



DOING THE CONTINENTAL

Words and pictures
by Jo Vaughan

Five 'vans from across the Channel make South Wales well worth a visit

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The depths of South Wales are a long way from the European mainland, but Continental Motorhomes endeavours to bring the best of foreign motorhomes to its corner of the world. Started in 1985 by Jeff and Lynne Lewis, together with their son Gareth, this family-run company has about 100 motorhomes on display at any one time – about 30 per cent of which, are new vehicles from its franchises (Auto-Trail, Excel and Chausson). The remainder of its stock is all top-drawer secondhand vehicles that hail from far and wide. In fact, the current stock list included motorhomes from Germany, France, Italy and Belgium – a true pan-European selection that proves worthy of the company's name.

Our five selected motorhomes are all from the other side of the Channel, and all are great value for money. Most of Continental's vehicles are relatively modern too, with our choice being no different in this regard, the oldest vehicle being a Laika at seven years old. There's a wide selection of base vehicles,

too. Half are based on the ubiquitous Fiat, but there are two Fords and one Iveco chassis on the list.

There seems to be a high turnover of stock at Continental, facilitating a constant change in what's on offer for the customer who can't make up his or her mind and requiring multiple visits. And who can blame anyone for being in a quandary with this much choice! Mark Duncan, one of Continental's managers, explained that he was astounded by the number of 'vans sold this year. 'At the beginning of last year everyone talked about the recession and what effect it would have on business, but we've all been surprised at how well it's gone', he told me. 'We phased out caravans at the beginning of the year, and we wondered what this would do to our sales figures. But it's one of the best things we've done, despite our 25-year history of having caravans on the forecourt!'

Whether it's your first motorhome, or the latest of many purchases, Continental tries to

ensure you are matched with the right vehicle. For instance, newbies receive a special warranty pack that not only provides two-year peace of mind, but also includes road tax, insurance, PDI and a new MoT. All the customer has to do is get in and drive off. And there's a leased-out accessories store within the grounds, specialising in electrical equipment, plus a large workshop that offers warranty work, bodywork repairs and habitation servicing, and is also able to fit awnings, bike racks or anything else you may need added to your motorhome. 'We don't turn anyone away', said Mark. 'We do the whole thing, from catering for people that - unfortunately - damage their vehicle and need a repair, to simply fitting a swivelling seat.'

But of course, the weather isn't always great in Wales, so Continental has a large indoor showroom that holds numerous vehicles. There are hot drinks available to thaw your chilly hands and I can honestly say there's a warm welcome on offer, too.

DETHLEFFS FORTERO T5915



£27,995



SPEC CHECK

- **Base vehicle:** Ford Transit chassis cab, 2.0-litre turbo-diesel
- **Year registered:** 2006
- **Recorded mileage:** 26,042
- **Number of owners:** 1
- **Options fitted:** Bike rack, TV aerial, roof rack and ladder, alarm, awning
- **Comfort features:** U-shaped rear lounge, Microwave, grill, three-burner hob, 103-litre fridge, gas-fired heater and boiler, swivel cassette toilet, large Heki rooflight, flat screen TV mounting, cab blinds
- **Berths:** 2
- **Length:** 5.96m (19ft 6.5in)
- **Width:** 2.26m (7ft 5in)
- **Height:** 2.71m (8ft 10.5in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3500kg
- **Payload:** 750kg

OUTSIDE STORY

This Dethleffs' exterior certainly has the wow factor, with its blue Ford cab, silver sides and colour-keyed accessories. Even the rear roof rack ladder is blue to match the body. It's in great condition, and there's a large external locker leading to the offside-under-seat area. The overcab profile balances nicely with the Ford's sloping nose and despite the feeling of internal spaciousness, its compact dimensions and through vision from the cab (via the back window) make it easy to manoeuvre out on the road.

LOOK INSIDE

The comfortable U-shaped rear lounge dominates the living quarters and is bright and airy, thanks to the large surrounding windows and the giant Heki rooflight. The freestanding table collapses to make the base for the huge double bed, although remove the side backrest cushions and shorties like me could use the settees as small single beds. Because they are so separate from the main seating area the cab seats don't swivel, but this ensures a comfortable seating position whilst motoring.

Between the cab and the lounge are the offside kitchen and nearside bathroom/wardrobe. The kitchen consists of a sink, drainer and integral three-burner cooker beneath two flap-down lids. Below is a large curved-fronted Dometic fridge, a cubbyhole that looks like it was once the cutlery drawer (before the previous owners got their hands on it), and a microwave. There are more owner-addition shelves and inserts in the upper cupboards, too, which leave you lacking food

storage - use the cupboards around the lounge.

The washroom has another, more useful, owner-added shelf, as well as storage for toiletries, a towel rail and an extendable tap that doubles as the showerhead. There's a small vent in the roof and a shower curtain attaches unobtrusively between the toilet and the cubicle's door.

The decor throughout is warm, inviting and un-Germanic. There's no blue to be found anywhere (other than the exterior). Instead, there is cream, orange and brown as the main colours.

CONDITION REPORT

There's nothing to complain about, although I would take out some of those non-standard additions, especially in the kitchen cupboards. The home made flip-up shelf on the rear of the kitchen unit could be useful, though, while the cord in the washroom would be useful for wet coats too - but it could do with stringing more tightly.

VERDICT

The Dethleffs' exterior looks young and modern, while the interior is warm and very much to British taste. The layout is roomy, too, with its lovely rear lounge offering fantastic all-round views of your campsite surroundings. It's an unusual floor plan for a Continental 'van, so it's a bit of a rarity too. The microwave transforms the kitchen, which otherwise would simply have a three-burner hob to cook on, but make sure there's enough storage throughout for your needs. More generally, this Dethleffs seems to have a very high standard of build-quality, so if you can fit all your camping gear on board and like the layout, you really can't go wrong.



CHAUSSON WELCOME 28SU



£33,450



SPEC CHECK

- **Base vehicle:** Ford Transit chassis cab, 2.4-litre TD
- **Year registered:** 2008
- **Recorded mileage:** 5021
- **Number of owners:** 1
- **Options fitted:** Satellite TV, awning, second leisure battery
- **Comfort features:** U-shaped rear lounge, front half-dinette with an extra seat, swivelling cab seats, overcab bed, TV table, three-way fan in overcab, flyscreen door, three-burner hob, oven and grill, sink with removable drainer, large fridge, swivel cassette toilet, separate shower compartment
- **Berths:** 4
- **Length:** 7.07m (23ft 2.5in)
- **Width:** 2.24m (7ft 4in)
- **Height:** 3.03m (9ft 11in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3850kg
- **Payload:** 716kg

OUTSIDE STORY

This Chausson is a bit of a beast, with its twin rear wheels and huge overcab, although the Ford Transit base (with 2.4-litre turbo-diesel engine) should be able to pull it more than adequately. It is subtly decorated with Chausson's trademark colours, and there's an external hatch leading to a full-width underfloor storage area that runs below the rear lounge. An awning sits above the caravan door, which is flyscreened.

LOOK INSIDE

The layout is great for families - you can put the kids to sleep in the small rear double bed (made from the bijou U-shaped rear lounge, complete with swivelling island leg table) while the adults can enjoy a drink and a chat up-front, before retiring to the large overcab double (complete with three-way roof vent and opening window). The TV cabinet is up front too, and you need to use the supplied booster cushions for the swivelling cab seats to comfortably sit in them when they're part of the living quarters - hardly an inconvenience. There's also a rear-facing seat on the offside, beside the caravan door, and a lap belt is fitted here (making a total number of five travel seats), although you wouldn't want to sit here for long journeys. And without a head restraint it is not the safest of seats either. But on site, you can rearrange the cushions to make an inward-facing seat so that everyone can sit together - here you use the table extension when dining.

Mum won't complain about the kitchen, with its three-burner hob, circular stainless steel sink and removable draining board. The galley also has a

reasonable amount of worktop and an enormous fridge, as well as an oven/grill - although this is placed above the fridge so you can't see inside without a small step. There's acres of storage for everything, from pans to foodstuffs.

The washroom, with its very large separate shower (finished in a smart, mint green), has lots of space for toiletries, although the mirror is too high - particularly for little ones.

You'd have perhaps expected to see this Chausson's colour scheme in one of the German 'vans rather than this French model, but it looks good (if a little cold), with its blue-striped fabrics and solid blue decorative panels.

CONDITION REPORT

This is an almost immaculate example of a Chausson Welcome - only two small holes in the bulkhead's fabric panels (where a picture or ornament was previously sited), along with two tiny drill holes beside the kitchen unit show any signs of previous use. The exterior looks great, and the interior is as new.

VERDICT

This Chausson has all the facilities on board that you could wish for as a family of four, although the width of the rear bed is probably more suitable for two kiddies than two adults. As a two-berth it works just as well, and many will like the two seating areas, getting a bit of space and privacy from one another. Once again, build-quality is excellent, and extras such as the cruise control - plus the on-road stability afforded by the Transit's twin rear wheels - will make this a great long-distance traveller.



LAIKA ECOVIP 9.1G



£29,995

SPEC CHECK

- **Base vehicle:** Iveco Daily chassis cab, 2.8-litre turbo-diesel
- **Year registered:** 2002
- **Recorded mileage:** 14,253
- **Number of owners:** 3
- **Options fitted:** TV aerial, top box, roof rack and ladder, awning, second leisure battery, satnav, flat screen TV
- **Comfort features:** Full dinette, travel seats for five (three three-point belts and two lap belts), rear speakers, three-burner hob, large AES fridge, garage, TV cupboard with tambour door, separate shower, marine-style toilet, gas-fired heater and boiler, flyscreened caravan door with built-in bin
- **Berths:** 5
- **Length:** 7.19m (23ft 7in)
- **Width:** 2.32m (7ft 7.5in)
- **Height:** 3.08m (10ft 1.5in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 4200kg
- **Payload:** 898kg

- 1 The Pullman dinette also provides a roomy single bed
- 2 The transverse rear bed is a long way from the floor, as there's a huge garage beneath

OUTSIDE STORY

An imposing-looking motorhome based on the Iveco chassis. Its plain exterior sports subtle graphics, although the body resists looking slab-sided. Huge doors on either side (tall enough to fit bicycles through) lead to the rear garage, and an awning sits above the caravan door. There's a roof rack and top box, accessed via a rear ladder.

LOOK INSIDE

The oldest of our selection, this Italian-built Laika looks it, although it's hardly a dinosaur. Inside, it was the height of fashion when launched, but today both the fabric and the woodwork have a yellow tinge that looks slightly jaundiced - although this could've been due to the dull light of a British winter's day! It's warm and inoffensive to the eye inside, though.

Neither cab seat swivels to face the Pullman dinette with its freestanding table (which drops down to make up a large single bed). The main sleeping berth is the high-level double bed across the Laika's rear end, beneath which is the large garage with internal access door. This bed has an opening rooflight, windows that don't stop the occupants from sitting up in bed, and a flat screen TV fitted at the foot. Another huge bed is found within the cavernous luton, complete with opening windows, reading lights and a roof vent.

The kitchen lacks worktop space (although cooks can easily use the dinette's table) and there's no draining board, but there is a drain in the three-burner hob. There's lots of storage space and plenty of cupboards, as well as a fitted cutlery drawer and two shelves with fiddle

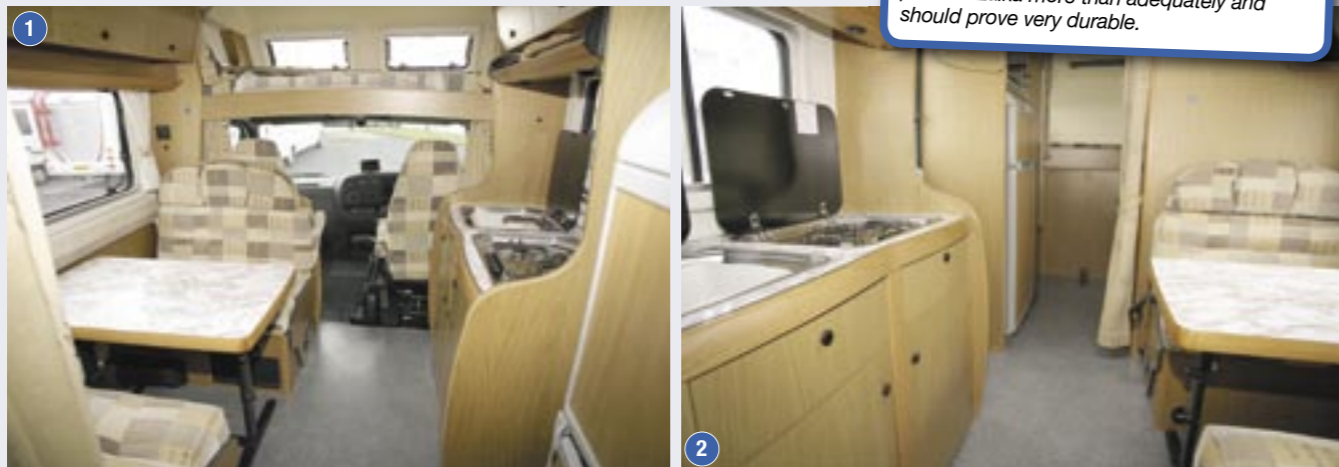
rails. The Smev combined oven and grill unit is above the 135-litre AES fridge/freezer. Aft of this, is the double-doored wardrobe. The washroom, opposite, has a separate shower cubicle, a marine-style toilet, moulded storage units and a washbasin, together with a large mirror above.

CONDITION REPORT

Again, there's little to complain about, especially regarding the exterior, which looks immaculate. Inside, there are a couple of small chips to the kitchen's carpentry - the result of everyday use - and inside the caravan door, something has scraped the wood, probably when the owners were loading or unloading. Apart from a strip of border paper (that you buy from DIY stores for your living room) the previous owners have stuck beside the dinette, there aren't any owner additions: this upmarket and well-equipped motorhome simply doesn't need them.

VERDICT

Okay, so the once-fashionable Laika hasn't dated well as far as decor is concerned, but this motorhome is simply superb value for money. It has everything on board that you could wish for, apart from a full complement of six three-point seatbelts. The separate shower, enormous garage and comfortable rear bed make this a 'van eminently useable for long-term touring, while the AES fridge and oven/grill will please any cook. It's a big beast to drive, and the Iveco was never the most refined of base vehicles (the cab is a little truck-like), but the 2.8-litre engine will pull this Laika more than adequately and should prove very durable.



HOBBY 670 AK FM



£34,995

SPEC CHECK

- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato chassis cab, 2.8-litre turbo-diesel
- **Year registered:** 2006
- **Recorded mileage:** 6542
- **Number of owners:** 1
- **Options fitted:** Awning, second leisure battery, Sony radio/CD player
- **Comfort features:** Full dinette, overcab bed, rear fixed bed, large garage with external access, roof rack, rear ladder, awning, three-burner hob, Smev oven and grill, fridge with separate freezer, large rooflight over lounge, bench cassette toilet, swing-wall creating showering area, rear privacy curtain, four travel seats with three-point belts
- **Berths:** 6
- **Length:** 6.89m (22ft 7.5in)
- **Width:** 2.28m (7ft 6in)
- **Height:** 3.05m (10ft 0in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3850kg
- **Payload:** 458kg

- 1 The lack of seatbelts and head restraints on the rear-facing bench is surprising in this six-berth 'van
- 2 There are three easy-to-negotiate steps up to the rear bed

OUTSIDE STORY

This Hobby's blue and white exterior looks modern and is typical of the marque - as is the large overcab that refrains from making the Fiat base vehicle look over-bodied. It'll drag the fuel economy of the 2.8-litre turbo-diesel engine down, but the heavy duty Maxi chassis should ensure a stable ride. The double floor means there's lots of underfloor storage, in addition to the huge garage, which only offers a door tall enough for bicycles on the offside. There are plenty of smaller locker doors in the skirts, too.

There are few extras added, although there is an awning and a roof rack and rear ladder.

LOOK INSIDE

Unlike the Dethleffs, the interior of this German-built Hobby is exactly as you'd expect, with light blue pin-striped upholstery, net curtains with fabric decorative panels and light wood-effect flooring. The layout is very Continental too, with full dinette (that doesn't utilise the cab seats), the rear high-level bed with garage below, and an amidships kitchen and washroom. In fact, layout-wise, the Hobby is very similar to the Laika, but completely different in many other respects.

For a start, the Fiat Ducato cab is much more familiar, and the furniture is less curvy. There's no positive locking on any of the cupboard doors other than in the galley - a huge no-no, particularly if carrying rear passengers. The freestanding table drops down between the bench seats to create a large double bed, making the total number of berths up to six. There are only four three-point seatbelts though - the rear-facing bench doesn't

even offer lap belts. Above the fridge is a TV locker with a tambour door and pullout, swivelling TV tray.

The kitchen lacks a draining board and the three-burner hob requires matches to light it. There's lots of storage despite the huge fridge (with separate freezer) and low-level Smev oven and grill. There's plenty of worktop space too.

The rear transverse bed has a two-piece mattress and is accessed via steps. There's no internal access to the garage, and windows at both ends of the bed will make it uncomfortable to sit up to read. The washroom has a false 'swing-wall' (to make a shower compartment) with the basin, storage and one of the two mirrors.

CONDITION REPORT

A great example of a secondhand motorhome, but showing just over 6500 miles, you wouldn't expect it to look too used! There's a small dent in the exterior where the wind has blown the door open with the key still in the lock, and the only owner addition is a useful coat rack on the fabric panel beside the washroom door.

VERDICT

Hobby motorhomes look great, but tend to lack some of the practicalities you get on similarly priced 'vans. Here, this Hobby has no internal access to garage, seatbelts on the rear-facing seats, and a flyscreen on the caravan door. The built-in rear steps up to the bed are a nice touch. This is a well-built motorhome in great condition, while the Maxi chassis is a huge boon, both for road characteristics and ability to cope with the loads in garage and underfloor space.



CI RIVIERA 171



£25,500



SPEC CHECK

- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato chassis cab, 2.8-litre TD
- **Year registered:** 2004
- **Recorded mileage:** 7467
- **Number of owners:** 1
- **Options fitted:** Roof rack, ladder, TV/DVD player, TV aerial, bike rack, removable carpets
- **Comfort features:** Swivelling cab seats, two forward-facing travel seats with three-point belts, large sociable lounge, domestic-style cooker with extractor fan, 97-litre fridge, overcab bed, Thetford cassette toilet, separate shower compartment, Truma heater with blown-air
- **Berths:** 4/5
- **Length:** 6.73m (22ft 1in)
- **Width:** 2.22m (7ft 3.5in)
- **Height:** 3.05m (10ft 0in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3500kg
- **Payload:** 580kg

OUTSIDE STORY

CI is much more of a budget brand than its fellow Italian here (the Laika), and it's easy to see that it's not built to the same standards. Exterior colours are much brighter and sunnier than the Laika's muted graphics though, and this example is packed with extras. There's an exterior locker to the nearside under-seat area and an awning over the caravan door - which, incidentally, is on the nearside too. That makes it the only motorhome in our line-up to have its door on the 'correct' side for the UK.

LOOK INSIDE

This CI's decor is ultra-modern yet timeless, with its grey, white and cream patterned fabric and net curtains. The layout too is really roomy, with swivelling cab seats turning to face the L-shaped settee on the offside and the inward-facing long settee on the nearside. A section comes out of the first settee, though, to create foot space for the two rear passengers, both of whom are kept safe with three-point seatbelts. An omission from the spec list is a Heki rooflight - or any daylight-providing rooflight for that matter - although there are two opaque opening vents, both with flyscreens.

The overcab bed - where I found the removable carpets stored - is reached by a tall ladder, although this can't be used if the enormous lounge double is made up; that would mean an awkward leap via the cab seat's backrest, although the young and fit should manage fine! You can also use the long bench as an instant single bed if you choose, enabling this motorhome to sleep five people in comfort. You can easily cater for that

number, thanks to the Smev domestic-style cooker with four gas burners, oven and grill. And although there's no draining board, the CI has acres of counter space opposite (underneath the TV cupboard with its tambour door). Here, there's a combined TV/DVD player fitted.

The washroom offers a Thetford swivel-bowl toilet and a separate showering compartment that has seen the previous owners replace the fabric shower curtain with solid Perspex doors. There's masses of storage space here and a good-sized washbasin. The towel rail rather digs into your arm though, while you're sitting on the throne.

CONDITION REPORT

A minute dent in the luton, some untidy mastic, and slightly discoloured mains inlet and water filler covers are the only criticisms here. The interior is immaculate, with nothing untoward to report. You may wish to replace the cab curtains, however, which have been removed by the previous owner in favour of simply using insulated screens for privacy.

VERDICT

The looks and layout of this CI are bound to appeal to British buyers - as will the fact that the caravan door is on the right side for our shores. The kitchen is very English, too, with its full cooker unit, and the bathroom (with its separate shower cubicle) is good enough to ensure that this is a motorhome in which you could flit around Europe using aires and basic-facility sites. I found it hard to pick holes in any aspect of the Riviera 171, except that it obviously won't appeal to those who want a fixed bed and the extra storage that goes with it. My pick of the bunch.

1 With the cab seats swivelled, there'll be no complaints about lounge space

2 Despite the lounge taking up more than half of the living space this 'van still has decent kitchen and washroom provisions

