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# Overcab, over here

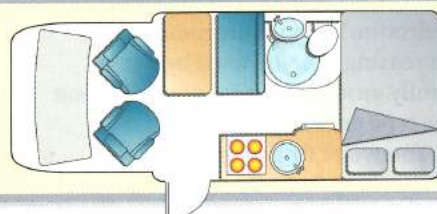


*Peter Vaughan*

Spanish brand, Benimar, has a new entry-level range this year, which – unusually in 2019 – includes overcab models

## BENIMAR PRIMERO 301

**Price from:** £44,995  
**Berths:** 4 **Travel seats:** 4  
**Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato  
**Length:** 5.99m  
**Gross weight:** 3,500kg





The typical half-dinette lounge has differing floor heights – note the overcab bed in its stowed position to allow walk-through access to the cab

**O**vercab coachbuilts have been increasingly replaced in most model ranges by low-profiles, especially those with over-lounge drop-down beds. It's easy to see the appeal of the smoother, more aerodynamic shape, and a lower overall height is always a good thing for economy as well as stability. But the overcab is not dead.

Family-orientated 'vans, especially at the budget end of the market, are still regularly seen with an overcab bed. Kids love that lutan 'den' and it's a great dumping ground for lightweight stuff such as bedding and coats, as well as being an instant bedroom. When motorhomes are, increasingly, being used by wider family groups, it's not surprising that the type endures.

You won't find overcabs in the best-selling Swift Escape or Elddis

Autoquest line-ups these days, but not all the major continental makers have deserted the sector, which remains popular with hire companies. Carado, Chausson, Roller Team, Sunlight, Sun Living, Weinsberg – and more – are all active in this market, along with the Spanish marque, Benimar. Its Mileo range offered no less than five overcab models in 2018.

For the new season that has been reduced to three but your choice hasn't suffered – the manufacturer has simply moved two of the layouts into the new, more affordable Primero range (oddly, though, the two bunk bed layouts remain as more expensive Mileos).

There aren't many things that get cheaper year-on-year, but the Primero 301 you see here is a whopping £6,000 less than the Mileo 301 it supersedes. Of course, there are consequent

reductions in kit, too, but a sub-£45k sticker price is increasingly rare on a new coachbuilt...

### TALL STORY

I don't know if it was the lofty lutan or the unpainted, black bumper but my father-in-law's opening remark, "that's not as nice as the one you had last week" (referring to a £98k Kon-tiki) perhaps wouldn't have been levelled at a low-profile Primero. The styling here is more about practicality – creating a generous overcab bedroom – than aesthetics.

It's a tall 'van (over 3m) and you can feel the reduced urge above 60mph as the 2.3-litre diesel engine pushes that uncompromising shape through the air. It's all about wind direction because there's sometimes more noticeable effect from crosswinds,

**SECOND OPINION**

*"It's the two instant double beds and the value for money that are key to this Spaniard's appeal"*

RACHEL STOTHERT DEPUTY EDITOR



The wardrobe is practical but space is a little restricted by the step inside



A swing-out extension leaf allows four to dine around the wall-mounted table

The rear bed is ideal for tall motorhomers and there's room to sit up for that morning coffee



too, though Benimar has done its best to counter that by using the lower, wide rear axle Camper version of the Ducato chassis-cab. That keeps the floor level low, too, and obviates the need for an external step.

All that said, the 130bhp engine (rather than the 150bhp Multijet unit of a Mileo) never really struggles and all legal speeds can be maintained in most normal conditions. And, while you miss out on some of the Mileo's luxuries (such as sat-nav and alloy wheels), everything you really need is here. There are none of those misleading options packs, either, so what you see is what you get – including cab air-con, cruise control, a passenger airbag, radio/CD with Bluetooth and ESP, Traction Plus and Hill Descent Control.

It's the familiar Fiat cab with unembellished black fascia and

no carpet but fully reupholstered seats with twin armrests and height adjustment. Compared with newer designs from Ford, Mercedes and VW, it's a bit dated, with the Ducato seeming to show its age most notably now in the gruff delivery of its diesel engine. Despite that, the Fiat still dominates the market, so rivals (bar the occasional Transit-based model such those from as Chausson and Roller Team) are similarly afflicted.

**SELLING IT SHORT**

Both overcab models in the Primero range come with fixed bed layouts and a modest overall length of just 5.99m. There's the 301 (as tested here) with a transverse rear double bed over a garage and the 331 with a French bed floorplan. Both are layouts more usually associated with low-profile

motorhomes and it would be far easier to find rivals to the Primero in this style. However, six-metre, rear garage low-profiles are usually two-berths (with, possibly, an occasional extra bed formed from the lounge).

The fact that the Benimar comes with four berths in two instant double beds – in a body length less than many van conversions, remember – is its biggest USP, then. Whether you want really generous, separate his 'n' her beds, or room for kids or grandkids, it's this that is key to the 301's appeal.

And, when you sample the overcab bed, you'll appreciate the reason for the Primero's bulging luton. Others may possess prettier lutons in curvy moulded GRP, but you'll pay for that in terms of the accommodation offered. If you are going to use an overcab as an adult bedroom it needs to be a big one like this – and forget the looks. >

## LIKED



- Garage storage and big payload
- Two instant, good-sized double beds

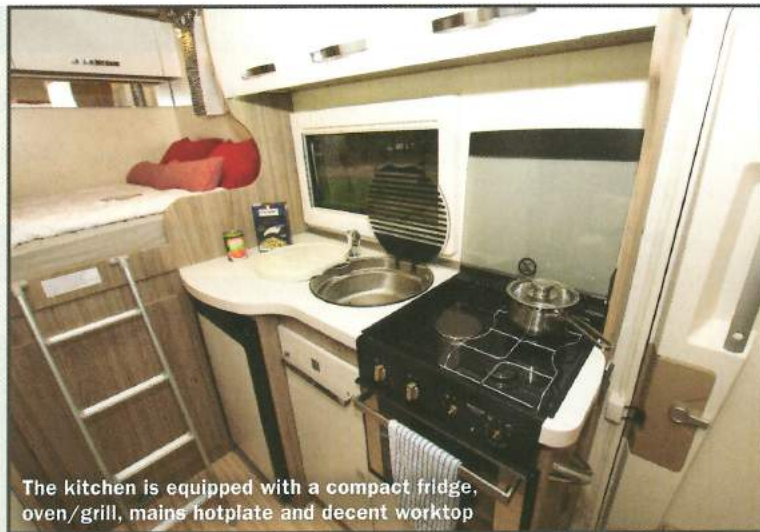
## DISLIKED



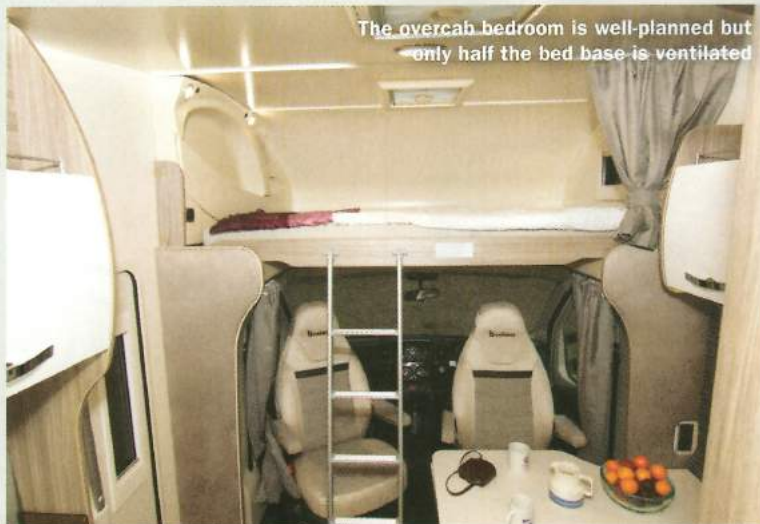
- Odd gap between washroom and the 'van's ceiling
- Half-dinette and cab seats at different heights

## WANTED

- Cab and lounge reading lights
- Fitted cab blinds or screens



The kitchen is equipped with a compact fridge, oven/grill, mains hotplate and decent worktop



The overcab bedroom is well-planned but only half the bed base is ventilated

Here, there's no real loss of headroom at the front of the overcab and the bed is a huge 1.99m by 1.54m, although the mattress is rather firm and only vented underneath at the forward end. It's a well-planned bedroom, however, with an opening window on the offside, a roof vent, and two individually switched spotlamps on the nearside. As well as a double USB port, there are also useful moulded pockets for tablets, phones, magazines, etc. And, when morning comes, half of the bed tips up on gas struts so you don't have to stoop to enter the cab.

The Primero's other bed also runs across the width of the vehicle at a high level, so has the same access: a ladder (albeit four rungs instead of six) to scale and, potentially, a partner to clamber over. I noticed the panel where the ladder for the rear bed

attaches flexed as I climbed up into bed – and, before you ask, I'm only about 70kg!

This rear bed is another biggie – even longer than the overcab one, although a little narrower (and slimmer still towards the foot, where the washroom intrudes). Headroom is much greater, though (a metre versus 630mm), and here there are two opening windows and a roof vent. The mattress sits on a fully slatted base and, despite the nearside window, there's room to comfortably sit up in bed – it's the best place in the 301 to read as the only directionally adjustable lights in the 'van are above the head of the bed. Like the luton, it is designed so that you sleep heads to the nearside.

Both beds also come with simple curtains for privacy, while another pair of thin curtains runs around the

cab – we'd recommend you budget for adding cab blinds or silvered screens.

## GOING UNDERCOVER

Of course, the other big plus of this layout is the storage offered beneath the bed. At first, this appears to be accessible from inside but, actually, the door beneath the bed reveals a small wardrobe. A side-to-side rail provides enough height for shirts, although these need to be twisted to one side to hang neatly as there is a step in the wardrobe's floor.

The garage itself has two loading doors, which are higher off the road than some as there is no step in the floor level here. However, internal height still just exceeds a metre and there are 12V and 230V sockets, as well as heating and lighting and servicing access for the boiler,



A typically Continental layout that works well in a six-metre 'van but it's rare in combination with an overcab luton

although there's no spare wheel. While peering underneath, though, you will spot the easy-to-use waste water drain and large bore outlet.

If you fill the garage with other gear, you can mount a bike rack on the stern – the fixings are already there. And, if travelling light is an anathema to you, then the payload of 850kg is impressive. It's another benefit of paring back the spec.

### KEEP LEFT

The Primero may not be as lavishly appointed as a Mileo, but it still has upmarket framed windows, Grade III insulation and NCC approval, as well as 99% wood-free construction.

More importantly, perhaps, it has the habitation door on the UK side, unlike most imported motorhomes. Thank the buying power of importers,

Marquis, for that, as well as the fact that both companies are part of the French Trigano empire.

And, while the galley here omits a microwave from the kit list, it does have an oven/grill, a hob with mains-powered hotplate (as well as two gas rings) and a more-than-acceptable slab of worktop space (where you can also deploy the removable draining board). You certainly will not be disappointed in this kitchen if you are coming from a British-built motorhome.

In terms of storage there's a deep pan drawer under the oven as well as a largish cutlery drawer and three overhead lockers. The fridge has a modest 81-litre capacity and the cupboard alongside it would benefit from the addition of a shelf.

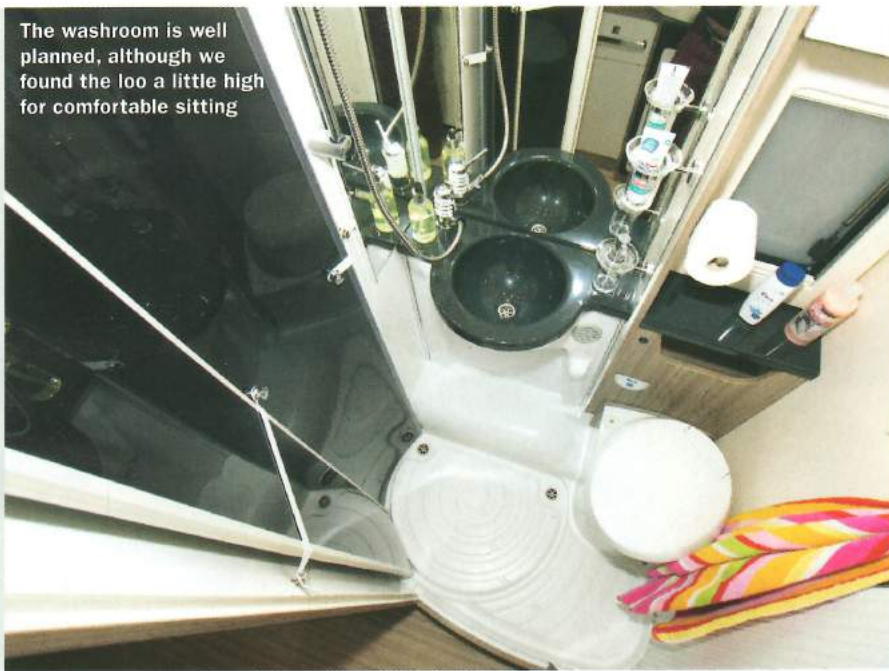
A stranger detail concerns the washroom opposite. Clearly designed

and assembled as a complete unit before being installed in the 'van, there is a gap of up to 110mm between the top of the washroom and the actual ceiling. Washroom whiffs and steam may inadvertently enter the living area this way, although ventilation is supplied by both a window and roof vent, while the shower has twin drains.

The other area of note is the height of the loo (you'll need long legs to sit comfortably), and some may be less than keen on the substantial (240mm) step up into the 'little room', though the rest of this space seems well thought out.

The shower head is the tap doing double duty but the rotating tinted screens form a decent-sized space for hosing yourself down. The only towel hook is a little low and close to the loo, but that's easily solved. >

The washroom is well planned, although we found the loo a little high for comfortable sitting



**HALF TIME**

White walls, light-coloured fabrics and furniture and plenty of artificial illumination mean that the Primero doesn't feel claustrophobic inside, despite its compact size and the lack of any XL-sized rooflights.

On site, the front seats swivel easily to face a half-dinette bench and wall-mounted table with rotating extension leaf. There's room for four to dine but the front and rear seats are at different levels, with a 110mm variation in floor height.

It is the cab seats that offer more comfort, as well as being better matched to the table. The half-dinette is firm and upright but does have a little shape to its backrest.

Befitting its entry-level status, there are no rear speakers but that's not a big concern with this layout. More of an issue for some will be the omission of a TV bracket or any obvious location for one.

For a budget model, though, the Primero is well appointed. Heating, for example, is by a gas/mains 4kW Truma Combi and the door has a window and bin. You'll also find five 230V sockets, four 12V ones and double USBs in each bedroom.

**THE VERDICT**

*The two big double beds, both instantly available with bedding in situ, are key to the appeal of this new Benimar. Added to that are a keen price, compact size and that rear garage which, for once, is mated to a generous payload. Of course, the lounge is the compromise, but the spec doesn't seem to have suffered too much (considering the price) - reading lights and cab blinds could easily be added by a dealer.*

**THE ALTERNATIVE**

**Hobby Siesta De Luxe A60 GF** £61,995  
**Weinsberg CaraHome 550 MG** £47,960

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**FACTS AND FIGURES**

**PRICE**  
 From: £44,995  
 As tested: £44,995

**BASICS**  
 Berths: 4  
 Travel seats: 4

**Warranty:** Two years habitation and base vehicle, five years body integrity  
**Type approval:** European Whole Vehicle

**DIMENSIONS**  
 Length: 5.99m (19ft 8in)  
 Width: 2.30m (7ft 6½in)  
 Height: 3.05m (10ft 0in)  
 Gross vehicle weight: 3,500kg (3,650kg option)  
 Payload: 850kg

**BASE VEHICLE**  
 Type: Fiat Ducato Camper chassis-cab

Engine: 2.3-litre, Euro 6, 130bhp, front-wheel drive, six-speed manual gearbox

**KITCHEN**  
 Cooker: Thetford Triplex with two gas burners, mains hotplate, combined oven and grill  
 Fridge: Thetford 81-litre, three-way

**BEDS**  
 Overcab bed: 1.99m x 1.54m (6ft 6in x 5ft ½in)  
 Rear double: 2.10m x 1.37m max (6ft 11in x 4ft 6in)

**ESSENTIALS**  
 Fresh water: 120 litres (inboard)  
 Waste water: 105 litres (underfloor)  
 Space/water heating: Truma Combi 4kW blown-air, gas/mains  
 Leisure battery: 110Ah  
 Gas: 2 x 6kg

**OPTIONS**  
 Fitted to test vehicle: None  
 Other options available: 3,650kg upgrade (FOC), 150bhp engine with Comfort-Matic gearbox (£2,100)

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