

Beni, vidi, vici!

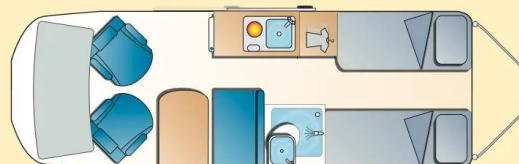
Spanish brand, Benimar, serves up a continental feast with a sprinkle of British ingredients



Iain Duff

BENIMAR BENIVAN 161

Price from: £57,495
Berths: 2 **Travel seats:** 4
Base vehicle: Fiat Ducato
Length: 5.99m
Gross weight: 3,500kg





It's a typically continental half-dinette lounge with a full-height walk-through into the cab but no overcab sunroof

At a time when campervans are more expensive than ever, we are all looking to get as much as we can for our cash. And, when it comes to value for money, you could do an awful lot worse than this new Benivan. Not only is the Benivan 161 keenly priced, but the standard spec means you get a lot of 'van for your buck.

The Benivan is the campervan range of Spanish motorhome brand, Benimar. Exclusively imported to the UK by Marquis Leisure, Benivan has the undeniable feel of a continental 'van – fixed bed floorplan, sliding door on the 'wrong' side – but with some elements that are very much aimed at the UK market.

BEHIND THE WHEEL

The base vehicle is the Fiat Ducato, which comes as standard with a 140hp engine and six-speed manual gearbox.

A nine-speed automatic transmission is available as an option, but that will add a whopping £4,000 to your bill. Going for the auto does mean you get Campovolo Grey paintwork, though, instead of the standard Expedition White seen here.

Whichever option you choose, there is plenty included that's designed to make driving easier and more comfortable. You get the stop/start function, ESP with Traction Plus and hill descent control, cab seats with twin armrests and Bluetooth/radio controls on the leather steering wheel. The radio isn't included as standard, but the model we tested was fitted with an Xzent stereo head unit (£816 extra), with DAB radio and sat-nav. It also has Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, so you can connect your phone's apps to the vehicle.

Cab air-conditioning, cruise control and front fog/cornering lights are also

part of the standard spec, as are 16in black alloy wheels and a colour-coded front bumper.

There's no storage shelf above the front seats and there's no fashionable overcab sunroof, either – the space is taken up with map and document pockets. However, that extra headroom means you can comfortably walk through from the cab to the lounge without having to stoop, which is a real benefit.

Externally, the Benivan has black, grey and gold graphics, a solar panel and caravan-style windows that sit proud of the bodywork.

This is the six-metre version of the Ducato, so it's easily manoeuvrable, and I had no problems nipping around town after collecting it from the Marquis premises in Northampton. Supermarket parking bays will inevitably be too short, however, and the 2.65m height will, of course, rule



The DAB radio is an optional extra, but the controls on the wheel are standard



The table has a swing-out extension leaf



The fridge can be accessed from outside through the sliding door



The sliding door, on the continental side, has a flyscreen and electric step

SECOND OPINION

"This is a well-priced continental-style campervan that squeezes single beds into the six-metre Fiat Ducato."

PETER VAUGHAN ROAD TEST EDITOR

out multi-storey car parks, so urban parking needs some thought. Out on the open roads of Northamptonshire, the Benivan felt reassuringly stable, even on the twisting rural thoroughfares. There was a little rattling coming from the kitchen area – although, it has to be said, this was not helped by the state of the roads.

LIVE IT UP

Until recently, the Benivan range was built by Auto-Trail in the UK and that meant the models were very much geared towards British preferences.

However, that has changed. Production now takes place in Italy and the UK-style rear lounge layouts have disappeared, replaced by fixed bed floorplans.

Like many imported campers, the sliding door is on the offside, although this doesn't appear to be a major

problem for most UK buyers.

The Benivan 161 has two berths and four travelling seats, with the layout consisting of two single beds or one big double to the rear, a central kitchen with washroom opposite, and a front half-dinette lounge, which incorporates the cab seats.

As someone who falls into the, ahem, 'heavy set' category, this is a layout that I find problematic in a few ways and it does sometimes feel that it's a design that is not meant for me. Taller campers may find some aspects of the layout to be challenging, too. For example, if you are on one of the rear travel seats, the dining table is quite a squeeze to sit at and could do with being an inch or two narrower for comfort. On the plus side, it has a swing-out extension leaf, so, if you are sitting on one of the swivelled cab seats, you will have plenty of legroom and space on the table to tuck into

your meal. It's worth remembering, of course, that campervan living always needs some compromise – and what works for one person won't necessarily work for another.

As mentioned, there's no big sunroof above the cab, so the lounge misses out on the light that would come flooding in from that.

However, that doesn't mean it's a gloomy area. Quite the opposite, in fact. Thanks to the push-up Heki rooflight above the table, the large side window (which, like all the habitation windows, is fitted with blinds and a flyscreen) and the window in the side door, the area fills with natural light – and the brown and beige upholstery helps brighten up the space. You can also leave the side door wide open to provide more light (and ventilation); the mesh flyscreen keeps mozzies and midges at bay.

A large cupboard is situated above ►

LIKED



- Keenly priced and good level of spec
- The combined oven/grill increases cooking options

DISLIKED

- Tricky washroom door opening
- Only one burner on the hob

WANTED

- Somewhere to hang coats
- More kitchen storage



The kitchen has decent worktop space but lacks storage and has just a one-burner hob

the lounge window and under the half-dinette is a good-sized storage locker, easily accessed by lifting the seat. There's more storage in a cubbyhole discreetly built into the floor space.

The dining table can be removed and attached to the outside of the 'van for use in an awning or just for al fresco eating. The final production version will have a compartment in the side door for storing the table to create more space for travel.

If you need your *Coronation Street* fix on your travels, the wall above the travel seats is ideal for a telly; there's a mains socket and a TV aerial point fitted here as well as a handy USB charging port.

COOKING WITH GAS

The galley is a typical design running along the offside, with a small work surface (no fold-out extension) and just one gas burner, which is limiting if

you like to cook in the 'van. Below the decent-sized stainless-steel sink, though, is a combined oven/grill, a relatively rare find in this type of layout, which will be warmly welcomed by UK buyers.

Kitchen storage is in the eye-level locker and drawer under the oven, but no cupboard due to the presence of the oven. There's a mains socket under the overhead cupboard, but it's immediately above the sink; it would perhaps make more sense to be at the other end, closer to the worktop.

The fridge is a 70-litre compressor model with a small freezer compartment. It would be enough for a couple on holiday – remember this is a two-berth camper. The fridge faces forward at the end of the kitchen unit and the dual opening door means it can be accessed from outside and inside.

The passageway between the kitchen and the washroom is very narrow – just

40cm wide at its narrowest point – and I found it a little uncomfortable to squeeze my way through. That's not going to be a problem for everyone, but if you are bigger built, then take it into consideration. The oven door opens easily enough but when you open the washroom door, it hits the oven handle. Not ideal.

A LITTLE WONDER

Campervan washrooms are, by definition, compact spaces and are rarely particularly comfortable. It's all about making the best use of the limited space and the Benivan does a pretty good job of that. The fashionable fittings and colour scheme, which replicates the muted brown and beige throughout the 'van, also give it the appearance of a posh hotel rather than a campervan.

The Thetford cassette toilet has a



One of the rear single beds is considerably longer than the other

swivel bowl to create more space when you're showering and the shower itself is on a riser, with the fittings separate to the basin tap. The large square basin folds down from inside the wall when needed and is a clever use of space.

Toiletries can be stashed in one of the cubicle's two cupboards and there's plenty of cabinet space for storing toilet chemicals, too. The LED light makes the cubicle bright, but I spent a lot more time than was really necessary trying to find the light switch. I eventually discovered it hidden away in the locker above the window.

One thing worth mentioning is how easy the grey waste drainage system is to use. Unlike some vans where you have to fiddle with an awkwardly positioned tap to empty the tank, the Benivan has an easy-to-reach T-handle under the chassis, which you simply pull and allow the water to drain out.

GOLDEN SLUMBERS

The sleeping area is at the rear of the camper, with two comfortable single beds running lengthways, one 1.99m long and the other 1.74m. In the production model, the corner of the mattress on the longer bed will be sliced off to create more walking space. The singles can easily be converted into a transverse double measuring 1.86m by 1.74m. Simply hook the centre panels onto the base of each single bed and lay the spare cushion sections on top. There's no obvious place to store these cushions when they're not in use, other than on top of one of the single beds, so, if you don't plan to use them, you might want to just leave them at home.

The double bed set-up brings me to another washroom-related issue. Because the loo door has its hinges on the right, when the double bed is in place, it's difficult, if not impossible, to

open it without perching precariously on the end of the bed, grabbing the handle and somehow pulling it away from you. How easy this procedure would be in the middle of the night while half-asleep is anyone's guess and a simple solution would surely be for the door to open the other way.

If the kitchen storage is limited, the same cannot be said about the bedroom. There are two eye-level lockers along the nearside wall and two more opposite, one of them designed to be used for hanging longer items like shirts, as there's no wardrobe.

Under one of the beds you'll find the gas locker (accessed from the rear), the leisure battery and the heating and hot water systems, while the 85-litre inboard fresh water tank is under the offside bed. There are also two under-bed storage units that can be removed completely to create a wider floor space. These are held in ►



An opening window provides washroom ventilation



A tip-up basin increases space for showering and using the loo

THE MMM VERDICT

What you see is what you get and, at this price, that's a lot more than you might expect. When it's not unusual these days to have to pay £70,000 or more for a campervan, it's nice to see a well-equipped, larger camper priced at less than £60k. If you are a couple looking for a fixed bed option, this Benivan could be on your shortlist if you can live with the compact kitchen with just a one-burner hob. Note, too, that one of the single beds is quite short.

place with straps to allow more storage space in the rear for bikes, etc, when you're travelling. Lashing points on the floor let you tie the items down so they don't move around in transit.

MORE, MORE, MORE

Given the price, you'd be forgiven for thinking the Benivan would miss out on some features, but it really does hold its own. Inside, for instance, the main overhead lights are touch control and there's an electric step at the side door that automatically retracts when you turn the ignition key, so you can't accidentally drive off with it extended.

A solar panel is also standard, and

while it wasn't much benefit on a dreich March day in Northamptonshire, it should be invaluable in sunnier climes when you're off-grid.

Far more useful during my trip was the Webasto blown-air diesel heating system, which helped make the 'van nice and cosy after dark. [MMM](#)

MOTORHOME SUPPLIED BY

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FACTS AND FIGURES

PRICE
From: £57,495
As tested: £58,311

BASICS
Berths: 2

Travel seats: 4

Warranty: Two years on base vehicle and habitation, five years water ingress

Type approval: European Whole Vehicle

DIMENSIONS
Length: 5.99m (19ft 8in)

Width: 2.05m (6ft 8½in)

Height: 2.65m (8ft 8½in)

Gross vehicle weight: 3,500kg

Payload: 647kg

BASE VEHICLE
Type: Fiat Ducato LWB panel van

Engine: 2.2-litre, 140hp, front-wheel drive, six-speed manual gearbox

KITCHEN
Cooker: Dometic single gas burner hob and Can oven/grill

Fridge: Dometic 70-litre dual opening compressor

BEDS
Singles: Offside 1.74m x 0.75m (5ft 8in x 2ft 5in), nearside 1.99m x 0.68m (6ft 6in x 2ft 3in)

Alternative double: 1.86m x 1.74m (6ft 1in x 5ft 8in)

ESSENTIALS
Fresh water: 85 litres (inboard)

Waste water: 75 litres (insulated, underslung)

Space/water heating: Webasto diesel-fired blown-air/Truma gas water heater

Gas: 2 x 6kg

Leisure battery: 100Ah

OPTIONS

Fitted to test vehicle: Xzent stereo head unit (£816)

Other options: Automatic gearbox (£4,000)

THE ALTERNATIVES

Chausson V597 Sport Line	£67,490
Dethleffs Globetrail Classic 600 DF	£57,200
Dreamer D55 Fun	£54,100
Etrusco CV 600 DB	£52,600
Weinsberg CaraBus 600 ME	£61,960

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