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NOW THAT FIAT HAS FINALLY got around to launching its long-awaited Comfort-Matic automatic transmission, those manufacturers who build on the Ducato's Boxer and Relay siblings have been left wondering when their self-shifters are going to come on stream. Auto-Sleepers, which builds on the Peugeot Boxer among others, has clearly decided that the wait will either be too long, or come to nought, and has taken the unprecedented pre-emptive step of launching an entirely new range of quality motorhomes based on the Mercedes Sprinter – which has had an auto option right from its launch – exclusive to the 10-branch Marquis dealer network.

However, the automatic transmission is an option – and at £3250 (which includes an upgrade to the 150bhp engine, alloy wheels, cruise control and cab air conditioning), is an expensive one to boot – so we wanted to see how the standard model's six-speed manual gearbox allied to the less potent 129bhp engine stacks up.

EXTERIOR FEATURES 9/10

No doubt about it: the three-pointed star treatment really suits this latest addition to the Auto-Sleeper ranks. That's the good news. The bad news is that anyone expecting a whizz-bang new-look conversion to go with the new base vehicle is going to be disappointed. From the cab back, in fact, the Marquis Devon is all-but indistinguishable from the Boxer-based Auto-Sleeper Nuevo – inside and out.

It's not entirely bad news, though, because only a myopic serial pessimist could call the Nuevo unattractive, and the Devon is, if anything, even better looking, thanks to its ice-white flanks and lack of contrasting lower panels. Its minimalist graphics work better, too, and the (optional) alloy wheels are the final finishing touch.

And with the Nuevo-esque looks comes Nuevo-esque quality: flush-fit windows and doors (the conversion door locks and unlocks via the Mercedes remote key fob, too), beautifully aligned panels and a signature heavily-moulded rear/roof panel treatment that looks great, but helps to prevent rainwater from pooling, too.

Being the smallest of the Counties means that exterior adornments are few and far between, but traditionalists like me will approve of the separate header tank fill point for the toilet, the nearside ribbed skirting locker, the enormous metal wide-bore grey water drain (complete with proper metal tap) and the low-set gas locker.

The electric step pops out at a usefully low level, too, bridging what would otherwise have been quite a climb inside, while anyone wondering whether or not our test model's flush-fit awning is standard-fitment can rest assured that it most definitely is.

Sprinter

■ WORDS AND PICTURES Ed O'Connor

It's nearly a decade since Auto-Sleepers built on a Mercedes, and with the option of an automatic gearbox, the Sprinter-based Devon is turning heads



VAN ON TEST
Auto-Sleeper Devon
£42,495 OTR



On the forecourt
at Marquis
Motorhomes

ahead



The three-pointed star magic has worked a treat

ON THE ROAD

8/10

The Devon sports a 129bhp engine under its bonnet as standard so this new Sprinter-based Auto-Sleeper feels pokey on the road. A brief test-drive of this powerful Devon with a part load on board showed it to be a spirited performer so whether you're embarking on a short UK break or a longer stint on the continent, you'll make swift progress.

That said, inclines did necessitate a downshift into fifth or fourth gear via the six-speed manual gearbox, but on the flat it felt surprisingly gutsy, if a bit vocal, under hard acceleration.

The manual gearbox is disappointing, however. Our test example admittedly had just a handful of miles on it, and the shift action will almost certainly loosen up, but where brand new Ducato/Boxer-based motorhomes I've tested have sported a

pleasingly mechanical feel to their gearbox, this one bordered on the unpleasantly notchy, with upshifts into second feeling ill-at-ease. Certainly, anyone coming to a County from a sweet-shifting Ford Transit-based Marquis such as the Hampshire will find it takes some getting used to.

Selecting reverse gear feels a bit odd, too, as it involves lifting a sleeve on the gearlever, pushing across to the left and then pulling backwards. Familiarity should, however, knock the edge off this rather unnatural-feeling shift pattern.

Elsewhere, the Devon scores very highly, with next to no discernible conversion noise (although more severe potholes can elicit a wince-inducingly loud rattle from the fitted crockery) and handling that, while not quite on a par with the class-leading X2/50 Ducato/Boxer siblings, is nevertheless tidy and predictable, the low-profile body clearly helping in this respect. Ride comfort is a big



The gear pattern will take some getting used to

improvement on the overly-firm Fiat/Peugeot twins, but where the softer-sprung Transit still has the edge in this respect, it's nice to know that the Mercedes has an ESP (electronic skid prevention) system fitted as standard in addition to the usual ABS brakes system.