

# Winds of change

Lightweight it may be, but Optare's new Bonito is not only well constructed, but also technically advanced. Steve Banner reports from its launch in the Netherlands

Using a chassis-less, one-piece integral body shell, constructed from high-strength, vacuum-formed, woven GRP (glass reinforced plastic) foam sandwich panels by Plastisol, of the Netherlands, Optare's new 17-seater, front-wheel-drive Bonito low-floor, wheelchair-accessible minibus grosses at just 5 tonnes. And that's for a 7.5m long, 5m wheelbase, 2.6m high and 2.2m wide vehicle – thanks to panels claimed to be 15% lighter than aluminium, and 30% lighter than polypropylene.

Power comes courtesy of a 3.0-litre, 157bhp diesel, married to a six-speed manual gearbox. Both are sourced from Fiat's Ducato, as is the rest of the running gear, including the rear stub-axles, while the absence of a chassis means the rear suspension is fixed directly to the body. And the Ducato story continues, with the dashboard also the same as Ducato's, aside from a touch-screen that controls functions such as the heating. Even Fiat's Comfort-Matic automated manual gearbox is available as an option. That said, Bonito is styled to look like part of the Optare family.

## Easy access

Getting to the detail, rear air suspension is standard – front air suspension is optional – and allows the back of the vehicle to be lowered for easier access. A manual 400kg capacity rear access ramp, sourced from Acdeos, is also standard, while a manual ramp (fitted into the floor and giving access via the nearside entrance) is optional. Also, either a manual or an electrically-powered nearside door – supplied to Plastisol as a cassette, ready for installation, and sourced from Tamware of Finland – can be specified, with Bonito using a 12v electrical system.

As for the passenger seats, they are demountable, by Rescroft, although Phoenix can be fitted for a small charge. A completely flat saloon floor – also using GRP sandwich construction and fabricated as an integral part of the body – makes life easier for wheelchair users. Low-profile, floor-mounted tracking, to which wheelchairs can be secured, is standard, while Bonito can carry up to seven wheelchair passengers, plus two seated, once the appropriate number of seats have been removed.

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Passengers also get a good view, courtesy of a low-level waist rail and deep windows. Ditto the driver, who also gets dash-mounted CCTV, with optional reversing camera.

Costing almost the same as two vans converted into accessible minibuses, Bonito's biggest drawback, in the current economic climate, is price. Optare and Plastisol counter this objection by pointing to the newcomer's durability. Free from rattles and squeaks, the body will not corrode, can withstand hefty impacts, is easy to repair and is self-supporting, they argue, without any need for a steel



**Plastisol's panels are an integral part of the new Bonito. They are combined to form a single body shell to cut weight from the vehicle**

frame. Nor is it likely to leak – and there's a 10-year warranty on the GRP panels.

Set up 40 years ago, and with sites in the USA and the UK, as well as the Netherlands, Plastisol also builds bodies for fire engines and other specialised applications, again using its GRP sandwich panels. Plastisol and Optare hope to win Fiat's approval

– or at least a letter of no objection – for the vehicle: a move that, if successful, could open sales opportunities in markets worldwide.

Durable though it may be, Bonito will not be fitted with a destination board or marketed by Optare for stage carriage work, despite its apparent suitability for the subsidised rural bus routes market. Optare will instead continue to promote its Solo, available with wheelbases from 4.13m to 6.57m and at gross weights of from 8.0 to 11.3 tonnes, for such applications. Optare commercial director Chris Wise argues that van-derived

components are not tough enough to withstand the rigours of bus work – despite the fact that they are employed daily on stop-start deliveries run by the big parcels fleets.

That said, the firm may add a smaller Bonito, targeted at operators needing such vehicles to access awkward locations.

Optare's Bonito comes with a lifetime body structure warranty, plus a three-year bumper-to-bumper warranty covering the driveline and other key components, and is now on sale in the UK. **TE**



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