



two's company

From 1994 to 2000 Auto-Sleepers' Duetto was one of Britain's best-selling high-tops

Words Graham Fischer | Pictures Jo Vaughan

ROYALTY, that's how Auto-Sleepers were regarded back in the early 1990s. Harmony and Symphony were their most popular high-tops back then, though they were built on the soon-to-be-axed Talbot Express. It was an open secret that its replacement (the Peugeot Boxer) was behind schedule. This, together with the news that the first generation of Renault Traffic was also for the chop, meant that Auto-Sleepers had to plug a gap.

They'd already dipped a toe in Ford waters with the elevating-roof Frisky and coachbuilt Legend, so the blue oval was the obvious choice. What surprised many was

the decision to use the long-wheelbase van. Time has proved it to have been an inspired decision. It was a much faster seller than later shorter versions.

Open a door (take your pick from any of the five available!) and enter what is basically a longish corridor. The comfy forward lounge utilises the swivel cab seats and also features a two-seat inward-facing settee on the offside and a forward-facing travel seat on the nearside.

Behind the settee you'll find a generously sized and comprehensively equipped kitchen, opposite which is the wardrobe and the rear corner washroom.

Sleeping accommodation consists of two easily-made longitudinal single beds that

offer easy access and egress, or a fiddly-to-make all-over double bed.

A wheel-in-each-corner format, together with a slick gearbox, makes press-on miles a joy and country lane pootling perfection itself. The cab seats are some of the best ever. They have two armrests, are adjustable for rake, reach and squab height, plus they have an inflatable lumbar support and even a heater for those frosty mornings. Speaking of which, the standard heated quick-clear windscreen is another bonus. For many, though, the Tranny's rear-wheel drive is the most important feature as they tow boats/caravans/trailers.

Although its replacement was liked, this generation of Duetto was loved.

FACT FILE

PRICE WHEN NEW
£24,485 (1994 launch price 75bhp diesel)

BERTHS 2 (4 optional)
TRAVEL SEATS (INC DRIVER) 3

DIMENSIONS 5.56m L, 2.06m W, 2.69m H

MAXIMUM WEIGHT
2830kg-3300kg

PAYLOAD 457kg-757kg

BASE VEHICLE

FORD TRANSIT LWB KOMBI

ENGINE Manual: 2.5D (75bhp), 2.5TD (100bhp), 2.0P 77bhp/115bhp. Automatic: 2.5D (80bhp), 2.5TD (85bhp)

production timeline



1994
Model launched on long-wheelbase Ford Transit van with Auto-Sleeper high-top

1995
All now built on higher-spec LWB Kombi window-van. 2.5D Auto (80bhp) launched

1996
Transit facelift - smiley grille, new facia, larger mirrors, 2.5TD (100bhp) option, payload up



Although its replacement was liked, this generation of Auto-Sleeper Duetto was loved

What goes wrong?

BASE VEHICLE The Transit is bombproof, though not perfect. The 2-litre DOHC 115bhp petrol engine is a flyer – and economical too – by far the best motor, but rare. The 75bhp DI diesel is noisy and smoky, but unbreakable. Despite EGR valves on later models getting gummy up, a quarter of a million miles is frequently achieved. The 80bhp non-turbo diesel is actually more spirited than the 85bhp turbo-diesel when mated with the automatic 'box. The former was specially-developed to power automatic variants. It smokes under load though as 'the special development' really meant over-fuelling! The 100bhp TD engines are very good, but were not very often specified for the Duetto because it incurred a long delay.

Biggest enemy is rust. Wheelarches, cab steps and bottom of the doors are the main culprits. Use a magnet to detect filler. Only cure is to cut corrosion out and weld new panels in.

MOTORHOME Not 100 per cent reliable, but breathtakingly close. Auto-Sleepers were at the peak of their game back then. Blown-air heater spares may be challenging but it's easy enough to replace the whole unit – and not for a king's ransom either.

Alternatives

Most folk bought a Duetto because they wanted this combination of the extremely popular Ford Transit, rear-wheel drive and Auto-Sleepers' build-quality. One of the Duetto's most important features was a 'proper washroom', with shower, washbasin, and flushing cassette loo. Duetto was built on the long-wheelbase panel van, so it really did offer 'the facilities of a coachbuilt in a high-top'.

Duetto's short-wheelbase cousin, the Flair, sold steadily though it only had a slide-out loo and a privacy screen.

Most competitors used either a Sheldon or Reimo GRP high-top on a standard-height panel van, though some used Ford's high-top.

Leisuredrive converted lots of Ford Transits offering standard layouts or a bespoke conversion. Although Horizons Unlimited offered the Orrizonte on the long-wheelbase Transit, the big challenger was Devon's Discovery, which offered a proper loo compartment in a short-wheelbase package. It was a remarkably clever design and a strong seller.

There were loads of other alternatives both from Auto-Sleepers and their competitors, though most were on the (squarer-sided) Peugeot Boxer/Fiat Ducato/Citroën Relay.



Diesel engines were rather noisy



A full washroom in a small motorhome



Spacious lounge, one rear travel seat

1997

Auto now available with either 2.5D (80bhp) or 2.5 'soft blow' TD (85bhp)

1998

Standard engine 2.0P 115bhp. Re-worked power steering. Carver P4 replaces Propex heater

1999

Ford fitted Auto-clutch and LPG fuel option offered

2000

Run-out models. Down-spec LE only offered with steel wheels and other cost-cutting



This Duetto shows how Auto-Sleepers hold their price above other marques

the one you want

Avoid the few built in 1994 on the standard van, and those without power steering. About 99 per cent were built on the Kombi version of the van, which meant that they had special vehicle spec instead of builder's cart spec. Most purchasers chose the standard two-berth. Although a four-berth was available, Duettos only had three travel seats.

Facelifted ones had the smiley grille and also benefited from significant spec improvements. The powerful petrol engine would be my favourite motor. Although latterly it was the entry-level power unit, there are not many around because most opted for diesel power and/or auto. There isn't a bad engine option and anyway you'll have to put up with whichever accompanies your chosen transmission. The silky smooth trouble-free automatic gearbox employs a torque converter. Duetto is one of the few motorcaravans of this generation with which purchasers have a reasonable chance of finding an auto.

The condition of the bodywork is everything. Look twice for filler. I'd always go for an automatic with the latest plate I could afford.

our industry insider says -

Later models are a diamond bit of secondhand stock. Non-power steering examples are difficult to shift off the forecourt. Tin worm is costly to put right, so we just trade on part-ex rusty ones. We find this generation easier to sell than the newer ones because our customers reckon they're much roomier. Very popular with folk trading up from a pop-top.

REAL PRE-OWNED PRICES

Here are some examples of Auto-Sleeper Duettos we've seen for sale recently. These are the advertised prices and not necessarily the sale price achieved.

1994	2.5D	110,000 miles	£9995	Private
1995	2.5D	61,000 miles	£13,995	Trade
1995	2.5D	47,400 miles	£15,995	Trade
1995	2.5D Auto	48,000 miles	£14,000	Private
1997	2.5D Auto	40,500 miles	£14,995	Trade
1999	2.5D	58,000 miles	£18,995	Trade

Duettos can be bought from £5000 but if you want one with more bodywork than holes you'll need to pay at least £10,000.

one we found

As shown in this feature

The Duetto shown here is in reasonable nick, although it shows how Auto-Sleepers hold their price above other marques. This 10-year-old vehicle is immaculate outside except for a few weather streaks. Inside it's good although the washbasin has cracked at some point. The green carpet and curtains are A1, as is the upholstery. Owner additions include an awning and a two-bike rack. The roof side window will be replaced before sale.

data

Make/model: Auto-Sleeper Duetto
Engine: 2.5 non-turbo diesel (75bhp)
Year: 1999 (V) **Previous owners:** 3
Mileage: 42,000
Price: £18,995
Supplied by: Oak Tree Motorhomes, Nottingham,
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www.omcmotorhomes.co.uk

our testers said...

We started our January 1995 road-test with the words: 'Yes, it's true. Duetto does have everything you would expect in a coachbuilt motorhome fitted into a vehicle that is pure high-top camper.' We liked the high-spec cab with features absent even from rivals' options lists. Alloy wheels and tinted glass were standard. We were less keen on the engine, saying 'there is no mistaking it's a diesel!'

We reckoned the Duetto's closest rival was the Peugeot-based Symphony – also from Auto-Sleepers – but early sales success and keen pricing were also noted.

WHICH motorhome says ★★★★★

This tough Transit was top tackle as a luxury two-berth high-top, but less successful as a family 'van. Too many are now duo-tone... white and rust.