

# The wonder of wanderlust

THE ROMANIES never had it this good. I guess the modern equivalent of the vardo to us softy 21st-century types is the deluxe motorhome. Well, OK, this particular Romany caravan didn't need a horse (there's a 150bhp engine with fully automatic gearbox), the pot-belly stove is replaced by a dual-fuel space heater, and there is absolutely no enamel washbasin in evidence – there's a compact shower room on board complete with flushing toilet and wash basin.

To tell the truth, I felt a bit of a fraud when I told friends and family that I was heading off into the Cotswold countryside to get closer to nature. Apart from the obvious space constraints, there's pretty much every home comfort you could need on board the Marquis Northants Auto-Sleeper.

### Taking the reins

Based on a Mercedes Sprinter chassis, with a driveability that made it an absolute pleasure to handle, the Northants is a home-away-from-home on four wheels. Sure, at first glance she seemed a bit of a beast compared to my family estate car, and the thought of getting behind the wheel was, initially, a little intimidating. The lovely people at Marquis Motorhomes, however, showed me the ropes and assured me that in no time at all I would be driving her as if I always hit the roads in a 20-odd-food vehicle. They were so right. You make the obvious allowances for width and length, particularly when turning corners or parking into cosy spaces, but these soon become second-nature, and before long you're just enjoying the smoothness of the drive.

### The romantic road

It's not so much about the getting there; it's more about how you do it. The winding country lanes at high summer are never a chore to drive down, with the froth of cow parsley on either side and the scent of verdant life wafting in through the driver's window. Glorious. And travelling with what is effectively your bed in the back gives a sense of freedom – that the countryside's yours for the taking, that you can park up and allow your steed to graze

Candia McKormack takes to the road in a Marquis Northants Auto-Sleeper and finds the freedom of the open road

on whichever fertile grass verge takes your fancy. Of course, this isn't actually the reality – there are certain bylaws to be observed – but there are countless camping spots in this area that are there for the picking. And they can provide your steed with as much fuel as it needs (thanks to handy electrical hook-ups).

### Setting up camp

We'd booked – almost blindly – into a farm park in the Oxfordshire Cotswold countryside. Always liking to live slightly on the edge (it's the rock'n'roll way), I surfed the net a couple of days before departure and found what looked to be the ideal site: no nasty big clubhouses here, no sweaty adults encased in comedy animal costumes and absolutely no cabaret-and-spandex evenings. What I hadn't expected was the extent of the blissful serenity we found. I could learn to adapt to life on the road, I thought fleetingly (but where would I put my books, the plasma TV and the cast iron bath that has comforted me through the rough times? Hmm, maybe not).

As I had been briefed thoroughly beforehand on the drill for setting up camp by the team at Marquis, it was quite a doddle. While my other half, Tony, hooked us up to power and water, I set the onboard computer to 'living' and turned the back of the motorhome into a rather cosy living/dining room cum kitchen cum bedroom. Piece of cake.

There was a neat little flat-screen TV above the passenger seat that swivelled round to the optimum viewing position (incidentally, the passenger and driver's seats do likewise), a decent-sized 'fridge, microwave and gas cooker. There's also a cracking little heater that does the job very quickly and efficiently when things get a little chilly later on in the evening.

One of the things I was most impressed

with was the mind-bogglingly clever use of storage. With cunning design standards that would put the Scandinavians to shame, every last inch is utilised. Not quite room for my book collection, but still finding all the little hiding places was enough to keep me out of mischief for half an hour or so. If you're away on longer trips, there's room for most things you would need – the trick is remembering which compartment you've left them in...

### Hitting the hay

Heading back from the local pub with the contented feeling only the perfect amount of cider, pork and bonhomie can give you, we followed the welcoming light back to our home for the night. The camp site we'd chosen had the most fantastic washrooms – all clean and pink with bags of room and gentle local radio playing day and night. But had we chosen less wisely, the Northants is perfectly equipped – with its compact shower compartment featuring washbasin and cassette toilet. You obviously need to be fairly compact yourself – and pretty economic with your hand movements too I have to say – to be perfectly comfortable in the space, but we're not in Doctor Who territory here after all, so let's be realistic about what can be achieved in so small a space.

I had expected the business of setting up the bed to be a bit of a palaver to be honest, but a bit of pulling here and a swift bit of cushion-throwing there and the generously-sized double bed was ready in the time it takes to fluff up pillows and turn down a duvet. There are a lot of curtains and blinds to draw before you settle down for the night – including ones for the windscreen, all the side windows and the skylight – but it's well worth taking the time to see to these if you've promised yourself a lie-in any time after 6am. We, sensibly, did take the time and slept like proverbial babies.

As a first-time motorhome user, the experience as a whole was a very positive one, and for the thousands of dedicated owners out there, I can see that it is a very definite and positive lifestyle choice.

The world's your oyster when your home is on four wheels... ■



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### AT A GLANCE:

- MOTORHOME:** Marquis Northants, from their County Range
- PRICE:** From £50,995 (basic) on the road.
- BASED ON:** Mercedes MWB 3500 KG MTPLM
- ENGINE:** 150bhp 6-speed CDI Manual
- OVERALL LENGTH:** 6,445mm/21'2"
- OVERALL HEIGHT:** 3,130mm/10'3"
- OVERALL WIDTH:** 2,660mm/8'9"
- BERTHS:** 2
- BED SIZE:** 2,100mmx1,920mm/6'11"x6'4"
- ADDITIONAL OPTIONS:** Automatic transmission £750
- Alloy wheels £695
- Overcab lockers in lieu of overcab bed £375
- Air conditioning £1,495
- Cruise control £295

