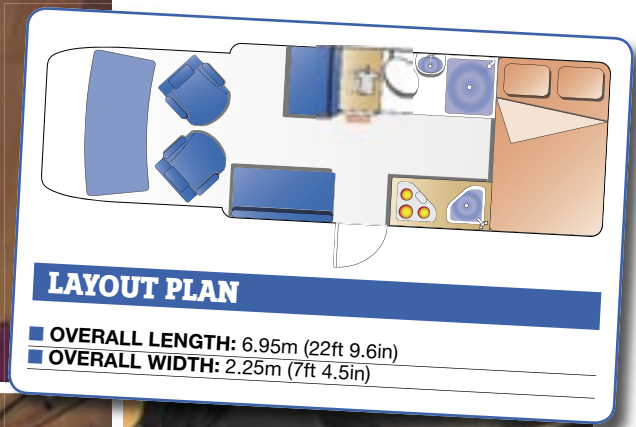


LONG-TERM LOVER

Tribute T-725 on 2.2-litre Ford Transit



- 1 The view forward from the low-level rear bed – opposite the kitchen is the washroom and wardrobe
- 2 Good quality furniture belies the Tribute's budget status
- 3 The Transit benefits from driving position-improving lowered seats
- 4 The table has no extension, but the swivelled cab seats are unusually comfortable



The latest budget model from Auto-Trail boasts a low-level fixed bed and an impressive new warranty

Words & pictures by Andrew and Rona Bromley



Tribute coachbuilt motorhomes (not to be confused with Trigano Tribute panel van conversions, which are imported from Italy) are the budget range made by Auto-Trail at its Grimsby factory. However, Auto-Trail is also a member of the huge Trigano group of companies, so there is a family connection. Unlike other Auto-Trails – these days, all built on Fiat's Ducato – Tributes are based on Ford Transit chassis cabs, and were the first to feature Ford's wide-track chassis, specifically designed for motorhomes. Currently, there are four in the range: two on the medium wheelbase and two on the long wheelbase chassis. They have different interior layouts, but all are overcab designs. However, this is about to change as a couple of low profiles will be launched at the

new London ExCel show in February. Sidewalls are skinned in GRP, with acrylic skirts and rear bumpers made sectional for easier, cheaper replacement – a nice practical touch. The big news is that all Trigano brands, (including Ci, Roller Team, Auto-Trail and Chausson), get a 10-year water ingress warranty for 2012. Full details weren't available at time of writing, but this should reassure buyers. Other converters have also recently introduced 10-year warranties, including Bristol-based Bailey, which introduced it across its new range of motorhomes. At just under seven metres, the T-725 is medium-sized, with room for four to travel and (it's claimed) six to sleep. Last year's T-725G had a high-level transverse bed over a garage. However, this year the bed is lower, and so the

garage becomes merely a large locker (hence no 'G' suffix). For a proper garage, the higher bed can still be ordered, albeit at a £375 cost. It then becomes the 725G. With an on-the-road price (as tested, with extras) of £39,064, it's comfortably below the psychological £40,000 mark. Other British companies (think Elddis and Swift) have a strong following in this budget end of the market, but since their launch a couple of years ago Tribute motorhomes have forged a healthy entry-level niche for themselves too. It's a funny thing, fashion. Just a few years ago, if you wanted a motorhome, it was almost always white. These days, silver cabs and decals are all the rage, so a pure-white motorhome such as this Tribute comes as a surprise. A bulbous, flat-sided luton is rarely conducive to good-looks however useful it

may be. Here, maybe the long wheelbase and relatively short rear overhang help aesthetics. Perhaps it's the clever charcoal-and-yellow decals, diverting attention from the overcab, or the colour-coded grille? Whatever the reason, the proportions of this Tribute are right.

ENGINE ROOM
No more Tributes will be built on the Euro 4 engines so, as soon as current dealer stock is sold, buyers will get Euro 5 compliant engines, which come with a £946 price premium. For that you get lower emissions, improved fuel economy (10% better claims Ford) and service

intervals stretched to once every 30,000 miles or once every two years. All Euro 5 models are front-wheel drive Transits powered by a 2.2-litre 140bhp Duratorq TDCi engine coupled to a manual six-speed 'box (currently, rear-wheel drive Transits have the 2.4-litre motor).

COCKPIT
The Transit cab has a pleasant fascia – blue-grey below and dark grey on top with lots of cubbies and storage. It has all the modern accoutrement you'd hope for: cruise control, twin airbags, steering wheel controls for radio/CD player, fog lights, even a heated windscreen. However, air-conditioning and electric mirrors and windows are optional extras.

The tactile steering wheel is leather-bound, but regrettably its position is fixed, which is a rather outdated feature. However, the seats are adjustable and I was delighted to find Tribute has the new, lower seat swivels. The improvement to the driving position made by this little modification is enormous. The gearlever falls easily to hand, while the handbrake, located on the driver's offside, isn't a long reach. Long-stemmed door mirrors offer a reasonable view aft, but the trip computer's screen is dull and difficult to read.

DRIVING EXPERIENCE
We own a Transit panel van conversion ourselves, so this Tribute made an interesting comparison. Though the engine was young, it was very responsive and powerful, pulling smoothly away from rest, with no tendency to stall if lower revs were used. Round tight bends, on rural Lincolnshire roads, the Tribute handled excellently, much better than our own 'van, in fact. I can only put this down to the wide-track chassis – surely it can't just be the natty rear spoiler? Also, at 2.25 metres wide, it's slightly narrower than most coachbuilds: every little helps on smaller roads. The chassis has a good turning circle and a supple ride without undue body roll, while the whole was noticeably quiet on the move, save for a rattle somewhere above the cab – probably an individual problem. Overall, this Tribute was a pleasure to drive, providing real competition for the ubiquitous Fiat Ducato.

IN THE LOUNGE
The caravan door lacks central locking, but has an opening window and flyscreen. The lounge is to the front and comprises a nearside two-seater settee and an offside half-



dinette, with two belted travel seats. The table is lightweight and wall-mounted, but has no extension, so those on the side settee will need to stretch to reach it – or eat with plates on their laps.

The cab seats swivel and Rona found them unusually comfortable in this mode. But, as is often the case, the passenger seat is too far from the table.

There's a large push-out window on each side of the lounge and a skylight. A pair of adjustable halogen reading lights sit over the side settee and there are LED strips, so it's quite light in here.

Seats with flat cushions are clad in Finsbury (grey/beige) upholstery with darker swirls, while faux curtains are mouse-coloured. Oatmeal carpets (grey mats in the cab) are removable, and the mid-tan (Acer) woodwork is attractive and sturdy.

Half-dinette lounges aren't generally the last word in comfort, but this one is adequate for four – six would be a squash.

KITCHEN

The Tribute's kitchen is in a unit on the nearside, aft of the habitation door. The work



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WE LIKED

- Base vehicle – performance and handling
- Comfortable cab seats with lower swivels
- Robust, no-nonsense family accommodation
- Sectioned skirt and bumpers for easy replacement
- Water ingress warranty

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Sink with integral stainless steel drainer
- More storage in the washroom
- Toilet with its own flush water supply

WE DISLIKED

- Lack of spare wheel
- The dinette bed

surface, finished in a dark grey speckle, contains the hob at the door end and sink at the other. Both are roughly triangular with glass lids.

The hob has three, manually-ignited gas burners and the sink has an internally-mounted mixer tap. This arrangement gives plenty of work space (with a pair of mains sockets usefully sited amidships at the back), but there's no drainer and the design means you can't butt a tray up to the sink.

Underneath the hob is a bow-fronted 80-litre fridge, which has a removable freezer compartment. We didn't like how the internal plastic containers clashed – either the salad drawer or a door pocket must be removed.

Under the sink is a combined grill/oven, with cupboard beneath, and between that and the fridge is a vertical cupboard containing a cutlery drawer (rather small), with shelves below. Overhead lockers have plenty of space

and include a crockery rack, while all is illuminated by an under-cupboard LED strip, window and skylight.

It's an attractive galley, suitable for a small family, though lacking full washing-up facilities, while some may object to the oven being so close to the rear bed. Thankfully, an upstand from the work-surface protects the bed from water splashes.

BEDTIME

For the four travellers, there's plenty of space in two double beds. Lowering the over-garage bed has allowed Auto-Trail to place high-level cupboards all round, still leaving 700mm (2ft 3.5in) headroom below them for sitting up to enjoy the bedtime Horlicks. There are two adjustable halogen reading lights at the (offside) head and a window at the foot.

The divided mattress lies on a condensation-reducing mesh mat over a plywood base. It's a big bed and just a 870mm (2ft 10in) climb from the floor, via a good carpeted step. There's no privacy curtain and, as always, one person will have to climb over the other to get out of bed.

The overcab bed is of similar length and slightly wider. Maximum headroom is 715mm (2ft 4in), but it curves down to the front. A bulkhead light is mounted on the offside, with a window on the nearside.

An alloy rail can be mounted to stop unforeseen descents and privacy curtains are fitted. However, the lightweight access ladder couldn't be used on this prototype, as the sockets for its hooks were misaligned, so the ladder fouled the table. It's a relatively simple thing to fix though.

Dinette beds must be extraordinarily difficult to design, as very few are properly usable. Like many of its rivals, the Tribute is intended to sleep six, but we'd forget the idea, save in dire emergency. Not only would the motorhome interior become cramped with so many bodies, but the overcab bed would be inaccessible: with dinette bed made up there's nowhere to stand the ladder.

We hoped the flat seat cushions would help dinette bed making, but the cushions are

of varying thicknesses and the backrests of the travel seats have cut-outs for the metal frame. Adding to our perplexity were two grey infill cushions – for the life of us, we couldn't work out where to incorporate them! For the record, this bed is both long and reasonably wide (1.21 metres/3ft 11.5in), but we'd keep it in lounge configuration.

Used as a four berth, the Tribute's sleeping accommodation is successful.

WASHROOM

Opposite the kitchen is the washroom. Behind a wooden door, it's a relatively plain, wood-lined space, illuminated by a rooflight, translucent window and strip LED lamp. Unusually, there's no mirror – that's outside, opposite the kitchen.

The Thetford C250 swivelling loo uses water from the main freshwater tank, and there's a plastic oval washbasin under the window. A toilet-roll holder is in precisely the wrong spot and the towel-ring also needs re-locating. Warm air enters the washroom via a vent from the adjacent heater.

Storage is rather lacking: there's only a slim high-level locker above the window and headroom is low, too. However, step down through folding doors into the separate shower cubicle and there's more height. It's plastic-lined, has a hook for the showerhead and chromed corner baskets. There's one – front-mounted – drain-hole and a most useful (removable) rail for hanging wet clothes.

This washroom is rather austere – extra storage facilities and a mirror wouldn't come amiss, but the shower cubicle is practical and easily cleaned.

STORAGE

There's lots of space in this motorhome and a 640kg payload allows you to fully utilise it. Of course, three passengers will take up quite a lot of that allowance (the driver is already included in the payload calculation).

In addition to sleeping, the luton provides masses of storage. The wardrobe is opposite the caravan door and has a 1.14-metre drop and lots of space – particularly if those lounge

5 Rear bed is lower than last year's model and has a nice carpeted step

6 The commodious overcab bed offers good headroom

7 A rather austere washroom, but a practical, easy-clean shower cubicle

8 The kitchen is quite practical, but there's no way of butting a washing-up tray to the sink

9 The dinette bed looks much better than it really is

10 Large underbed locker isn't a garage, but there's room for loads of clobber

11 A large wardrobe (with heater below). The infill cushions use up some space

TEST EXTRA SPECIFICATION

- **Price from:** £37,110 OTR
- **Price as tested:** £39,064 OTR
- **The vehicle:** Ford Transit LWB wide-track chassis cab, 2.2-litre 140bhp turbo-diesel, six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle and conversion, 10 years water ingress
- **Dimensions and weights:** Length 6.95m (22ft 9.5in); width 2.25m (7ft 4.5in); height 2.94m (9ft 8in); gross vehicle weight 3,500kg; payload 640kg
- **Belted seats:** 4 (incl driver)
- **Beds:** Overcab double 2.08m x 1.35m (6ft 10in x 4ft 5in); dinette double 2.08m x 1.21m (6ft 10in x 3ft 11.5in); rear transverse double 2.08m x 1.33m (6ft 10in x 4ft 4.5in)
- **Water heating:** Truma boiler, gas/mains operation
- **Space heating:** Truma convector with blown-air, gas/mains operation
- **Tanks:** Fresh water 85 litres (18.7 gallons); waste water 85 litres (18.7 gallons)
- **Gas:** 1 x 13kg and 1 x 7kg cylinder
- **Options fitted to test vehicle:** Cab air-con (£955), Sports Pack – heated/electric mirrors, wind-out awning, rear 'sports spoiler', TV aerial, mains electric blown-air heating, dash trim, scatter cushions, removable carpets, sports decals (£999)
- **Other options available:** Euro 5 engine (£946) while current Euro 4 dealer stock is sold off

bed infill cushions are left at home!

There's space under the side-facing settee (shared with the gas isolation taps and leisure battery), easily reached by raising the gas-strut-supported top. And there's more under the travel seats, plus four un-shelved lockers above.

Above the rear bed are six big overhead lockers, while below is the large underbed locker. There's a small interior tambour access-door for this, but you'll need to send a kid through – it's too tight for an adult.

Normal access is via the two exterior doors – the larger on the nearside. This won't allow full-sized bikes through, but there's a huge amount of space for clutter, and for a spare wheel, which is not supplied, so you'll have to

buy yourself one.

The alternative garage version has a larger door, which would accommodate bikes. However, the Tributes come with strengthened points hidden within the rear panel, designed to take a bike rack.

EQUIPMENT

Underslung water tanks each have an adequate, but not over-generous, 85-litre capacity. Space heating is provided by Truma's convector, which has both blown-air and Ultraheat mains operation. An 85 amp hr leisure battery is supplied, which could be bigger, and there's gas locker capacity for one 13kg and one 7kg cylinder.

For its price, and apart from the missing



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On Test Tribute T-725

spare wheel, this motorhome comes very well-equipped – especially if you choose the Sport Pack, which includes carpets, TV aerial, electric mirrors, wind-out awning and mains electric heating. At £999, most folk will surely choose this, as it's very good value.

CONCLUSION

Sturdily-made, practical, capacious, sporty – all these epithets apply here. The Tribute T-725 is a strong competitor in its sector, offering a proper alternative to those wanting something other than Fiat or Peugeot-based motorhomes. Coupled with its fair price and long water-ingress warranty, this is indeed a tribute to its Auto-Trail maker. ■



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