

# A REAL GRAND TOURER

GEORGE HINTON JOINS THE COUNTY SET AND FINDS HIMSELF IN SUFFOLK



ABOVE: Mercedes' cab blends well with 'Sigma' body (alloys extra). Functional step below grille facilitates windscreen cleaning

**M**ARQUIS MOTORHOMES launched its exclusive Auto-Sleeper Mercedes County range at the NEC show in February. Auto-Sleepers has built on Mercedes in the past (remember the short-lived Montana, a Vito-based elevating-roof camper conversion?) but this is a full-blown coachbuilt range of different lengths, layouts and even widths, built on the Sprinter. This test is of one of the first Suffolk models to leave the Willersey assembly line, courtesy of Marquis Northampton, now the retail chain's premier branch.

The Suffolk is essentially the Mercedes equivalent of the Peugeot-based Sigma EL, which has just won the class for Coachbuilts from £36,000-£45,000 in the

Club's 2008 Design & Drive Competition. Since we tested that model extensively in Ireland last summer (report in last November's *Magazine*), we will concentrate here on highlighting the differences between the two while looking at the whole Mercedes County range.

#### CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

The four models embrace two basic layouts, each in two sizes, beginning with the short-wheelbase 19ft 6in Devon, a classic rear-kitchen design with short parallel settees that make a double bed. This is a low-profile tourer with MTPLM of 3200kg (upgrade available) and the 2.2 129bhp turbodiesel engine.

Next, Surrey and Suffolk share a 20in extension in body length to a still-popular

21ft 2in on the medium-wheelbase Sprinter. The Surrey is the long Devon with 6ft 4in settees giving the option of single or double beds or travel seats, plus the second double bed over the cab. Chassis is rated 3880kg, while the rear lounge Suffolk is 3500kg, as it only has two designated travel seats.

All three are 7ft 5in wide (8ft 9in including mirrors) but the range-topping long-wheelbase rear-lounge Berkshire puts on girth as well as length to give a really roomy interior, externally 23ft 11in long and 7ft 9in wide. Like the Suffolk, it has the 3880kg chassis, but with the 150bhp engine and a superb L-shaped swing-out kitchen extension.

Body construction follows Auto-Sleepers' established polystyrene



sandwich techniques, while deep side skirts in thick GRP incorporate low-level lockers for storage and gas (3x7kg in the Suffolk). The standard awning fits flush without compromising internal locker space.

Rear-wheel-drive means a higher chassis and an electric Omni-Step for access, but inside, the floor is level. A passenger swivel is optional, while Devon and Surrey have two swivels as standard.

#### ON THE ROAD

The demonstrator had the optional fully-automatic five-speed gearbox, available only with the 150bhp engine, costing £3250 packaged with alloy wheels, cruise control and cab air conditioning. (The other extras with the standard engine and six-speed gearbox are £2000.) This makes for very relaxing driving, with nicely-weighted rack and pinion steering needing just 3.5 turns between excellent locks.

The selector is dash-mounted with a conventional PRND layout, the selected gear being displayed in an LCD readout on the instrument panel. There's no detent button on the lever, just a shaped gate to slot it through. In Drive, you have the manual over-ride options: each tap of the lever to the left drops down one gear in sequence through fourth to first, while a tap to the right takes you back up. Very useful for engine braking on descents.

The smoothness of the gearchanges would not disgrace any car. In conjunction with the well-known soft ride of the Sprinter, especially compared to the

Ducato, it endows the Suffolk with a new limousine-like quality.

Performance is competitive, reaching 50mph from stationary in around 13 seconds and 60mph six seconds later. We did not expect anything like the 23.6mpg on motorways or the best of 30mpg we achieved with the Peugeot equivalent last year, with a torque converter taking its share of the power, but the 21mpg we returned, again almost entirely on motorways, was far better than we hoped, and this on a brand new engine.

At the UK motorway limit, the engine turns at 2750rpm, with top speed in the region of 83mph, indicating plenty in hand for normal motorway cruising. Mechanical noise is subdued, but the 235/65 R16 Continental tyres generate quite a bit of roar, as does air rushing through the ventilation system, or in this case, the air conditioning. The furniture can get a bit excited on poor roads, but this should quieten when the cupboards are full.

All-disc ABS brakes are powerful, as are the headlights. Heated door mirrors have electric adjustment of the main glasses only, with manually-set lower wide-angle lenses, and an internal mirror gives a good degree of through-vision. There are two airbags, but the steering column is non-adjustable. Folding armrests are fitted to the inner side of each cab seat, leaving the hard plastic moulding on the cab door for the other arm, but you are both well provided with cupholders and storage; a bottle recess in each cab door, a fold-out drink holder built

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Exceptionally light and airy lounge/dining area; roof design disguises height of Luton; access to overcab bed is unobstructed at night; Mercedes cab packs loads of storage  
BELOW: Kitchen layout permits two additional work surfaces (one in doorway)



into the ashtray and two further cup/can recesses on the dash-top storage areas.

We experienced two vibration problems; the generation of a transmission vibration when pulling away from a slow corner as the engine passed through the 1300-1500rpm rev range with Drive selected. We can't say if this momentary shake was a one-off, or typical of this engine and transmission and there's no reason to suspect it will cause any long-term damage.

The second thing was akin to having a woodpecker in the cab, but was simple to identify: the pleated Remis blinds fitted to the cab doors appeared to be missing intermediate fixings at the bases of their central uprights. Other examples on display seemed firmly fitted, so this is obviously a very minor glitch, which we alleviated temporarily by stuffing some packing behind the flexy blind frames.

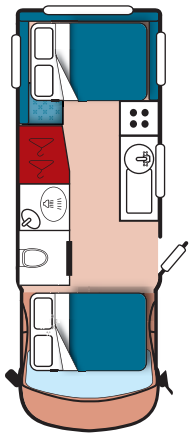
#### LIVING ABOARD

Inside, first thing that strikes you is the walnut-foiled furniture finish, used everywhere including the walls, whereas the Sigma uses upholstery material around the lounge. In both colour and matt finish, it just screams 'I'm plastic wood' at you and, despite added bright plastic 'chrome' highlight strips across the cabinet doors, seems at odds with the quality image the Mercedes badge prepares you to expect. We much preferred the Sigma's light wood finish with silver accents.

The Reflex foam-filled upholstery is different too, but very pleasant in a multi-textured Belgian flatweave. Shades of wheat and honey are accented by top edges and piping in a restful fern green with four scatter cushions and two bolsters. Colour alternatives are blue, burgundy or brown.

Interior lighting is identical to Sigma with the main diffused lighting operable from the keyfob by remote control (two keys operate the entire vehicle).

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RIGHT: Washroom is practical and spacious, lacking only a shelf

Heating and hot water systems are as Sigma, but we were disappointed to find no heed taken of our experience last year with the exposed water heater drain valve in the offside bed locker, where stored items can press on the valve, releasing all your water. Tanks are similar, but not identical, to the Sigma at 71 (73) litres (15.6gal) fresh water mounted behind the axle, while the side-mounted waste tank is 53 (60) litres (11.6gal). (Berkshire tanks are larger.) A large diameter drain valve is recessed in the nearside skirt moulding.

The Auto-Sleepers electronic touch-screen control panel is set at 45 degrees to the roof lockers just above the entrance door. Multiple functions include a levelling indicator, but a spirit level's easier! The Remis cab blinds replace the Sigma's cab curtains, but the Seitz/Dometic pleated cassette blinds for the caravan windows have full supplementary curtains, except in the kitchen. Detachable straw-coloured carpet is in two sections plus a separate cab carpet, and carries the Marquis monogram,

as do the internal mirrors (stickers rather than etched glass).

The main free-standing table (stowed in wardrobe) is the Sigma's 3ft job, but you don't get a front coffee table.

We can't comment on the cab radio/CD player - it had not been fitted. Mercedes has unfortunately followed the trend to replace the spare wheel with a sealant and an electric pump, but Auto-Sleepers says there are customer benefits, in reduced cost of the base vehicle and increased payload from the weight saving. It also gives more latitude in siting underfloor tanks and Mercedes service covers any consequent problems under its three-year warranty. A useful rubber-floored external wet locker is sited below the washroom.

### KITCHEN

The Sigma's excellent 1.5m-long kitchen, with its two large additional hinge-up and slide-out work surfaces above and beside the fridge, is brightened by a Mini Heki (fan vent optional) and installation of a 700W Daewoo 20-litre microwave oven in place of the front-most roof locker. Auto-Sleepers' traditional four-place set of white crockery is provided, now without silver rims for microwave compatibility. That leaves one shelved locker between the crockery and the cocktails for food storage.

The Spinflo dual-fuel cooker and 86-litre Dometic fridge are carried over, as is the stainless steel sink/drainer in linen finish under its flush 'chinchilla' glass lid-cum-chopping-board. One fluorescent tube is located across cooker and sink beneath the roof lockers. A shelved cupboard between cooker and fridge, that also houses the gas manifold, supplements the shallow pan locker below the oven.

### WASHROOM

The Sigma's compact swinging handbasin-wall design appears again, forming a generous separate shower enclosure on demand. It is well lit and ventilated, but still lacking in storage space, with only a tiny wall cabinet behind the sliding mirrored doors above the basin. There is a great need for a shelf to put toilet things on, as the only flattish surface is the toilet lid, but although Auto-Sleepers acknowledged this after our Sigma test, the Suffolk is exactly the same. Apart from that, it works well.

### SLEEPING

Ease of conversion to night use is marred only by the need to find homes for the five cushion sections left over, four being big corner wedge-shapes, but what is the cab for at night-time anyway? Once you've pulled the two slatted bases together and allowed the two backrest cushions to drop flat, it's a big comfortable bed (6ft 11in x 4ft 11in) and that's the important thing. Slatted bed bases are rear-hinged for



### CONVERTER/SUPPLIER

Auto-Sleepers, Orchard Works, Willersey, Broadway, Worcs WR12 7PT  
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access with one external but no front openings. The side sofas, of unequal length, provide optional single beds for the average couple, at 4ft 11in and 6ft 5in long, both 2ft 4in wide. There are two halogen 'wineglass'-shaped spotlights above each of the three lounge windows, so it doesn't matter where you place your pillows.

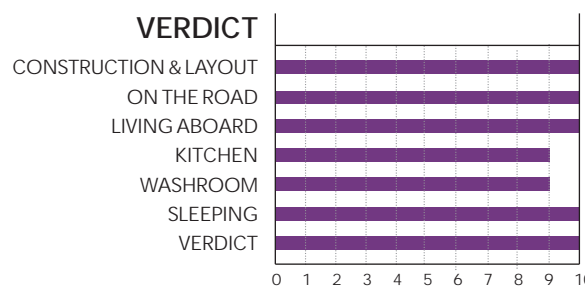
There is no TV cabinet as such, but a neat Avtex 150 flatscreen digital TV is bracketed to the wardrobe wall. Unfortunately, Auto-Sleepers' restraint, comprising a piece of cloth that wraps round the hinged arm secured by a press stud, isn't up to the job with the weight of the TV attached. A piece of webbing with a 10p rucksack clip would be better.

The 6ft 4in x 3ft 9in overcab bed (headroom 1ft 10in) is accessed by a secure folding ladder stored loose in a thick carpet-like bag. A Mini Heki provides light and air, there's a light both ends, a curtain and a safety net, but no windows.

### VERDICT

While the Suffolk shares the Sigma's foibles of poor washroom storage and a smaller-capacity fridge than there's space for, many will appreciate the automatic option, and the benefits of the level floor, smoother ride and an even better-specified kitchen. It's another model I'd certainly put on my personal shortlist were I looking for a two berth, as the lack of travel seats limits its usefulness as a true four berth. ■

Technical	
RRP/otr as tested	£43,995/£47,245
Engine	4-cyl 2148cc common-rail turbodiesel. Std: 129bhp (97.5kW) @ 3800rpm Opt: 150bhp (113kW) @ 3800rpm 243lb ft (330Nm) torque @ 1200-2400rpm
Transmission/option	Six-speed manual/five-speed auto
Overall length	6.44m (21ft 2in)
Int length behind cab	4.67m (15ft 4in)
Overall width	2.26m (7ft 5in) exc mirrors 2.66m (8ft 9in) inc mirrors
Overall height	3.13m (10ft 3 1/2in)
Internal height	1.96m (6ft 5in)
Internal width	2.11m (6ft 11in)
Fuel/econ/tank cap	Diesel/21.0mpg/75 litres approx/16.5gal.
Fresh/waste water	71/53 litres (15.6/11.7gal)
MIRO (inc driver, 90% fuel)	3120kg (61.4cwt)
MTPLM	3500kg (68.9cwt)
Payload	380kg (7.5cwt)
Berths	4
NCC approved	Yes
Caravan Battery	100a/h
Options	150bhp engine £695; automatic transmission with 150bhp engine £1720; cab a/c with pollen filter £1305; alloy wheels £640; cruise control £265; lockers ILO overcab bed £375



Insurance: 0800 028 4809  
Info: marquis-group.co.uk