

The Benmore evolution

Words and photographs by Bill Savidan

Definition: "Evolution, the gradual development of something into a more complex and better form"

Rob Floris bought the Christchurch-based UCC Motorhomes, previously known by the full title of Universal Caravan and Coachbuilders, around 12 months ago. This longstanding company has the capacity and skills to produce a range of stock and custom-built leisure and commercial vehicles such as motorhomes, campervans, trailers and sports caravans. It specialises in producing four, five and six-berth motorhomes for both private users and rental operators and has produced large numbers of these over the past decade. As you can imagine, it has learnt a thing or two about what works and what doesn't.

As each season passes, the New Zealand motorhome market becomes more complex. Improved quality levels, design innovations, updated interior décor and layouts, introduced each year by local and overseas manufacturers, raise the standards. Then these standards become the 'norm' demanded by buyers. To keep abreast of this demand, Rob Floris and his team at UCC Motorhomes embarked on a programme of gradual improvement. The latest manifestation of this evolution, the six-berth 'Benmore', is the subject of this month's review.

During its lifetime the Benmore's fibreglass body panels have been modified and upgraded, the most recent being to the rear panel to incorporate the latest Hella tail-lights. Changes like this, combined with continual quality improvements, keep the Benmore looking fresh, if not new.

"Customers have told us they can never have too many exterior lockers, so we have tried our best to provide them," says Rob. "There are large lockers below the floor on both sides at the rear of vehicle, and across the rear, a full-length locker for skis, poles and fishing gear. Freedom

campers appreciate the external shower [hot and cold], knowing that ample fresh water [160-litre tank] is available."

Another nice touch is the gas bayonet connection point in the gas locker for a BBQ. The vehicle reviewed was fitted with the standard 4.5-metre Fiamma awning and an 80-watt solar panel.

The folding Tecno step and robust handrail make it easy to get in and out of the motorhome. Lifting the stairwell moulding provides easy access to the vehicle starter battery at a convenient height. Once inside, the beech laminate surface used on the furniture and bulkheads, combined with the layout of the interior, creates a first impression of spaciousness and light.

The entry is more or less amidships. To the left are two facing settees. The bathroom/toilet is opposite and to the right is the kitchen bench. A full-size 'Kiwi U-shaped lounge' fills the rear of the Benmore. Opposite the kitchen bench is a hanging locker beside a bench-high cabinet housing a pull-out pantry and a cupboard with drawers above. There is no shortage of overhead locker storage. They are above the lounge seats, the kitchen bench and the cabinet opposite, as well as the forward settee on the driver's side.

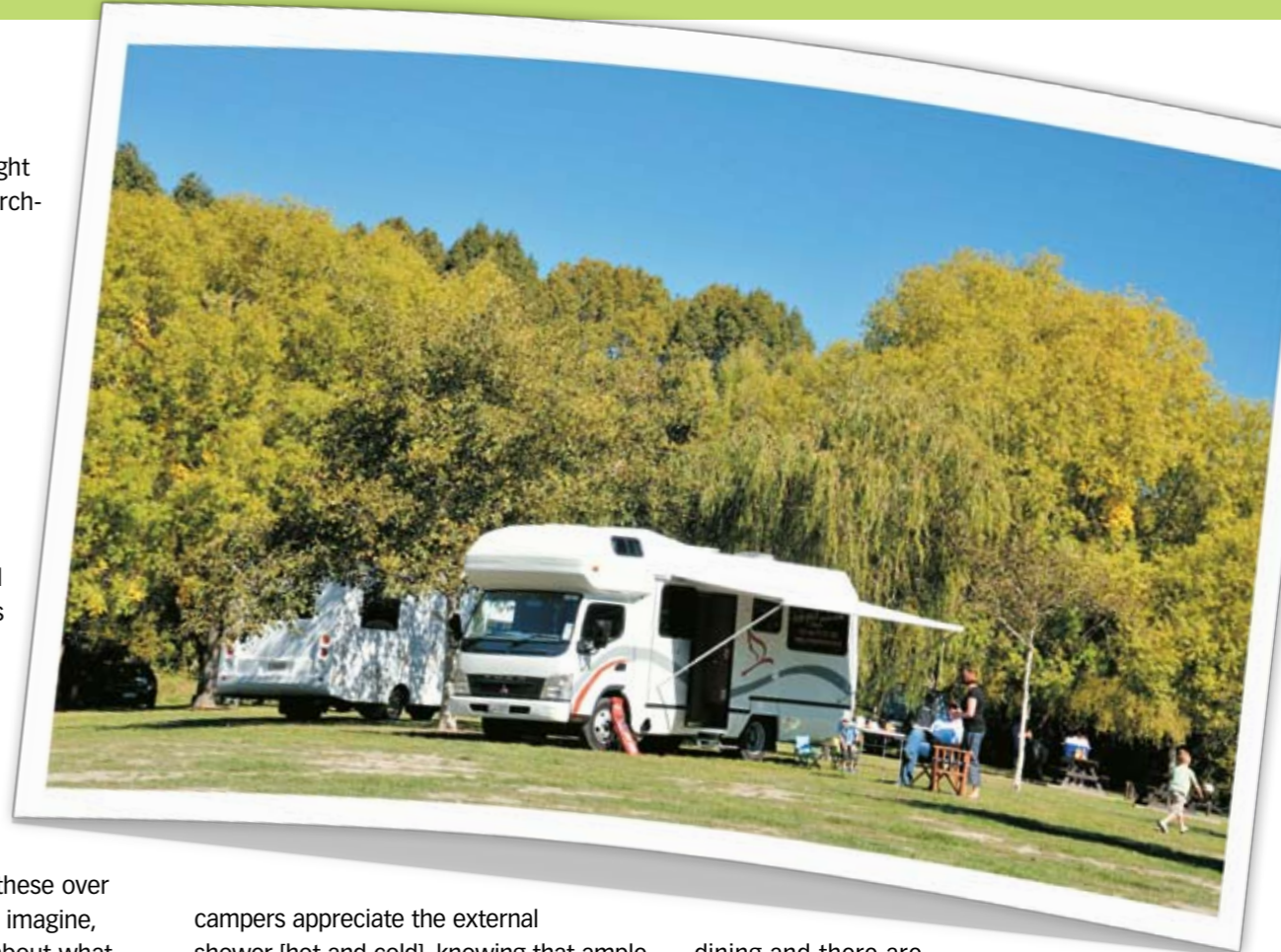
There are two locations available for

dining and there are two tables – a small one with a single leg and a larger one with two legs. The small one can be placed between the forward settees or in the rear lounge area for small groups. The larger two-legged table can be used in the lounge for larger groups.

There are also a variety of sleeping options. The twin settees convert into a comfortable 2100mm x 1200mm double bed. The lounge converts into a 2100mm x 1830mm double or two 1830mm x 700mm singles, and the Luton provides a 2100mm x 1200mm double bed.

Some considerable thought has gone into off-setting the shortcomings often found with Luton beds. The ladder is permanently mounted and has a substantial, safe feel to it. The bed base moves forward out of the way when the bed is not in use, which helps ease access to the driving cab. The forward sloping front part of the Luton has been partitioned off into an open-fronted locker, providing a practical place for books, teacups and other bits and pieces, and making good use of this 'out of the way' area.

The bathroom is pretty much 'standard Kiwi' and is based on a fibreglass shower-tray moulding with an up-stand for





Above: The 'Kiwi U-shaped lounge' can have either a smaller one-legged table or a large two-legged version
 Left: The kitchen layout is functional, with a microwave above the sink and the Waeco fridge below. Two fold-down bench flaps increase the kitchen work area.

mounting the Thetford cassette toilet. Over the toilet is a Cleo fold-down hand basin with a mirror-fronted cabinet above. In the corner beside the cabinet is a vertical rail for the shower handpiece. A solar light fan vent in the roof and a slide-opening window handle light and ventilation issues. Basically, it has everything required in a compact space.
 The galley kitchen layout is very functional. Above the glass-lidded sink is the Sharp microwave, below is the silver Waeco 12/230-volt 108-litre fridge, and to the left is the Smev oven with separate

SPECIFICATIONS

- **External dimensions**
 Length: 6.8m
 Width: 2.25m
 Height: 3.1m
 Internal height: 2.05m
- **Weights**
 Tare: 3850kg
 GVW: 5600kg
- Hehr tinted windows with flyscreens all round
- 9kg gas bottle
- Truma hot water – gas and electric
- Eberspacher diesel heater, 2.2kW
- Fire extinguisher
- Three cab seatbelts, four rear seatbelts and a child seat anchor
- Safe, magazine rack
- Fresh water – 160 litres
- Grey water – 180 litres
- **Price (as reviewed) \$155,000**



grill and four-burner hob. Positive ventilation options for removing steam and cooking odours are provided by the Dometic rangehood, the sliding window behind the hob, and the two 400 x 400 Dometic ceiling vents.
 The only storage below the bench is the floor-level locker beneath the oven that could accommodate pots and pans. However, the cabinet opposite has dedicated drawers for crockery and cutlery, and of course, the pull-out pantry. There is a rack for glasses in the overhead locker. Both the cabinet and kitchen bench tops have fold-up extensions so that the total bench-top area is more than adequate for meal preparation. While there is not a surplus of storage in the kitchen area itself, there is enough for day-to-day needs, and there is ample storage in adjacent overhead

lockers and in the drawers under the lounge seats for storage of items less frequently used.
 One glance at the lounge seating area tells you most of what you want to know. Windows all round provide plenty of light and the opportunity to keep an eye on outside events. Come evening, dropping the blinds and switching on the interior sidelights give a cosy feeling of intimacy. The seat squabs are a cushy 125mm thick and well shaped. On the model reviewed they were upholstered with a hardwearing, deep chocolate fabric with a cream coloured pattern that provided a nice contrast to the brassy/gold roman blinds and the light gold timber. The vinyl floor is covered with a grey/brown loose-fit carpet. The brushed aluminium trim on the cabinetry and the curved locker doors add a contemporary feel. The side seats are long enough to stretch out on for a mid-afternoon snooze and the whole area converts into a very large comfortable bed. The 19-inch Teac Axia LCD TV with DVD player is strategically fitted on a swinging arm (hope the ref doesn't spot it) for viewing from the front of the van when needed.

The base vehicle is a Mitsubishi Fuso FE150E3 3.9-litre Turbo common rail diesel, 148hp, five-speed manual. The cab seating is quite upright, which offers excellent driver visibility and comfort. It has a driver's airbag, cab aircon, central locking, heated electric exterior mirrors and can be upgraded with leather upholstery and wood-grained trim. There is direct access from the cab to the motorhome, although those of us who are less agile than we were may choose to use the cab doors when the weather is fine.
 It is nimble to drive and I was soon quite confident to keep my place in the traffic flow on the open road, overtaking where necessary to avoid slower vehicles. It came as a surprise to me to observe how much respect car drivers paid to me in this larger,



Above: Looking forward from the rear lounge
 Left: There are dedicated drawers for crockery and cutlery and a pull-out pantry



bulkier vehicle, especially in city traffic!
 Rob and his team at UCC Motorhomes are to be commended for the manner in which they have breathed new life into this six-berth stalwart of the NZ motorhome scene. It has been so well received by the buyers in the New Zealand marketplace, UCC is taking steps to ramp up production, which is a very encouraging sign in these uncertain times. 📺

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