

the transformer

With a concealed, fold-down bed and an innovative washroom wall that slides back to create a shower cubicle, this is a low-profile coachbuilt that transforms before your very eyes

EXCLUSIVE
FIRST EVER
TEST

It has some interesting innovations which, by and large, work very well



ONE of the biggest players in the European motorhome and caravan market, Hobby have been building vehicles in northern Germany for over 40 years now and currently import a range of stylish low-profile and overcab coachbuilds through their extensive network of 25 UK dealers. Customers can choose from Ford-based motorhomes - which start at £44,026 - or Fiat Ducato-based models which start at £57,586 for the model we are testing here, the newest addition to the slightly narrower than usual, curved sided, low-profile Van Exclusive range.

The Ford-based models are Hobby's entry-level coachbuilds (including a rear lounge Siesta developed especially for the UK), with a more basic standard specification. The Fiat-based models come with a high level of standard equipment, including cab air-conditioning and a top-of-the-range Truma Combi 6E gas/electric unit for water and space heating.

The brand-new 2012 Van Exclusive 60KI is a four-berth, low-profile with twin fixed bunks in the rear offside corner and an innovative double bed in the front, which folds down from the wall to cover the daytime seating

area. There's also a clever washroom in the rear nearside corner, with the washbasin mounted on a sliding wall that pushes forward over the toilet, so that a shower cubicle can be assembled in the space behind it.

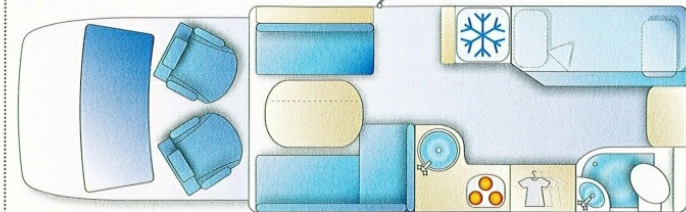
behind the wheel

For my week-long test I drove the Hobby to the south Lincolnshire coast, staying at the Caravan Club's Hawthorn Farm site, next to the village of Sutton-on-Sea. The coast here consists of long sandy beaches, with large man-made and natural embankments protecting the low-level land behind from



this month's layout

fold-down front double and bunks



flooding. It's a great part of the world and I was there in October, when the summer tourists had gone and it was very peaceful. However, I still enjoyed glorious sunny weather, although the outside temperature required a pullover or fleece for long walks along the beach. If you've got a dog, like many of my fellow campers on the site, then you'll love it here, with plenty of walking opportunities.

The Hobby's Fiat Ducato base vehicle was fitted with the latest 2-litre 115bhp Euro V low-emissions motor. This engine - which was very smooth and quiet, with enough power and torque to make driving effortless - is only available with left-hand drive. The six-speed gearbox was also a delight to use, though I had to re-adjust to the left-hand drive layout of the press vehicle. Rest assured, all of the official UK imports will be right-hand drive (unless you specify otherwise), though the layout in the living space behind the cab will still be the same as continental examples, with an entrance door on the offside. The entry-level engine for the UK will be the Euro V 2.3-litre Multijet II with 130bhp.

The Hobby's cab is a nice place to sit, with folding armrests for both driver and passenger seats, plus the ability to set an exact temperature, with a system that uses the standard air-conditioning in warmer months. Official UK imports will also come with a reversing camera and a built-in TomTom sat-nav as standard, so you don't need to worry about paying for any extra-cost options on the base vehicle.

take your seats

Once pitched-up there's the option of putting down the standard rear corner steadies for extra stability if you want (I didn't!), and it was time for me to fully explore the interior. The first thing to do, if you want to maximise the interior space, is swivel the cab seats to face the rear. Once done, you've got a lounge or dining area with seating totally surrounding the fixed table in the centre. On the offside there's a narrow, low-level bench seat which would be fine for children, or for visiting adults, but which isn't comfortable for long periods of time. The reason for the low height of this

An innovative concealed fold-down front double bed, rear fixed bunks and a clever washroom transform this layout

FOR

INNOVATIVE DESIGN
SOLID CONSTRUCTION
CLEVER AND COMFORTABLE
FOLD-DOWN BED
INSULATED AND HEATED
WASTE WATER TANK
BELTED TRAVEL SEATS
FOR FOUR

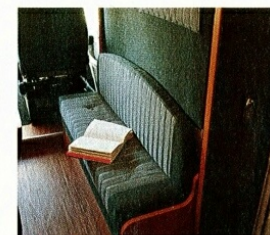
AGAINST

CRAMPED SHOWER
CUBICLE
LONG REAR OVERHANG
HIGH-LEVEL POSITION
OF GAS OVEN
DARK INTERIOR WITH
FEW OFFSIDE WINDOWS

seat will become clear later, when I describe the bed make-up procedure. However, this limited size doesn't really matter because you've still got the swivelled cab seats, plus a large L-shape seating area on the nearside.

A pair of forward-facing seats, which form the smallest part of the 'L' in front of the central kitchen, both have three-point seatbelts, so a total of four people can travel in this vehicle, exactly matching its berth capacity (as many of you will know, this isn't always the case!). When four people are travelling in the vehicle, the section of seating immediately in front of the forward-facing seats can be removed, by taking off the small seat squab and folding back the hinged panels that make up the seat base. Once on site, it's easy to put this section of seating back, to complete the L-shape around the table again.

Taking interior photographs for this test, I found myself constantly moving from front to back, wielding the heavy camera tripod, and I was glad that one side of the central table could be folded-down, to increase the passing space. The table is permanently fixed





FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £57,586
PRICE AS TESTED £57,586
BERTHS 4
TRAVEL SEATS (INC DRIVER) 4
DIMENSIONS 7.28m L, 2.24m W, 2.74m H
INTERIOR HEIGHT 1.94m
MAXIMUM WEIGHT 3500kg (4000kg chassis available)
PAYLOAD 373kg
BEDS Fold-down double bed 1.98m x 1.27m, twin single bunks 1.90m x 0.85m
FRESH WATER 100 litres (inboard)
WASTE WATER 92 litres (underfloor, heated)
LEISURE BATTERY 80Ah
MAINS SOCKETS 4

BASE VEHICLE

FIAT DUCATO CAMPER
CHASSIS-CAB
ENGINE 2.0 Multijet II Euro V 115bhp (2.3-litre 130bhp with RH0)
MPG 29.0

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING Three-burner gas hob (plus eye-level oven/grill on UK models)
FRIDGE 140-litre Dometic fridge with removable freezer compartment
GAS 2 x 6kg cylinders
HEATING Truma Combi 6E gas/electric blown-air
BOILER Truma Combi 6E gas/electric



to the floor, so if it wasn't for this hinged section it would be a real pain to move about. It's also worth noting that there are a couple of heating outlets for the powerful gas/electric blown-air system in the lounge, so you'll stay cosy when dining here in winter.

continental cuisine

Next stop is the kitchen, which occupies the centre of the layout. On the offside there's a large Dometic 'Tower' fridge with removable freezer compartment. On UK imports this will have a gas oven mounted on top of it, as the Germans know how much we like our pies over here! They, of course, are just happy to fry a few sausages on the three-burner hob - I know this because of a West German school exchange trip in the early 1980s, when a kind family fed me nothing but sausages for a week! At the time, I think I was more impressed by the fact that they scoffed cake for breakfast, which was paradise for a greedy English kid. Did I mention the fact that they gave me a four-pack of Mars bars and a three-pack of chewing gum each day for my packed lunch - heaven!

Anyway, enough reminiscing, back to the Hobby's kitchen. The oven in UK

versions should make the kitchen more appealing for buyers over here, though it will be mounted quite high up, making it hard for short cooks to reach comfortably.

The main kitchen area forms an L-shape on the nearside, with a stainless-steel sink (no drainer) and the already mentioned three-burner gas hob. There's also quite a lot of storage, in several cupboards and lockers, plus a set of drawers that usefully includes a domestic-sized cutlery drawer - at last! Task lighting is also very good, with a couple of spotlamps under the roof lockers, plus there are two mains sockets here, for your kettle and toaster.

wonder washroom

Washroom innovation is nothing new, and I remember looking at a classic 1960s Dormobile Debonair conversion on the Bedford CA, where the clever space-saving toilet cubicle folded out from the wall using a series of hinged panels. Of course, we've now got the equally clever swing-wall design in Auto-Sleepers' coachbuilds, which makes the best use of a relatively limited space.

Hobby have invented their own unique solution to this space problem in the

TEST ROUTE

For this test I headed to the Lincolnshire coast, just north of the Wash. Here you'll find small coastal villages and good access to the beach in many areas, with people fishing on the beach when the water is too cold for swimming. There's also a number of nature reserves along the coast, making it a great place for wildlife lovers. It was good to see that I could actually drive a motorhome right up to the beach in a couple of areas, with car parks that didn't have the dreaded height barriers. I would particularly recommend the carpark at Huttoft Beach, where you can walk directly onto the beach.



Huttoft Beach is close to the village of the same name and there's a large concrete parking area, though you're not allowed to wild-camp here.

1st stop



Sutton-on-Sea is close to the Hawthorn Farm Caravan Club site. The town has a long sandy beach, with quaint beach huts lining the prom.

2nd stop



Mablethorpe is a small seaside town that hasn't been developed as much as its larger neighbours, making it more interesting to explore.

3rd stop



Saltfleetby-Theddlethorpe Dunes is a national nature reserve, up the coast from Mablethorpe. You can walk over the dunes to the beach.

4th stop



Donna Nook National Nature Reserve is based around a long sandy beach, north of Mablethorpe. It's also home to an RAF base.

5th stop





'smallest room' and created a sliding-wall washroom, no less! The washbasin and a small cupboard are mounted on a sliding wall, which can be pushed back over the toilet when you want to have a shower. A bit of a shove is needed to start it moving, while holding up a small release lever, but soon you'll be enjoying the Tarzan-like thrill of moving a whole wall with your bare hands!

With the wall moved out of the way, a series of hinged plastic panels fold out to cover the walls in the space behind it, forming a small shower cubicle. Small is the operative word here, as my wide 6ft 2in frame was tightly squeezed once inside. Apart from the limited space, which should be fine for people who are under 6ft, the shower cubicle looked good. A flexible pull-out hose formed the shower itself (doubling-up as the tap when the basin wall is pushed back into place), but there was nowhere on

the wall to mount this at a high level. I would have preferred a simpler washroom design, with a larger permanent shower cubicle, but that would result in less wardrobe space, or design compromises elsewhere.

This is probably a good place to talk about the Hobby's water system, which is worth a mention because there's a 92-litre insulated and heated waste tank under the floor, with a large-bore drain pipe to the nearside. This is about as good as it gets on the waste front, so full marks here. The fresh water tank is a 100-litre unit, situated inboard under the dinette seating, so this again is suitable for all-year use.

storage solutions

Before talking about the Hobby's star feature, its fold-down wall bed, it's worth mentioning the storage options in this mid-sized coachbuilt. The star feature here is the large

QUALITY COUNTS



The fact that this press demonstrator had come direct from shows both in Germany and the UK, with me getting it direct from the Birmingham NEC show before a dealer could PDI it, shows that it must be pretty robustly screwed together. Everything worked and the only sign of NEC show damage was a shelf that had been ripped off the wall in the washroom (someone probably pulled on it when sliding the washroom wall across). A similar shelf in the kitchen looked really secure.

I always like to look at the behind-the-scenes practicalities of any motorhome I test and the Hobby scored well when it came to the water system. I liked the underfloor heated and insulated waste tank, with a wide-bore drain pipe. Matched with the in-board fresh water tank, this makes for a vehicle that should be fine for year-round use.

A good look under the vehicle showed a chassis with quite a large rear overhang and no outriggers to support the floor, other than the main chassis rails. This is common to most motorhomes and, if the box that makes up the motorhome shell is really tough, then this isn't a problem.

external locker door, which opens onto the rear bunk area. If you want to store large items, the lower bunk hinges up, to provide a tall 'garage'. With the lower bunk left in place, there's still good storage for items such as deckchairs or, in my case, a few boxes of Hobby brochures left over from the NEC show! This press demonstrator had been to shows in both Germany and the UK before it got to me, and Hobby's representative joked that 300,000 people had 'used' it before me - in which case it had stood up pretty well!

The other storage areas are pretty good too. There are two wardrobes, one at the rear (with a series of shelves) and one next to the kitchen (with hanging space as well as a shelf). Add in plenty of roof lockers, plus an illuminated drinks cabinet that boasts an array of Hobby-branded glasses (yes, real glass!) and the total storage capacity is pretty good. Incidentally, the payload limit is 373kg, which is probably about average for a coachbuilt of this size, but may be rather tight for family use. Investigate the 4-tonne chassis upgrade if your licence allows you to drive a vehicle of over 3500kg.

and so, to bed

Time for the Hobby's party trick, in the form of its unique fold-down double bed. Now, we've all seen motorhomes with lowering double beds, originally in A-class 'vans, but more recently in a myriad of Bürstner-copying low-profiles. A fold-down wall bed is something of a novelty, though.

One of the main problems to overcome is how to get such a bed to hinge down across the whole vehicle. For instance, if it was hinged half-way up the wall, then you'd



only get half a bed. If it was hinged from the bottom of the wall, you'd get a bed that folded down to floor level, with no room for any other furniture.

So, what did Hobby do to get round these problems? Well, they've designed an electronically-controlled mechanism that slides the bed away from the wall, while it is still in the upright position. Once you have activated this, the next step is to manually lower it (because it has slid away from the wall slightly there's a cantilever effect as the rear of the bed lifts up). Cleverly, while you are lowering the bed, the fixed table, which has a hydraulically-operated base, lowers down towards the floor at the same speed as the bed folding down from the wall. Still with me?

The double bed base finally hits 'land' on the other side of the aisle, where it sits above the nearside settee squab. With an infill cushion put in place at the foot of the bed, you've got a large double that's about two metres long.

It's a really comfortable bed and it only takes a few moments to set it up, so full marks

to Hobby. It seems a bit complex, but it's probably easier than a lowering roof bed, especially a manually operated one. And it is easier to access as it comes down nice and low.

You'll also see why the offside settee has to be so low to the ground, because the bed lowers over the top of it. The back of the bed also has a magazine or book rack made out of cloth pockets, which creates a small library against the offside wall, when the bed is stowed. Keep the magazines or books in place when you lower the bed and you'll literally go to bed with a book - a novel experience!

As well as this double bed, the Hobby boasts two bunks at the rear, both of which

INSURANCE QUOTE

Based on this motorhome being kept at a Peterborough (PE35) postcode and being driven by a married couple aged 55 with full No Claims Discount on their car, Safeguard would quote a premium of: **£395.53** with a total excess of £300. Policy automatically includes breakdown and European cover.

www.safeguarduk.co.uk
0800 977 5953



OPTIONS

BASE VEHICLE

UK-spec vehicles cab come equipped with cab air-conditioning, plus sat-nav and a reversing camera, as standard, so there's no need for any options. You can opt to upgrade to a 4-tonne Maxi chassis, though, for additional payload - at an extra cost of £1350.

CONVERSION

Alternative upholstery options, including leather; Hobby's own underfloor air-conditioning system; external gas barbecue point.



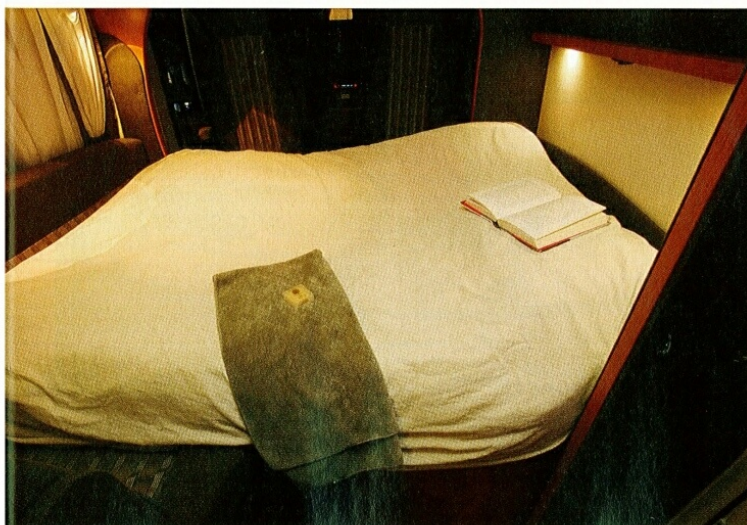
are large and very comfortable. In fact, all 6ft 2in of me slept in the lower bunk and had a great night's sleep. Children would love it here, especially as they each get their own wall lamp with a teddy bear design on it!

added versatility

I enjoyed my week with the Hobby. It has some interesting innovations which, by and large, work very well. The fold-down bed is a better idea than the sliding-wall washroom, since the shower cubicle is a bit too small. The twin bunks mean that it's targeted more at families than couples, but if you occasionally take the grandkids away with you, then you'll love the flexibility offered by this layout. When the kids are not with you, you can fold up the lower bunk and have a garage instead.



An innovative folding bed layout in a well-built motorhome. Great for families or couples who occasionally take kids.



RIVALS



CHAUSSON FLASH 22
BASED ON Ford Transit 350EL
NOTES The Flash 22 picked up an award from this magazine last year and it still looks great value. We'd add the Silver Pack (silver cab, air-con) and 1400hp engine upgrade, but Chausson's very keen pricing still impresses. Some prefer driving the soter-riding Ford base vehicle and the only real downside is a lack of an oven (though there is an eye-level grill for the UK).
WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE April 2011

PRICE FROM
£38,770



BURSTNER IXEO TIME IT 660
BASED ON Fiat Ducato 2.3 Multijet
NOTES This Ixeo Time is a 6.70m low-profile which boasts twin bunks running across the entire width of the rear, with a central kitchen and washroom. The adults have a large double bed which pulls down from the roof, to cover the front dinette area. It's a nice layout if there are four of you and you don't want to drive a huge coachbuilt and Bürstner do drop-down beds as well as anyone.
WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE n/a

PRICE FROM
£48,500



SWIFT BOLERO 684FB
BASED ON Fiat Ducato 2.3 Multijet Al-Ko
NOTES Looking to buy British? Well you won't find a low-profile with bunk beds but Swift's smart Bolero has been revamped for 2012 and now comes with four travel seats in some versions, such as this 7.04m-long 684FB. You'll have to make up a bed from the half-dinette lounge to sleep four (there's also a French bed at) but Al-Ko chassis and Aibo heating are now standard.
WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE n/a

PRICE FROM
£50,995