

showdown | tag-axle twin-lounge 'vans

españa por favor

They're the sort of motorhomes in which you could spend the winter touring, chasing the milder climes of the southern mainland Europe, but which of these tag-axle 'vans is best?



AT A GLANCE

AUTO-TRAIL FRONTIER ARAPAHO

BASED ON FIAT DUCATO 40
HEAVY AL-KO TAG-AXLE

FROM £69,920

This British motorhome has two full lounges, but is this a benefit or a nuisance? And does the vehicle's added size make it more cumbersome on the road than the more compact Hobby?



AT A GLANCE

HOBBY TOSKANA EXCLUSIVE D750H RL

BASED ON FIAT DUCATO 40
HEAVY AL-KO TAG-AXLE

FROM £75,836

This brand-new Hobby has a layout only offered in the UK, and it's already picked up a *Which Motorhome* award, winning its class for 2011.



COMPARED
TAG-AXLE
TWIN-LOUNGE
MOTORHOMES

ON THE OUTSIDE ★★★★★

New this season is a wider choice of available luton styles. You can either have the Hi-line with its luton window and roomy overcab bed, the Lo-line with a row of lockers, or the Super-Lo-line with a panoramic skylight and aerodynamic shape. This is the Hi-Line, making this a six-berth motorhome, but if you prefer the other options the Arapaho is a four-berth instead.

The Hi-line is the least sleek, visually, although the eye is dragged away by the cab’s silver paintwork. Add to this the blue stripes and logos and you’ve a simple but not unattractive ‘van. The alloy wheels look smart, and there are various skirt lockers along the sides. At the rear is the ‘Frontier’ branded spare wheel carrier, as well as a reversing camera and ladder – if you want the colour-coded roof rack it’s a £185 option, but the roof-mounted solar panel is standard.

On the nearside are the water filler, barbecue point, fridge vents, gas locker and the recessed built-in awning. The offside has the toilet hatch and the waste taps.

ON THE ROAD ★★★★★

Neither of these motorhomes feels nippy, due to their size, but both have a tag-axe chassis boasting six wheels apiece, and this means that they handle extremely well. But the Auto-Trail is by far the longest, measuring 8.71m against the Hobby’s 8.05m, and this difference is obvious when manoeuvring, especially with that huge overhang. And the Hi-line shape doesn’t make for great aerodynamics. However, Fiat’s 3-litre turbo-diesel engine is plenty powerful enough.

As part of the flagship Frontier range, you’ve got all the toys you could wish for inside the cab. There are twin airbags, sat-nav, TV and a stereo system with a screen that works in conjunction with the reversing camera and the flip-down TV (between the two cab seats). There’s air-con, cruise control, and the optional Comfort-Matic gearshift. An expensive option (£1386), it’s only available with the 3-litre engine; this six-speed gearbox is perfect for long distance touring.

This may be a six-berth motorhome but with this lounge layout you can only transport two extra passengers. You have to create the footspace for them by removing part of the front L-shape sofa – a quick and easy process to provide seats that have three-point seatbelts and head restraints. For six travelling seats, order the standard dinette layout with the rear-facing bench with three-point belts and head restraints (the latter two features are a cost option at £800).

ON SITE ★★★★★

There’s plenty of living space. The front lounge consists of an L-shaped settee which, with the swivelling cab seats, makes for a spacious seating area. This is an optional seating configuration, albeit a no-cost one – as standard it comes with a front dinette, which would also provide an instant dining area.

Behind the caravan door is the large fridge/freezer and the wardrobe, while opposite is the spacious washroom. Then there’s that large U-shaped rear lounge with its all-encompassing windows, scatter cushions, pair of reading lights and rear speakers. There’s another TV table here with aerial plugs and sockets, below which is a cupboard. Small shelves sit in the rear corners, and curtains pull across on rails.

The upholstery is predominantly cream and fawn with swirly patterns. The curtains are also fawn, as are the scatter cushions, and the removable press-studded carpet is a practical mid-brown shade. To counteract the potential drabness, the woodwork is a warm hue with the upper cupboards sporting a darker section upon which the chromed handles are fixed.

ON THE BOIL ★★★★★

Auto-Trail know how to create a perfect kitchen when it comes to storage, cooking facilities and worktop space. The stainless steel sink (with in-built drainer) sits at one end of the counter, while the cooker unit is at the other. This leaves a large expanse of worktop in the centre for food prep. For cooking there’s a three-burner hob, electric hotplate, grill, oven and microwave.

An opening window sits behind the counter, and there’s a fan-equipped roof-vent. There are two 230V sockets above the tap, with on-off switches for safety. The huge 190-litre Dometic fridge/freezer is the other side of the caravan door.

ON-BOARD STORAGE ★★★★★

Despite the lack of a fixed bed there’s masses of storage in this motorhome. In the kitchen, there are two high-level lockers, one of which is shelved, while the other has plate and cup racks. Two drawers are below the counter (one for cutlery) and there’s another large cupboard below with wire racks, and there’s another even larger cupboard. Only the drawers have positive locking, while none of the high-level lockers do. This is a regular complaint from us – we’d like to see this amended in 2012.

There are three high-level lockers above the front lounge, and nine over the rear

FACT FILE

PRICE FROM	£69,920
PRICE AS TESTED	£72,904
OPTIONS FITTED	Media Pack (£999), Platinum Pack (£599), Comfort-Matic gearbox (£1386), L-shaped front lounge (no extra cost)
BERTHS	6
TRAVEL SEATS	4 (6 optional)
DIMENSIONS	8.73m L, 2.31m W, 3.07m H (Hi-Line including aerial)
INTERIOR HEIGHT	1.94m
MAXIMUM WEIGHT	5000kg
PAYLOAD	960kg
BEDS	Front lounge bed 1.84m x 1.03m, rear lounge bed 2.11m x 2.15m, overcab bed 1.92m x 1.23m
FRESH WATER	136 litres (underfloor, insulated)
WASTE WATER	68 litres (underfloor)
LEISURE BATTERY	110Ah
MAINS SOCKETS	4

BASE VEHICLE

FIAT DUCATO 40 HEAVY
AL-KO TAG-AXLE
ENGINE 3-litre Multijet
Power 157bhp

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING	Three burners, electric hotplate, grill, oven, 700W microwave
FRIDGE	190-litre fridge/freezer
HEATING	Truma Combi 6 gas/mains
BOILER	Truma Combi gas/mains

FOR

SPACIOUS LAYOUT
WELL-PLANNED KITCHEN
FITTED MICROWAVE
AES FRIDGE/FREEZER
HIGH EQUIPMENT LEVEL
RECESSED AWNING
CHOICE OF OVERCAB STYLE

AGAINST

NON-POSITIVE LOCKING CUPBOARD DOORS
EXTRA CHARGE FOR SIX SEATBELTS
HUGE OVERHANG AND LONGER THAN HOBBY
LACK OF INSTANT DINING AREA

BUY IF...

YOU WANT A BRITISH MOTORHOME WITH A BRITISH FEEL AND SPRAWLING SPACE IS YOUR TOP PRIORITY

(one of which is a cocktail cabinet with four glasses and space for two bottles). Between the rear lounge and the fridge is a tall double-doored wardrobe with smart Perspex panels. There’s a silver roller-shuttered door hiding another cupboard above the fridge, as well as a small flap-down fronted cupboard below.

There’s a huge amount of space beneath the U-shaped sofa; each side settee has drop-front door access. The rear settee hides a vehicle-wide hatch that can be accessed via two external doors, either side of the vehicle. The front settees have free space below, the table sits in a locker inside the caravan door, and there’s ample storage in the washroom.

ON TO BED ★★★★★

If you don’t want to make a bed up every night the only bed option is above the cab, although with no roof vent in evidence it could get stuffy in summer. There are a couple of spotlights for reading, a privacy curtain, and the bed base folds back during the day to create extra headroom in the cab.

The front lounge bed is easy to make by pulling out the side extension on the sofa units toward the kitchen, before rearranging the tabletop and the cushions (it’s not quite as straightforward as with the double dinette). But the rear bed will be the top choice, with its pull-out slats. Then, with a quick rearrangement of cushions you’ve got a huge bed that’s flat and very comfortable.

ON THE LOO ★★★★★

The separate shower cubicle isn’t massive, but it is adequate, with a folding Perspex screen. The rest of the washroom is roomy, with a Thetford swivel-cassette toilet and oval washbasin. There’s a good-sized mirror (set high), a cupholder and a towel rail.

ON QUALITY ★★★★★

The upper cupboard in the washroom rubs on the shelf below – it does open and close but over time it will mark the latter. And there’s a rough piece of edging just inside the habitation door. And there are those non-positive locking catches to consider.

ON VALUE ★★★★★

It’s a shame that the extra rear seatbelts in the standard front dinette layout come at such a premium in this expensive motorhome, but other than that, the amount of equipment on board is impressive. You would want both the Premium and Media Packs to make this motorhome truly special, making the Arapaho’s basic price £71,518 – which is still substantially cheaper than the Hobby.



the rear bed will be the top choice of many... with slats and cushions you’ve got a huge bed that’s flat and comfortable



ON THE OUTSIDE ★★★★★

On looks alone the Hobby is streets ahead of the Auto-Trail. The body is slightly bowed to provide some shape – even the back panel curves slightly. On the offside is the traditional set of triple windows that are one of Hobby’s trademarks, and a long skylight is set within the ultra-low-profile luton. The shorter overhang makes a big visual difference. It’s a shame that those six wheels aren’t shod with alloys, though.

The decals are traditional Hobby, with blue and silver skirts and minimalist flashes. Here the cab is white, which doesn’t look as sporty as the Auto-Trail’s painted nose. On the nearside is the one-piece habitation door (note it’s on the British side), as well as the fridge vents. The offside has another large locker door leading to the under-seat storage area, the toilet hatch and the mains point.

ON THE ROAD ★★★★★★

With the same engine fitted into this shorter, sleeker motorhome, the Hobby is a pleasure to drive. It’s a shame it doesn’t have the automatic gearbox, although it’s an option just as it is on the Auto-Trail. Again, here you’ll find two airbags, cruise control and an excellent radio system which also acts as the reversing camera. Although this Eclipse system doesn’t have the exclusive ELAC speaker system. This sees a network of six speakers positioned along the motorhome’s roofline hidden behind the ceiling’s lining which provide rich hi-fi tones and a constant sound level throughout the living quarters.

The two inward-facing settees behind the cab can be rearranged into two forward-facing seats with three-point seatbelts and headrests. They aren’t the most comfortable seats for long distance travelling as the squab cushions are a little short, and the nearside passenger doesn’t have a window. As most of these motorhomes will be sold to older people who occasionally take family members away, the comfort factor of these seats is unlikely to deter purchasers.

ON SITE ★★★★★★

As you pass through the door there’s a grab handle and two coat hooks. To the right are the two inward-facing settees that, with the swivelling cab seats, make up the front lounge. This is a very sociable area with a sturdy island-leg table that swivels in front of the passenger seat. Straight in front of you is the L-shaped kitchen, while to the side is the wardrobe, boiler cupboard and washroom. At the rear is the U-shaped lounge complete with another island-leg

table. On the back of the washroom wall is a swing-around mount for a flatscreen TV, along with aerial and mains sockets.

The interior décor is very tasteful, if slightly dark. The two-tone grey upholstery, with its silvery threaded stripes, is smart and modern, but it lacks the Auto-Trail’s homeliness. The cream panels on the lockers lighten the mood. The wood is mid-tone, and handles are all chromed. The curtains at the windows are just for show, but nets pull across to hide the blinds. There are plenty of skylights, including that large one within the luton moulding. There’s a Heki-style rooflight behind this and a standard one over the kitchen, but the rear relies on those side windows due to the drop-down bed.

ON THE BOIL ★★★★★★

The German manufacturers know that today’s British motorhome has to have an oven and grill, so there’s Thetford’s Triplex unit which has an electric hotplate and two gas burners, as well as a combined oven and grill. And it has a huge Dometic fridge/freezer – although it’s got manual energy selection buttons unlike the Auto-Trail, which has the AES automatic system.

On the left as you face the kitchen is a circular stainless-steel sink (without drainer) while the cooker and hob are on the right; this leaves a good amount of space between. There’s another work surface above the fridge, finished in that smart black countertop, but it’s too high to use for food preparation.

ON-BOARD STORAGE ★★★★★★

The top drawer in the kitchen has a fitted cutlery tray, and this is also where all the gas taps are found. There are two more drawers, as well as another storage cupboard with a flip-down door. Underneath the sink is a curved door hiding more shelved storage. The eye-level lockers give more shelves, although no plate and cup racks. There’s also a central shelving unit with chromed fiddle rails.

There are four large shelved lockers above the front lounge and six over the rear lounge. There are five cupboards in the luton area, although without positive locking catches; other locker doors do, however.

There’s a small amount of storage beneath the front passenger seats, but the bulk of the space is beneath the rear lounge. There’s an external locker door leading to the offside settee and, like the Auto-Trail, there’s across-the-van storage below the rear settee.

The twin-doored wardrobe has a shelf at the top and a narrow, half-height hanging section with three shelves to one side. The

FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £75,836

PRICE AS TESTED
£76,514

OPTIONS FITTED
Shower surround sound (£539), TV bracket (£139)

BERTHS 4

TRAVEL SEATS 4

DIMENSIONS 8.05m L,
2.31m W, 2.91m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT
2.04m

MAXIMUM WEIGHT
4500kg

PAYLOAD 682kg

BEDS Electric lowerable
bed 1.90m x 1.40m,
rear lounge double
2.16m x 1.45m

FRESH WATER
100 litres (inboard)

WASTE WATER
100 litres (underfloor)

LEISURE BATTERY
80Ah

MAINS SOCKETS 4

BASE VEHICLE

FIAT DUCATO 40 HEAVY
AL-KO TAG-AXLE

ENGINE 3-litre Multijet
Power 157bhp

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING Two gas
rings, one electric
hotplate, Thetford Triplex
combination oven/grill

FRIDGE Dometic 150-
litre fridge/freezer

HEATING Truma Combi
6 gas/mains

BOILER Truma Combi
gas/mains

FOR

DROP-DOWN
ELECTRIC BED

TWO PROPER LOUNGES
AS STANDARD

STYLISH BODYWORK

HABITATION DOOR ON
UK SIDE

OPTIONAL HIGH-TECH
STEREO SYSTEM

MODERN DÉCOR

VERSATILE FRONT
LOUNGE

BOMBPROOF BUILD-
QUALITY

AGAINST

NO DRAINING BOARD

LACK OF WASHROOM
ROOF VENT

SMALL WARDROBE

NOT THE BEST REAR
TRAVEL SEATS

BUY IF...

YOU LOVE THE STYLING
AND THE QUALITY
AND WANT THE
COMBINATION OF A
REAR LOUNGE AND AN
INSTANT BED

seatbelt strengthening bars, which intrude slightly into the wardrobe, would look much better boxed in. The doors below the wardrobe hide the Truma boiler.

In the washroom there’s just one large locker beneath the washbasin, although there are various cubbyholes and shelves.

ON TO BED ★★★★★

The sleeping quarters make this Hobby one of a kind. The main double mattress is upon an electrically-operated platform that drops down over the rear lounge at the touch of a button, with a key-operated safety catch. The ceiling lights switch on as the bed drops, and there are smart white blinds on the front and back of the mattress, as well as elastic restrainers. Once tucked up in bed, there’s no roof vent or reachable windows.

There’s another sleeping option – drop the table and rearrange the cushions in the lounge below for another double bed. It’s a bit of a jigsaw puzzle, but there’s plenty of headroom for the downstairs occupants. It’s like having double bunk beds, and everyone has easy access to the rest of the vehicle.

ON THE LOO ★★★★★★

The washroom has a heavy door handle just like you’d have on a domestic internal door, and there’s a tall frosted panel beside this that some may not like for privacy reasons.

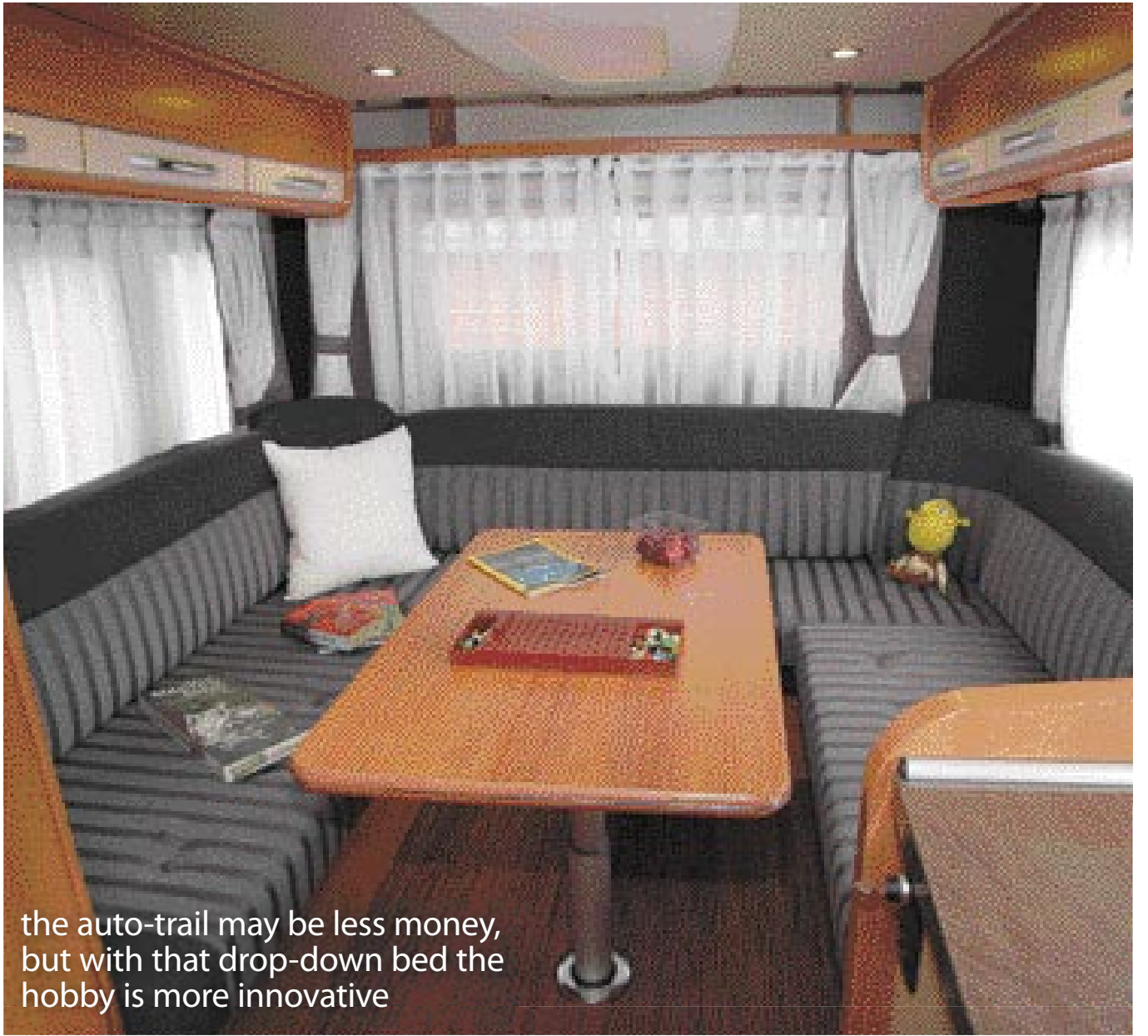
The silvery wall-finish looks great with the grey shower tray and washbasin. Above the basin are two rows of mirrors and between this and the separate shower is the Thetford cassette toilet. The shower cubicle is a generous size. The wheelarch intrudes slightly, but has been made into a step, and there’s a soap tray, towel hook, and a height-adjustable rail for the shower head. Keeping the water in are Perspex doors. There’s no roof vent in the shower.

ON QUALITY ★★★★★★

This motorhome feels bombproof, although there are tiny details that could be improved upon such as the seatbelt mountings in the wardrobe that would be better boxed in.

ON VALUE ★★★★★★

It’s more expensive than the Auto-Trail, but it is more suitable for long-term winter living with internal water tanks. Then there’s that interesting external bodyshell which must be much more expensive to create, and a wrap-around roofline to avoid leakage problems. That, together with the drop-down bed, means that while the Auto-Trail may be less money, the Hobby is more innovative.



the auto-trail may be less money, but with that drop-down bed the hobby is more innovative



alternatives

The most obvious rival here is the Bessacarr E799 (or its Swift Kon-Tiki 649 equivalent, which is identical in all but colour scheme). The Bessacarr boasts a bigger front lounge than the Arapaho, with an offside dinette and side-facing settee, while the amidships galley is quite separate from the seating area. At 8.67m it's almost as long and it can be ordered with High-line or Low-line overcab body types.

Much smaller than these two but with German quality to match the Hobby's, a drop-down bed (in the cab) and a rear lounge is the brand-new Hymer B534, which we test next month.



WHICH
motorhome says

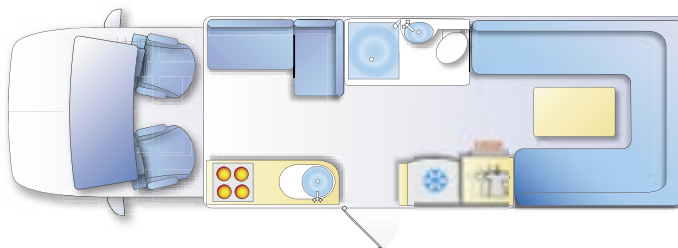
AUTO-TRAIL FRONTIER ARAPAHO ★★★★★
HOBBY TOSKANA EXCLUSIVE D750H RL ★★★★★

Both are excellent in their own way. The Auto-Trail is very conventional, with some great features such as the solar panel on the roof and the entertainment system. But if you're going travelling to Spain or Portugal, hiding from the winter cold, you really don't want to be making up a bed every night – and not everyone wants to sleep in a luton. That's where the Hobby's electric bed comes into its own. It does limit the amount of headroom in the rear lounge (5ft 7in), though. But it has an 'English-style' kitchen, and the habitation door is on the 'proper' side for us Brits.

If you want to carry rear passengers regularly then the Auto-Trail's seats are better suited, as the Hobby's, in their forward-facing position, aren't as comfortable. Décor-wise, it's horses for courses – the Auto-Trail is classical, the Hobby is a little darker inside, but the Toscana's shapely exterior and cream cupboard fronts make up for this. The shower in the Hobby is also larger than the Auto-Trail's, and on the road it's shorter for easier manoeuvring with less of an overhang. The Hobby can perhaps provoke a 'love it or loathe it' reaction, but we awarded it the Best Luxury Motorhome (over 3.5 tonnes) in the Which Motorhome Awards 2011.

AUTO-TRAIL FRONTIER ARAPAHO

The Arapaho is part of Auto-Trail's luxury Frontier range, which has a full set of bells and whistles. Other tag-axes sharing the 8.73m body length are the island bed Comanche (see page 93) and the transverse fixed bed Chieftain. There are smaller Frontiers too, starting with the 6.81m Navajo and including the new-for-2011 Dakota with its nearside fixed bed and end washroom. If you like the Arapaho's layout but can't accommodate its bulk, why not try the 7.90m (single rear axle) Scout instead. All Frontiers can now be ordered with the much more stylish Super Lo-line overcab.



HOBBY TOSKANA EXCLUSIVE D750H RL

Hobby's Toscana range is exclusively low-profile and Fiat-based, with models starting from just 6.47m long. Toscana Exclusives are the posher curved-sided models, with body lengths from 7.47m. The 750s are the tag-axe derivatives, of which there are five. The traditional FLC model has an elongated version of the classic French bed design, with a big front lounge – and it can be ordered with a drop-down bed over the lounge. The GFLC is a garage model with transverse double bed above. And finally, the ELC has fixed twin beds and a washroom across the entire rear end of the motorhome.

