

# Short and SHARP

End-lounge campervans have suddenly become very popular. **Nick Harding** tries out a compact yet versatile newcomer



**C**OMPACT AND feature-filled it may be, but if you're over 6ft this probably isn't the vehicle for you. Why? Because the rear bed is 6ft x 4ft at its maximum, and there's a limited range of adjustment for the driver's seat. Welcome to the EL, the smallest of three new Dorset models built by Auto-Sleepers for its sister company, Marquis Motorhomes.

This is the 'special-edition' equivalent of the Auto-Sleeper Stratford, but upgraded with cab and habitation air conditioning, microwave and awning.

My week of testing the Dorset EL was based on a stay at the wonderful, adults-only Bath Chew Valley, an Affiliated Site in the Club's network that offers top-quality facilities.

## CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

Peugeot's medium-wheelbase high-roof Boxer window van is the starting point for a conversion that really does squeeze a lot in – not least a larger-than-you'd-expect washroom with separate shower behind the driver.

Then, there's the kitchen just inside the sliding side door, and a twin-settee lounge at the back that you can also access via the full-height rear doors; a free-standing step is provided, slotting between the seats or in the shower tray.

These Marquis 'Auto-Sleepers' also go for a higher spec cab, here featuring passenger's airbag, cruise control and the aforementioned air con.

Despite this example coming in a rather plain white, there are some interesting

exterior and interior options available at no extra cost – golden white and azzuro blue for the former, and burgundy, blue, green or 'mocha' for the latter. Surprisingly, to me, Marquis has opted not to specify the alloy wheels that would complement the high-spec image.

Another notable feature of this vehicle is the use of glass for the side windows. Tinted to the point of appearing black from the outside, they also have an athermic coating designed both to keep heat out and provide some insulation.

## ON THE ROAD

Having sorted out the glass plate in the microwave, the oven's shelf and grill pan, I was on my way for a rattle-free drive – initially. I'm afraid after the first few

### Vehicle supplied for test by:

Marquis Motorhomes, Auto-Sleeper Group, Orchard Works, Willersey, Nr Broadway, Worcestershire WR12 8QF  
Call 0800 026 7777

uses, noises developed from the cassette blinds, the free-standing table (in its stowage point over the cab – but more about that later) and, it seemed, even the kitchen unit itself.

It's a shame because these latest Peugeots really are a pleasure to drive. The 120bhp engine, allied to a six-speed gearbox, really is a peach, providing welcome economy figures at high cruising speeds. Acceleration from a standing start isn't the Peugeot's strongest card, but that's easily outweighed by genuinely good handling, braking and steering, plus cab comfort.

The front seats now come with integral seat belts (previously the door pillars were mounting points), which could prove more comfortable for shorter users. Another improvement is the extra padding on the head restraints. Peugeot gets a black mark for its latest key fob, however: it's all too easy for the key to flick open when it's in your pocket.

The exterior double mirrors are excellent, and there's extra reassurance from the limited view the driver has through the back windows. It may be a detailed point, but the steering wheel-mounted controls for the stereo really are a boon (remember, they're not offered on the Fiat Ducato equivalent of the Boxer).

## LIVING ABOARD

There were plenty of admiring glances cast the Dorset's way during this test. A few folk even asked for a look inside, which usually inspired the same comment: "Wow, how do they get so much into such a small vehicle?" Nobody, however, picked up on the Dorset's refillable 25-litre LPG tank, underslung along with the fresh and waste water tanks, at 69 and 40 litres respectively. Filling up with LPG at an appropriate fuel station will cost you a fraction of an exchange cylinder refill. This is just one feature of a number that add up to what should be a very efficient vehicle in use.

My biggest problem is with storage. The free-standing table is a prime example. It takes up a lot of space in the overcab, making it inconvenient to put anything else up here.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Marquis Motorhomes was established in 1973



High-spec features in the Peugeot cab include passenger airbag and cruise control, but the stereo remains basic

The table's relatively generous size came with a further payback. You have to be either incredibly well organised, or on the slim side in order to manoeuvre around it once it's set up.

True, there's also a pivot table for use with the swivelled cab passenger's seat. A clever footplate helps overcome the issue of dangling legs here, but in this instance fitting it necessitated removing the plastic panel from the back of the seat base. Also, there's no logical place to stow it.

Staying with the storage theme, I'd have happily left the rear door step and some of the floor carpet pieces behind, for example. The rear nearside seat base is free for luggage, but the opposite one is home to the water heater and more, leaving little space for anything else. There are storage pockets, some open cubbies and neat (rather than large) overhead lockers (including one for the ubiquitous Auto-Sleeper crockery set) for the lounge.

To end on some positives, I was glad to see a carbon monoxide alarm is fitted as standard (surely all motor caravans should have one). The Remis rooflight lets in loads of light and air. Marquis generously provides three mains sockets, and the location of these, plus the all-important heater controls, is spot-on.

## KITCHEN

The kitchen unit's extendable worktop certainly comes in handy. There's also the fridge – a compressor unit from Waeco – and a microwave oven to complement the cooker and sink with add-on drainer (although the latter needed a bit more thought to operate properly – it lay too flat on this example).

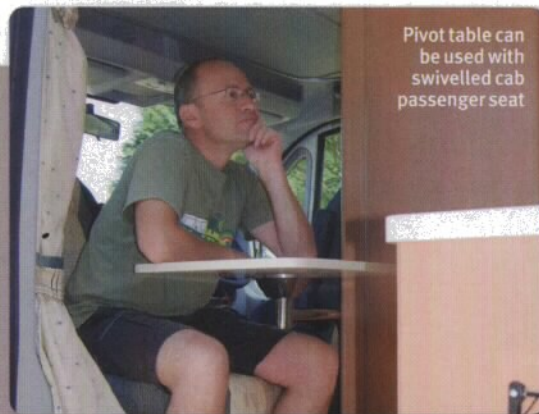
The thinking behind the compressor fridge is there's no need to worry about exterior venting, while the 110A leisure battery and lower current draw of LED interior lighting help resolve any power worries. I've always felt compressor fridges are more suited to van conversions, anyway.

Interestingly, being on mains hook-up for the duration of this test and having made use of the microwave and a mini mains-operated kettle for my brews, I used very little gas at all.

Again, storage is at a premium in the kitchen, despite a deep drawer and cutlery stowage. The drawers below the wardrobe opposite could, in theory, be called into kitchen action, however.

## WASHROOM

At first I didn't like the idea of open shelving for storage, but soon realised it's actually quite handy for stuffing away washbags etc. Still, a low-level locker for items such as toilet chemicals wouldn't have gone amiss.



Pivot table can be used with swivelled cab passenger seat



Rear lounge set-up features short settees. Free-standing table is maximum size, but can be tricky to get around

“There were plenty of admiring glances cast the Dorset's way”



|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| RRP                 | £39,995 OTR   |
| Engine              | Peugeot Boxer 2.2 HDi, 120bhp   |
| Transmission        | Six-speed manual, FWD   |
| Overall length      | 5.42m (17ft 9in)  |
| Internal length     | 3.87m (12ft 8in) inc cab  |
| Overall width       | 2.26m (7ft 5in) mirrors folded  |
| Overall height      | 2.69m (8ft 10in)  |
| Max internal height | 1.88m (6ft 2in)   |
| Fuel/econ/tank      | Diesel/34.4mpg/19.8gal (90 litres)  |
| MRO                 | 2819kg (55.5cwt)  |
| MTPLM               | 3300kg (65cwt)  |
| User payload        | 481kg (9.5cwt)  |
| Berths              | 2   |
| Options             | No-cost alternative exterior and interior colours and fabrics; alloy wheels £391; reversing camera £325 |
| Options fitted      | None  |
| NCC approved        | Yes   |

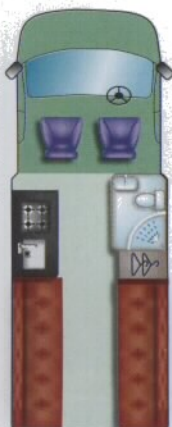
Club insurance: 0800 028 4809 • Info: marquismotorhomes.co.uk



Top: comfortable rear lounge

Above: the bed is just over 6ft x 4ft, squeezed into the rear

Right: separate shower cubicle in the washroom even features a shaving mirror, the toilet area is roomy, but window is non-opening



But full praise to Marquis for the separate, fully-lined shower cubicle arrangement here, right next to a swivel-bowl toilet with more space around it than you find in many a coachbuilt.

There's a rooflight overhead, which compensates for the non-opening window.

### SLEEPING

Reflex foam, as used here, takes a bit of getting used to, but it's very good, offering a firmness that won't sag with time. Pulling together both slatted seat bases and filling in with the backrests produces a bed that's officially 6ft x 4ft, although my tape measure reckoned on a vital extra inch longer. So, it's pretty cosy. Indeed, rather than sitting knee-touchingly close in the lounge, you may feel more relaxed simply lounging on the mattress area.

The latter scenario seemed best for watching TV – a rather neat 10in screen slides out from its dedicated locker. A storage pocket nearby is ideal for books if they are more your thing and the LED reading lamps and downlighters are classy and modern. There's conventional overhead lighting, too.

Curiously, there are two blown-air outlets in the lounge, one on top of the other, but these are directly under the bed when it's made up. Coupled with the fact that the only other outlet is in the

washroom, I thought the lack of any such heating further forward in the living quarters a bit strange. True, there's the air conditioning unit overhead, which could be set to warm if needed. Incidentally, I'm told its outlet faces towards the cab so that if you want the unit on through the night you won't catch a chill when you're in bed.

Finally, I'd have preferred insulation screens for the cab windows instead of (or better, still, in addition to) the lined curtains, but I'm assured I'm in a minority on this one. Likewise, I wonder if the curtains for the rear windows will prove sufficient in extremes of cold.

### VERDICT

I always find it ironic that a 'special edition' vehicle like this, sold via a 10-strong dealer network, boasts greater UK distribution than so many so-called mainstream marques. That means something – for vehicle servicing, repair work and after-sales generally.

The Dorset boasts terrific flexibility – it can be used as everything from a second (or indeed first) car to a camper capable of

travelling further afield without depending on sites with mains hook-ups all the time.

You'll have noted my previous comments and no doubt come to the same conclusion as me – that this is a high-top for shorter folk. But, if you like your motor caravans both compact and laden with goodies – and still maintaining a competitive price with the prospect of strong residuals – go ahead and take a closer look. ■

