



# FINEARTO

Vehicle supplied by the importer: Travelworld RV Ltd, Halesfield 14, Telford, Shropshire TF7 4QR. Call 0845 230 5033/4

Above: no cab doors – entrance is midships

**George Hinton samples a German A-class with a unique, British-specification layout that hits many of the right notes**

**A**LTHOUGH THEY have played with them on and off, currently no major British motorhome company builds a series-production A-class. A few coachbuilders will make something to your

requirements on a truck or coach chassis, but they don't come cheap. For anything remotely affordable, you need to look to Europe or USA, and for this test we have opted for Germany. Niemann & Bischoff is now imported into the UK by Travelworld RV, which was once exclusively tied to the American market but now also deals in leading British and European marques.

### CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

We have published a brief test review of an Arto before, but here we've been afforded the luxury of a full live-in test on the tag-axle 74LE GB. This has a special rear U-lounge layout, giving the flexibility of a double or twin beds, while retaining a drop-down double in the cab area and a dinette that can sleep an adult or possibly two children. The big bonus is that there are six three-point seat belts for travelling.

First thing to note is there are no cab doors, the sole entrance being midships on the UK offside. As this is a Continental

design, but right-hand drive, the driver's storage pockets become the front passenger's, while the driver gets none, the gas locker (2 x 11kg) stealing the potential space. However, there is a handy dashboard shelf to the right of the adjustable steering column as well as the large lockable central bin and glovebox and top compartment.

Ducatists will also notice the handbrake is not where expected but on the inboard side of the driver, where it still gets in the way of seat swivelling, when it needs to be released with the vehicle in gear (and preferably chocked) once on site.

### ON THE ROAD

Fiat's Ducato Maxi 40 Heavy chassis, to Camping Car spec, has a lowline Al-Ko twin-axled chassis grafted on aft of the cab with a Maximum Authorised Weight (MAW) of 5000kg. (Smaller models start at 3500kg.) At 7.75m (25ft 5in) long, and with a sensible overhang at the rear, it looks 'right' and handles well.

Standard power unit is the 2.3-litre 130bhp Multijet, but all Travelworld's stock is fitted with the 3.0-litre 160 Power option which has chain-driven camshafts.

The brochure quotes unladen weight at 3400kg, which would give a colossal payload, but our weighbridge told a different story: with full fuel and water tanks and allowing 75kg for the driver, our starting weight was 4035kg. The maker's weight is without options and curiously allows only 20 litres for fresh water capacity, but even so, the remaining 965kg is still generous. The twin axles not only add stability but seem to make road humps flatter, each being rated at 1500kg. A Fix 'n' Go kit substitutes for a spare wheel.

No problems with the six-speed transmission going forwards, though the ratios are different from the 2.3. With the extra power, performance is similar to a 3.5-tonne 2.3, with 0-50mph achieved in around 16 seconds, but the extra torque means you might have less traction from standstill in the wet. The abundant torque means the engine has to work less hard, so we still achieved 19.9mpg on our motorway run from Telford to Surrey, with around 3500 miles recorded.

There is no through-vision or standard rear camera, so just as well the bumpers are separately-replaceable GRP mouldings at both ends. The single-lens external mirrors are powered and heated and well tucked-in at each side. Though newly-registered, the demonstrator is to 2008 spec – 2010 models have top-hung coach-style mirrors in body colour. Cab air conditioning is a fitted option, but no airbags were installed – another chargeable option.

The ride seems slightly firmer than on conventional editions of the Maxi chassis tested recently, no doubt due to the tag-axle layout. Also firm are the SKA cab seats, which have integral seat belts and even adjustable cushion length (19-21in).

For night driving, the small H7 projector headlights give a better, shadow-free beam than standard Ducato lamps, but could perhaps be a bit brighter. Engine access is okay for checking fluids through the wide GRP bonnet and soundproofing is excellent. The body is substantially free of rattles, though inevitably you get a little bit of noise from the overcab bed mechanism.

### LIVING ABOARD

The Al-Ko chassis provides a double floor within which tanks etc can be located without freezing, so there is a double electric step for access. This doesn't retract automatically, but sounds a high-pitched warning if you start the engine with it down, reminding you to hit the dash 'retract' button.

The floor is flat until you get to the rear lounge area, which has an 11cm (4in) step up, as well as a privacy curtain. It is

both light and cosy inside, thanks to the Heki 3 rooflights at each end and the cream microfibre lining on the aluminium walls and ceiling.

'Crema' upholstery is the lightest of four available options. There are soft leather sides and bolsters and centre panels in an almost hessian-look material. Free options are dark blue, burgundy or black and there are two all-leather cost-options.

The offside saloon window slides, to avoid clashing with the door and allow ventilation on the move, while the others are all top-hung. Electrical and heating controls are grouped above the doorway. Headroom is a good 6ft 6in except in the washroom, where you lose three inches due to the shower tray.

The forward L-shape lounge, with its single sofa opposite, can seat six in comfort once the cab seats are rotated. For dining, the permanent table-top can be extended from 820 to 1130mm (3ft 6in) long and slide in any desired direction. There is an identical table at the rear, but you'd need to carry a third for use outdoors.

Space is no problem as seat bases may be used for stowage, although a label warns (in German) against storage in the dinette seat base, which houses the battery charger and mains consumer unit, with the twin 85Ah gel batteries under a floor hatch. Exterior access lockers are located at the rear (full width with internal seat locker access) and midships (70% width and floor hatch access).

There are four long roof locker doors, sub-divided into three internally, and two are shelved. The wardrobe, automatically lit, has a minimum drop of 84cm (33in), but this can be extended to 104cm (41in) by lowering the adjustable bottom shelf.

A detachable-face JVC in-dash radio/CD/DVD player with remote control is part of Media Pack 2, and doesn't cut out every 20 minutes! A concealed Philips 19in LCD monitor pops up from behind the offside settee, and a Maxview Gazelle 360° antenna is fitted. Stereo speakers are provided over the nearside settee, but not in the rear lounge. Just one mains power socket is installed, on the face of the nearside sofa.

Lighting is interesting. 'Mood' lighting is fitted above the roof lockers, comprising 20 LEDs up front, switched from the doorway (like the awning light). Then there are six halogen downlighters – two under the base of the overcab bed, two in the kitchen and two in the walkway. Two adjustable halogen spotlights are sited over the nearside settee.

The rear lounge is less well-lit, with 38 warm white LEDs above the roof lockers, supplemented by two spotlights under the rear roof lockers.

Heating and hot water are provided by a Truma Combi boiler sited under the nearside rear sofa. >>

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Niemann & Bischoff is based in Polch, near Koblenz in Germany



Arto oozes quality inside

Main saloon double is generously sized

“...there are six three-point belts for travelling”

RATINGS	
CONSTRUCTION & LAYOUT	9
ON THE ROAD	8
LIVING ABOARD	8
KITCHEN	7
WASHROOM	6
SLEEPING	6
VERDICT	7

RRP	£79,995 (stock vehicles only)
Engine	Fitted option: 2999cc Fiat/Iveco Multijet 160 Power
Power	157bhp (115.5kw) at 3600rpm
Torque	295lb ft (400Nm) @ 1750-2500rpm
Transmission	Six-speed manual, front-wheel drive
Overall length	7.74m (25ft 5in)
Internal length	6.12 (20ft 1in) from dash
Overall width	2.79m (9ft 2in) inc mirrors
Overall height	2.95m (9ft 8in)
Max internal height	1.98m (6ft 6in)
Fuel/econ/tank	Diesel/19.9mpg/17.6gal (80 litres)
Kerbside weight	4035kg (79.4cwt) inc driver, 100% fuel, 100% water
MAW	5000kg (98.4cwt)
User payload	965kg (19cwt)
Berths	5
Travel seats	6
NCC approved	No

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Three-burner hob and good storage in kitchen



Oven is located over fridge



Washroom is well designed



Table for four



Front settee-derived bed is best regarded as a single



Comfortable drop-down bed

**KITCHEN**

The kitchen contains a semi-triangular glass-lidded three-burner gas hob (with electronic ignition) and sink, leaving a front worktop space of approximately 28 x 9in.

Three drawers get deeper as you go down the stack, the top one housing a large cutlery tray, the bottom one big enough for saucepans. Gas valves are tucked away high on the right side of the adjacent cupboard that houses a slide-out recycling bin with twin containers.

There is no grill, but an oven is located on top of the Dometic Tec Tower fridge-freezer opposite. One of the few things we can criticise is the fact that the oven base is 5ft 2in above the floor, yet the whole fridge/oven unit is mounted on top of a full-depth drawer, which doesn't seem to need to be there. An electric Omnivent roof vent in line with the cooker has a three-speed two-way fan, but my wife found it difficult to reach the switches.

For electrical appliances, a twin 12/230V socket is fitted at the front left side of the worktop, but this condemns you to dangling flexes for kettles and toasters.

**WASHROOM**

A double-thickness locking edge allows a proper lever handle for the door to the smallest room. It makes good use of its compact dimensions (1100 x 915mm,

43¼ x 36in) and incorporates a 635mm (25in) diameter shower with divided rotating screen in translucent acrylic. The shower, on a chrome riser rail, has a rub-clean pencil-type head which works well, and the tray has two drains.

The toilet is a slightly-dated Thetford C200 swivel fed from the main tank. There's no window, but plenty of light comes through the conventional five-way rooflight. A mirrored splashback is fitted behind the 16 x 9in kidney-shaped handbasin. White plastic is used for the towel rail and toilet roll holder.

Three halogen downlighters are well-sited above the basin with an accessible switch below it. For storage, a shelved high-level cabinet has three small 4-5in high external acrylic shelves for oddments. A second shelved cupboard is set below the basin. Generally, this is a model of how a washroom should be.

**SLEEPING**

Niesmann & Bischoff does offer the excellent Frohli polypropylene-sprung bed suspension system as an option, but not on this model, which has sprung timber slats only for the drop-down cab bed. Unsurprisingly, this proved the most comfortable in the vehicle, measuring 6ft 2in x 4ft 2in, with generous 30in headroom. It is 4ft high, so access is

easy from the adjacent sofas, and there's halogen lighting and a five-way rooflight for light and air.

The main saloon bed makes a transverse double measuring 6ft 10in x (up to) 5ft 11in. Six-inch cushions help compensate for the solid foundation. Alternatively, the side sofas can be used as two singles of 5ft 11in x 2ft. The L-shape front settee that converts to a travel seat by taking out a section of side sofa also changes into a bed by lowering the table, but the offside end is only 2ft wide, so it is best regarded as a single.

The foam-filled aluminium windscreen blind is electrically-operated, with pleated blinds for the double-glazed sliding glass side windows. We thought these would be great insulators, but were disappointed to find condensation on glass and surrounds after a chilly night.

**VERDICT**

With its high-gloss aluminium/Styrofoam/aluminium sandwich two-tone grey coachwork, the Arto certainly looks distinctive, and if you have an aversion to Luton beds, the comfortable pull-down alternative will be an attraction.

Whether you think it has enough toys to make it worth £80,000 is another debate altogether, but new orders would be at the exchange rate of the day. ■

