



PLANE SAILING

Coachmen Concord 275DS on LWB LHD 6.0-litre Power Stroke Ford Super Duty E450

A 'subsonic' American RV takes all the comforts of home to the rolling hills of Derbyshire





Words and pictures by Jonathan Lloyd

Many folk still feel that there are only two sorts of motorcaravaner: those who choose optimum mobility and as a result suffer minimal on-site comfort and those whose priorities are the obverse - maximum on-site spaciousness with a commensurate decrease in manoeuvrability on the road.

This polarising phenomenon is worldwide. Even in America, it is not uncommon to find a 45ft super coach RV parked up next to a fixed roof split or bay window Volkswagen camper made to look even smaller by running on lowered suspension and low profile tyres.

With a very few exceptions, Europe has failed to emulate America's leading contribution to motorcaravan design, the concept of the slide-out. This has enabled the previously impossible to be achieved, a motorcaravan that is small on the road, but large on site. Get all enthusiastic over the idea and shove on multiple slide-outs and you're really cookin.'

Keep those thoughts at the back of your mind while we examine the current UK market. To address the increasing number of ever-longer European imports, volume UK manufacturers are building more often on tag-axle chassis. For 2007, this is (on several models) to provide sufficient space for a permanent island bed without having to reduce the lounge accommodation to such an extent that any guests have to sit on the bonnet!

Our third strand involves those wishing to upgrade to an American A-class from a mid-sized European coachbuilt, but who worry over the left hook (left-hand drive) and the size difference. They wish for something to ease the transition.

So to summarise, purchasers want more size on site, but less on the road, plus all the American RV goodies in a size suitable for UK use at around the same price as a large tag-axle European.

Cue drum roll. Step forward the latest low profile coachbuilt from well-established RV manufacturer Coachmen Industries that really could turn out to be all things to these folks.

WELCOME ABOARD FLIGHT 275DS FROM GALVESTON

Plane sailing? This Concord is a subsonic motorhome not a supersonic aircraft but as it

was reported to just 'fly' we'll continue with the affectation.

Concord is a range name and all Concords are built on the same chassis (though with different wheelbases). All are left-hand drive low-profile overcab coachbuilts with the caravan entrance door on our offside. Regular readers may be aware that I'm a big fan of the blue oval and happen to think that the E450 Super Duty is one of the most competent motorhome chassis around. It is exceptionally rugged with a very strong ladder chassis, twin-rear-wheel drive and some of the best engine options in the business. Further, the driving environment felt both friendly and familiar as it's not a world away from European coachbuilt 'vans.

An important benefit of retaining the Ford cab is that it has an exceptionally strong safety cell complete with twin airbags as standard.

Power Stroke engines are big, lazy old V8 diesels, or rather they were. The latest generation claims to provide a 45 per cent increase in power output and, when mated to the all-new 5-speed overdrive automatic transmission, a 50 per cent decrease in fuel consumption. Too good to be true? Let's find out...

CLEARED FOR TAKE-OFF

The new 6.0-litre V8 didn't feel as though it had a 45 per cent increase in poke over the outgoing 7.3-litre version, it actually felt as though it had more like double the power. Stroke the loud pedal and progress was so serenely smooth, it encouraged me to give a regal wave out of the window.

Bury the throttle and suddenly 300 horses waken; the classy lady lifts her skirts and just flies. Acceleration for a six-and-a-half tonner was just awesome.

Although I should be too old for these kind of antics, Power Stroke's performance at the traffic lights grand prix did cause a communal dropping of jaws among the white van man fraternity. In fact some of them even stopped talking to their bookies on their (non hands-free) mobiles for a second or two!

There is a serious point here though; with road overcrowding becoming an issue, driving a left-hand drive vehicle in Blighty and overtaking (say a tractor on local roads) is becoming increasingly dangerous. Anybody



AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £69,995 (plus OTR package)
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **BASE VEHICLE:** LHD Ford E Series 450 Super Duty LWB chassis-cab
- **LAYOUT:** Front lounge with slide-out ahead of central offside kitchen with washroom opposite. Across-the-rear bedroom with queen bed in slide-out
- **ECONOMY:** 20.7 mpg overall

Pilot and navigator sit on soft grey hide. The Super Duty proved to be a fine example of 'point and squirt motoring.'





with a degree of self preservation would wish to be in the way of potential oncoming traffic for as short a time as possible and a vehicle with snappy acceleration allows such a manoeuvre to be undertaken safely. Having passed my driving test in the days when any diesel-powered vehicle took the entire length of the A1 to overtake anything, I still tend to err the other way in moderately powered motorcaravans and wait until Farmer Turnip turns off.

Thus it was reassuring to have such power available when driving solo as it enabled quick and effortless overtaking. However, many choose this chassis for its excellent ability to tow heavy trailers and here power is even more important. I have personal experience of heavyweight towing with a Super Duty - well, the name says it all, really.

Although 275's length (by British standards) is biggish, the wheelbase isn't so. This, together with rear-wheel drive, allowed it to turn much

tighter than it had a right to. Add in the standard rear vision camera, with its clever LCD monitor in the driver's sun visor, and the resulting package is pretty nimble, though obviously not in 'black cab' territory. Further, because the Concord has curved sides, the rollout awning doesn't actually project at all, so there should be fewer worries about it catching overhanging branches and the like.

Clever Coachmen has also addressed the problem of potential grounding by making the departure angle steeper - that's tech-speak for putting an upward slope to the skirts behind the back axle. Because of this, you'll be less likely to leave the back half behind on a Greek island ferry ramp.

Many are of the opinion that automatic transmission contributes to safer travel as (so the argument goes) it allows the driver to concentrate on where they are going. A similar argument has been made for electronic cruise

control; both are standard here. Although I've not seen much in the way of objective experimental evidence to support or dismiss either assertion, what is beyond argument is just how pleasant and relaxing it was to drive a motorcaravan so equipped. As for the standard cab air-conditioning, I'm not sure that I'd now buy a new motorcaravan without it.

Firestone airbag-type assisters (called Ride-Rite in the States) augment the multi-leaf rear suspension and can be inflated to suit individual tastes and differing driving conditions. These came set at 60psi and that proved spot-on for me and mine. Some years ago, Ford switched to over-centre swinging axles at the front and this gives good road-holding with none of the tendency to wander associated with earlier models.

A wide rear track and twin wheels add to lateral stability and although it was subjected to blustery side winds, the Concord remained largely unaffected by such destabilising forces,

ABOVE LEFT: By the end of the week I'd just about fathomed out how to use the vast array of sound and picture gizmos in the 'entertainment centre.

ABOVE RIGHT: The single-glazed glass windows collected a fair amount of condensation.

RIGHT: General view forwards showing kitchen and lounge. I found dining from the settee a challenge but 2007 models will be more meal-friendly.

FAR RIGHT: General view rearwards showing kitchen on left with washroom opposite.



I LIKED

- Aluminium body frame
- Large water, waste, sewage and gas tanks
- Powerful engine
- Five-speed overdrive automatic transmission
- Curved body sides
- Cathedral rear window
- Solid cabinetwork
- Restful interior ambience
- Feeling of spaciousness created by twin slide-outs
- Fire extinguisher plus LPG, CO2 and smoke alarms as standard
- Radio/cassette/CD wired to leisure battery
- Standard tow receptor

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Quieter space heating
- Levelling jacks
- Double-glazing

I DISLIKED

- No flame-failure devices on hob
- Unlined cab dividing curtain
- Giving it back



which was very impressive for a motorcaravan of this size.

The 275DS arrived with lap-only belts on the side facing sofa and tub chair, so my recommendation has to be against carrying passengers in the rear. This shouldn't really be a problem, as this 'van is marketed by the importers as a 'two-berth with auxiliary sleeping accommodation for visitors.'

And now what you've all been waiting for. Was it as economical as had been claimed? The short answer is a resounding yes, though like most things in life there is a but. This was that consumption is more directly linked to driving

conditions than with a typical mid-sized European offering that most motorcaravanners own.

On reflection this is unsurprising, as moving such a heavyweight from zero to say 30mph and then back to zero again takes a lot of effort, especially as most of the 50-ish (I didn't actually count them) traffic lights I encountered in one journey were on red! Further, for part of this review we toured in the hilly terrain of the Peak District quite deliberately as we knew it would be a demanding test. Over a week covering 670 miles, the 'van returned 20.7mpg overall, far more along the motorway with the cruise control set at 60 mph and far less in hilly

terrain. This is a massive improvement on the old 7.3-litre engine.

SPACE RACE

It was revealing to sit in an un-extended Concord before deploying the electrically operated slide-outs just to see what a difference they make to space. To say that they transformed the interior wouldn't be an exaggeration.

First impressions of the newly expanded salon suggested that living in the 275 was going to be a delightfully sybaritic experience. And so it was!

However, there were some initial reservations, principally over the rather informal dining arrangements, especially for GOM (Grumpy Old Men prone to indigestion) such as me who are more used to dining whilst sat at the ubiquitous Pullman dinette and consider the American-style TV dinner to be one of the biggest threats to civilisation. So just how was a sofa with two individual tables going to cope? Much as I hate to admit it, the answer is better than expected. It was fine for most of time though I did miss the sociability of sitting around a table with friends for drinks and nibbles, or a board game.

The choice is yours though and if you would like to have a dinette instead of a settee, you can as a no-cost option. This decision is only likely to worry purchasers of 2006 models though, for 2007 Coachmen offers a U-shaped sofa and large table which cleverly combines all the advantages of both of the former options, but with none of their disadvantages; a neat trick.

Also, 2007 production models will replace the tub chair with a reclining armchair and matching footstool, and the old-fashioned tubed telly with a 26-inch LCD model with DVD player, plus a Bose Wave radio sound system. In addition, both end walls in the lounge slide-out will have an opening window as standard. It just gets better doesn't it?

The entertainment complex entertained, and the efficient if rather noisy thermostatically controlled gas-fired blown-air heating successfully kept the winter chill away. With over 7kW of toe toasting available it would, wouldn't it?





ABOVE LEFT: The kitchen majors on substantially built storage cupboards and domestic-size equipment. A separate faucet delivers filtered drinking water.

ABOVE: No bruised elbows in the washroom, while the equipment was all first-class. A foot pedal operated the loo flush.

LEFT: The Jack Knife sofa ready for overnight guests.

BELOW LEFT: Room with a view. The bedroom has a large queen double bed, oodles of clothes storage and 'that' window!

I did feel that the single-glazed glass windows allowed a teensy bit of the outside to come in. Heavy condensation in the mornings confirmed my suspicions. It certainly wouldn't put me off buying a Concord. Double-glazing may be available in 2007 as an extra-cost option, but be warned this may erode payload.

Illumination (both natural and artificial) was flexible and more than adequate. The Lloyds are huge fans of the RV pleated day/night blinds

fitted here, and much prefer them to ordinary blinds and curtains.

All lamps are 12V so you can use them whether or not you are on hook-up or have the genny running

CATERING AND RELAXING

Those of us who get frustrated when a baked bean blocks the motorcaravan's dollhouse-style waste water plumbing will rejoice in the

fact that all of Concord's plumbing, in fact all of Concord's kitchen, is of domestic standard. There was plenty of food storage space available for cans and packets in the cupboards and for frozen and chilled food in the gargantuan two-door fridge/freezer.

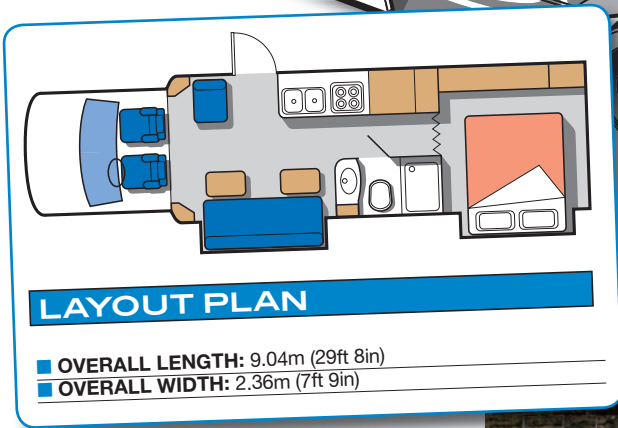
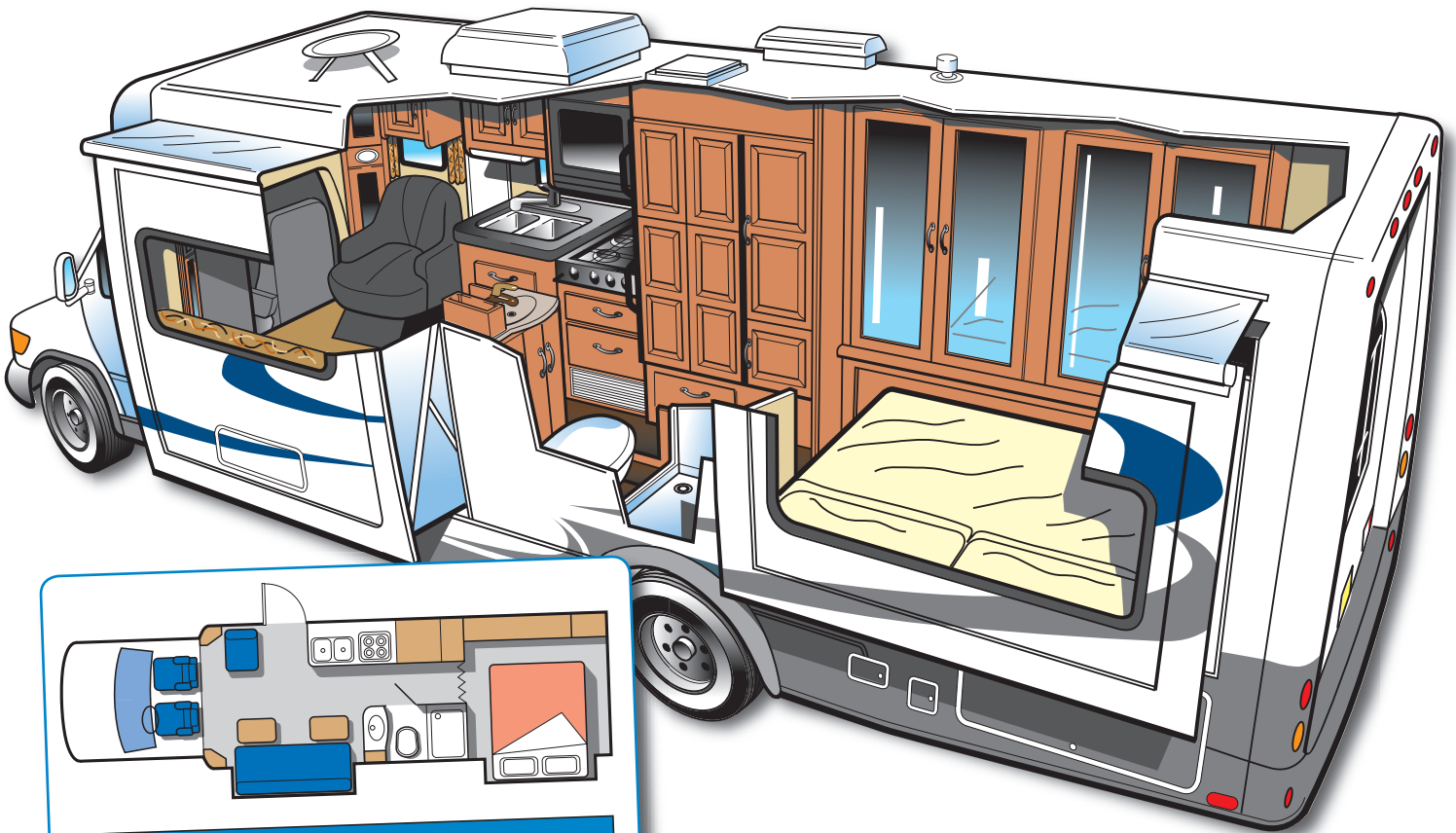
Cooking smells were effectively extracted by the over-hob fan and/or by opening the adjacent window. The Magic Chef three-burner gas hob could have been used to cook aboard the Ark - thankfully, its dated design didn't lessen its efficiency. In contrast, the 110V eye-level microwave/convection oven/grill was pretty much cutting-edge with all sorts of programmes for browning and baking. For 2007 the hob will be getting a makeover and I believe this will now feature electronic ignition, plus the Combi-oven will be re-sited underneath the hob. Doesn't bother me in the slightest but 'management' at 5ft 3ins tall finds high-level ovens a real pain and this mod gets her vote. The moulded composite worktop with integrated sinks fared well and it looked tough enough to withstand attacks by cack-handed cooks.

One of the disadvantages of the individual tables was that there was nowhere to put a serving dish so that diners could help themselves without having to get up from the table. That said, it wasn't really earth shattering and eight days lounging, catering and dining all went smoothly, with no serious problems.

WING COMMANDER'S WASHROOM

As with the kitchen, the real appeal of the washroom is not so much to do with the range of equipment fitted as standard, but with the fact that it is all of





domestic size and quality. As a result, it should be long lasting. It certainly felt more substantial than 'standard' motorcaravan kit.

The matinee idol style of illumination around the dressing room type mirror worked for me!

The mixer tap in the walk-in shower cubicle was found to mix well and the pump delivered a good flow to the showerhead. I did think though, that it would be better if the tray was set into the floor to reduce the sizeable step up required to clear the shower's threshold.

We like the foot-operated marine-style lavatory usually found in RVs, though this one was plastic not ceramic, as they always were in the past.

CONCORD KIPPING

Front first. For those occasions when aunt Jemima, cousin Wilbur, or the grandkids turn up to 'stop you feeling lonely,' they can kip on the converted settee. This turns into a bed with an easy jack-knife action which my years of experience have led me to deduce that is probably why it is trade-named a Jack-Knife sofa. It's actually long enough and wide enough for two average size adults, though I guess it's really meant for kids.

Move towards the rear of the motorhome and the sleeping accommodation moves up a gear. Whatever the individual priorities for your new motorhome are (for most potential purchasers of this size motorcaravan), a permanent queen-sized island bed within a slide-out has got to be among them. It was very comfortable, easily accessed and had dumping surfaces adjacent for the book, spectacles, falling-down water nightcap, or early morning cuppa.



RIGHT: Water station was logical and easy to use.

FAR RIGHT: Inside, the 'management panel' told all.

It is, of course, a 'room with a view'. Most visitors and rubber-neckers thought the cathedral-style window looked great from either side. The 'wall-to-wall' mirrored wardrobe doors may appeal or offend depending on how inhibited your intimate activities are. Those who insist on having the light off will be reassured to know that the manufacturer intended them to be used for adjusting one's vestments.

In another life I was a gent's outfitter in a very upmarket emporium (really) and this probably explains why I got so excited over the wardrobes. Although this really belongs in the next section I'll tell you why. Firstly the wardrobes had separate castellated hanging rails for his 'n' hers. Separate so as to minimise argument; castellated to prevent the twin sartorial faux pas of squashed suits and creased couture. What really appealed though was its cedar wood lining. This will keep clothes smelling fresh. All those years ago we used it to line storage cupboards for the dress hire stuff, you know; penguin suits for weddings, DJs and frock coats for the pretend gentry, capes for the Bow Street Runners and so on.

STORAGE

We've already dealt with the bedroom and kitchen and it would be really tedious reading to have me go through the rest of the motorcaravan describing each and every storage opportunity. Instead, here is a roundup: Overall, the Concord has plenty of varied accessible storage both internally and externally. The only slight criticism that could be made was that it did lack any 'through' belly lockers (those that go full width down below). Those with arthritis or rheumatism will welcome the ease with which high-level lockers open and drawers slide, aided and abetted by decent pull handles... none of those tiny push buttons here.

Other notable storage involves water and gas. The water tanks are large enough to go several days without refilling the fresh and emptying the waste and sewage. I've no real idea how long the built-in gas tank would last as it would depend on usage but a guesstimate would be a couple of winter months, more if on hook-up

IN-FLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT AND GIZMOS

This motorcaravan has a very high level of equipment fitted as standard. Fabrics and



WE STAYED AT
 Camping and Caravanning Club site,
 Teversal, Nottinghamshire,
 (tel: 01623 551838; web site: www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

Caravan Club Site, Losehill, Castleton,
 Derbyshire, (tel: 01433 620636;
 web site www.caravanclub.co.uk)

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY
 Travelworld RV, Halesfield14, Telford,
 TF7 4QR (tel: 08452 305033;
 web site: www.travelworldrv.co.uk)

MMM LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

- Low profile coachbuilt

PRICE

- From: £69,995 (plus OTR package)
- As tested: £72,995 OTR

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** LHD Ford E Series 450 Super Duty LWB chassis-cab
- **Berths:** 4
- **Three-point belted seats:** 2 (including driver)
- **Warranty:** 1 year base vehicle and conversion, 2 years structure and major components

CONSTRUCTION

GRP-clad sandwich construction sidewalls mounted on aluminium frame. Moulded GRP end cap, interface, skirt and wheelarch mouldings. Laminated roof with rubber crown. Caravan entrance at front on (UK) offside

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 9.04m (29ft 8in)*
- **Width:** 2.36m (7ft 9in)*
- **Height:** 3.12m (10ft 3in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 5.28m (17ft 4in)*
- **Rear overhang:** 2.99m (9ft 10in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 6372kg* (Note: If you are contemplating buying a motorhome with a maximum authorised weight of over 3500kg, then you must check that you are licensed to drive it. 3500kg weight restrictions apply to the driving licences of those who passed their car driving test after January 1st 1997 (who need to pass a further test), and also to those of 70 years of age and over (where a more stringent medical is required to retain the right to drive vehicles over 3500kg). For more information ask for DVLA booklet D100 at your post office or log on to www.dvla.gov.uk.)
- **Payload:** 2007 model: 830kg (after 100 per cent fresh water, fuel and LPG)

INSIDE STORY

Front lounge with slide-out ahead of central offside kitchen with washroom opposite. Across-the-rear bedroom with queen bed in slide-out

- **Insulation:** Roof and floor 101mm, walls 50mm
- **Interior height:** 1.98m (6ft 6in)

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 6.0-litre V8 turbo-diesel, producing 220.75 kW (300bhp) @ 1700rpm



- **Transmission:** Five-speed overdrive automatic gearbox, twin rear-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 20.7mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all round. Foot-operated drum parking brake
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent coils on over centre swinging axles. Rear: multi-leaf springs on live axle. Firestone Ride-Rite adjustable air bag rear spring assisters
- **Features:** Driver and passenger airbags, ABS, Brake assist, cruise control, dash air-conditioning, electric mirrors and windows, leather trimmed fully-adjustable cab seats with two armrests, radio/cassette/CD player, headlamp height adjustment, height-adjustable top seatbelt mounts, beverage tray, storage for oddments

LOUNGING & DINING

Three seat settee in slide-out with two island leg individual tables. Tub chair opposite

KITCHEN

Offside, centrally-located with base and high-level units. All equipment is of domestic size and quality.

- **Sink:** Two moulded integrated units. Monobloc mixer tap with extendable spout and spray facility. Filtered drinking water supply via separate faucet
- **Cooker:** Magic Chef three-burner hob with piezo ignition. 110V combination microwave
- **Fridge:** Large two-door Dometic 3-way fridge-freezer

WASHROOM

Full-size washbasin with monobloc mixer tap, cupboards under and dressing room-style illuminated mirror above. Electrolux foot pedal flush toilet. Separate step-in shower compartment with sliding screen. Full range of accessories fitted

BEDS

Rear double

- **Length:** 2.08m (6ft 10in)
 - **Width:** 1.52m (5ft 0in)
- Lounge double
- **Length:** 1.90m (6ft 3in)
 - **Width:** 1.22m (4ft 0in)

STORAGE

Salon: Full range of high-level lockers. Glass fronted display cabinets. All of settee seat base accessed by assisted squab lift. Bedroom: Large hanging wardrobe with four mirror doors. Chest of drawers, assorted vestment and shoe storage. Seven exterior-accessed lockers

LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Inboard. Capacity 162 litres (35.6 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung, heated. Capacity 185 litres (40.7 gallons)
- **Sewage:** Underslung, heated. Capacity 102 litres (22.4 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Atwood storage boiler, gas-mains operation
- **Space heater:** EI boiler multi-outlet thermostatically controlled blown-air. Output 7.32kW
- **Leisure battery:** 2 x 110 amp hr
- **Generator:** Onan 4kW electric-start, runs on LPG
- **Gas:** Fixed tank in belly locker. Capacity 38.5kg propane
- **Air-conditioning:** Saloon and bedroom fed via roof ducts. Output 3.95kW
- **Lighting:** Ten luminaries each with two (switched) filament lamps. Six swivel reading lights. Central overhead luminaire in lounge. Striplights over kitchen work surface. Infinity rope lights in entertainment console
- **Sockets:** 230V: 18 (four in bedroom, six in lounge, two in kitchen, four in entertainment console, two exterior). 12V: Four (two interior, two exterior)
- **Control panel:** Mounted adjacent to caravan door. LED displays for tank and battery levels. Digital readout for genny. Fuses in separate consumer unit adjacent to 230V/110V transformer at foot of bed.
- **Blinds/curtains:** Pleated day/night blinds to all windows except kitchen that has a Venetian blind. Unlined fabric panel attaches by Velcro to isolate cab
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base vehicle and conversion:** Rear vision camera and LCD monitor in sun visor. Full UK conversion to road lights and to domestic electrical circuits (including 230V/110V transformer). Paint upgrade and stainless steel wheel liners. UK/European TV and DVD player (all included in OTR price package of £3000)

Other options

- **Base:** None
- **Conversion:** Booth dinette in lieu of settee (FOC). Alternative soft furnishings and cabinet finish (FOC)

E&OE

cabinetwork are all top-dollar. Added to this are systems fitted for comfortable living anywhere in any climate such as an electric-start genny, separate filtered drinking water supply, heated tanks, ducted, living area air-conditioning, really powerful space heating and advanced LPG, CO2 and smoke alarms. Now consider the luxuries fitted as standard. Too many to mention them all here, but a selection follows: Large colour TV, DVD player, quality sound system, awning, exterior power points, phone jack, wash-down station, towbar receptor and much more. I hope you can see from these lists just part of the reason why I found this motorcaravan so appealing.

A minor thing puzzled me, why is the lens to the awning light yellow? Presumably it's some dopey safety requirement in Galveston, USA.

CONCLUSION

This is a classy carriage, great accommodation, eminently suitable for European use, strong value for money. Double-glazing would have made it perfect, but, that said, I still want one.

AND FINALLY

Sadly, after years of testing motorhomes, I'm used to (though still exasperated by) dealers and manufacturers who fail to keep appointments and offer vehicles for test that clearly haven't had any sort of PDI or are not very clean.

In contrast, this vehicle was immaculately prepared and Ross Edwards (one of Travelworld's principals) came in to work during his time off, just to give me a personal run-down on the equipment and wave me on my way and again at the end of the test for a de-

brief. Thank you Travelworld for 'service with a smile'. It should be the norm but... □