

On Test Autocruise Oakmont



I must admit to feeling pretty down in the dumps when the phone rang. Two minutes later however, my mood had brightened considerably as a six-day trip to the Champagne region of France was on offer. As a confirmed Francophile and lover of the grape in all its forms, this seemed just the ticket. But what motorcaravan to take? Although I could've simply saddled up my VW California rising roof camper and headed off, I fancied something more in keeping with a champagne lifestyle (after all my middle name is Charlie) and I had just the 'van in mind... Just one phone call and an e-mail later, I'd bagged myself one of the very latest luxury models from a respected British manufacturer. The Autocruise Oakmont features an island bed layout; that's a fixed double - with easy access on three sides - in its own bedroom in the rear.

PRIVILEGED LIFESTYLE

GB Privilege specialises in escorted motorhome tours. This holiday, organised for IH Motor Campers' fifteenth birthday (see Clubs pages in this issue), saw me travel via Dover to Calais, then 200-or-so miles south to the Champagne region and Chalons-en-Champagne.

This was going to be the ideal opportunity to seriously test the mettle of one of the first new models to hit the streets since the Swift Group took over terminally ill Autocruise. So new was the Oakmont, that I found myself sitting behind the wheel of the first example to be built; it wasn't long since I'd been checking out the vital statistics of this very 'van at February's NEC show.

So, after packing top hat, tail coat, monocle and spats an easy trip south from Autocruise's Mexborough home saw me pitched just 15 minutes from Dover, at the Caravan Club's oh-so-convenient Black Horse Farm site and - you might have guessed - enjoying a couple of pints of London Pride in the nearby Black Horse.

IT'S A FIAT?

Well, actually no, but the Oakmont is underpinned and propelled by top-dog, Fiat Ducato's closest relative, the Peugeot Boxer. For those that don't know, both base vehicles



Words & pictures
by Dave Hurrell



The Oakmont provided luxury living for a champagne trip to France

AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £51,555
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Peugeot Boxer
Al-Ko chassis cab
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of twin-sofa lounge, nearside kitchen, offside washroom, separate rear bedroom with island double bed
- **ECONOMY:** 22mpg overall



ISLAND 'CRUISE

Autocruise Oakmont on 3.0-litre Peugeot Boxer

*A champagne lifestyle beckoned as one of the latest
British low profiles ventured across La Manche*





are built on the same production line at the Sevel Plant in southern Italy and - in this form - are identical in all but badges and name.

Although Autocruise could've fitted the smaller and Peugeot-specific 2.2-litre, 120bhp engine as standard, it has grasped the motivation nettle with maximum force - three litres and 157 horses live under the Oakmont's bonnet. A six-speed gearbox lurks amongst the mechanicals; its top ratio is nice and tall - perfect for relaxed autoroute cruising. A squint under the bonnet revealed that this example had yet to have the remedial work carried out that helps solve the new Sevel's tendency to allow water into the works. A leaking scuttle seal allows the wet stuff to run down and collect on top of the engine and other vital areas, so if the job's been done you should see a plastic cover atop the motor and notice that the plastic scuttle moulding's central join has been resealed. Some helpful soul had applied liberal amounts of black mastic to the underside of the scuttle moulding here - not a Fiat technician I hope, as the job reminded me of those things that hang down in caves and were, I seem to remember, an obsession of my geography teacher. No matter, in spite of rain, the Peugeot performed faultlessly throughout the test.

Aft of the motivation department, this Peugeot sports an Al-Ko chassis - something that makes a better job of supporting the Oakmont's 7.7-metre length than the standard frame could ever hope to do. You get independent rear suspension with this set-up too; again better for ride and handling than the standard frame's cart springs.

LION AROUND

Peugeot's Lion motif provides the perfect visual metaphor for this motorhome's on-road performance. The latest cab is one of the most comfortable and car-like there is - surprising for a commercial vehicle you might think: maybe, but not as surprising as the performance from the range topping motor. I could - conveniently - describe the engine note as being like a lion's roar, but in reality there's more of a purposeful Leo-type growl when you squeeze the go pedal. There is power aplenty here and amazingly, not a hint of turbo lag. Just 'look' at the throttle and you're off!

Progress through the gears can be swift as this engine has plenty of torque too. Unlike previous examples I've tested, this one was more than happy to tackle that tall top gear from around 45mph on the flat. Third proved to be particularly useful in town where few gear changes were needed. Out on the French autoroutes high speed performance was as close to effortless as you're likely to get in any motorhome of this size: as a long distance tourer, the Oakmont should not disappoint. Downsides? Well, all that power comes at a price and one that's going ever higher as fuel prices hit the stratosphere: a sickly grin crosses my gnarled old features when I think back to the days when the idea of fuel at a pound a gallon seemed ridiculous! These days it'll cost you around 90 quid to fill your Oakmont with fuel, while at the end of the test it was covering 22 miles for every gallon of DERV consumed.

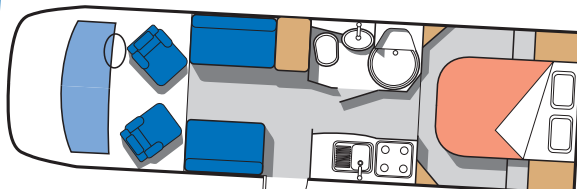
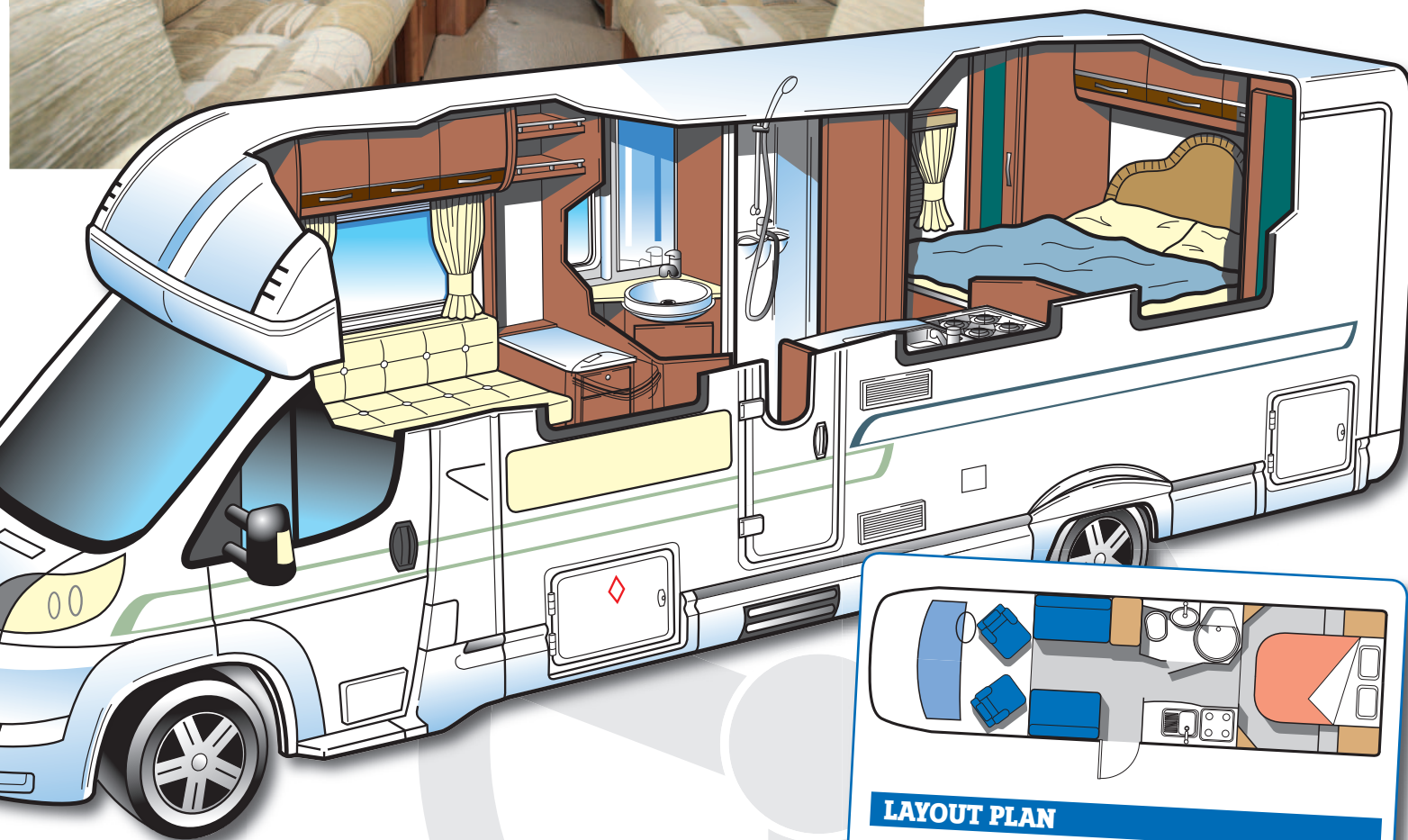
Finally, there's the vexed question of the judder: the current Sevel-built base vehicle's reluctance to reverse smoothly uphill. I'm pleased to report that the Oakmont reversed





tread, electrically operated step and superb quality entrance door that sports a window, gas strut stay and key-operated lock that's one of the easiest I've used. In spite of its Al-Ko chassis, this 'van is quite tall and care is needed when climbing and descending the outside step - more so when it's wet.

The entrance delivers you into the lounge, where twin sofas look welcoming. A sharp right turn sees you in the nearside-located galley with the washroom opposite. Finally, a step up leads to that all-important bedroom, with longitudinal double bed dominating the scene. Commendably, the Oakmont manages to fit all these in an overall length that's well under eight metres. The downside of this is that just about every area is of more modest proportions than those found in competitors that often break the eight-and-a-half-metre mark.



LAYOUT PLAN

- OVERALL LENGTH: 7.71m (25ft 3.5in)*
- OVERALL WIDTH: 2.20m (7ft 3in)

uphill without juddering, but with the engine spinning at 2500rpm and with me slipping the clutch to maintain control. Fact is, the reverse gear does seem to be quite high and I would not try to go backwards uphill without slipping the clutch anyway.

Meanwhile, Fiat engineers are, we are assured, looking into this problem: my researches have discovered that Ford's Transit and Volkswagen's T5 reverse without drama. I'm also told that the Renault Master reverses in a fashion that would please even the most discerning Italian tank driver!

HEART OF OAKMONT

And so to the living quarters where it's that island bed in its boudoir that'll be the main reason to buy this 'van. You enter via a twin-



1 The comfortable cab hides Peugeot's most powerful motor

2 Kitchen and washroom stand together directly aft of the lounge

3 The interior proved to be comfortable to live with, but I kept my red wine away from the sofas!



NATURAL CHOICE

Swivelling cab seats and twin, inward-facing sofas will bring a smile to the faces of most British motorhomers - this layout is a favourite that's comfy all-year round. Convincingly 'woody' cabinets look classy with silver trim and dark inserts, but I was less impressed with the lack of positive latching on overhead lockers.

The fabrics follow the latest light-coloured neutral trend and appeared hardwearing: I simply drunk my red wine outside!

Seriously though, the combination of materials - with proper lined curtains at the windows - made for a classy-looking interior that proved to be a pleasure to live with. The compact nature of the lounge means the sofas are quite short - feet-up lounging is only achieved sat on the cab seats with feet on the adjacent sofa. Even so, six people can be accommodated when entertaining. The Autocruise tendency to offer simple, but practical features, here takes the form of a low-level cupboard. Its top provides a place for drinks and snacks, while adjacent sockets also make it a home for your TV at an excellent viewing height.

Mealtimes see a freestanding table emerge from dedicated storage under the island bed. This table is easy to erect - standing between the sofas - but less easy to extract from its lair. As a regular attendee of lifting and handling courses during my previous life in engineering, I can confirm that all that 'straight back and lift with your legs' stuff'll be of little use here. The table offers dining for four, but its relatively modest size means is far better with just two diners. Do bear in mind though, that the adjacent cupboard top will provide reasonably spacious buffet facilities for bottles and dishes.

OAKMONT MENU

Well-equipped, but bijou best describes the kitchen which bristles with useful kit, all packed

into a small space. The cooker is the star - Spinflo's Caprice is domestic-sized and here offers three gas burners, one electric hotplate, separate grill and oven. This is just the type of kitchen kit that often gives British 'vans the edge over their Continental cousins, as you'll rarely find such a cooker fitted to 'vans from the European mainland. The Caprice proved to function as well as it looked - even the grill worked well, where others have required the use of a calendar to time the browning of your morning toast! Cooking kit is further enhanced by a standard-fit microwave oven that - in spite of its lofty setting - proved very useful. Curry is a rarity in France, but my Chicken Madras (bought in Blighty) was 'zapped' to perfection in three or four minutes. A sensible sink with drainer and a decent-sized fridge complete a capable quartet of kitchen kit. Having said that, it's storage space and work surface that are a tad tight in this galley. There's a small slab of surface to the right of the sink and a drop-in cutting board/sink cover helps, but preparing the kind of complex meals that'll do the cooker justice will involve careful pre-planning. Storage too, is modest with one of the two overhead lockers compromised by the flue of the cooker hood. Below, there's pan storage under the cooker, but only one cupboard and a small drawer.

A SWIFT WASH

The washroom is entered via a door with domestic-style handle and latch and it's here that the influence of new Autocruise owner, Swift makes its presence felt. Owners of the likes of Swift's Kon-Tiki will feel very at home in here, as this washroom is almost the same. A good-sized vanity basin is set into an equally good-sized counter that has enough room for all those essentials you need when using the little room. To the left, the ubiquitous and (in light of the new model), slightly

old-fashioned Thetford swivelling cassette loo sports electric flushing. It's here that the first problem is discovered, as access when sitting is slightly tight and swivelling room is compromised. Opposite, the separate shower is a Swift classic - drum-shaped and strongly made, it's good to use as long as you're not too wide in the beam. Light and ventilation are spot-on, with a sensible obscured opening window and a Mini Heki rooflight above. There's a good-sized locker above that sadly, is unshelved, plus a shelved cupboard below. The scene is completed by a mirror and good quality fittings that take towels, tooth cleaning gear, soap and toilet roll.





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SLEEP LIKE A LOG

The star-of-the-show island bed looks extremely inviting, neatly installed in its own room at the rear. The bed's top quality mattress rides on a sprung-slat frame - the whole thing proved to be every bit as comfy as my bed at home and my five-foot-ten frame was fine sleeping here. Taller folks might find things less comfy as my trusty tape measure revealed that this bed is just over six-foot-one long. It also has a rounded foot, which exacerbates the situation. A concertina screen slides easily across to complete separate bedroom status, creating a cosy atmosphere and complete privacy. It was only now that

I realised the space - especially at the foot of the bed - is quite tight. (I discovered it when the time came to get undressed.) At the head of the bed a comfy headboard and twin reading lamps impress, while there's enough headroom to twist bed and lockers above to sit up and read.

A second double bed can be made from the lounge sofas, which simply pull together, their backrests dropping in to complete a comfy sleeping space. It's comfy, but not too wide; with one sofa shorter than the other, maximum width is really only that of a generous double. Bear in mind also, that the Oakmont has no rear seatbelts. Aimed

I LIKED

- Relatively modest dimensions
- Powerful base vehicle
- Comfortable cab
- 'Proper' lounge
- Well-equipped kitchen
- Comfy bed
- Superb heating system
- Big external storage locker

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Bigger water tanks
- A bulk gas tank
- More heat in washroom

I DISLIKED

- Difficult access to table
- Lack of space at foot of bed

squarely at the touring couple, this 'van's second bed is mainly useful for visitors. Of course, couples who prefer to sleep separately may find these arrangements spot-on.

HOLLOW TREE

Of course, you're not interested, but if you drive west out of Calais towards Coquelles, you'll discover a retail park with a rather large branch of the French supermarket Auchan. Wine was on my shopping list (plus a baguette and some fromage for journey home) and I quickly discovered that the Oakmont's across the rear locker would accommodate plenty of the stuff. This locker's not really a garage, as it's too low, but with a door at either side and a tough GRP-lined interior it'll swallow just about all your outdoor kit and, of course, all that wine. There'll be room for a couple of folding bikes too, as long as they'll fit through the doors.

You'll also find branches of Sainsbury's, Majestic Wine Warehouse and Odd Bins at Coquelles. Me? I confined my 'retail therapy' to Auchan where there's a good selection of wines on offer in six-bottle cases.

Interior storage space starts with a big overcab locker and carries on with overhead lockers in lounge and bedroom, sadly, none



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4 The bijou galley is well equipped, but short on cupboard space

5 At mealtimes the table is best for two diners

6 Fellow travellers, Mike and Iris Jones from Dorset try the lounge

7 There's storage in the island bed's foot, but beyond, the table is tricky to get at. Notice the radiators - just like home

8 The lounge cupboard's top is a useful surface and perfect for your TV

9 The washroom comes straight from Swift

10 Up-front, the transverse lounge bed is more of a generous single

11 The reason-to-buy island bed is comfy, but not too long. His and hers wardrobes work well



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LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

Low profile coachbuilt

PRICE

- From: £51,555
- As tested: £53,492

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Peugeot Boxer Al-Ko chassis cab
- **Berths:** 4
- **Three-point belted seats:** 2 (including driver)
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle and conversion

CONSTRUCTION

Sandwich construction walls with alloy skirts, plastic wheel arches, GRP roof, rear and transition panels. Caravan entrance on UK nearside

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 7.71m (25ft 3.5in)*
- **Width:** 2.20m (7ft 3in)
- **Height:** 2.83m (9ft 3.5in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 4.60m (15ft 1in)
- **Rear overhang:** 2.13m (7ft 0in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 4250kg*
- **Payload:** TBA

INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of twin-sofa lounge, nearside kitchen, offside washroom, separate rear bedroom with island double bed

- **Insulation:** Floor 30mm, walls 25mm, roof 30mm
- **Interior height:** 1.94m (6ft 4.5in)

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 3.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 115.5kW (157bhp) @ 3500rpm
- **Transmission:** Six-speed gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 22mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs with ABS all round
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent with coil springs. Rear: Independent with torsion bars
- **Features:** Remote central locking, electric windows and mirrors, cab air-conditioning, driver's airbag, radio/CD player with steering wheel-mounted controls, cruise control, trip computer, reversing camera with LCD monitor, height-adjustable cab seats, removable cab carpet, high-level shelf, twin door bins, central 'laptop' locker, variable windscreen wiper delay 12V socket



LOUNGING AND DINING

Swivelled cab seats and short inward-facing sofas offer lounging for up to six people. Freestanding dining table emerges from dedicated storage under island double bed, to stand between the sofas and provide dining for up to four people

KITCHEN

Located amidships with one drawer and cupboard below, two lockers above. Small amount of work surface to the right of the sink, cooker hood with two-speed fan

- **Sink:** Rectangular stainless steel unit with drainer, matt chrome swivelling mixer tap, drop-in worktop/chopping board
- **Cooker:** Spinflo Caprice, with three gas burners, one mains electric hotplate, separate grill and oven all with electronic ignition, Daewoo 700W microwave oven with digital display and push-button controls
- **Fridge:** Dometic RM7401L, three-way, manual energy selection. Capacity 104 litres

WASHROOM

Thetford electric-flush swivel-bowl cassette toilet, oval plastic washbasin in vanity counter with cupboard below, mirror and locker above, fitted toilet roll holder, towel ring, tooth mug, soap dish. Separate circular shower cubicle with rigid semicircular sliding door, mixer tap, riser rail, showerhead, two robe hooks, wooden duckboard in single-outlet tray

BEDS

Lounge double

- **Length:** 2.03m (6ft 8in)
- **Width:** 1.14m (3ft 9in) max

Rear island double

- **Length:** 1.87m (6ft 1.5in)
- **Width:** 1.33m (4ft 4.5in)

STORAGE

- **Lounge:** Overcab locker, four high-level lockers, low-level shelved cupboard with drawer above, storage space under lounge seating. Bedroom: Two high-level lockers, his 'n' hers wardrobes with side-to-side hanging rails, two low-level triangular shelved

AUTOCRUISE OAKMONT

cupboards, bed base lifts on gas struts allowing access to storage space in its foot. Outside: Large across-the-rear locker with external access doors on both sides

LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Underslung, insulated. Capacity 88 litres (19.35 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung. Capacity 73 litres (16 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Alde Compact 3010 boiler, gas-mains operation
- **Space heater:** Alde Compact 3010 boiler with 'wet' radiators and circulating pump, gas-mains operation
- **Leisure battery:** 120 amp hr
- **Gas:** Capacity 2 x 7kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Lounge: Two mains-operated wall lamps, four adjustable halogen spots, one oval fluorescent ceiling lamp, fluorescent lamp in overcab locker. Kitchen: One oval fluorescent ceiling lamp, one adjustable spot, two downlighters. Washroom: One oval fluorescent ceiling lamp, two downlighters in shower. Bedroom: Four angled downlighters, two adjustable spots. Outside: One multi-LED awning lamp, two fluorescent strip lamps in rear locker
- **Sockets:** 230V: 6 (2 in lounge, 2 in kitchen, 2 in bedroom), 12V: 2 (in lounge and bedroom)
- **Control panel:** Located to left of caravan door with LCD display. Controls/indicates lights, tank levels, battery levels/charge, pump, current flow, clock, solar panel output (when fitted)
- **Blinds/curtains:** Remis pull-down blind/flyscreens to all caravan windows, lined curtains to lounge and bedroom windows, pull-together blind to windscreen, insulated pop-on internal screens to cab side windows, blinds/flyscreens to all rooflights
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base:** Cab air-conditioning and cruise control (£987)
 - **Conversion:** Wind-out awning (£950)
- Other options
- **Base:** Alloy wheels (£725), captain's seats (£881)
 - **Conversion:** Roof rack and ladder (£600), external gas point (£95)

E&OE



with shelves. In the bedroom, his 'n' hers wardrobes stand either side of the bed. Space is available under the lounge seating, but this is compromised by the heater, leisure battery and gas locker. Finally, the foot of the bed offers yet more space

Payload is, of course, an important issue, but the Oakmont's four-and-a-quarter-tonne maximum authorised weight should provide a good payload. I say should because at the time of the test, no payload figure was available. If you find this is still the case when you come to look at an Oakmont (or any other 'van for that matter) insist on a trip to a public weighbridge before you buy.

CIRCULATING THE SAP

With out doubt, the star of the Oakmont's life support is the heating system, the Alde Compact 3010. This gas/electric-powered boiler also feeds heated water to radiators throughout the interior, thus providing

heating and hot water supply that's as near as it's possible to get to your central heating system at home. An easy to use control panel provides temperature control, full programming and allows the setting of gas operation, mains electric operation, or a combination of the two. Surprisingly cold weather during the test saw me use the system in anger and it provided plenty of warmth and hot water with operation that proved to be very quiet. Setting the temperature down to around 13 degrees also kept things snug all night long.

Glitches included an over-warm bedroom and a slightly cool washroom: Autocruise promised to look into the problem, but I really am being picky here - the system is the best motorhome heater I've ever had the pleasure to use. One modification I would make is to fit a bulk gas tank, as the two 7kg cylinders that the gas locker takes would not last long in really cold conditions.

The rest of this 'van's kit is pretty much up to scratch, with an easy to use control panel that's nevertheless one of the more technical of the breed. In fine Autocruise tradition lighting is very good: high quality spots and neat ceiling lights are complemented by downlighters - four angled units in the bedroom providing very good general illumination.

Water tanks are underslung, the fresh tank is insulated and its cap is accessible through a hatch in the floor for cleaning. However, the tanks aren't the biggest and the waste tank's drain, although easy to get at, looked like a bit of a 'work in progress' - hanging down at the rear. The water filler is a plug-in affair with built-in filter and top-up facility provided by a dedicated submersible pump. A pair of Midi Heki rooflights proved to be just perfect mounted above lounge and bedroom and the Remis blinds at the windows are the latest pull-down type where blind and flyscreen are neatly linked together and follow through for easy use.

CONCLUSION

There's now a good choice of island bed layouts out there with models from many of the mainstream manufacturers competing for your attention and your pounds. Oakmont should appeal to folks that want a 'van of the type that offers a traditional lounge, but not in a vehicle that's too long. The fact that the Oakmont is well under eight metres long (where some competitors are longer) is demonstrated by compromises that include short sofas, a bijou galley, and a bedroom with a shorter island bed that offers little room at its foot. That said, this 'van is still very comfortable to live with and owners will appreciate its relative lack of bulk when on the road, in campsites and car parks. Driving proved to be very pleasurable, with huge amounts of power on tap and a cab environment that ensures comfort, even on long journeys.

I've long been a fan of Autocruise products and even with its Swift-esque washroom, the Oakmont retains the firm's approach to motorcaravan design and construction with sensible features that work well. If the Oakmont were mine I'd hanker after a larger fresh water tank and would fit a bulk gas tank, all the better to feed a heating system that's hungry in cold weather.

Thanks to its shorter bed and smaller shower the Oakmont is not very suitable for the taller or more well-built among us, but it's definitely one of the best island bedded 'vans around ■

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

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WE STAYED AT

Black Horse Farm Caravan Club Site, 385 Canterbury Road, Densole CT18 7BG (tel: 01303 892665; website: www.caravanclub.co.uk)
Camping Municipal, Chalons-en-Champagne, Rue de Plaisance, 51010 Chalons-en-Champagne, France (tel: 00 33 326 683800);
Hotel Bal Caravanning, 500 Rue du Vieux Chateau, 62890 Tournehem, France (tel: 00 33 321 356590)



12 Across-the-rear locker is a great kit swallower

13 High tech panels control life support

14 Fresh water goes in through a filter

15 Alde's wet central heating system is a star