



Taking the loungeroom on a gypsy cruise of Australia

Keith Didham

HANDS up all car drivers who have cursed the owners of large motorhomes for being on the road. OK, that's most of you.

Motorhomes, you say, are big, ungainly, thirsty, are real slugs and have no place on the road. Right?

Far from it. The world of recreational vehicles has changed rapidly. Nowadays you don't even need a truck licence to pilot one — and they're dead easy to drive, providing you remember they are more than twice as long and twice as high as your compact family car.

That ease of driving is becoming a big drawcard for those following the call to holiday at home in these tough economic times. And we are not talking about the traditional long-retired grey nomads here.

Enter Trakka's 730, a plush home away from home which is pulling interest from a new and younger breed of RV buyer.

"We're finding our 730 and the bigger 770 are drawing interest from baby boomers who have done their overseas trip but now want to explore Australia," says Trakka's managing director Dave Berry.

That means they can rent out their house for a year, live on the road in luxury and recoup most of their purchase price once they get rid of the travel bug. That's if they decide to sell — and most motorhome owners it seems are hanging on to their new wheels because they love the gypsy lifestyle.

A shortage of near-new vehicles on the market has kept residual values high, although the economic crisis may change the playing field. There are mixed messages coming from caravan park operators. While the number of visitors has softened in recent months, there is an increase in first-time users from two groups — the family campers on a budget and from mobile home owners.

Britz, one of the country's big campervan hire players, says it has noticed an upsurge in Australian clients, as against overseas tourists.

"We have seen a huge increase in domestic bookings over the past five years, with Aussies making up more than 40 per cent of our customer base," says Britz brand manager Johanna Penny.

You certainly don't have to rough it when camping in the Trakka 730. At \$160,000 it lacks for little in terms of life's luxuries, such as leather upholstery, plush settees, air conditioning, double-glazed windows, privacy blinds and a 48cm HD television with DVD player (for an extra \$900 you can have a second one in the rear lounge/bedroom).

The Trakka is based on a Fiat Ducato, but the

cabin is where any similarity with a delivery van ends. Check the rear view mirror and you realise there's a kitchen, bathroom and lounge following behind, all fitted out in timber, grey plastic and plush cream and navy blue decor.

Up front above the cabin is a double berth but you need a ladder to get up there. It can be a bit of a struggle so it's best left for the kids. Down below, the leather upholstered driver's and passenger's captain's chairs can swivel and become a second lounge area. There are two more inward facing seats (with seat belts) behind them that surround a slide out and swivelling dining table.

The galley has a microwave, gas oven, gas hotplates, 175-litre fridge/freezer and filtered drinking water system.

Across the way there's a small wardrobe and the enclosed bathroom with shower and a trick chemical loo that powers in and out of the wall by remote control. Trakka has applied for a world patent for the now-you-see-it now you-don't party trick.

The options list includes a separate stainless steel barbecue, solar charging, satellite navigation, satellite TV and reversing camera (a must for a vehicle this size).

Setting up and plugging in takes less than a couple of minutes. Even the power cord is neatly stored in its own locker while another locker is designed to house the barbecue.

However, the 730's boot is on the small side and needs a couple of straps to stop the outdoor chairs from falling out. There's only one 240-volt power socket and it's not easily reached from the table.

The Ducato is imported from Fiat as a cab only with a German-built Alko chassis. Trakka then coach-builds the body to its own design.

The Ducato has anti-lock brakes and traction control and the 3-litre turbo diesel has 115kW and 400Nm of torque on tap. That may not sound sufficient for a vehicle that weighs in at 4250kg. But the engine, coupled with a six-speed auto (Fiat calls it the Comfortmatic) which also allows for manual shifting when required, gives surprisingly perky performance thanks to its good range of usable torque.

We had no trouble cruising all day at about 100km/h, pulling 2000 revs, and stretching to 110km/h at 2200 revs on the highway. A delay in upshifting gears in automatic took a little getting used to, as did a predictable understeer, but the 730 returned an impressive 13.5-litres/100km over a mix of rural, city and highway conditions, giving it a range of about 900km.



Daily Telegraph
Saturday 4/4/2009
Page: 56
Section: CARS Guide
Region: Sydney Circulation: 325,000
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 796.36 sq.cms.
Published: MTWTFS-

Brief: ALFA_ROM
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Comforts of home: The driving, living and dining area of the Trakka 730 (left) and the campervan sleeping quarters (above)