



AUTO SUGGESTION

George Hinton samples the latest example of compact camping with a flexible twist

Vehicle supplied for test by: Roy Wood Transits, 429 Reading Road, Winnersh, Berkshire RG41 5HU. Call 0118 979 0202.

What you see here is a new name – Auto Camper – built by and exclusive to Roy Wood Transits (RWT). The concept is one born of our time: a high-value-for-money basic camper, offering great flexibility in both specification and use.

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

The base vehicle is the short-wheelbase, front-wheel-drive Ford Transit 260 window van with sliding doors on both sides, medium roof and Trend pack. This adds the 125bhp engine upgrade, metallic paint (choice of four shades) with body-colour bumpers and grille, front foglights, side protection mouldings, full wheel covers,

power mirrors, trip computer, cruise control, Bluetooth, auto lights/wipers and heated windscreen.

The van weighed in at 2,225kg with driver, 90% fuel and water, leaving a 345kg available payload. While adequate for a touring couple, were you to fill all the available seats with average-size, 75kg adults, you would only have 45kg for

luggage or other items. Draining the water tank would gain you 28kg, leaving you 73kg provided you had not specified more extras than the few our demonstrator had fitted. However, a 200kg/£600 payload upgrade is available.

RWT has made a complete break with tradition, providing totally wood-free furniture made from CNC-cut, high-frequency-welded solid polypropylene. It is 5mm and 11mm thick and leather-grain textured on the outer surfaces.

Exposed cut surfaces get a rounded, heat-smoothed finish, so nothing needs sanding, painting or varnishing, nothing can splinter and nothing can rot if exposed to prolonged dampness. This, and the fact the furniture units are entirely workshop-built then fitted to the vehicle as completed items, help keep build costs low. The floor is finished in grey, heavy-duty vinyl over plywood, Ford vinyl door cards are retained and the ceiling keeps Ford's own moulding. This is strictly a summer vehicle – there is no body insulation and the windows are all standard Transit glass.

Layout is classic camper, with kitchen and storage along the offside and a three-seater bench in the centre that converts into a decent double bed.

The whole raison d'être of the Auto Camper, however, lies in the inside/outside kitchen, which is why the optional Fiamma awning is fitted to the offside: sink, hob and fridge are all just as useable from the outside as from within. The latter can be slid either inside or out, which is handy for loading shopping.

The optional Dometic 976 portable toilet is stowed in a rear cupboard. Both 28-litre water tanks are within the kitchen unit and filled and emptied via the offside sliding door, so the drain hose is always clean and the water secure.

ON THE ROAD

All Transits now feature the 2.2-litre Puma engine offering six-speed gearbox and various power outputs from 100bhp to 145bhp. Our 115bhp demonstrator was one of the last Transits built to the Euro 4 emissions standard, so unless you manage to secure this particular vehicle, which is on sale at the special price of £28,995, what you will get will be a Euro 5 van.

This has slightly more power and lower CO₂ emissions, down from 213 to 189gm/km, which equates to lower fuel consumption. I achieved 34.5mpg* so would expect the Euro 5 to hit 37.5mpg in the same conditions, which is excellent.

You could hardly ask for a nicer vehicle to drive – there is a slick, dash-mounted gearshift and powerful brakes, while the

ride is rattle-free. Light weight contributes to a lively 0-50mph time of under 13 seconds, and high gearing makes for a very quiet, economical cruiser. A speed of 50mph cruising in sixth gear requires just 1,500rpm, 70mph just 2,250rpm.

Through-vision is slightly limited by both the barn-type rear doors and the rear seat's high backrest. Power door mirrors are excellent, with separate wide-angle glasses.

The standard cab air-conditioning, column-mounted radio/CD controls, Mondeo-style leather-clad steering wheel incorporating cruise controls and ample cab storage are all good news. A full-size steel spare wheel stows in a rear cradle.

LIVING ABOARD

There is no side entrance step, so this is where you start tailoring the Leisure Van to your particular needs. You could simply leave a 19-20in climb up, use a portable step or go for one of two fitted options – a pull-out step at £240 or an electric auto-retractor at £450. An entrance grab handle is £120. You don't really need a step at the rear, but there's the option if needed, packaged with reversing sensors. A towbar is also on offer.

The RIB rear bench seat is shaped and raked for comfortable travel for three, the flat sleeping surface being on the opposite side. It features integral three-point seatbelts, accommodates child seats securely and has slide-away head restraints. A narrower dual seat is a no-cost option and gives you internal access to the rear (you also get a set of extension cushions so you don't have to suffer a narrow bed).

The Midi roof option at £495 offers extra storage potential – designed as a three-compartment box with open front and deep retaining lips, it is intended specifically for light items such as clothing.

There is hanging space immediately behind the kitchen unit, but the hanging depth is just 24in, not much more than the 18in length of the rail. The wheelarch causes the restriction, but you could probably persuade RWT to incorporate the shallow lower locker in front of this into the wardrobe to save your frocks getting crumpled.

There are three good 14in-wide lipped shelves to the rear of the wardrobe, easily accessed through the back door, each 8in high and gradually tapering upwards from 13in deep at the base. A plastic tambour door below them lifts to reveal the optional toilet (£102), which can be used with the bed in position. There's a semi-hidden compartment beneath the toilet, revealed when the table is removed from its rear stowage point.

Everything falls to hand in the stylish Transit cab

Rear seat is comfortable for travelling

TECHNICAL

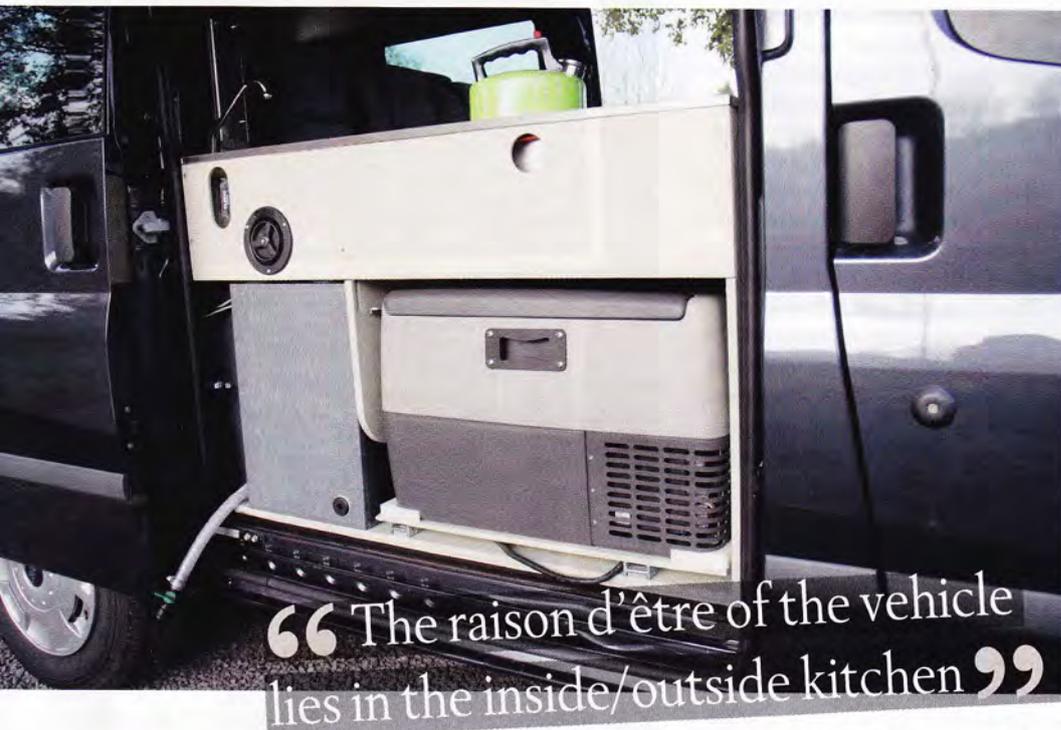
RATINGS



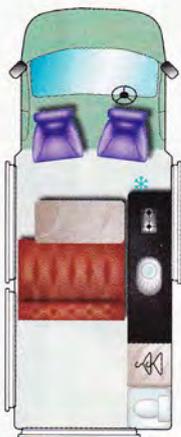
RRP/as tested	£30,421/£32,392 OTR
Base vehicle	Ford Transit 260 Trend SWB
Engine	2,198cc TDCi
Power	125bhp (93kW) @ 3,500rpm
Torque	350Nm @ 1,800-2,400rpm
Transmission	Six-speed manual, FWD
Fuel/tank/econ	Diesel/17.6gal (80 litres)/34.5mpg*
Overall length	15ft 11in (4.86m)
Overall width	6ft 6in (1.97m) exc mirrors; 7ft 8in (2.34m) inc mirrors
Overall height	7ft 7in (2.31m)
Max internal height	5ft 7in (1.70m)
MRO	2,255kg (44.4cwt)
MTPLM	2,600kg (51.2cwt)
User payload	345kg (6.8cwt)
Berths	2
NCC approved	no

Figures supplied by manufacturer *Euro 4 figures achieved on this test

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“The raison d'être of the vehicle lies in the inside/outside kitchen”



Other stuff-in storage is provided under the bench seat but, if you prefer, a three-drawer system in polypropylene can be installed for £360. Finally, there's an uninsulated locker above the cab roof, spacious enough for pillows and/or the insulated window screens. There is also the vast 'boot' area that can be used for bikes, prams, storage boxes etc.

Unusually, for dining there's a small (23½in x 15½in), stainless steel-topped table which is incredibly heavy for its size at 9lb. It's sized for a single place setting, so the optional second table and floor socket is really an essential at £234. It sits on a new Fiamma aluminium pedestal, now equipped both ends with tapered plastic finials – no more sharp-edged tubes! We're told a lightweight polypropylene table is in development.

Lighting is courtesy of two powerful 4in-diameter, 72-LED ceiling units, switchable from white to soft blue, supplemented by two central Ford ceiling lamps and a pair of rotating 20-LED downlighters located above the kitchen.

A panel above the sink carries pump, fridge and ceiling light switches and water tank status indicator. The single control for the Webasto diesel-fired hob is alongside.

Optional heating would be via the add-on Webasto Air Top diesel space heater (£960), installed in the kitchen unit.

The 5ft 11in-wide interior is 8ft long measured from the back of the cab to the rear doors. A 90Ah auxiliary battery is installed under the driving seat.

KITCHEN

The 3ft 9½in x 1ft 4in (116 x 41cm) worktop has the same brushed stainless

steel surface as the table and incorporates a high-quality 13in x 12in stainless sink sourced from the marine industry. This features a metal, fold-down internal tap and black glass cover matching the ceramic hob. There's no drainer, but plenty of space for a tray-type, provided the hob is not in use. Height is 26½in.

The hob proved easy to use – simply press a button on the wall panel, dial up the desired heat on a scale of one to five, then wait. There's a quiet purr from the hob on start-up and some pinging noises as the underfloor exhaust heats up, but other than that it is quiet and totally fume-free.

Winter-time cooking isn't a whole heap of fun as the van windows are all fixed and there is no rooflight but, as stated earlier, this is really a summer van. If you want ventilation, there are the cab windows or the multiple doors, but you might prefer to specify the optional Ford sliding window behind the hob for £234. There's also an electric sunroof option (£594), but it's not directly over the cooker.

Crockery or cutlery fittings are notably absent, but there's a narrow drawer to the left of the hob where you can put all your cutlery and kitchen tools. Between the hob and the driving seat is a small 16in x 10in worktop, but provided they are not in use, you can also use the hob and sink cover as work surfaces.

SLEEPING

Bedmaking is relatively easy, though you need to go outside to do it. Push down the front handle to slide the rear seat fully forwards, then pull a lever in the side of the base to release the hinge lock and allow it to flip over and forwards. A similar lever lowers the backrest to where the squab just was, then, going to the back of the van, you simply pull the bed extension down. The bed is a commendable 6ft 5in x 4ft 3in in size; it's quite firm, but a memory foam overlay is offered as an extra. The gap left at the rear is sufficient for access to the toilet.

Instead of blinds or curtains, you get a full set of eight insulated window screens, which attach inside with plastic suckers. ■

VERDICT

The basic Leisure Van Classic at £24,995 is a good starting point from which to specify your own bespoke camper. The plus points are many – no gas is required, it's easy to maintain inside and out and RWT's back-up is superb. It's great value for money and I like the approach of being able to choose exactly the options you need.

