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Glorious Gloucester

■ WORDS AND PICTURES Ed O'Connor

Marquis' latest addition to its Mercedes-only range attempts to right the Berkshire's few wrongs with a fixed bed and better washroom. But has it worked?



VAN ON TEST
Marquis County Gloucester
£49,995 OTR. £52,995 as tested



Step inside the Marquis and discover what impressed judges of the Design & Drive Competition

EVERYONE THOUGHT THAT Marquis and Auto-Sleepers had hit the nail right on the head when they unveiled the all-new Mercedes-based County range in early 2008, and certainly its engineering and build quality were up there with the very best – the Berkshire in particular performing well in the Caravan Club's Design & Drive competition.

For a flagship motorhome, though, its

EXTERIOR FEATURES 9/10

It's hardly breaking news to say that few other British manufacturers build a motorhome quite as well as Auto-Sleepers does, but when you can further factor in a base vehicle as top-notch as the latest Mercedes Sprinter, it's probably fair to say that mainstream mass-production rivals currently have no real like-for-like answer.

The Gloucester's conversion may look suspiciously familiar to anyone who's ever owned an Auto-Sleepers Nuevo or Sigma, but that's not to damn the newcomer with faint praise, for while it might not be the last word in envelope-pushing style, the flush-fit windows, doors and awning, allied to weapons-grade grey water drains and a conversion door that closes with a reassuring thud, not a wince-inducing clatter, add up to what must rate as the classiest and best-engineered British motorhome in its class. The rear elevation is disappointingly close in appearance to 'cooking' Sigmas and Nuevos, however.

Full marks are further due to the minimalist graphics and lack of contrasting skirt/bumper colours, although this does have the adverse effect of making what is already an enormous motorhome appear more gargantuan still. Certainly, anyone eyeing the Gloucester's towering overcab moulding with some unease will be relieved to hear that Auto-Sleepers is planning to unveil lower-profile Marquis models later on this year.

Incidentally, our test model's alloy wheels form part of the £3,000 Anniversary Pack, which also comprises automatic transmission, cruise control and cab air conditioning too.

washroom is a bit poky (even if its lounge and kitchen most certainly are not), and so the International Caravan & Motorhome 2008 show, at the NEC in October, saw the launch of a sister brand on the same 3880kg long-wheelbase chassis, the Gloucester, which makes do with a slightly smaller front lounge, but makes up for it by offering an electric French bed and corner washroom with a fully separate shower. The question is, does it cut the mustard?

ON THE ROAD 9/10

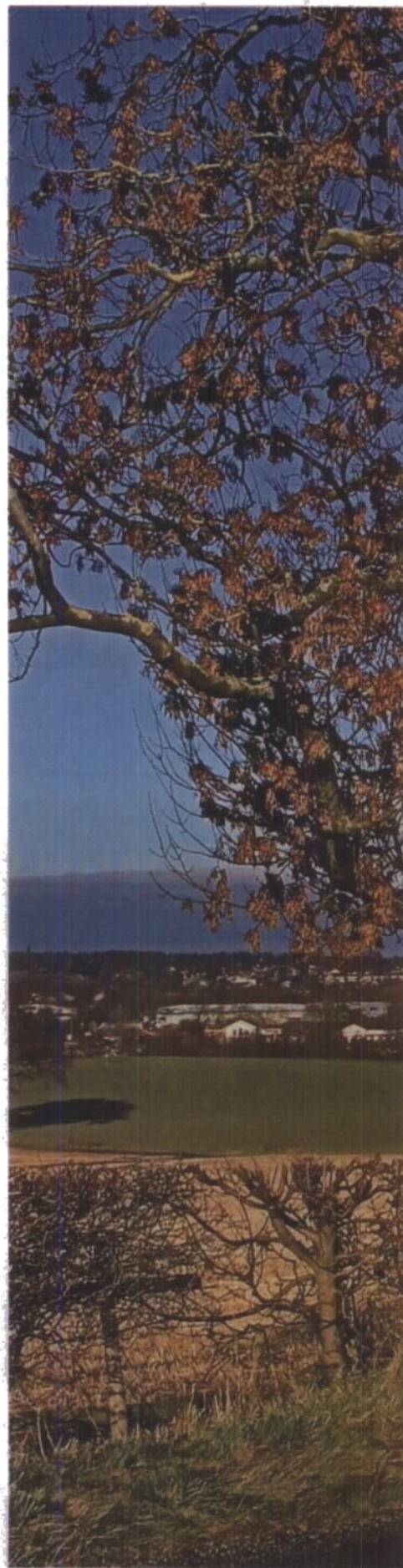
Happily, the Gloucester rolls off Auto-Sleepers' Willersey production line packing the Sprinter's 150bhp CDI turbo-diesel engine as standard, although it is allied to a six-speed manual gearbox whose shift pattern takes quite a bit of getting used to (especially reverse) and is rather on the notchy side. Less-than perfect transmission aside, however, the 150bhp engine is more than man enough to haul the Gloucester along at a respectable lick, and has the added benefit of being well endowed in the torque department, and nicely muted at cruising speeds. The growl you get under full throttle is rather appealing, too.

Our Anniversary Pack-enhanced test model, however, meant that the Sprinter took care of its own gearshifts, and I have to say the Fiat's ComfortMatic auto will have to be pretty good to equal, let alone better, the Sprinter's S-Class saloon-derived unit.

You can hoick the dash-mounted shift lever over to shift gears manually, of course, but I imagine 99 per cent of owners will leave it in full auto-mode and enjoy the nicely slurred up and down shifts and – strangely – rather snappily kickdown.

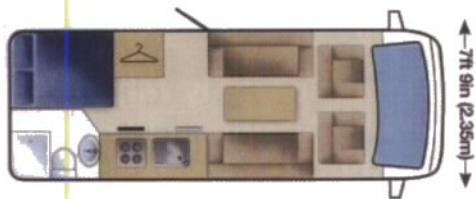
Handling is, as you'd expect with that enormous overcab moulding, hardly akin to being on rails, but the steering is nicely weighted (and blessed with a surprisingly good turning circle), and the ride comfort is at least a match for Ford's previously class-leading Transit.

In fact, only a kitchen unit that even with the oven pans and shelves removed and muted beneath the end bedroom duvet, prevented this motorhome from getting a full-house 10 out of 10. ▶



Marquis Gloucester

£49,995 on the road (£52,995 as tested)



BASE VEHICLE

Mercedes-Benz Sprinter LWB chassis-cab with 2.2-litre 150bhp CDI turbodiesel engine and six-speed automatic gearbox

BERTHS

4/5

BED DIMENSIONS

Central double 2210mm x 1220mm (7' 3" x 4'), double 1980 x 1370mm, overcab 2030 x 1100mm (6' 8" x 3' 7")

MTPLM

3880kg

PAYLOAD

420kg (est)

GAS

2 x 15kg Butane (2 x 13kg Propane)

BATTERY

100Ah

FRESH WATER

91 litres (underslung)

WASTE WATER

76 litres (underslung)

BASE VEHICLE

Mercedes-Benz Sprinter LWB chassis-cab with 2.2-litre 150bhp CDI engine and six-speed automatic gearbox. Anti-lock brakes, electronic brakeforce distribution, all-disc brakes with Brake Assist, MacPherson strut front suspension, 3880kg chassis

STANDARD EQUIPMENT

ABS, electronic brakeforce distribution, electronic stability programme, acceleration skid control, start-off assist, brake assist, remote central locking, electric windows, electric door mirrors

OPTIONS

Anniversary Pack 1 includes alloy wheels, cruise control and cab air conditioning (£2,000). Anniversary Pack 2 includes Pack 1 plus automatic transmission (£3,000)

MANUFACTURER

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www.marquismotorhomes.co.uk

FOR

Exceptional build quality, much-improved washroom, Frolexus electric rear bed, kitchen, base vehicle

AGAINST

No exterior storage, no rear travel seats, small overcab bed

PRACTICALITY 8/10

Some form of rear travel seat provision would have resulted in an extra mark being added to this section's tally, given that the Gloucester can sleep four adults, but the parallel lounge design obviously precludes any such installation.

Elsewhere, only a noticeably smaller lounge than the Berkshire's (and that titchy dining table) really counts against the Gloucester – the general layout being arguably the best of all worlds, both cab seats swivelling easily (albeit with the seatbelts annoyingly in tow) and hot, spitting pans in the kitchen being a sensible, safe distance away from people sat in the lounge.

Top marks are due to the super-duper rear bed and excellent washroom, too.

KITCHEN 8/10

It's hard to find anything wrong with the Gloucester's galley. On the face of it, you've got it all, from high-quality equipment (including a domestic-style dual-fuel spark-ignition full cooker, hood extractor fan and a 700W Daewoo microwave oven that's (for once) positioned at a sensibly low level), through to an easy-clean linen-finish sink/drainer and a worktop provision that's better-than-average, especially when you take into account the Chinchilla glass sink/drainer cover.

You might perhaps have expected a slightly bigger fridge than the 88-litre example supplied (although this is actually the biggest fridge you can get on any County), and opening the cupboard to the right of the cooker reveals, not the handy storage space you may have been hoping for, but all the boiler gubbins), but storage elsewhere is pretty good, and the whole area is well-lit.



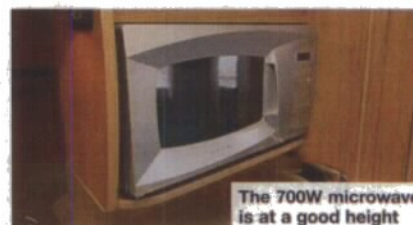
This supportive bed is electric!

NIGHT-TIME 9/10

Once again, the Gloucester misses out on a full-house score by the tiniest of margins. View this as a four-berth (or better still a two-berth) motorhome, and by all means add that 10th mark. Unfortunately, Auto-Sleepers persist in referring to the overcab area as a bedroom, and with precious little headroom, just 3ft 7in of width to work with and not much in the way of lighting, that's arguably a bridge too far in our book. Six-year-old Johnny might be able to put up with a night or two up there, but we doubt anyone much older than an early teenager would. No, this is an area best used as somewhere to store bedding during the day.

As for the other beds, well, you're spoilt for choice. The central double is properly long (at 7ft 3in), if of only average width (4ft), but it makes up for that in a jiffy (pull the seat bases together, and rearrange the cushions) and actually looks considerably bigger than the bald figures suggest.

It's the rear bed you'll really want, though. It's the widest bed available (although, strangely, not the longest), it has the best view of the well-hidden (when not in use) flat screen TV, and its beautifully supportive and comfortable Frolexus bed base is actually electrically adjustable. Bedtime bliss? Yes, we think so!



The 700W microwave is at a good height



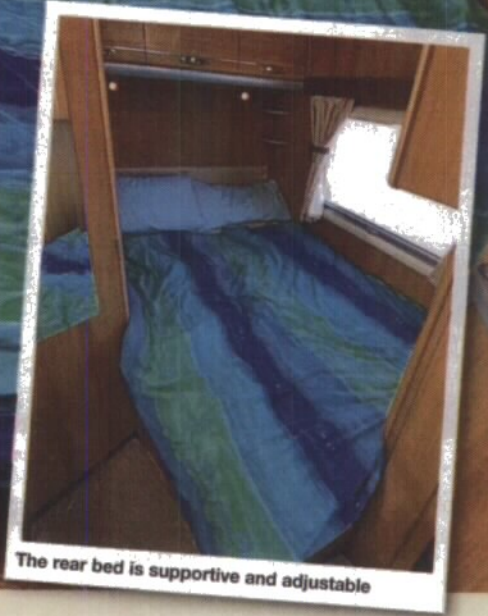
The well-lit kitchen has all that you need



The superb Mercedes Sprinter makes the perfect base for this high quality motor caravan

The cab seats swivel round easily for comfy lounging, but the seatbelts come too

This 7ft 3in bed should suit even the tallest motor caravanner!



The rear bed is supportive and adjustable

The Gloucester sleeps five, but it makes an absolute palace for two!

DINING

7/10

After a promisingly strong start, the Gloucester rather falters in this section of the test, and it's all down to a folding table that simply isn't big enough or wide enough for a motorhome this size.

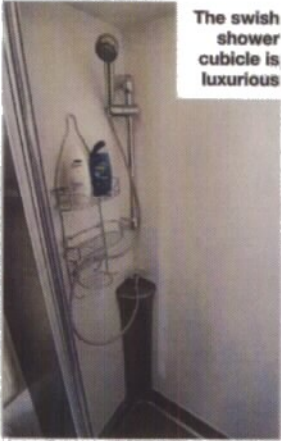
It's probably an illusion, but the table looks no bigger than the necessarily emaciated one Auto-Sleepers fits to its van conversions. That's fine in something as compact as a Warwick or Symbol, but in something as full-fat as this whopping great range-topper, it looks like the proverbial pea on a drum.

Certainly, it looks as though Auto-Sleepers could feasibly add two or three inches in width, and probably a foot or more in length to the current table, and still not have it dominate proceedings.

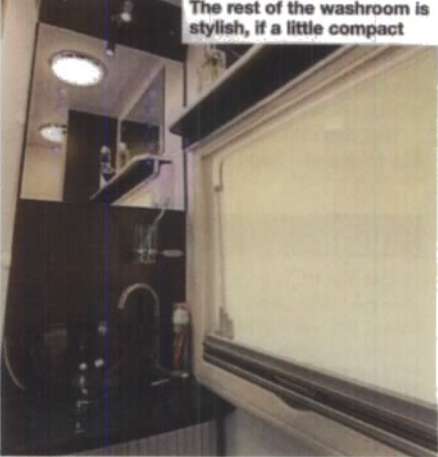
As it stands, though, you'll get no more than four diners around it, and anyone unfortunate enough to be seated either at the rear end of the lounge, or on one of the swivel cab seats, will have to resign themselves to either eating off a tray on their laps, or going hungry!



Table for four? I'd buy a bigger one!



The swish shower cubicle is luxurious



The rest of the washroom is stylish, if a little compact

WASHROOM

9/10

This is where the Gloucester really makes considerably more sense than its Berkshire sibling. Where the latter's all-in-one swing-wall affair is at once tiny, cold-feeling and gloomy, the Gloucester's deluxe washroom is positively a talking point.

For one thing, it sports a properly separate (as well as good-sized and well-lit) shower cubicle that's positioned sensibly at the far rear of the room. This leaves the toilet free even if there's someone having a

shower, and it's blessed with a pair of handy metal storage shelves.

The washroom area proper is a little on the small side (hence the missing 10th mark), but it makes up for this by sporting plenty of surface and cupboard space, together with a much-needed injection of style, from the smoked plexi-glass stand-alone washbasin, through to the faux carbon-fibre trim and groovy blue pin-lights sunk into one of the mirrors. Excellent!



There's great storage space under the rear bed

STORAGE 9/10

The Gloucester puts in a strong showing in this section, with, yet again, only a curious lack of exterior skirt storage (something its Berkshire sibling does have) counting against it. The storage potential beneath the French rear bed (which is accessible via an exterior locker door) is obvious, as is the generous space available in the void over the cab area (the best use for it), but what is less obvious is the space elsewhere.

The nearside settee base, for instance, lifts to reveal a large central pull-out drawer,

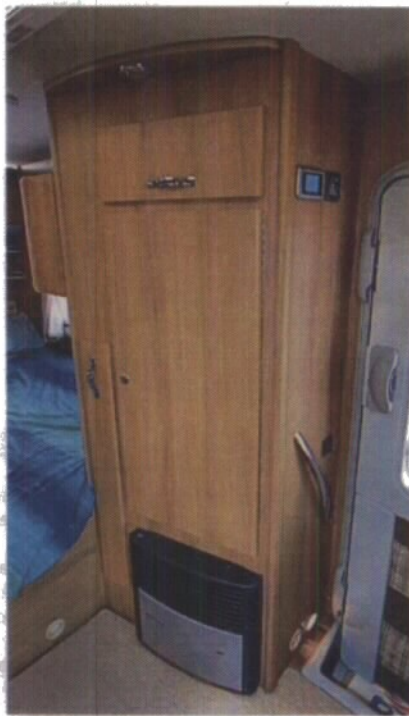
BUILD QUALITY 9/10

If only the kitchen unit hadn't rattled like a tin tray full of china crockery during the test drive, this would have been a richly deserved full-house of marks. Seriously. Conversion noise aside, I guarantee you'll struggle as much as I did to pick holes in the Gloucester's standards of build quality. In fact, with the possible exception of the draughted mixture of 'handed' roof locker catches Auto-Sleepers insists on fitting to its vehicles (why not just fit central thumb buttons instead?), the Gloucester emerges from this section of the test pretty much without a blemish.

Cabinetry is first class throughout, the floors, walls and ceilings respond to the thump of a fist by feeling like they're made of bricks, and I failed to find one example of untreated wood, missing screws or wonky door alignment - the washroom door, in particular, looking and feeling solid enough to double as a domestic door.

with two good-sized storage pods either side. There's external access here, too. Opposite, meanwhile, only the (admittedly substantial) back of the gas locker impedes the still-impressive space lurking beneath the offside settee.

The wardrobe is a good size, too, even if it isn't a properly four-square shape.



The wardrobe is a funny shape, but nice and big



Parallel lines make for practical lounging

LOUNGING 8/10

Something had to give in the transition between Berkshire and Gloucester, and it's arguably in the lounge area. However, this is not to unduly criticise the Gloucester, for any motorhome lounge you care to mention tends to look pretty anaemic compared to the almost hilariously massive U-shaped affair sported by the Berkshire.

In isolation, the Gloucester's lounge is actually pretty good: parallel settees make for convivial face-to-face get-togethers, whether it's a romantic tête à tête or a noisy game of cards for six; while those swivel cab seats add a further two lounging posts.

If we have a slight criticism, it's that there's nowhere obvious to prop your head if you want to use the settees as a pair of chaises longues, although you could recline in one of the cab seats and prop your legs on the nearest settee.

Motor Caravan says

The ladies and gentleman of the press have not, I think it's fair to say, been over-effusive in their praise of Auto-Sleepers' Mercedes-based flagship models, but the Gloucester changes all that. Admittedly, its exterior styling is still a little bit too close to that of cheaper models for comfort, and its dining table is comically small, but there are no other major issues about which to complain.

It is beautifully built, sports an excellent kitchen and washroom, some of the best beds in the business, a perfectly amenable lounge and an embarrassment of storage, all powered by the classiest base vehicle you can buy. No doubt about it: Gloucester is the brightest star in the County firmament.

Exterior features	9/10
On the road	9/10
Lounging	8/10
Dining	7/10
Night-time	9/10
Storage	9/10
Kitchen	8/10
Washroom	9/10
Practicality	8/10
Build quality	9/10
Overall mark	85/100

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