

MAKING AN ENTRANCE

Tribute T-720 on 2.2-litre Ford Transit

A new marque from Auto-Trail dunks its toe into the entry-level family motorhome market



Auto-Trail has always concentrated on the quality end of the market, but global financial problems have now created a niche that's shouting to be filled. Foreign imports are suffering from overblown price tags due to unfavorable Euro/Sterling exchange rates (plus a dearth of secondhand motorhomes), and this has created an opening for good, UK-made entry-level motorhomes. Auto-Trail has thus, grasped the nettle - striving to meet this demand. The name chosen for this new endeavour is Tribute, and Auto-Trail has based the new marque on the latest Ford Transit - a base with a lowered chassis and wider rear axle.

There are four layouts on offer, all manufactured in Lincolnshire. The two 6-Series models are based on the MWB chassis, with the 6-speed 115bhp 2.2-litre engine. The 7-Series utilises the long wheelbase chassis and boasts the latest 140 horsepower motor.

All four models have a gross vehicle weight of 3500kg. The range includes a fixed rear bed version, and all models have overcab beds.

CONCOURS

The T-720 boasts 140bhp and six berths, with opposing rear settees, a mid galley kitchen, with washroom opposite, and a half-dinette with small side settee forward. It's difficult to make any motorhome with a luton look pretty - the best it can be is handsome or bullish. Non-colour coded grey bumpers match the grey skirts and strong grey seals around the edges of the overcab. Some roughly rounded swoopy graphics in bronze and silver achieve a look that has character. I liked the 'eyebrows' on the overcab: a nice touch.

The graphics and trim combine, with the posh exterior door, to make the 'van look more expensive than it actually is - a sought after trait.

ENTREE

But what does this entry-level motorhome look like inside?





Words by Di Johnson,
pictures by Pete Johnson



Family-friendly motorhoming at a keen price

AT A GLANCE

■ **PRICE FROM:** £35,995 OTR

■ **BERTHS:** 6

■ **LAYOUT:** Swivel cab seats ahead of offside half-dinette, with side sofa opposite, offside wardrobe and washroom, nearside kitchen, twin-sofa lounge in rear

■ **ECONOMY:** 26.1mpg



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- 1 Lack of an external step makes getting aboard a bit of a stretch
- 2 Open galley kitchen lessens the corridor effect. Wardrobe is opposite
- 3 Furniture belies the Tribute's entry-level aspirations
- 4 Cab has cruise control, plus steering column mounted radio controls

Well, pretty darned good is the answer. I expected flimsy fixtures and fittings, and a yucky finish, but was wrong. The caravan door should have alerted me: it's sturdy, has a window, two-point locking and a gas strut restraint: not at all cut rate.

The inset step saves having to install an external tread. However, those of us in the height-challenged department would appreciate a bit of extra help to mount this beastie. After all I'm really not short (at nearly 5ft 2in), and there's plenty shorter.

As I cast my eyes around the interior, the words family-friendly sprang to mind. However, first, let's see how the 140bhp Ford copes with the steep hills and bends of North Yorkshire...

GRAND PRIX

Both I and my photographer, Pete, found the seats comfortable and easily adjusted to our vastly differing heights: an advantage not to be taken lightly if there are two drivers. There are no adjustable lumbar supports, but contrary as I am, I find seats more comfortable



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On Test Tribute T-720 on 2.2-litre Ford Transit

without these devices.

The small steering wheel contributes to the car-like feel of the drive and the back window in the lounge provides good rearwards vision. For families acquiring their first 'van, this could prevent the odd clout when reversing. The layout of the cab is good, with plenty of little cubbyholes to stash clobber, with insets for bottles, cans and mugs.

When I set off I found the clutch rather... strong. As usual, I forgot this as soon we were on the road. The gearshift's a delight - positive, light and in exactly the right position; we both agreed on this. Braking needs a tad more determination than Fiat's ubiquitous Ducato, but the suspension is more forgiving. We found some mega-cruddy roads when dithering around the moors and the Transit's pliant suspension saved our delicate teeth on more than one occasion. It must be mentioned that apart from the grill pan rattling (I'd forgotten to wrap it in tea towels), there was little conversion noise. I noticed that the Ford's engine tone isn't quite as refined as the Fiat's.

When first I set my posterior in the Ford's comfortable cab, I worried that the mirrors looked a trifle frail and might produce the dreaded mirror tremor. Wrong again, they're sturdy enough to be stable under the most jarring of conditions. Would you believe there's a nanny-ish (sorry) visual prompt, to change up - supposedly to enhance your fuel economy and reduce emissions? I found the prompt (a green arrow lights up on the dash) suggesting a gearshift was at times a tad early, and preferred to judge for myself.

However, there are no worries about the motor's ability to propel you and your 'van at the speed you'd wish. But in case you get carried away, cruise control is fitted as standard - possibly saving you the odd speeding fine. With full tanks, the 'van dealt with a 33 per cent



incline with verve. My one beef is that there's no spare wheel provided. A Fix and Go puncture repair kit won't do you much good when you're fifty miles from a garage, in some foreign part, with a shredded tyre. But this *is* an entry-level van, and there's a payload to consider too.

I reversed a quarter of a mile along very narrow roads and steep curves, to enable the clever one to get a photo, and I can report, honestly, that there were absolutely no reversing problems.

LOOKS ARE EVERYTHING?

The Tribute manages to walk the delicate path between being affordable, and not looking too budget. While there are no frills in the things that matter, it seems there's been no brutal cost cutting. Overhead lockers have positive locking and nice long metal handles to grab. A domestic-style door handle on the washroom looked as if it could be from a much dearer vehicle.

The colour palette is slate-grey worktop and table, with cappuccino-patterned upholstery, tweedy-brown and oatmeal faux curtains and solid wood furniture in a pale Beech-ish colour. Wood strip-effect vinyl covering the floor is similarly toned, topped with removable corn-coloured bound-edge carpet.

The wall covering is my only gripe. Something more durable would be ideal, though I recognise that there have to be cost savings somewhere. There were already several small scuffs in vulnerable places, such as near the bed slats and table-hanging positions.

LOUNGING OR DINING

A feature of this Tribute is its flexibility. Both cab seats can be swivelled, with the cab floor on the same level as in the rear. This enables six to lounge up front. Two can sit on the forward-facing half dinette (which has two three-point seatbelts) and two more on the nearside settee. Against the offside wall, in front of the dinette seats, a table (with drop-leg) can be hung, providing realistic dining space for four. A Seitz rooflight and two windows provide plenty of natural light, while LED strip lighting takes care of the dark hours.

In the rear lounge there are two opposing settees seating six, and here too, there's a hanging rail for the table, enabling four to dine. Slight snag, there's only one table

provided, but a second might be purchased. Or you might buy a freestanding picnic table, which would have dual use. With a family in residence a second lounging/hobbies area is a boon in an English 'summer'.

With three windows surrounding the lounge, there's no necessity for a rooflight. Under the overhead lockers on one side are two LED spots for reading. Auto-Trail's Gavin Claricoates, said they intend to fit a couple of spots to the offside too, in addition to the LED strips.

FOOD FOR THE FAMILY

The galley kitchen is arrayed along the nearside opposite the washroom. A family might find the 77-litre fridge a bit small for all their groceries - again, the Tribute is made to be affordable. The worktop somewhat makes up for this lack. This is because, in the potting bench-style kitchen working area, you feel the cook's been given a practical workstation.

A three-burner corner hob with spark ignition occupies one side, and a good-sized stainless sink sits in the opposing corner. Both have hinged glass lids. Between, is a good area of worktop, beneath a Spinflow Duplex grill/oven combination (also equipped with spark ignition). A cupboard big enough for pots (beneath) is also where the gas-isolating valves are homed. A cupboard alongside provides a cutlery drawer and three layers to stash away tins, bread and suchlike. It's also home to the fridge's mains isolator switch. There was much cursing and wondering why the fridge wasn't working (on 230V power), until I found its magic toggle.

The two overhead lockers in the kitchen have mug, plate and bowl racks to keep crockery safe.

SHOWER HEAVEN?

This is where it gets sticky. From the looks of it, Auto-Trail has designed a very practical washroom. Open the washroom door fully and you'll notice there's a clash with the handle and the nice big mirror on the washroom wall, opposite the kitchen.

However, revealed inside, is a proper one-piece separate shower cubicle (in white plastic) with bi-fold door. It's equipped with a dedicated showerhead, but no riser, and a two-tier chromium shampoo and gunge rack. These all contribute to its practicality. Properly separated





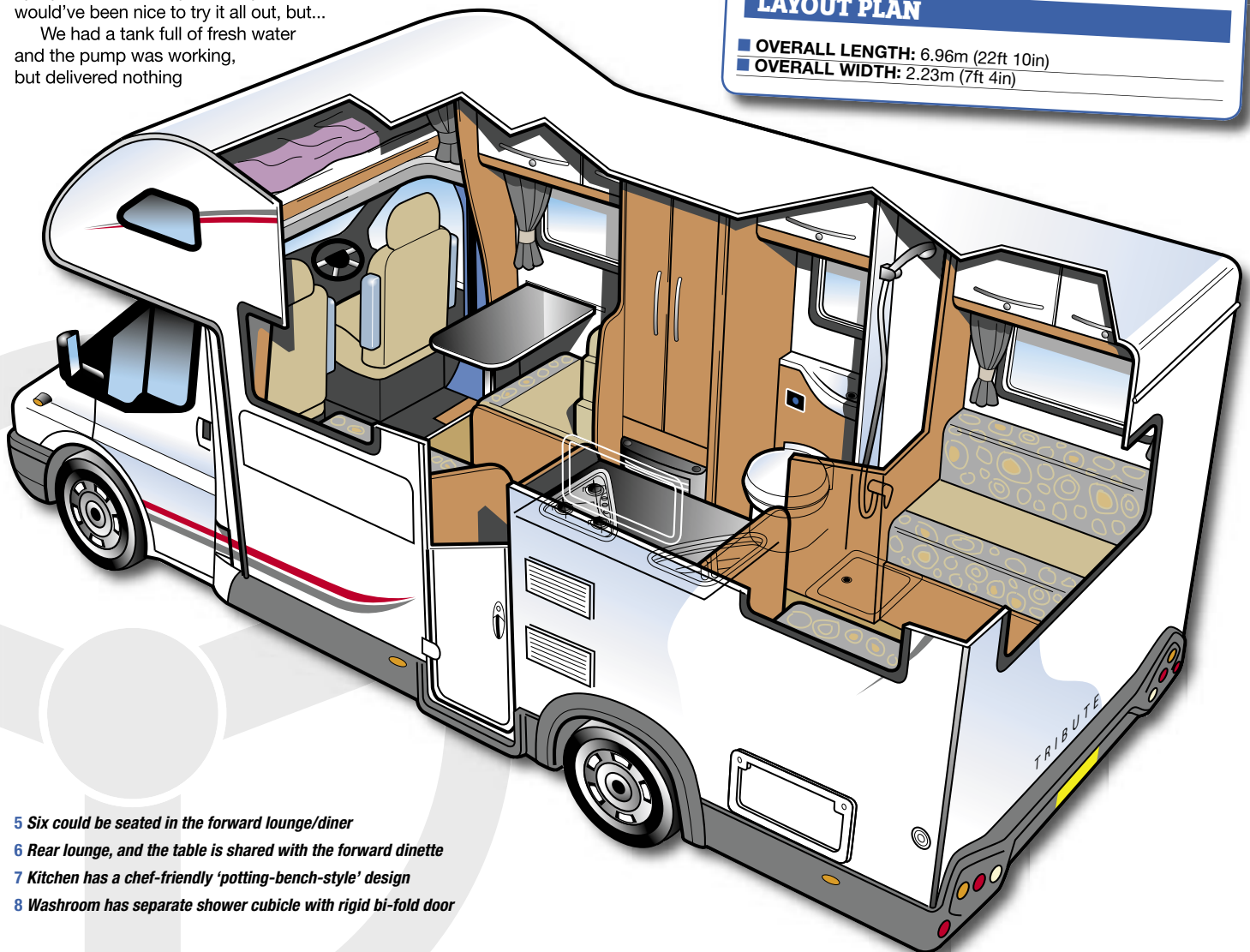
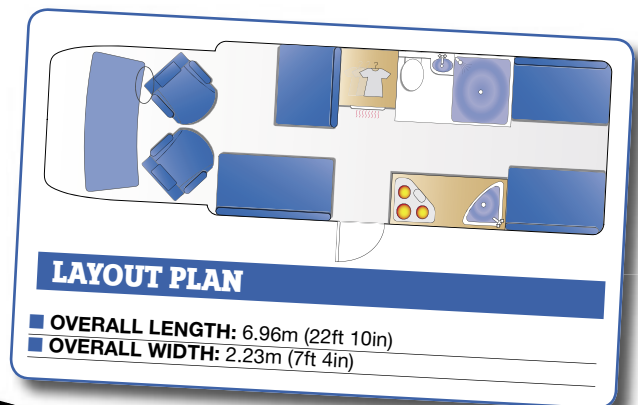
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showers make it so much easier for a family to perform their ablutions, as you don't have to wipe down the toilet and floor afterwards.

In the main body of the washroom is a teardrop shaped basin, with a useful little shelf and soap depression incorporated. There's also an overhead storage locker. The towel ring, hooks and toilet-roll holder are all quality fittings, while a Thetford swivel-bowl toilet and opening opaque window complete the picture. And it would've been nice to try it all out, but...

We had a tank full of fresh water and the pump was working, but delivered nothing

stronger than the occasional strangulated splutter. The clever one said, 'perhaps the filter's blocked or the pump's drawing air'. 'Don't be daft, it's new', said I. He was right, of course, the filter was full of lots of black plastic swarf, which he cleared, but it still wouldn't deliver the goods.



- 5 Six could be seated in the forward lounge/diner
- 6 Rear lounge, and the table is shared with the forward dinette
- 7 Kitchen has a chef-friendly 'potting-bench-style' design
- 8 Washroom has separate shower cubicle with rigid bi-fold door

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Were we doing something wrong? I rang Gavin at Auto-Trail who couldn't understand it, as the 'van had been checked. I reassured him that we were parked close to the facilities, so it was little inconvenience to us. So, I'm pretty sure it's a good washroom, but we couldn't test it. Gavin rang us when we got home to tell us they'd solved the problem. The tank's dip-pipe had fallen off apparently. It will now be fixed more securely, so it shouldn't happen again with these 'vans.

SLUMBER PARTY

When you're moving about in the back of the 'van you notice that there's a bit of sway in the rear, if you'll pardon my language. There's a price to be paid for the forgiving suspension and large-ish rear overhang. However, it wasn't bad, so we wouldn't have lowered steadies even if the Tribute had any fitted.

For our first night, we thought we'd try the overcab double bed. Right then: pull the slatted supports rearwards and flip the mattress extension down onto the slats, easy. Now, reach for the ladder, hmm... I couldn't reach it - stored in the nether regions of the overcab. I needed another ladder to reach it: where's Pete!

With the ladder retrieved and clipped to the edge of the bed, I clambered up to see what was on offer. There's an opening window and a light, but not too much headroom. It's not a sitting-bolt-upright-in-bed-reading sort of an overcab, but consider - when you snuggle down on your side to read a bodice ripper or gung-ho thriller - how much more diesel the 'van would use if the overcab pod were taller.

The mattress wasn't thick, so I anticipated a restless night, but was pleasantly surprised.



Not bad at all. I really liked the two open (inset and capacious) cubbyholes that are large enough to store books, alarm clocks and even lightweight summer clothes. The heavyweight privacy curtain should also help get youngsters off to sleep.

The next night we tackled the rear bed. Make up is again, easy: pull the wooden slats

forward into the space between the settees and rearrange the bases and backrests into a flat bed, making sure the joins aren't near your hips. I piled on the bedding and settled down for the night, but didn't stay long.

I found the downstairs bed much harder than the overcab and deserted Pete for the more comfortable alternative. Pete's



9 The rear bed is easy to construct, with pullout wooden slats, but I found it quite firm

10 With the forward bed made up there's no space for the overcab ladder

11 Overcab bed proved to be the most comfy



a toughie and said he had a good night's sleep. I guessed as much from his snoring! Nonetheless, he joined me for the next night in the softer of the beds.

Since you can't use the ladder with the forward lounge/dinette bed made up, I'm assuming it's designed for occasional use. The table is used as a support base for part of the bed, while the side settee's base pulls into the centre of the 'van to support the cushions. Finally, find two (suarish and long slot-shaped) infill cushions to complete the jigsaw.

Since there are only two rear belted seats, I think that, for the majority of the Tribute's life, it will be used as a four berth.

However, with a bit of careful planning six could be berthed occasionally; remember, you can't use a ladder when the forward bed's in situ. I can understand Auto-Trail's thinking: it probably didn't cost a whole lot extra to make these additional berths available.

CARGO

How many 'vans in this price range come with an exterior locker for hoses, hook-up cable and wedges? Well, this Tribute has one. It utilises the space under the nearside settee, and it's also big enough for reasonably sized chairs. Umbrella-style chairs could be accessed from outside, but anything larger might need to be inserted from under the settee base. I found the catches difficult to open. The clever one said I was being a wimp, but I noticed even he had to use two thumbs.

Storage, overall, is good, with high-level lockers running all around the ceiling. As the tanks are underslung there's fairly unrestricted storage space under the settees. However, it's not that easy to get at the space, as there are no hinges or gas struts fitted. On the side settee, near the cab, there's a drop-down door along the front of the base, giving easier access to this storage. Also in this space, is the (70 amp hr) leisure battery, fitted beneath its floor.

The wardrobe is not exactly capacious for a six berth, but then we've already established

it probably won't be used to full capacity very often. It is however, adequate, and there is space enough for the odd ball-gown, penguin suit and maybe more. It's quite a deep space, and it's warmed - situated as it is, above the Truma heater.

THE NECESSARIES

Fresh and waste water tanks have 80 litres of capacity, and both are insulated. Battery capacity is 70 amp hr, which sounds fine with lighting being all - ultra efficient - LED-powered.

However, if any residents like to keep up with the soaps they'll need a more power-hungry TV. If that's the case you won't want to spend too much time disconnected from the mains: unless, of course, you upgrade the battery.

WE LIKED

- The gearbox, and horsepower
- Comfy suspension
- Flexible lounge/dining design
- Plenty of storage
- Battery-saving LED lighting
- Oven and grill
- Comfy mattress in overcab bed
- Quality fixtures and fittings
- Removable bound-edged carpet

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A drainer for the sink
- A larger fridge
- An extra 230V socket up front
- A softer rear bed
- A second, free-standing table

WE DISLIKED

- Easily scuffed and marked wall covering material
- High caravan entry step (or one of us did)

The radio/CD player has desirable supplementary controls on the steering column and an auxiliary input for an MP3 player. Space heating is supplied by a 3kW gas-fired Trumatic convector heater, and a Truma Ultrastore gas/mains-powered boiler supplies 10 litres of hot water. There's space for one 13kg and one 7kg gas cylinder.

Heating can't be left on when travelling, resulting in chilly journeys for rear passengers during colder months.

The savings made by only having, say, a



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The payload of 650kg seems adequate for this vehicle. If, however, you start adding rollout awnings, bike racks, tow hitches, roof racks and satellite dish this will eat into your allowance. The rear overhang has also to be taken into account when bike racks are fitted.

CONCLUSION

I think Auto-Trail has done a remarkable job filling a niche with the Tribute. It may be an entry-level motorhome, but the fixtures and fittings belie its 'affordable' aims. Certain areas, such as the wall coverings, are obvious budget finishes, but it's difficult to find much

three-burner hob won't be noticed, but the smaller fridge might be an inconvenience for a family. Simply carrying enough milk, salad and veg would be difficult, let alone the beer and white wine.

There's a double 230V socket in the kitchen and a single beneath the offside rear overhead locker - together with 12V and aerial sockets - intended to serve a television. With children aboard, an extra 230V socket in the front lounge might save a few arguments with Play Stations and Nintendo thingamajigs. If it comes to that, it should also be useful for laptops, and when charging other devices. You don't have to be a child to need toys...



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12 Simple control panel and light switches are above caravan door

13 There's external access to - nearside rear settee - storage space

else to really criticise, apart from fridge size.

The Ford engine performed well, and endowed the Tribute with an appealing drivability. If I were looking for motorhome capable of taking me and my family down to the Mediterranean for the summer holidays, then the Tribute would be a very serious contender. ■

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Tribute Motorhomes, Trigano House,
Genesis Way, Europarc, Grimsby,
North East Lincolnshire DN37 9TU
(tel: 01472 571075; web site:
www.tributemotorhomes.co.uk)

WE STAYED AT

West Ayton Caravan Club Site,
Cockrah Road, West Ayton,
Scarborough, North Yorkshire YO13 9JD
(tel: 01723 862989)



LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TRIBUTE T-720

TYPE

Overcab coachbuilt

PRICE

- From: £35,995 OTR
- As tested: £35,995 OTR

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Ford Transit, long wheelbase, low frame chassis cab, with wide track rear axle
- **Berths:** 6
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (incl. driver)
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle & conversion

CONSTRUCTION

Sandwich construction with aluminium roof and rear, high impact GRP sidewalls, acrylic-capped ABS side skirts and rear bumper

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 6.96m (22ft 10in)*
- **Width:** 2.23m (7ft 4in)*
- **Height:** 2.89m (9ft 6in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 3.95m (12ft 11.5in)*
- **Rear overhang:** 2.07m (6ft 9.5in)
- **Gross vehicle weight:** 3500kg
- **Payload:** 650kg

INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside half-dinette, with side sofa opposite, offside wardrobe and washroom, nearside kitchen, twin-sofa lounge in rear

- **Insulation:** Floor 45mm, walls & roof 40mm
- **Interior height:** 1.95m (6ft 5in)

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 2.2-litre turbo-diesel, producing 103kW (140bhp)
- **Transmission:** Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 26.1mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all-round with ABS
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent on coil springs. Rear: Leaf springs on rigid axle
- **Features:** ABD, Hill Launch Assist, cruise control, driver's airbag, cab remote central locking, electric windows, height and rake adjustable cab seats with twin armrests, headlamp height adjustment, two 12V sockets, variable rate intermittent wiper control, multi-function trip computer, economy gearshift indicator, radio/CD/MP3 player with steering column-mounted controls, triple nearside door bins and single



offside, recesses and receptacles for phones/cans/gloves/maps/sunglasses, dash-top storage lockers, centrally-mounted flip-over picnic tray, Fix and Go puncture repair kit, no spare wheel

LOUNGING & DINING

Swivelling cab seats, front offside half-dinette with rail-hung single-leg table and nearside settee. Rear lounge has twin side settees and a rail for the table. Removable carpets over vinyl flooring

KITCHEN

Nearside galley layout has Formica worktop with inset left-hand sink and right-hand hob, central cupboard and cutlery drawer below, oven/grill and saucapan cupboard to the left, fridge to the right. Two high-level lockers have racks for crockery

- **Sink:** Spinflo quadrant-shaped stainless bowl with chromed mixer tap under glass lid
- **Cooker:** Spinflo quadrant-shaped three-burner hob, Spinflo Duplex oven/grill, all with spark ignition
- **Fridge:** Dometic 77-litre three-way, manual energy selection. Capacity 70.5 litres

WASHROOM

Thetford swivel-bowl, electric-flush toilet. 18-litre cassette has wheels and extending handle. Plastic basin and shelf has stainless mixer tap. Three-way roof vent, large opening opaque window. Separate Plastic-lined shower cubicle with bi-fold door, stainless mixer, hose and showerhead, wire shelves

BEDS

- **Rear lounge double**
- **Length:** 2.08m (6ft 10in)
- **Width:** 1.35m (4ft 5in)
- **Dinette double**
- **Length:** 2.08m (6ft 10in)
- **Width:** 1.22m (4ft 0in)
- **Overcab**
- **Length:** 2.08m (6ft 10in)
- **Width:** 1.38m (4ft 6.5in)
- **Headroom:** 710mm (2ft 4in)

STORAGE

Overhead lockers: Six around rear lounge, two on each side of front lounge (Sargent power supply

unit built into one) and two with crockery racks over kitchen, one in washroom. Overcab: Two capacious cubbyholes recessed in bulkhead. Under settees: Four unobstructed spaces (apart from by water heater) under offside rear. Wardrobe has two doors, a hanging rail and is warmed by the heater flue. Exterior: Access to rear nearside under-settee storage

LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Underslung, insulated, capacity 80 litres (17.6 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung insulated, capacity 80 litres (17.6 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Truma Ultrastore boiler, gas/mains operation
- **Space heater:** Trumatic 3kW gas convactor, gas only operation
- **Leisure battery:** 70 amp hr
- **Gas:** 1 x 13kg and 1 x 7kg cylinder
- **Lighting:** All lights stated to be LEDs. Overcab bed: one diffused lamp. Forward lounge: Two ceiling strips and a high-level continuous rope mood-light. Kitchen: One ceiling strip and one strip over worktop. Rear lounge: Two ceiling strips and four adjustable reading spots. Washroom: Two ceiling strips. Awning: One diffused lamp
- **Sockets:** 230V: 3 (two in kitchen, one under offside rear top locker). 12V: 1 (under offside rear top locker)
- **Control panel:** Sargent EC51 unit for 12V functions, (mounted over caravan door) with LED pin-lights/click-touch switches to monitor and control
- **Blinds/curtains:** Cab windows supplied with interior thermal screens. Caravan windows/rooflights (except washroom window) fitted with blind/flyscreens. Privacy curtains to overcab bed, curtains to front and rear lounges.
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

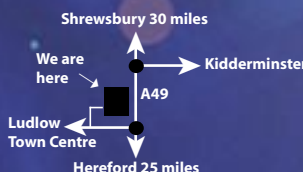
- **Fitted to test vehicle**
- **Base:** None
- **Conversion:** None
- **Other options**
- **Base:** Drivers Pack upgrade - heated windscreen, heated / electrically-operated mirrors, passenger airbag, cab carpet (£399)
- **Conversion:** Lux Pack upgrade - dash trim, 230V blown-air heating, cab blinds, two scatter cushions, TV aerial (£499)

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