



Quality treat

George Hinton looks at a classy, high-specification new addition to Auto-Trail's popular Frontier range of coachbuilts

Vehicle supplied for test by: Auto-Trail VR Ltd, Trigano House, Genesis Way, Europarc, Grimsby DN37 9TU. Call 01472 571000

AUTO-TRAIL'S FLAGSHIP Frontier range is also its biggest, featuring a total of 10 layouts, each available in three cab variants as a no-cost option: Hi-line, Lo-line or, new for 2011, Super Lo-line. These offer an extra double bed, extra storage cupboards or a cab sunroof respectively.

Maximum weights span 3.5 to 5 tonnes, lengths from 22ft 4in to 28ft 7in (6.61-8.71m), while the price range is £50,472 to £68,725. When you examine the quality and specification of these models, they seem very good value.

Here we take an in-depth look at the new four-berth Dakota, which promises to be one of the most popular layouts.

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

It's a classic fixed-bed design with bathroom behind, our test demonstrator featuring the Lo-line cab. Auto-Trail builds exclusively on Fiat, the Dakota being on a standard long-wheelbase (4.04m) Ducato 40 Heavy to Camping Car spec. Alloy wheels are standard, with Continental 225/75 R16 tyres, the spare (steel) being mounted behind a locked cover on the tail.

This new 2011 version has grown 4in since last season. Although rated at 4,005kg, the under-bonnet plate on this prototype still showed 3,500kg, which could have caused problems at a vehicle check, as the unladen kerb weight (MRO) with the usual 90% fuel and water, one

13kg propane cylinder and driver, was 3,615kg. This leaves a user payload of 390kg which, with only two (cab) travel seats as standard, is adequate.

Insulation to Grade 2 means comfortable living at 70°F inside while it is freezing outside, achieved with 40mm thick walls and roof and a 45mm floor. The body is clad with a 1.7mm high-gloss, dent-resistant polyester outer skin (rather than aluminium), roof and rear panel are in GRP side skirts are acrylic-capped ABS and there's a recessed 4m awning.

Two sofas at the front form an extra double bed on demand while midships is the main L-shape kitchen unit on the offside and a big twin-doored fridge-

freezer opposite. A concertina door pulls from a recess between kitchen and wardrobe to close off the bedroom area if required. There is the usual large storage area beneath the bed slats, which rise on twin gas struts and have external access, while a substantial door leads to the rear washroom and large, separate shower.

ON THE ROAD

With 130bhp to propel it, and a flat torque peak between 2,000 and 3,000rpm, performance unladen was very acceptable, with acceleration from 0-50mph taking around 18.5 seconds.

There is a 157bhp 3.0-litre option, essential if you propose towing or need the automatic option. From our experience, it's probably more economical too.

Perhaps reflecting the weight, fuel consumption (19.7mpg) was heavier than

expected, but this was a fresh-from-the-box example with just 36 miles behind it when collected.

The ride isn't bad considering the load capacity and it's mechanically quiet. Even the cooker was silent with the glass lid padded and the grill pan stowed. Ducato controls are always light, but this model lacked feel, and it was deflected a little by strong crosswinds at over 60mph when unladen. We enjoyed the usual luxuries of cruise control, remote stereo controls and cab air conditioning, plus twin multi-stage airbags.

Forward and side visibility are good, the latest Remis pleated cab window blinds having frames well-tailored to the door glasses. A little through-vision is gained by wedging the bathroom door open, but the window is high, so you can see trucks behind but not cars. An automatic reversing camera is included in the Media Pack, its view displayed on the large touch-screen of the optional £999 double-DIN multi-media system (which includes a 15in cab-mounted fold-down TV monitor). Reversing uphill produced no dramas.

LIVING ABOARD

An automatic step that pops out and an awning light that comes on as you press the remote central locking button are a neat 'welcome home'. The manual step over-ride button is set rather high to reach from outside, but you should only need to use it from within.

All is cosy inside, from the 'Finsbury' upholstery fabric to the 'Acer' woodgrained wall panelling. Three Heki rooflights - one large and two 'Mini' - illuminate the interior during daytime, while at night the all-LED Auto-Trail lighting is becoming something of a legend.

The cab seats swivel and there's a nice rigid circular coffee table that clamps to a ribbed alloy tube bracketed to the front end of the nearside settee. The main table can be fitted between the seats at 37½in x 22¼in and, of course, it can also be used outside.

There's storage beneath both settees, all tanks being under-floor, and the slatted bases are screwed to hinged frames of flanged square alloy tubing, so there should never be problems with legs falling off! There is also front-flap access. A little capacity is lost to the gas locker in one seat base, but it's mainly below floor level, with space for a spare 7kg cylinder.

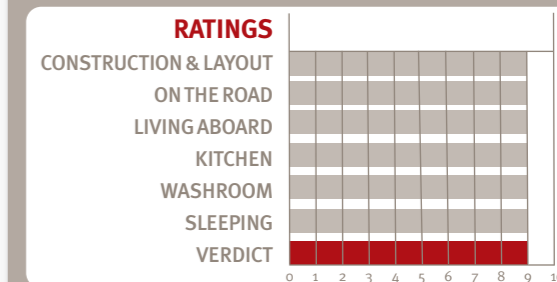
Top lockers provide more storage, but again this is shared. At the front on the offside is the Sargent electronic control panel, which features a full-colour display screen mounted above the entrance door, while the adjacent cupboard houses the base of the TV mast and its amplifier. Meanwhile, the rear nearside cupboard has clips for wine bottles and glasses. >>



Super kitchen with decent storage



Stylish exterior



RRP/as tested	£54,428/£58,264 OTR (inc VAT at 20%)
Base vehicle	Fiat Ducato 40 Heavy
Engine/option	2,287cc Fiat/Iveco Multijet (3.0-litre 157bhp engine available - £1,810)
Power	130bhp (95.5kW) at 3,600rpm
Torque	236lb ft (320Nm) @ 2,000-3,000rpm
Transmission/option	6-speed manual, FWD (Comfortmatic auto available - £1,386)
Fuel/tank/econ	Diesel/19.8gal (90 litres)/19.7mpg
Overall length	24ft 11in (7.60m)
Overall width	7ft 7in (2.31m) exc mirrors
Overall height	9ft 11in (3.02m)
Max internal height	6ft 6½in (1.99m)
MRO (incl driver, 90% fuel, 90% water)	3,615kg (71.2cwt)
MTPLM	4,005kg (78.8cwt)
User payload	390kg (7.7 cwt)
Berths	4
NCC approved	No - complies with ISO 9001: 2008

Figures supplied by manufacturer

Club insurance: 0800 028 4809 • Info: auto-trail.co.uk



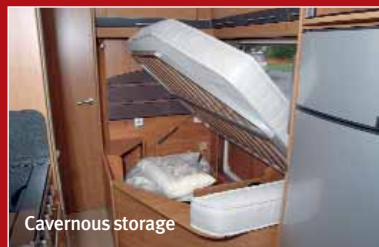
Comfort comes guaranteed with the fixed bed



Easy to set up lounge bed



Main table can be used outside too



Cavernous storage



Washroom is generously sized



Our Dakota came with extra-cost options

There is ample storage for bedding and clothes above the cab (the front axle rating is 2,100kg). Warm air heating and hot water are supplied by a Truma Combi boiler located under the fixed bed.

KITCHEN

This has everything: a full-size dual-fuel cooker, huge 190-litre Dometic S8555 fridge-freezer and a Daewoo 750W microwave oven. Couple this with bags of cupboard, rack and drawer space and it should leave any cook happy. So long as they are 6ft tall! Top lockers are never desirable locations for microwave ovens, but this one is also above the deepest part of the kitchen, over the sink.

The two-piece sink cover helps maximise worktop space and decent storage areas include a top crockery cupboard, a pan locker under the oven and a big cupboard under the sink, flanked by a sliding-basket store.

Two 13A sockets are set in the splashback, there's gimmicky-but-neat edge-lighting to the acrylic splash-shield and under the worktop edge, and ventilation is via ceiling Omnivent.

WASHROOM

The well-presented, full-width rear washroom sports a huge, rectangular shower cubicle that will appeal to the big-boned. Bright LED strip-lighting occupies the length of the longest wall, the switch currently being outside under the dressing table roof locker.

The washroom/toilet area features a floor-to-ceiling shelved storage unit as

well as a basketed cabinet under the fixed basin. There are some oddly-tapered shelves beneath the window, but the only other place on which you can put your toiletries while washing is a small plastic extension to the basin/soapdish. That's a shame, as there's a good section of blank wall to the right of the big mirrored splashback just crying out for a shelf or two. Auto-Trail says it prefers storage that can be used while travelling – why can't we have both? The flat-topped Thetford C300 toilet does provide somewhere to put things, however.

Lighting is excellent, naturally, helped by a Mini Heki and the clear rear window, and there is the usual set of chromed accessories.

SLEEPING

The fixed double measures 6ft 2in long, while width tapers from 4ft 3in to 3ft 3in. As a wonderful bonus, it has one of the dreamiest mattresses you could ever wish to float off to sleep on.

The sofa double is a cinch to assemble: just pull the sliding bases together and drop the backrest cushions flat at each end. The resulting bed is 6ft 10in long. Width is 3ft 3in for half that length and 4ft for the remainder. The sprung cushions mean it's not that much less inviting than the dedicated bed.

The windows all have pleated blinds and flyscreens of the either/or variety – so you can't leave a window open in summer with the insect screen and blind in place to keep out both bugs and light. You do have the Omnivent, however. The

Frontiers have generously-cut full curtains with chrome eyelets to engage on the chrome curtain rails, while the cab has its own pleated blinds.

Two LED spotlights serve each bed, and a very useful remote control, included with the Media Pack, allows you to control lighting and sound system (speakers are set above the headboard) from the comfort of your berth. This is luxury! However, we would have appreciated a night shelf or two in the corners.

Four more top lockers surround the bed, then there's the dressing table with double-doored cupboard beneath and three drawers below the deceptive wardrobe. Its door is just 12in wide, but inside is an auto-illuminating 21in hanging rail with a good 44½in drop below it.

The dresser is backed by a useful 25½in square mirror and there's another long one in the doorway, making three all told. Should the cab-mounted TV/DVD player be too distant, there is a 'station' to take a flatscreen TV in the bedroom.

VERDICT

What's not to like about the Auto-Trail Dakota? The good-value option packs make the equipment list impressive. There are external connections for a hot shower and a barbecue, a lockable folding rear ladder and an 85W solar panel to top up the 110Ah battery, while corner steadies – which we didn't feel were needed – can be added if you wish. It drives well, is comfortable with a quality ambience and has every mod con – certainly with the Media Pack fitted. ■

