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MMM

THE MOTORHOMERS' MAGAZINE



EXCLUSIVE

**NEW BENIVAN
CAMPERVAN**

MAGICAL ESCAPES

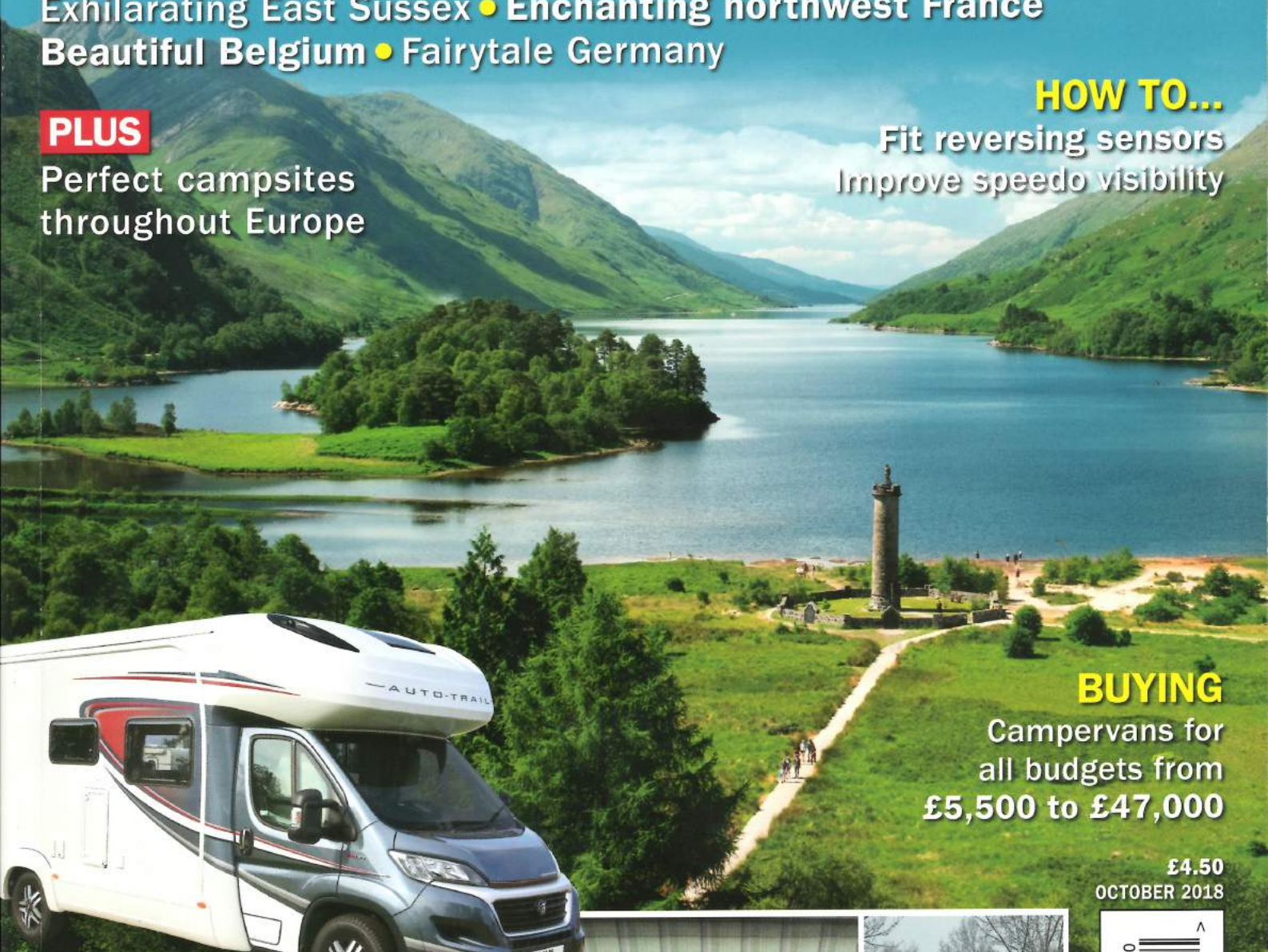
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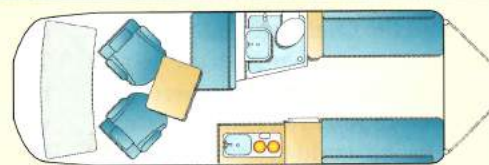


Peter Vaughan

Built in Britain for a Spanish brand with a French parent, the Benivan adopts a classic UK layout

BENIMAR BENIVAN 122

Price from: £46,495
Berths: 2 **Travel seats:** 4
Base vehicle: Fiat Ducato
Length: 6.36m
Gross weight: 3,500kg





There's only one table, which seems a touch small here, but rather too big when placed up front

Badge engineering was once rife in the car world. Many *MMM* readers will remember when Austin, Morris and Wolseley would produce virtually the same car, with just a few tweaks to the cosmetics.

It's often been an approach used in the motorhome market, too. Compass and Elddis were long-term twin brands, with the former resurfacing this year after a lengthy absence, producing – you guessed it – Elddis layouts with different fabrics and graphics. Swift, at one time, offered Ace and Bessacarr versions, as well as its own brand – all basically the same vehicle. And, on the Continent, you'll find the Challenger range bears an uncanny resemblance to the Chausson motorhomes seen here. That's before you even contemplate the confusing world of dealer specials.

The advantages for the

manufacturer obviously lie in economies of scale – change the graphics, maybe the wood tone or upholstery, add (or even subtract) some spec and, *voilà*, you have a new range. Not only that but you can display them to new customers through a separate dealer network.

So, it's hardly a new idea but its execution reaches new heights for the 2019 season. You'll be familiar with Auto-Trail's Tribute van conversion range, formerly built in Italy but manufactured in Grimsby for the last couple of seasons. Now, though, the Tributes have close relatives wearing Benimar (Benivan), Chausson (Twist) and Roller Team (Toleno) badges. These brands are all members of the French Trigano Group and, while their main factories are in Peníscola (Spain), Tournon-sur-Rhône (France) and San Gimignano

(Italy), respectively, these new van conversion line-ups all hail from north Lincolnshire. They are not identical, though – each has adopted two out of three of the Tribute layouts and specs vary, so compare carefully.

FASTEST 'VAN IN THE WEST

The Benivan name, for me, conjures up images not of beaches in Benidorm, but of the late Benny Hill singing "Ernie, and he drove the fastest milk cart in the west". Perhaps appropriately, therefore, the Benivan outperforms its sister models because it has the 150bhp Multijet motor.

It's the pick of the current Euro VI Ducato engine line-up and has a torque output closer to that of the 180bhp than the 130bhp engine. It adds an effortless nature to driving and, with fewer gearchanges, will



The cab comes with sat-nav and the highly desirable 150bhp engine



The kitchen stretches part-way across the door, which has an electric step



The gangway is narrowest between the rear travel seat and the sink area. The fridge sits beneath the wardrobe

SECOND OPINION

"Benimar's one-spec-fits-all policy with plenty of desirable kit as standard is the real story here"

DANIEL ATTWOOD MANAGING EDITOR

probably also prove more economical.

My very first impressions, however, were not of generous go but being startled by a high-pitched squawk. If you turn the ignition key with the step still out, your ears are subjected to this electronic reprimand as the step automatically retracts.

In the cab, you can't help feeling that the Fiat is showing its age, too. At launch, more than a decade ago, it hardly had the high-quality feel of a VW interior and, now, its design (which has barely changed) is a long way behind the likes of the Ford Transit and Volkswagen Crafter.

In line with Benimar's usual policy of everything included in the specification, though, the Benivan has a well-appointed cab. The high-backed cab seats both have height and tilt adjustment, as well as twin armrests and an attractive, rather

automotive, grey trim in a mix of tweed and suede-style fabrics. Cab air-conditioning, cruise control, a passenger airbag, leather steering wheel and chrome-ringed dials are all featured here, as are (much more unusually) automatic headlights and windscreen wipers. Unseen but highly important is the standard ESP with Traction Plus.

Where many imported marques leave a gaping hole quite literally in the spec, with just a void in the dash, the Benivan also comes with an Xzent DAB radio with sat-nav and reversing camera. On the test vehicle this only took instruction from the touchscreen, rather than the steering wheel-mounted switches, and it didn't include Bluetooth. Manoeuvring was made easy, however, by the clear display showing what's right up close to the camper's derrière.

ALL WHITE ON THE NIGHT

The Benivan comes in white, with a colour-coded front bumper, glossy black grille and skidplate, and LED daytime running lights. The most significant addition to the looks, though, is the 16in alloy wheels.

Of course, being built in Britain means that the Benivan has its sliding door on the UK nearside and this entrance comes with the aforementioned electric step, but no flyscreen, which seems a pity. Another downside is the potential clash between the sliding door and the rear lounge's nearside window, if left open.

The windows are caravan-style units that sit proud of the bodywork, but there's no shortage of side glazing.

A push-up Heki sunroof is fitted over the rear lounge but it would have been good to have a second such fitting over the front seating area, >

LIKED



- Well-shaped rear passenger seat
- Light-coloured furniture adds to the feeling of space

DISLIKED



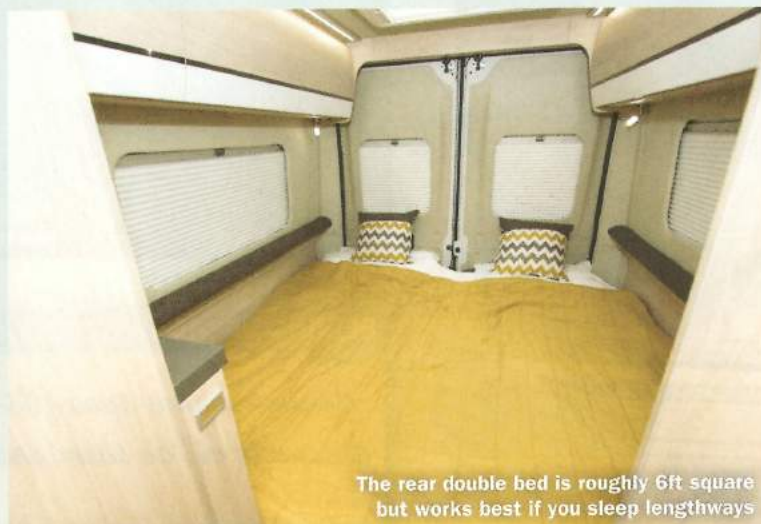
- Lack of legroom in front dinette
- Fixed upper backrest cushions in rear lounge

WANTED

- Flyscreen on sliding door
- Small, round table for use up front



The worktop extension panel is vital for food prep, while a microwave is fitted at a sensible height



The rear double bed is roughly 6ft square but works best if you sleep lengthways

which can feel gloomy.

Along the offside you'll spot the filler for the underslung gas tank (so cheaper refills and no space lost inside) and, under the sill, the fresh and waste water drains, which were getting rather grubby to handle even on this summertime test.

FOR FOUR OR TWO?

The Benivan 122 sits in a range of two (there's also a shorter 120 without the rear travel seats) and adopts what is reckoned to be the UK's most popular layout for larger (six-metre-plus) van conversions. That's rear lounge floorplans that also offer a second seating area (usually a half-dinette) up front. It does this in the extra-long (6.36m) Fiat Ducato panel van.

There are no surprises inside the Benivan, then, especially as we've

seen all but the décor before in the Auto-Trail Tribute 680, but where the Benivan differs from some of its rivals is in offering four travel seats but only two berths. To some that might seem nonsensical but it adds versatility for those who may need to carry a passenger from a younger or older generation from time to time. And, if grandchildren are the passengers, they may well prefer sleeping separately, in a tent or awning. Certainly, a benefit of the half-dinette bench not having to double up as a bed is that it can serve its sole role much more successfully. Here, for once, is a seat that could carry two adult passengers long distances without the usual moans about upright, shapeless seating.

Maybe Benimar should consider adding a rising roof option (like Globecar, Hymer, Pilote, Westfalia) for those who need a true four-berth.

TOGETHER, OR APART

While beds created from campervan half-dinettes are rarely much cop, it is expected that rear lounges will adapt easily into beds. Here, that's definitely the case – if you're not too tall.

Neither of the rear sofas is quite 6ft long (the offside one is fractionally shorter) but, for many, they can be used as single beds, simply by removing the backrest cushions.

If you prefer a double bed, the slatted seat bases simply slide out, complete with support legs, and meet in the middle, whereupon backrest cushions fill in the centre of a huge bed. Now you have a choice of sleeping lengthways (easier access) or across the 'van (for a slightly longer bed) but check out our photo of the bed and you'll see that a small section of backrest cushion is fixed, which rather negates any extra inches gained



The pale wood tone helps the Benivan feel more spacious. Unusually, it looks more attractive with carpets removed to reveal grey vinyl floor

by sleeping transversely. And, while the Benivan looks very well finished, with its vinyl window surrounds and plastic rear door trim panels, the mattress width across the 'van is reduced compared with some rivals by the fact that the interior panelling doesn't follow the shape of the van.

Night-time pluses are upmarket concertina-style blinds, reading lights in all four corners of the lounge/bedroom and a slim surface atop the table's locker for bedtime drinks, etc.

A double duvet and pillows will easily fit under the nearside settee but the offside space is largely filled by the Combi boiler and the leisure battery.

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

Of course, the rear space is even more appealing in the daytime, when jazy scatter cushions allow feet-up

relaxation in spacious style. When the weather is kind, flinging open the back doors only adds to the appeal. It's not hard to see why rear lounge van conversions are so popular.

For dining, the tabletop is extracted from its own locker adjacent to the offside settee, while its island leg comes out of the wardrobe. It's not a big table (700mm by 550mm) but it should be adequate for two.

We'd prefer to see a slightly larger free-standing table (which could also be used outside), along with a smaller, round table for use up front. The one table currently supplied can be resited up front but it is too dominating in this smaller space. In any case, the front lounge is a rather compromised design. Spinning the cab seats around is easy but the gap between the swivelled driver's seat and the rear bench is only just over 140mm, so

knee-room is lacking. There may be four seats in this dinette but you'd struggle to occupy more than two or three of them.

WOOD-N'T IT BE LIGHT

Lighter wood finishes seem to be gradually returning to the motorhome world and, in the Benivan, it's easy to see the effect that has on the impression of space. Combined with ceiling-level LED strip lights, the 122 feels more spacious than you'd expect and even the gangway between the bathroom and galley doesn't appear too confined.

The galley itself comes with a two-burner hob and sink combination unit, while an 800W microwave adds to the cook's repertoire (at least while you're hooked up). Unusually, and pleasingly, the nuker is fitted under >



The good-looking washroom has few foibles to its design



The tabletop has its own locker; the ledge above is useful at night

the hob, rather than above your head!

Storage is in a large cutlery drawer alongside the microwave, two floor-level cupboards (more drawers would have meant less bending down) and a small top locker. Under the adjacent wardrobe is the 85-litre three-way fridge with removable freezer.

MAGNETIC ATTRACTION

Like much of the Benivan, the washroom will be familiar to Tribute owners, and it has the same foibles. The tip-up basin makes good use of space but its magnetic catches don't appear to be strong enough to hold it in the stowed position while driving. The toilet is mounted on a plinth, so requires long legs for comfortable sitting. There's no window in here and just a small roof vents. The shower needs a curtain to be deployed and the mirrored cupboard has lips on its shelves but could do with straps to hold shampoo bottles, etc, in place. The lower shelves don't have lips, so are not particularly useful.

All that said, the Benivan's washroom is well finished, reasonably roomy and fares no worse than many other van conversions. **4.5/5**

THE VERDICT

A high spec, including a solar panel and microwave, as well as alloy wheels, 150bhp engine, sat-nav and reversing camera, will differentiate the Benivan from its rivals. The layout is a best-seller but check that you are happy with the bed sizes and the front dinette.



THE ALTERNATIVES

Auto-Trail Tribute 680	£42,678
Chausson Twist V697UK	£43,490
Elddis CV40	£38,377
Swift Select 184	£45,500*

*2018 price

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FACTS AND FIGURES



PRICE

From: £46,495
 As tested: £46,495



BASICS

Berths: 2
 Travel seats: 4

Warranty: Base vehicle and conversion two years

Type approval: European Whole Vehicle



DIMENSIONS

Length: 6.36m (20ft 10in)
 Width: 2.27m (7ft 5in)

Height: 2.65m (8ft 8in)

Gross vehicle weight: 3,500kg

Payload: TBC



BASE VEHICLE

Type: Fiat Ducato extra-long panel van

Engine: 2.3-litre, Euro VI, 150bhp, front-wheel drive, six-speed manual gearbox



KITCHEN

Cooker: Two-burner hob, Daewoo 800W microwave

Fridge: Dometic 8-Series three-way, 85-litre, removable freezer compartment



BEDS

Rear double: 1.80m x 1.85m (5ft 11in x 6ft 1in)

Alternative rear singles: 1.78m/1.80m x 0.66m (5ft 10in/5ft 11in x 2ft 2in)



ESSENTIALS

Fresh water: 70 litres (underfloor)

Waste water: 70 litres (underfloor)

Space/water heating: Truma Combi 4E gas/electric blown-air

Leisure battery: 72Ah

Gas: 25-litre underfloor gas tank

OPTIONS

Fitted to test vehicle: None

Other options available: None

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