

REVIEWED



BENIMAR BENIVAN 161



Spanish brand, Benimar, serves up a continental feast with a sprinkle of British ingredients

Words & pictures ■ Iain Duff

At a time when campervans are more expensive than ever, we are all looking to get as much as we can for our cash. And when it comes to value for money, you could do an awful lot worse than this new addition to the Benivan range. Not only is the Benivan 161 keenly priced to start with, but the impressive spec

means you get a lot of 'van for your buck – and most of it comes as standard.

The Benivan is part of the campervan range from Spanish motorhome brand, Benimar. Exclusively imported to the UK by Marquis Leisure, Benivan has the undeniable feel of a continental 'van – fixed bed floorplan, sliding door on the 'wrong' side – but with some elements that are very much aimed at the UK campervan market.



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Behind the wheel

The base vehicle is the Fiat Ducato, which comes as standard with a 140hp engine and six-speed gearbox. An automatic nine-speed gearbox is available as an option, but that will add a whopping £4,000 to your bill. Going for the automatic does mean you get Campovolo Grey paintwork, though, instead of the standard Expedition White.

Whichever option you choose, there is plenty included that's designed to make driving easier and more comfortable. You get the stop/start function, ESP with Traction Plus and hill descent control, cab seats with twin armrests and Bluetooth/radio controls on the leather steering wheel. The radio isn't included as standard, but the model we tested was fitted with an Xzent stereo head unit (£816 extra), with DAB radio and sat-nav. It also has Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, so you can connect your phone's apps

to the vehicle.

Cab air-conditioning, cruise control and front fog/cornering lights are part of the standard spec, as are 16in black alloy wheels and a colour-coded bumper.

There's no storage shelf above the front seats and there's no big overcab sunroof, either – the space is taken up with map and document pockets – so you miss out on the extra light that provides. However, that extra headroom means you can comfortably walk through from the cab to the lounge without having to stoop, which is a real benefit.

Externally, the Benivan has black, grey and gold graphics, a solar panel and caravan-style windows that sit proud of the bodywork. This is the six-metre Ducato, so it's still easily manoeuvrable, and I had no problems nipping around town after collecting it from the Marquis premises in Northampton. Supermarket parking bays will inevitably be too short, however, and the 2.65m height will, of course, rule out multi-storey car parks, so urban parking needs some thought. Out on the open roads of Northamptonshire, the Benivan felt reassuringly stable, even on the twisting rural thoroughfares. There was a little rattling coming from the kitchen area – although, it has to be said, this was not helped by the absolute state of the road surfaces.

Live it up

Until recently, the Benivan range was built by Auto-Trail here in the UK and that meant the models were very much geared towards British preferences.

PROS

- Keenly priced and good level of spec
- The combined oven/grill increases cooking options

CONS

- Tricky washroom door opening
- Only one gas hob





**IT'S NICE TO SEE A WELL-EQUIPPED,
LARGER CAMPERVAN PRICED AT
SIGNIFICANTLY LESS THAN £60K**



However, that has changed. Production now takes place in Italy and the UK-style rear lounge layouts have disappeared, replaced by fixed bed floorplans. Like many imported campers, the sliding door is on the offside, although this doesn't appear to be a major problem for most UK buyers.

The Benivan 161 has two berths and four travelling seats, with the layout consisting of two single beds or one big double to the rear, a central kitchen with washroom opposite, and a front half-dinette lounge area, which incorporates the driver and passenger seats.

As someone who falls into the, ahem, 'heavy set' category, this is a layout that I find problematic in a few ways and it does sometimes feel that it's a design that is not meant for me. Taller campers may find some aspects of the layout to be challenging, too. For example, if you are on one of the travel seats, the dining table is quite a squeeze to sit at and could do with being an inch or two narrower for comfort. On the plus side, it has a swing-out extension leaf, so, if you are sitting on one of the swivelled cab seats, you will have plenty of legroom and space on the table to tuck into your meal. It's worth remembering, of course, that campervan living always needs some compromise – and what works for one person won't necessarily work for another.

As mentioned previously, there's no big sunroof above the cab, so the lounge misses out on the light that would come flooding in from that. However, that doesn't mean it's a gloomy area. Quite the opposite, in fact. Thanks to the push-up Heki rooflight above the table, the large side window (which, like all the habitation windows, is fitted with blinds and a flyscreen) and the window on the side door, the area fills with natural light. You can also leave the side door wide open to provide more light (and ventilation); the mesh flyscreen keeps mozzies and midges at bay.

A large cupboard is situated above the lounge window and under the half-dinette is a good-sized storage locker, easily accessed by lifting the seat. There's more storage in a cubby hole discreetly built into the floor space.

The dining table can be removed and attached to the outside of the 'van for use in an awning or just for al fresco eating. The final production version will have a compartment in the side door for storing the table to create more space for travel.

If you need your *Coronation Street* fix on your travels, the wall above the travel seats is ideal for a telly; there's a mains socket and a TV aerial point fitted here for just that purpose. There's also a handy USB charging port here, too.



FACT FILE

BENIMAR BENIVAN 161

Price from £57,495

The model we tested was fitted with an Xzent stereo head unit (£816 extra)

Berths 2

Travel seats 4

Base vehicle Fiat Ducato

Length 5.99m

Width 2.05m

Height 2.65m

Gross vehicle weight 3,500kg

Payload 647kg

KEY FEATURES

- Dometic stove with single gas burner and CAN oven/grill
- Dometic 70-litre dual opening compressor fridge with freezer compartment; Single beds 1.74m x 0.75m / 1.99m x 0.68m; Alternative double 1.86m x 1.74m
- 85-litre inboard fresh water tank
- 75-litre insulated underslung waste water tank
- Webasto diesel-fired blown-air heating
- Truma gas water heater

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Cooking with gas

The side kitchen has a small work surface (no fold-out extension) and just one gas burner, which is extremely limiting if you like to cook in the 'van. Below the decent-sized stainless-steel sink, though, is a combined oven/grill, a relatively rare find in this type of layout, which will be warmly welcomed by UK buyers. Kitchen storage is in the eye-level locker and drawer under the oven, but there's no cupboard due to the presence of the oven. A mains socket is located under the overhead cupboard, but it's immediately above the sink; it would perhaps be better at the other end, closer to the worktop.

The fridge is a 70-litre compressor model with a small freezer compartment. It's not massive but would certainly be enough for a couple on holiday – remember this is a two-berth camper. The fridge faces forward at the end of the kitchen unit and the



dual opening door means it can be accessed from outside and inside.

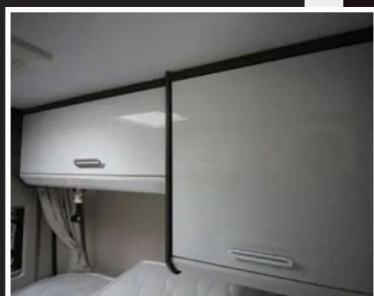
The passageway between the kitchen and the washroom is very narrow – just 40cm wide at its narrowest point – and I found it a little uncomfortable to squeeze through. That's not going to be a problem for everyone, but if you are bigger built then take it into consideration. The oven door opens easily enough but when you open the washroom door, it hits the oven handle. Not ideal.

A little wonder

Campervan washrooms are, by definition, compact spaces and are rarely particularly comfortable. It's all about making the best use of the limited space and the Benivan does a pretty good job of that. The fashionable fittings and colour scheme, which replicates the muted brown and beige throughout the 'van, also give it the appearance of a posh hotel rather than a campervan.

The Thetford cassette toilet has a swivel bowl to create more space when you're showering and the shower itself is on a riser, with the fittings separate to the basin tap. The large square basin folds down from inside the wall when needed and is a clever use of space.

Toiletries can be stashed in one of the cubicle's





? VERDICT

What you see is what you get and, at this price, that's a lot more than you might expect. When it's not unusual these days to have to pay £70,000 or more for a campervan, it's nice to see a well-equipped, larger camper priced at significantly less than £60k. If you are a couple looking for a fixed bed option, this should definitely be on your shortlist. With its dark wood furniture, classy coffee and cream upholstery and a plethora of features, it's got the look and feel of a more costly 'van.



two cupboards and there's plenty of cabinet space for storing toilet chemicals, too. The LED light makes the cubicle bright, but I spent a lot more time than was really necessary trying to find the light switch. I eventually discovered it hidden away in the locker above the window.

One thing worth mentioning at this point, is how easy the grey waste drainage system is to use. Unlike some 'vans where you have to fiddle with an awkwardly positioned tap to empty the tank, this Benivan has an easy-to-reach T-handle under the chassis, which you simply pull and allow the water to drain out. Really quick and easy.

Golden slumbers

The sleeping area is at the back of the camper, with two comfortable single beds running lengthways, one 1.99m long and the other 1.74m. In the production model, the corner of the mattress on the longer bed will be sliced off to create more walking space. The singles can easily be converted into a double measuring 1.86m by 1.74m. Simply hook the centre panels onto the base of each single bed and lay the spare cushion sections on top. There's no obvious place to store these cushions when they're not in use, other than on top of one of the single beds, so if you don't plan to use them you might want to just leave them at home.

The double bed set-up brings me to another washroom-related issue. Because the loo door has its hinges on the right, when the double bed is in place, it's difficult, if not impossible, to open it without perching precariously on the end of the bed, grabbing the handle and somehow pulling it away

from you. How easy this procedure would be in the middle of the night while half-asleep is anyone's guess and a simple solution would surely be for the door to open the other way.

For storage, there are two eye-level lockers along the nearside wall and two more opposite, one of them designed to be used for hanging longer items, although there's no full wardrobe.

Under one of the beds you'll find the gas locker (accessed from the rear), the leisure battery and the heating and hot water systems, while the 85-litre inboard fresh water tank is under the offside bed. There are also two under-bed storage units that can be moved or removed completely to create a wider floorspace. The beds can then be lifted on hinges and held in place with straps when you're travelling, to allow more storage space in the rear for bikes, etc.

More, more, more

Given the price, you'd be forgiven for thinking the Benivan wouldn't have all the features of a more expensive camper, but it really does hold its own, spec-wise. Inside, for instance, the main overhead lights are touch control and there's an electric step at the side door that slides in and out at the press of a button – and automatically retracts when you turn the ignition key.

A solar panel is also standard, and while it wasn't much benefit on a dreich March day in Northamptonshire, it should be invaluable in sunnier climes, especially when you're off-grid.

Far more useful during my trip was the Webasto blown-air diesel heating system, which helped make the 'van nice and cosy after dark.



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