

Suite CHARIOT

George Hinton says this sturdy motorhome from France is yet another triumph



Vehicle supplied for test by: Highbridge Caravan Centre, A38 Bristol Road, Highbridge, Somerset TA9 4EX. Call 01278 782725.

Chausson's Suite has intrigued since it was first launched as a compact, low-profile two-berth, offering a unique central island kitchen, electric roof bed behind the cab and generous rear bathroom. Indeed, it won the industry's European Innovation Award for 2010.

The four variants for 2012 include two fixed-bed models and one calculated to appeal to cycling enthusiasts, featuring optional electrically-operated vertical twin-cycle store. Here we look at the Suite Relax with fixed semi-island bed across the rear.

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

The Relax has a heavily-insulated sandwich panel body construction with GRP outer skinning and a hail-resistant 54.5mm thick roof and 63mm floor – the thickest we have come across. The caravan door is on the continental side but the cab gives easy enough access to our nearside. A silver metallic cab pack attracts a £1,912 premium, but includes manual cab air con, cruise control and a metallic grey spoiler. A spare wheel is optional, although Fiat's fix-and-go kit is supplied as standard.

Apart from in the cab, belted seating is restricted to two lapbelts on the forward-

facing dinette seat. This may be seen as a drawback for a five/six-berth and Chausson is working on homologating three-point belts for this area in the near future.

ON THE ROAD

The Fiat Ducato 35L chassis-cab has a long 4.03m wheelbase and the 2.3-litre 130bhp Euro 5 engine with particulate filter and six-speed manual gearbox.

We drove the upgraded 150bhp version of the same capacity, which costs an extra £880. This was too short a test to obtain meaningful figures, but Fiat claims fuel consumption improvement of between

9-14% over the Euro 4. The conversion is wide enough to be roomy inside (7ft 2in) while remaining manageable on country roads (under 7ft 7in excluding mirrors). Rated at 3.5 tonnes as standard, an optional £120 upgrade to 3,650kg helps payload for those without licence restrictions.

Ride quality isn't bad and wind noise is non-existent. Handling is excellent, aided by the wide-track rear axle. Reversing sensors are standard fittings – useful as there is no back window and the rear panel has cycle rack mountings.

Although mechanically checked, our demonstrator had not been through a full inspection, so we can excuse some loud furniture rattles from the midships area, which we traced to a loose-fitting kitchen cupboard door. Innovations such as the electric table and bed appeared to be entirely noise-free on the move.

Chausson chassis are supplied without a radio/CD player, allowing the dealer – in this instance, Highbridge Caravans in Somerset – to fit a unit of your choice. Rear roof speakers are already present in the kitchen area.

Interior heating by Webasto is diesel-fired and can be operated while on the move. The double dinette seat, although lacking full three-point seatbelts, overcame the common failing of making passengers feel insecure on cornering, being steel framed with adjustable backrest and featuring folding padded armrests similar to those on the cab seats.

LIVING ABOARD

Don't be put off by the plethora of innovations – they all work! For example, the electric centre bed, which descends on four belts, is an example of simple, robust

engineering. The drive mechanism looks a bit like a caravan motor mover, the belts winding round the drive spindles.

We didn't take the telescopic 'T-System' electric table apart, but no doubt it is similarly-executed. Both are controlled through key-operated switches, so it is easy to prevent children playing with them. Surprisingly, the electric entrance step has to be retracted manually before driving away – a buzzer reminds the forgetful.

Internal headroom is generally an excellent 6ft 11in, and there is an adequate 6ft 1in under the electric bed.

The living area is brightened by a wind-up sunroof directly above the cab, and extensive LED lighting fitted into mirrors and steps (there's a curved step up to the cab) as well as conventional ceiling and under-locker fittings, keep it equally bright at night.

As if that and the dark walnut-coloured furniture were not striking enough, you can choose from four soft furnishing schemes. One, 'Diamond Ambience', features stylish, part-ruched cream leather, and attracts a £415 premium.

The 30in x 37in table has a fixed electrically-telescoping base, but the top can be unclamped and slid in two directions as required. Six can sit round it courtesy of two side seats and the swivelling cab seats.

Fresh and waste water tanks both hold 105 litres. Unusually, the conventional filler for the fresh water is inside the vehicle, hidden behind the dinette seat. It can be filled externally provided you can connect to the mains, as pressure is required.

Hot water is courtesy of a Truma G/E Boiler located under the front nearside seat. Controls are located with those for the



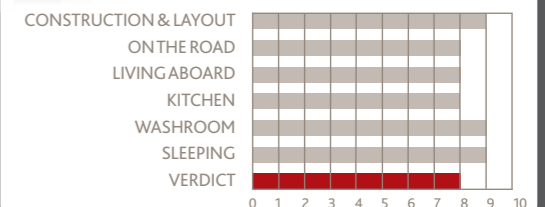
Well-organised driving environment



Six can be accommodated at mealtimes

TECHNICAL

RATINGS



“...the electric bed is an example of simple, robust engineering”



Electric bed takes the strain out of night-time preparation

RRP/as tested	£49,890/£52,682 OTR
Base vehicle	Fiat Ducato 3500 LWB
Engine	2,287cc Multijet 4-cyl DOHC 16v common rail
Power	130bhp (97kW) @ 3,600rpm (optional 150bhp £880; 180bhp £2,620)
Torque	236lb/ft (320Nm) @ 2,000-3,000rpm
Transmission	Six-speed manual, FWD (optional Comfortmatic six-speed)
Fuel/tank/econ	Diesel/19.8gal (90 litres)/26mpg
Overall length	24ft 7in (7.49m)
Overall width	7ft 6½in (2.30m) exc mirrors; 8ft 10in (2.69m) inc mirrors
Overall height	9ft 9½in (2.89m)
Min internal height	6ft 1in (1.85m)
MRO	3,160kg (62.2cwt)
MTPLM	3,500kg (68.9cwt)
User payload	340kg (6.7cwt)
Berths	5/6
NCC approved	No

Figures supplied by manufacturer

Club insurance: 0800 028 4809 • Info: chausson.tm.fr/uk-uk/



Above: the Suite's kitchen combines style with practicality

Below: we think any Suite owner will find favour with the washroom



“The cuisine island is pretty striking and, for the most part, practical”

kitchen area, while the rear bedroom has plenty of space. There's limited storage under the offside dinette seat, much space being occupied by the gas locker, which can take a 13kg plus a 6kg cylinder.

Electrical readouts, switches and tank level monitors are found in the 12V control panel above the entrance, where there are also some handy coat hooks.

KITCHEN

The cuisine island is pretty striking and, for the most part, practical. The one-piece, one-metre-wide black worktop is glass and sets off the two shiny gas burners a treat.

The Dometic RM8555 tower fridge-freezer with mirror-effect front lies just behind, in the aisle to the bedroom, and offers 190 litres total capacity. There is no oven, but a grill is situated above the freezer.

However, this isn't the end of the cooking arrangements: another selling feature of the Suite range is the Easy Chef, a three-burner gas hob/griddle permanently connected in an outside locker. Just unlock and swing down the bottom-hinged door and, hey presto, it's ready to use.

The worktop also houses a matt-finished 14in-diameter stainless steel sink, beautifully set off by its highly-polished rim. Just in case you need more worktop area, there's a large hinged flap in well-matched black laminate on the left side.

Island storage comprises two deep drawers below the hob with a shallower compartmented cutlery drawer at the top. Alongside is a curved-door cupboard containing a waste bin and saucepan shelf. There are also two top lockers, the left

heater, under the tall nearside shelved kitchen storage cupboard. Two TV stations are provided: a pole-mounted bracket on the nearside by the electric bed and a wall panel in the rear bedroom.

Blinds and net curtains are found at all windows except in the washroom, while the cab has Remis pleated window blinds.

There are no front roof lockers due to the presence of the electric bed, but there are two shelved cupboards at the back of the

shelved, the right ideal for cereal boxes and bottles. LED lighting is fitted underneath, but there is also good natural light from an 18in x 26in wind-up Remis rooflight.

WASHROOM

This too, as you might have guessed, is pretty stylish, but also totally practical.

A hardwood duckboard levels the floor over the twin-drained semi-circular shower tray, measuring approximately 19in x 25in (48 x 64cm). Within the shower area, the 11in diameter basin in polished stainless steel is set in a marble-effect plastic top.

There are fully-mirrored splashbacks, while the moulded lower fascia incorporates a towel rail. The faucet detaches from the sink to become the shower head - there's a riser rail to park it on, while a folding acrylic door protects the Thetford flat-top C300 rotating cassette toilet.

Naturally, the area is heated, and has both a wind-up roof vent and an opening window for ventilation. Twin LED downlight fittings illuminate the shower area, and there is a third above the toilet.

SLEEPING

Officially, the Suite Relax is a five/six-berth, the sixth requiring an optional extension to form a second double beneath the front bed. A single berth can be made beneath by rearranging cushions on the lowered table. Turning to the rear bedroom, which can be separated by sliding door, the bed here is 4ft 9in x 6ft 4in, with access along most of one side and along the foot. The wardrobe here is 21in deep and has a 19in illuminated rail with 38in drop.

In the opposite corner is a triangular cabinet with a drawer and a laundry bag below. Other clothes storage is found in the three roof lockers with side-hung double doors around the bed, while there is vast space beneath the slatted bed base, which rises on gas struts and is accessible from outside. ■

VERDICT

The Chausson Suite Relax certainly has the 'wow' factor, especially where the stylish kitchen is concerned, but you don't have to pay a ridiculous price for it. Only two passenger lap belts may be seen as a drawback - the final choice is yours.

