

REVIEW **TRAKKA VENETO 650**



The Great Entertainer



Photos: Frances Oliver

All the comforts of home are right behind you when you head away in the new Fiat Veneto 650 by Trakka. Its unique chassis and superb turbo-diesel motor provide a great home-away-from-home experience, writes Kevin Staples.

October's news feature on the Trakka Veneto outlined all the features that make this motorhome such a desirable vehicle and in this review, we explain how these features translate into benefits for the user.

It's hard not to be impressed by the Veneto at first sight, although the height of the vehicle and the size of the rear overhang did suggest that it might be a handful on the road. But how wrong we were...

One of the things that makes this vehicle unique – and a cursory glance at the exterior does not reveal the secret – is the aftermarket ALKO chassis. Al-Ko Kober GmbH is a Eu575 million turnover company with its headquarters in Southern Germany designing specialty low-line chassis for motorhomes, caravans and other special types of vehicles. We believe Trakka NZ has taken a bold step in offering this advanced chassis design to its clients. In the conversion, the

original leaf spring suspension is replaced by the ALKO torsion bar system.

Leaf springs are fine for commercial use but independent torsion bars are considered to provide a superior ride and handling for a passenger-carrying vehicle. While the van manufacturer's chassis is welded and painted, an ALKO chassis is hot dip galvanised and its sections bolted together.

The low-line design gives a lower centre of gravity and the wide track allows the rear wheels to be located closer to the outside of the coachbuilt body. The Veneto has its water and waste tanks mounted underneath the floor, keeping the weight low where it ought to be for improved road worthiness. With its updated chassis giving a gross vehicle mass of 3850kg and with a tare weight of 3160kg, a payload of 690kg allows sufficient capacity for four people plus food and equipment.

The ALKO chassis also enables the Veneto to be fitted with optional air

suspension which promises to cope even better with a wider variety of loads.

On the road

The new Fiat Ducato is unquestionably the best van ever produced by Fiat. The 2.8-litre JDT Diesel is a gem with plenty of torque at low revs and in fifth gear at 100km on the motorway was turning over at a leisurely 2300rpm. The northern slopes of the Bombay hills were dispatched in fifth gear. The southern side required a drop down to fourth but on reaching the crest we were still cruising at a strain free 80km/h. The Ducato had done 1100km so even better performance and economy can be expected when the vehicle is properly run in. Similar weight Fiat Motor homes when tested in Britain have produced fuel consumption figures of between 23 and 29mpg – excellent results given it had a loaded weight of up to 3850kg.

When underway we were able to carry on a conversation and talk on the mobile phone all in a normal voice because both motor and wind noise are barely audible. An examination of the front of the van shows that particular attention has been paid to aero dynamics, which also enhances the visual appeal. The ride/handling compromise is light years ahead of other designs. We found the compliant ride, stable and predictable cornering very much to our liking and

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even unsealed roads presented no challenge to the big Fiat. There were no creaks, groans, or other unwelcome noises from the body or interior fittings. Here we believe is a solidly built, well-integrated rig built by a manufacturer who has a long history in the motor home construction business.

ON-BOARD LIVING

No need for foldaway steps, stepping aboard is easy because of the low-slung chassis. The interior is nicely decorated with cream walls and a warm burn apricot covering on the squabble with matching gold curtains over the large push out windows gives the interior a feeling of sunny spaciousness. The lighting is provided by nicely contoured fluorescent lamps along with spotlights. Because the colour scheme reflected plenty of light we found the fluorescent lamps were all we needed for reading by.

The generously sized drying cabinet, which uses warm air vented from the fridge, will be a real bonus to owners who enjoy skiing and other outdoor activities. We liked the double glazed top hinged windows that could be fully opened for flow through ventilation but were also equipped with built in blinds and insect screens. To complement the windows is an oversized sky light roof vent with built in insect screen. Two removable carpets make housekeeping a simple affair.

The dining table is a pedestal design with an innovative arrangement that allows it to be moved left or right while still mounted on its pedestal. The tabletop was fine for two people but would need to be extended if four people wanted to dine comfortably. Although the temperature dropped to 10° outside at night at no time were we tempted to use the 240-watt gas heater. The Styrofoam composite panels with their 25 per cent advantage over regular panels are certainly proving their worth as superior insulation not to mention the double glazed windows. A stainless steel barbecue that rolled out like a drawer along with a rail for a clip on table is located on the outside to the right of the entrance door and will allow the chef to socialise while providing meals for the crew. In addition as easy to use awning



Clockwise from above: Ducato cab is a pleasant place to operate from; well-equipped kitchen area blends well with work station; Veneto brings home comforts to the beach; dining area light and spacious; bathroom compact but well finished; quality appliances will satisfy most chefs.



can be rolled out to protect cook and diners from the elements.

KITCHEN

If producing a delicious meal is what you enjoy, the three-burner Cramer stainless steel cooker with oven, grill, rotisserie and flush glass lid will not disappoint. An extractor above the cooker deals with any unwanted odours and a matching Cramer stainless steel sink with mixer faucet and flush glass lid sits next to the cooler. A fold up flap provides a simple and effective means of extending the working area of the bench. We think a separate drainer will be required to direct water into the sink and prevent it from running down the sides of the unit. Food storage cupboards are located under the sink bench but finding individual food items in floor level storage is not always easy. When discussing this with Doug Sheldon from Trakka NZ in Henderson, he suggested that fitting a “see at a glance” food storage drawer under the fridge would be a user-friendly option. We also found that the crockery would not fit the holding slots in the crockery drawer. Again Doug came up with a simple solution. Because of variable plate sizes each van would be sold with its own customised crockery set. The overhead lockers can be used for food and equipment that is not used so regularly. Our food items and bottles of wine looked quite lonely in the large 110-litre capacity Dometic refrigerator. On arrival at our site we switched the fridge to gas operation, turned the control up to maximum and back two notches. To our surprise everything was frozen solid in the morning. The remarkable efficiency of this appliance means that a dial set on 2 or 3 is all that’s needed for regular use.



BATHROOM

The bathroom is compact but contains all the essential fixtures like fold-down basin with tap, adjustable shower head and mixer and the Thetford swivel cassette type toilet. We learned after our first shower in the Veneto to direct the swivel shower head to the floor when first turning on the shower to avoid being doused with a character-building slug of cold water that has been sitting in the



The lounge/living area can quickly be converted to a cosy bedroom. The full-size double bed is 2m long and complemented by a bed above the cab.

plumbing all night. We also learned that it is advantageous to park the motorhome so that the front is slightly higher than the rear to facilitate drainage, because the drainage pipe is located in the floor in the back section of the shower cabinet. When underway of course water quickly drains away. Doug pointed out that future vans would have a wooden stand-on rack to keep feet above surplus floor water. What we did appreciate was the large combination roof vent and fan along with and open out window to quickly dissipate steam and moisture. The hot water system proved to be extremely efficient and made showering a pleasant experience.

SLEEPING

Versatility is the keynote here with three bed options to satisfy most needs. The rear lounge area can be used as two singles or a few seconds of your time will convert the singles to a double bed by a gentle tug and a slatted section cleverly concealed under the rear lounge seat pulls out. Place the lounge backrests on

the slats make up the bed and prepare for a comfortable nights sleep. Because we like the idea of a permanently made up bed we chose to sleep in the bed above the cab. A removable aluminium ladder gives access to this area, but using a ladder always involves a small risk. During the night my wife decided to come down for a drink of water and failed to place her feet securely on the rung. She came crashing down, and although bruised and shaken, fortunately nothing was broken. We think that some sort of handrail, "D" handle or support would reduce the risk of this sort of accident.

SUMMARY

We both agreed that a true test of a "getaway from it all" vehicle such as the Veneto needs to be done when it is not attached to its 240-volt umbilical cord. For this reason we chose the Kauranga Valley a DOC park and wilderness area in the Coromandel ranges. I would describe our experience of the Veneto as having your own beautifully appointed motel

room in a scenic location of your choice.

Don't be put off by the size of the vehicle. My wife remarked on how car-like it was to drive and we had no trouble using supermarket car parks – the uncovered parks areas that is. I am sure that if we had a few more days to spend with the Veneto more interesting discoveries would have been made about the features built into this motorhome. Apart from two or three minor niggles (and knowing Trakka will already have planned solutions) we would heartily recommend this motorhome to a buyer who is looking for a vehicle that is good to drive, is capable of spending time away from a 240 volt power source, is compact enough to access remote locations but provides all the home comforts you could ever need. ■

Thanks to the operators of Takapuna Beach Holiday Park for its use as our photo location. Ph/fax: (09) 489 7909; www.KiwiTravelChannel.co.nz; 22 The Promenade, Takapuna, Auckland.