

Buying secondhand

Help me to find... an Auto-Sleeper

■ WORDS AND PICTURES Chris Simmons

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Upholstery still looks contemporary

2003 Auto-Sleeper Executive SE

BASE VEHICLE

Peugeot Boxer LWB chassis-cab

ENGINE

2.8-litre HDi four-cylinder turbo-diesel

MILEAGE

12,020 miles

PRICE

£27,995

PRICE WHEN NEW

£38,251

BERTHS

2/3

NUMBER OF OWNERS

2

MODIFICATIONS

Fiamma F45i roll-out awning

FOR As-new condition inside and out, powerful engine, surprisingly contemporary soft furnishings

AGAINST All-in-one washroom, small and poorly-lit overcab bed is for occasional use only

THINK 'AUTO-SLEEPER Coachbuilt' and chances are that this superb Executive SE will be the image that springs to mind. The rounded monocoque conversion has gone down in motor caravanning history as something of a legend for its svelte looks, superb engineering and dogged resistance to water ingress. You can even forgive the pseudo-Morris Marina habitation door handle once you've sampled its reassuring rifle-bolt operation and the sweet 'click' of the door closing to. Only now are mainstream rivals able to match this superb level of engineering.

I was a little dubious at first about the high-ish asking price relative to its general market value, but once you've examined this example more closely, the reasons soon become obvious.

For one thing, that mileage reading isn't a misprint: it really has covered just 12,000 miles, something that's reinforced by the general condition of this five-year-old contender. The Executive's next owner might

want to invest in a set of wheel trims to cover the rather plain-looking steel wheels, and maybe slap a lick of paint on the habitation door hinges to cover the small areas where the original paint has chipped off, but that's the sum total of the exterior issues. There's even a Fiamma F45i awning in situ.

It's inside that the 'wow' factor really hits home, though. Put simply, it still looks pretty much the same as it must have done the day it rolled off the production line, with surprisingly contemporary upholstery allied to warm, flawless cabinetry and a general feeling of solidity. Those eagle of eye may spot very faint swirls in the stainless steel of the hob and sink, but you really do have to look hard to spot them, while the oven, grill and 70-litre Dometic fridge, while obviously used, have also seen the attentions of regular cleaning over the years. Again, they're in near-immaculate condition.

If the Executive shows its age anywhere, it's in the old-fashioned washroom,

where the facilities (bench-type toilet, tip-up sink and the separately-plumbed shower) are squeezed into one room. Again, it's all clean and sweet-smelling and has been well-maintained (and the shower tray is actually of a good size), but in these enlightened days of monobloc water-preserving mixer taps, the twin shower taps fitted herein do manage to feel just a little bit behind the times.



Even the kitchen looks pretty unblemished



Cabinets are solidly built



This design is a svelte classic

Benefits of Auto-Sleepers

The very reasons that put some buyers off this most British of motorhomes can actually work strongly in their favour. Being so British and so restrained in style and layout – and frequently aimed at couples and ralliers – means that younger buyers, and especially those with families, look elsewhere.

As such, Auto-Sleeper motorhomes often tend to be bought by more mature motor caravanners – and often retired couples – who, by their very nature, tend to cherish their charges with the sort of love and attention that your average family-friendly coachbuilt can only dream of.

Even better news is the fact that Auto-Sleepers established its reputation by building motorhomes up to a standard, not down to a price; so while the décor and soft furnishings may not be of the whizz-bang variety, you can be sure that the conversion as a whole is bolted together more sturdily than most.

2



Popular layout and lively décor



Linen-effect sink and cooker look unused



'Handed' handles are a minor gripe

2006 Auto-Sleeper Eton

BASE VEHICLE

Ford Transit 90 T300
LWB chassis-cab

ENGINE

2.4-litre TDi four-cylinder
turbo-diesel

MILEAGE

7114 miles

PRICE

£29,995

PRICE WHEN NEW

£35,995

BERTHS

2

NUMBER OF OWNERS

1

MODIFICATIONS

Fiamma bike rack

FOR 2.4-litre, popular layout, immaculate inside and out

AGAINST Upholstery hue, manual gearbox

I HAVE A BIT OF A SOFT SPOT for the Auto-Sleeper Eton, because I tested a model identical to Marquis Billing's example when it was brand new, back in 2006, and I distinctly recall being rather taken with it.

This being yet another used motorhome with so few miles on the clock that it's barely been run-in, it's hardly surprising that the Eton's exterior is simply immaculate. The single previous owner ticked the options box marked 'two-bike rack', but elsewhere, the Eton is to standard spec.

Stepping aboard this particular Eton, I can pretty much guarantee that you'll stop dead in your tracks and stare, slack-jawed and wide-eyed, around you as you drink in the striking upholstery (it really is that vivid a shade of violet!).

While the settees are (as you'd expect, given its obviously light use) still quite hard, they're comfy enough (and will 'give' with more use) and offer plenty of support. It does seem odd that the driver's seat doesn't swivel to make the most of those long settees, however.

Elsewhere, you'll struggle to find fault – one sticky roof locker catch aside – inside the Eton. The linen-effect sink/drainer and hob look every bit as unused as the dual-fuel domestic-style cooker and 77-litre Dometic Power Fridge. There isn't even any flame-blooming on the hob-top's pan supports.

The warm, light cabinetry is much the same as Auto-Sleepers uses today, although – unfortunately – the same goes for the occasionally frustrating 'handed' locker door

handles that are beautifully engineered, but not entirely intuitive in use. Top marks for the Bürstner-esque bendy lounge lights and large roof light.

The washroom is in the same corner as in the Executive, and though no bigger, stretches to a quasi-separate cubicle for the shower and wash basin, using a tambour sliding door.



Only a stropky clutch lets it down

5 top tips for an Auto-Sleeper

1 Check tech-specs: some base vehicles' badging (especially Fords) don't say which engine is used.

2 Check the floor: Auto-Sleepers are habitually bought for rallies and events, so they can get well used.

3 Check upholstery: earlier models are knocking on a bit, so make sure the seats are still firm and supportive.

4 Check the gearbox: pre-current shape, Transit-based vehicles had recalcitrant gears, especially into second.

5 Check registration document for dates: in lean spells some models pre-registered by dealers.

BUYERS' CHECKLIST

Follow this *Motor Caravan* checklist to help you make the right decisions when buying a used motorhome

DRIVING Make sure you test-drive the vehicle before purchase. Check for mechanical problems (especially if buying privately) and driving comfort.

BODYWORK Check for tell-tale signs of corrosion or badly-repaired accident damage.

CONVERSION Is the conversion suitable for your requirements? Will the motorhome fit comfortably on your driveway?

PDI Check if any minor repairs are taken care of in the dealer's pre-delivery inspection.

HPI Has the vehicle had an HPI check? This will reveal if a motorhome is subject to any outstanding finance, if it's an insurance write-off, or is stolen. Call Equifax-HPI on 01722 422422 or visit www.hpicheck.com

MOT Most dealers will give their vehicles a year's MOT. A complete set of old MOT certificates will help verify the mileage. An MOT test is also a good way of checking a vehicle that's being sold privately.

TAX Check to see if a year's road tax is provided.

REGISTRATION DOCUMENT Study this to verify the van's ownership history.

WARRANTY This should be provided by a dealer. You need to check the small print and stick to the servicing instructions.

FSH Has the motorhome got a full service history? Check with the vehicle's service booklet. Most dealers will give a motorhome a full mechanical and interior service before you buy.

FINANCE Check interest rates with banks/building societies, since the dealer may not have the best deal on offer.

EXPERT CHECK It may be worth paying for a mechanical check-over from the AA or the RAC. Autovan Services also offers a nationwide checking service for the habitation part of the vehicle's conversion: call 01202 848414 for details.

DON'T RUSH Take time to consider your decision before leaving a deposit and signing the order form. There are plenty of good motor caravans on sale, so don't feel under pressure.

3



The tiny tear in the sofa is easily fixed

There's a dual-fuel cooker and 77L fridge

2007 Auto-Sleeper Ascot

BASE VEHICLE

Ford Transit 135 T350 LWB chassis-cab

ENGINE

2.4-litre four-cylinder TDCi turbo-diesel

MILEAGE

513 miles

PRICE

£36,995

PRICE WHEN NEW

£40,550

BERTHS

2

NUMBER OF OWNERS

1

MODIFICATIONS

There's a factory-fitted flush-fit awning

FOR This really is a brand-new motorhome, with low mileage and no past owners except the dealer. Spacious U-shaped rear lounge and a super base vehicle

AGAINST Small tear in lounge upholstery needs fixing and the vehicle is a pre-registered example

THIS IS ANOTHER MOTORHOME I tested when it was new – at the time I pitched it up against an Autocruise – and for all I know, this may be the exact same model, for, with just over 500 miles on the clock, it's never been used in anger!

The reason for such low use becomes clear when you check the Ascot's history. It was registered in June 2007 – but only to Marquis itself. So this is a brand-new motorhome that's never been slept in, cooked in or lived in in any way.

As such, it's hardly surprising that the vehicle is in such superb order inside and out. There's a small tear in the rear settee upholstery, and the plastic surround to the main control panel over the door has come adrift, but elsewhere, you'd be hard-pushed to distinguish it from new.

The layout is very different to that of the Eton, with an unequal-length U-shaped end lounge, centre kitchen and forward washroom (this latter being identical to the Eton's). I always felt the swivel passenger seat looked a bit like a 'naughty chair', located as it is miles away from the action in the main lounge out back, but at least the

upholstery itself is considerably less in-your-face than the Eton's. The vehicle's next owner might want to attend to that seat rip before pressing it into full service, however.

The aforementioned kitchen is well equipped with a 2040E dual-fuel domestic cooker and 77-litre Power Fridge, and sports slightly more worktop space than the Eton's similar affair. The washroom, meanwhile, is all-but identical to the Eton's, right down to the diametrically opposed twin drains in the shower tray.

You should thoroughly enjoy driving this motorhome, too, since it sports Ford's top 2.4-litre TDCi engine – the clue lies in the six-speed manual gearbox, where the Eton's transmission is a five-speeder.



Ascot drives like a thoroughbred

Motor Caravan's choice

2006 Auto-Sleeper Eton

It's hard to turn down the super Executive SE, with its tiny mileage, big engine and proven layout. And whoever bags the Ascot will net a bargain. But I like the Eton, décor and all. It's £2000 more than the Executive, more contemporary and as-new.

Dealer fact file

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