



- 1** The European-favourite layout partners side kitchen with half-dinette up front
- 2** Centre washroom and crucial transverse double bed feature aft
- 3** Production models will be Boxer-based with 120bhp engine as standard



High top panel van conversions are enjoying resurgent sales at the moment and the brand-new Autocruise Pace goes a long way to explaining why. It's partly about desiring something more stylish than an ice-cream van lookalike. Pace certainly ticks all the boxes in that department: smart silver paint with a window-height, broad black contrast panel down each side catches the eye immediately, while the strikingly-modern, big-chinned body looks good from any angle. Combine the two and well... It's eye candy really. I'd splash out on some alloy wheels to complete that 'boulevard cruiser' look. Now, where are my Armani shades?

Sadly, the overall exterior aesthetic is compromised slightly by using a white surround for the cassette loo access door and white covers for the hook-up socket et al. It's possible to obtain all of these items in black



Words & pictures
by Jonathan Lloyd

UP TO SPEED

Autocruise Pace on LWB 2.3-litre Fiat Ducato

As revitalised Autocruise's new high top range surges ahead, we get to try the latest model - a 'van that offers a British take on a European favourite layout



and in my opinion, fitting these would have given a 100 per cent integrated look to the offside. Instead, it's only a 95 per cent success.

PACE MAKER

Before I take this any further, it is important to explain that the prototype tested was Fiat Ducato-based, while production models will be on the equivalent Peugeot Boxer (2.2-litre 120bhp). This will have no effect on the 'carcase' of the Pace (as all dimensions are the same), and most of my comments will apply across both base vehicles.

As tested, Fiat's 2.3-litre 120 horsepower engine is a gem, no question. It's free revving, quiet and civilised (you'd be forgiven for putting unleaded in the tank - it is that refined). Acceleration was brisk, and at motorway speeds in sixth gear, the engine was really only just at a trot (just 2450rpm at 70mph). Not only is it quiet, but examples I've had on extended road tests have also proved themselves to

be significantly more economical than their predecessors. However, as I've said on previous tests, sixth gear is quite tall and a down-change or two is required for spirited overtaking.

Braking was confident - with only light pedal pressure required - though not so light that rookies will stand it on end. Further, Boxer-based production models will arrive with all the electro-mechanical bells and whistles that minimise the risk of losing control through skidding.

The side windows immediately behind the cab provide good over-the-shoulder views - especially important when emerging from oblique-angled junctions. It looked as though a useful amount of through vision would be possible via an interior mirror, though as, in the test model such an item was 'absent without leave,' this remains to be proved.

For the last two decades I've been trying to inform anybody who'd listen that a true MPV (multi-purpose vehicle) is not an estate car or bread van with an extra row of seats in it, but

a motorcaravan such as this one. School run? Supermarket sweep? Dinner at Claridges? For all these occasions and many more, the Pace will comfortably and safely transport four people and not look out of place parked next to the latest people carrier in the car park.

I knew you'd ask if there was any juddering in reverse. (*For new readers: this is an ongoing issue with the latest Peugeot Boxer/Fiat Ducato base vehicle. DH*) The answer? Nope! But it did sound like a galvanised bucket full of nails being kicked over when proceeding backwards. Couldn't say for sure what it was, but my money would be on a damaged synchromesh.

A COMFORTABLE PACE

The lounge is a comfortable place, socially inclusive, and with plenty of natural light. It's a perfect place to unwind, relax or refuel. Favourite perch was the swivelled cab passenger seat with the sliding side door open.

On Test Autocruise Pace



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I LIKED

- Good-looking exterior
- Strong bodywork
- Excellent engine
- Comfortable lounge
- Kitchen with a view
- Versatile storage space
- Well-designed washroom

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Sliding window adjacent to the lounge
- Passenger airbag
- A three-burner hob

I DISLIKED

- Poorly designed TV locker

An ergonomically correct armchair and at one with nature!

The forward-facing rear seats also felt good. Supportive enough, without the over-firm (sitting on a church pew) profile of those found in some competitors. The bit of rake on the backrest should also help to see most folk comfy. The eagle-eyed may have already spotted that there were no rear seatbelts in place on this prototype 'van as they hadn't

yet been tested for type approval. The Swift Group (owner of Autocruise) has been at the forefront of gaining type approval for its motorcaravans and should be applauded for doing so.

A close up view of the offside lounge window shows just how well Autocruise has mixed contemporary design with traditional furnishings. There are no fussy curtains to get in the way and the latest pleated cassette blind has been fitted. To make it look less austere, a traditional wood capping is fitted to the sill and all is very well judged.

That said, I would have liked the nearside and offside windows to have swapped places. Rear passengers in my own motorcaravan always complain that they can't open the adjacent window when on the move. Swap the nearside slider with the offside top-hung version and it would be job done. Everyone aboard the Pace would be a happy bunny, even my brood of Olympic-standard whingers!

The raised portion of the lounge floor contains a useful storage space with top access, though see the 'bits and pieces' section for other ideas...

In our own (typical) coachbuilt motorcaravan, the rear-seat passengers have little protection from a side impact whereas in the Pace (and in others based on the latest generation of panel vans), not only is the side made of something more substantial than that used on most coachbuilts, its shape (pressed flutes and ridges combined with internal ribs) massively increases its strength. Not quite a safety cell, but getting towards one. Sevel really does this for its passenger carrying minibuses, but as the panel van and minibus



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share the same shell, any motorcaravan based on one will benefit from the same enhanced rear passenger safety.

FAST FOOD

Talk about a galley with a view! Even if it's raining one can (at least) have a gander out of the tinted acrylic window whilst washing up. However, if it's fine, slide back the side door and the 'inside' kitchen becomes almost part of the outdoors. A two-burner hob and grill/warming oven take care of the heat, whereas a Thetford three-way fridge (with electronic ignition, full-width freezer compartment and temperature gauge) does the same for the coolth.

An additional worktop hinges up from the end of the kitchen's base unit and will be much appreciated by those who actually cook in their motorcaravan, rather than just re-heating pre-cooked convenience food. In fact, my culinary machinations would spread on to the adjacent dining table, which is where I would keep the 'seasoning' for the chef. I love cooking with wine; sometimes I even put it in the food!

Speaking of the table, Pace owners won't need to carry a separate surface for al-fresco dining as this one just clips on the back of the kitchen base unit outside the side sliding door. In the relatively modest interior volume of this motorcaravan, any piece of equipment that has a dual purpose gets my vote.

COMFORT STATION

Frequently in the past, this has been the Achilles heel of panel van conversions, as the 'small room' was often compromised by the base vehicle's angled sides. Not in the Pace's case. Almost vertical panel van sides, together



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with a really clever wall/sink moulding, has enabled a comfort station worthy of any coachbuilt. The loo in here is the very latest electric-flush, swivel-bowl model from Thetford, complete with wheeled holding tank for strain-free transport to the dump station.

DOZING PACE

Folk interested in buying the Pace will be big fans of generously proportioned permanent

transverse rear double beds: only this one isn't! It's big enough all right, but doesn't have to be permanent, as the base and two-thirds of the mattress hinge out of the way to accommodate lengthy goods and chattels. Even when it's in the sleeping position, straight through storage is still available for skinny items.

There is a compromise here, and this is the fact that the mattress isn't a one piece



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- 4 The lounge offers two comfy armchairs
- 5 On the offside, white hatch and cover spoil the Pace's stylish look somewhat
- 6 Dual-purpose table works outside and in
- 7 The rear bed's mattress is a sum of parts, but should be comfy
- 8 Up front, a child's bed can be made from the dinette
- 9 Kitchen-with-a-view has two burners and a grill/warming oven. Flip-up worktop is a handy feature
- 10 The washroom features the very latest loo from Thetford



11 The double bed's base rises to increase kit-carrying capability

12 The TV locker needs a redesign

BITS AND PACES

This was the prototype Pace, but - by jingo - it was good. Let's not beat around the bush, it was hugely impressive. Of course it will be further developed as possible improvements come to light and new products become available. My suggestions follow...

We've already dealt with the sliding/top hung window positioning, but I did wonder why the small Mini Heki was over the lounge and the bigger Midi version over the bed. Perhaps the designers felt that the bedroom required an increase in natural light, whereas the panoramic glazing in the lounge already provided sufficient daylight? I'd still transpose them though, or add a second Midi Heki in the lounge.

Most 'vans with this layout place the fresh water tank in the forward-facing seat box or underneath the vehicle. If Autocruise used the space available under the raised dinette for fresh water storage, the tank would be less prone to freezing, and yet the underseat locker would remain available for storage.

Also, the TV bracket clashed with its locker door so the telly couldn't be swivelled to enable folk to watch it whilst in bed. This is something that needs a redesign.

And that's it, really, except I did wonder why the two other Autocruise high tops (Rhythm and Tempo) have a three-burner hob and the Pace only has a two-burner unit. I know it's a shorter kitchen, but I did think that Smev's one-piece, three-burner hob/sink combo would fit and might be better. As usual, management disagreed. Her opinion ran along the lines

affair - there are joins, though the fitted fabric 'hinges' should stop the sections parting company under restless sleepers. The opening rear windows will provide plenty of ventilation and each partner has their own individually switched reading light. Just as important to us as the bed itself, is what it leaves in the rest of the 'van. And that's a really good lounge area, kitchen, washroom and three doors, all accessible to one partner whilst the other is in the land of nod.

As a bonus, the forward-facing lounge seat converts easily into a single bed suitable for a youngster: or two if they are tiny.

PACE PLACES

A place for everything, really: let's first examine the storage space available when the transverse double bed is folded out of the way. It should be

perfect for bicycles or canoes when camping or for carrying fence panels and the like when DIY-ing at home. Clever Autocruise has even provided tie-down (lashing) eyes for secure and safe load lugging. At the risk of labouring the point; apart from the fact that Pace is a darn good motorcaravan, it's also a true MPV, or as Shakespeare didn't quite pen: a 'van for all reasons.

Other storage includes a well-made gas locker that can accommodate two 7kg cylinders, plus enough high-level lockers to satisfy even the most comprehensively accessorised motorcaravanning couple. The locker doors are attractively radiused and finished in a two-tone veneer with matching satin finish metal trim and handles.

The lightweight (dual-function) table has dedicated secure storage above the cab.



TEST EXTRA SPECIFICATION

- **Price from:** £34,850 OTR
- **As tested:** £34,850 OTR
- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato long wheelbase all-steel high top panel van, 2.3-litre turbo-diesel producing 120bhp (production models will be long wheelbase 2.2-litre 120bhp Peugeot Boxer-based), six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle & conversion
- **Layout:** Swivelling cab seats and half-dinette ahead of nearside midships kitchen and wardrobe with washroom opposite, fold-away transverse double bed at rear
- **Dimensions and weights:** Length: 6.19m (20ft 3.5in), width: 2.05m (6ft 8.5in), height: 2.83m (9ft 3.5in), maximum authorised weight: 3500kg, payload: 605kg

- **Belted seats:** Four (including driver)
- **Beds:** Rear transverse double: 1.92m x 1.35m (6ft 3.5in x 4ft 5in), dinette child's bed: 1.73m x 900mm (5ft 8in x 2ft 11.5in) max
- **Kitchen:** Stainless steel drainerless sink with hinged glass lid and folding mixer tap, Smev two-burner hob with hinged glass lid, Smev grill/warming oven, Thetford three-way fridge with full-width freezer compartment, fold-up worktop extension
- **Washroom:** Moulded wall unit incorporating vanity basin, shelf and storage cupboard, Thetford C-250 electric-flush swivel-bowl cassette toilet, basin tap doubles as shower head, nylon shower curtain, moulded shower tray floor

AUTOCRUISE PACE

- **Heating:** Truma Combi boiler with blown-air, gas-mains operation
- **Tanks:** Fresh water: 66 litres (14.5 gallons), waste water: 50 litres (11 gallons)
- **Gas:** 2 x 7kg cylinders
- **Optional extras fitted to test vehicle:** None fitted
- **Other options available:** Wind-out awning (£695), Comfort accessories pack: cab air-conditioning, cruise control, alloy wheels (£1386), 3.0-litre 160bhp engine upgrade with ComfortMatic automatic transmission (£2750)

E&OE

that the small three-burner combi hobs are not as good as most two-burner units as frequently, you can't even get two decent-sized saucepans on them.

What did gain universal approval was the latest Truma Combi boiler (with a choice of gas or 230V operation) and the brace of external steps. The electrically operated unit at the side door and the large, fixed full-width platform style one across both rear doors are excellent features.

The quoted on-the-road price includes a radio/CD player with extra speakers in the

rear, longitudinal roof rails, and an exterior shower. Even with a reduced specification, the Pace would have been good value, but with so much good kit included as standard it's even more motorcaravan for your money.

All that said, I wouldn't order a Pace without (if possible) specifying a passenger airbag - I feel it's about time base vehicle manufacturers were required to fit one as standard.

Lastly, although production models of the Pace will be Peugeot Boxer-based, the ComfortMatic automatic gearbox will be available: but, as Peugeot does not offer the

ComfortMatic, these will be to special order and based on Fiat's Ducato. Rumour has it that, as Peugeot didn't share the development costs for the auto box, Fiat won't let 'em have it!

PACE IN A PARAGRAPH

Comfortable, elegant and fuel-efficient. Best suited to couples who may occasionally take along grandchildren, rather than a young family. Not the first 'van with this interior layout, though it is by far the best interpretation of the design to date. It looks right because it is right: a real multi-purpose vehicle and a great motorcaravan. ■



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