



- 1 The Rapido is a head turner
- 2 Unusually for a Continental motorhome, the Rapido 710F features a U-shaped rear lounge
- 3 Side seats help make a small informal lounge for en route stops
- 4 Side seats and tabletop make the lower bunk, while the top bunk rotates down from the cab ceiling



AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** No longer available
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Fiat Ducato
Maxi chassis cab
- **ECONOMY:** 26mpg - 28mpg
- **COST OF SIMILAR AGED 'VAN TODAY:** £24,000



LIVING WITH A...

...2003 Rapido 710F

MMM teamster, Mark Brownrigg loved one secondhand 'van he was testing so much he bought it!



It's something that comes to most of us as we get older, the feeling that we should maybe downsize to something that's easier to drive. After running and loving three Hymer A-class motorhomes, warts and all (theirs, not mine!), I started to get uneasy about taking a biggie onto narrow roads. In fairness, more before the trip than during it, but since we do most of our touring out in wilderness areas, this unease was becoming an issue.

In the course of doing a Secondhand Choice piece for MMM, I stumbled onto exactly what I was looking for – a well-built compact 'van in pristine condition. On returning home, I opened

the door and shouted: "Get packed, we're going down to see a 'van," then dragged the boss – kicking and screaming – the 150-plus miles back down south. The little six-year-old Rapido 710F was still there, so I pushed her, still protesting, up into it. There was a silence, then she said: "I love this, let's see if we can do a deal we can afford."

This personal anecdote touches a number of common issues. First, it's a huge step down from an A-class into a coachbuilt, which is broadly the size of a long wheelbase panel van; could we adjust to the loss of space? Secondly, the 'van had done only 4,000 miles in six years and, from the MOTs, had lain idle for most of the last three years: engines are built to be used, would that idleness cause any engine or

equipment problems? Thirdly, I was buying from a dealer many miles from home so any warranty work was going to involve a major cost in terms of fuel and inconvenience. Would the long treks be worth it? Only one way to find out...

BEAUTIFUL?

Sure, beauty is only skin deep, but there is an aesthetic element in our liking for any motorhome. It has to appeal to us instantly, giving us that wow factor when first we see it in the dealer's yard, or when we climb up its step to look inside for the first time. Then it has to keep on appealing through years of ownership. How does the Rapido 710F measure up?

Bottom line: it's a head-turner. We've run

many guided tours for strangers who knocked on our door. Outside, it is a classy compact 'van, nice shape, interesting windows, low profile, simple graphics – sleek and feminine. Inside, one of the best-designed layouts you might ever see. It's a rare beast – a European 'van with a rear lounge and a forward space that provides a snack or coffee lounge for en route breaks. The front area also converts – providing two bunk beds. Joinery is good quality, with a wraparound finish and no beading. There's a neat – amidships – kitchen, while the lounge boasts a solid table, which lowers to help provide the base for a transverse double bed. As we use it, we keep discovering design features, which were years ahead of their time, such as controls that redirect engine heating into the rear lounge – warming it up as you approach a campsite. It's a 'van designed to the very margin of development: all is squeezed into an 5.77m x 2.11m (18ft 11in x 6ft 11in) body. Finally, Rapido build quality is as excellent as the design. We've stepped down from Hymer's A-class and don't miss a thing.

A CLOSER LOOK

Fiat's 2.8-litre engine is designed to pull heavier 'vans than this small Rapido. Surely one of the best commercial vehicle engines Fiat ever made, it should travel many times

round the world, and provides effortless power for any driving demands. The cab seats are comfortable on the longest journey and both swivel round to help make the coffee lounge. Two side seats here (which convert into the bottom bunk with the help of the coffee table top), are equally comfortable. In fact, I often retreat to these – working on my laptop while the boss is watching TV in the lounge.

The offside-located kitchen is beautifully finished, with strip lighting and extractor fan above hob and sink. The 80-litre fridge has 'elastic' sides – seemingly swallowing everything we put into it. As a typical European 'van, there's no oven/grill: you are supposed, of course, to live and cook outside, which is seldom an option with our Scottish midges and weather. We carry a small portable electric oven, and it's a simple task to sit it on the sink top and cook whatever we want when hooked up.

Opposite the kitchen, there's a neat washroom and a fair-sized wardrobe. The little room has a corner washbasin, attractive yet



spacious storage cupboards, an integral shower (which we never use) and a swivel-bowl toilet. All of this in white and rich blue – oh, and there's a blown-air heating outlet, which means she stays in there for hours...

The rear lounge is compact, but comfortable – the fixed table's top sliding to either side to give ease of access. Even a big guy like me can pile the cushions against the end wall and get his feet up (at an angle) for a read or a snooze. We installed a flat screen TV on the nearside, which folds out of the way to let the smaller and more intelligent member of the team (or so she says) in and out. This lounge converts easily into a comfortable double bed (dropping the table top onto wooden runners) then, equally easily, back into the lounge.

MAGGOTS IN THE APPLE?

Beware a 'van which hasn't been used – I was luckier than I deserved to be.

The first problem, which flared up as we reawakened the big engine and put it to work, was that it appeared to overheat, and we were hundreds of miles from home. This proved to be only a thermostat, which was acting up and a simple Unipart replacement soon had us on the road again.

On the bodywork, we found that the sealant under and across the roof had either cracked or had gone black with mould. After a bit of persuasion, the dealer had a fitter scrape it out and reseal everything as good as new.

Over the winter, the fresh water pump refused to work: an airlock was diagnosed locally, and I was shown how to tap the end of the pump (located under the wardrobe floor) to get the water flowing again. Repeated failures took me south to have the problem properly diagnosed as a slack fitting inside the pump: two twists tighter and was running with enthusiasm again.

You inherit other people's cunning plans: after eight weeks of frozen snow of the winter, we found both vehicle and leisure batteries completely dead. Replaced the vehicle battery, only to have the same thing almost happen again. The problem was finally diagnosed – a tracker device was discovered, and had been searching for a signal all winter thus draining the vehicle battery, then (through a link) the leisure battery. It cost me an unnecessary £120 when five minutes' work

WE LIKED

- Compact size and easy drive-ability
- Easy to park
- Solid build quality
- Great looks, inside and out
- Thoughtful design
- Engine-driven heating for rear lounge
- Engine power to spare
- Comfortable cab seats and useful coffee lounge
- Neat, pleasant and easily cleaned washroom
- High quality finish of kitchen
- Comfortable rear lounge
- Easy-to-make, comfortable bed
- Useful storage beneath lounge seats, with external and internal access

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A little more storage space
- A more solid step-down at caravan door
- More patience in the bald and bearded inhabitant!

WE DISLIKED

- Difficult to effectively fit a bike rack

could have disconnected it.

But it flagged up a related problem: there is a strange power equalisation link between leisure and vehicle batteries. If the leisure battery drains, then it can leave you without enough power to start. Constant monitoring and frequent winter runs are needed, it seems. All this is technology we could do without.

Our only ongoing problem has been with the fridge: it has a separate cooling fan which, when switched to automatic, keeps kicking in at all hours of the day and night, creating a din that made sleep impossible. The dealer replaced the thermostat, which made the problem even worse. Another friendly dealer oiled the bearings (reducing the din) and told us that there's no need to use the fan unless we are in the summer heat of France. It was one of those issues where the instruction manual proved useless, and nobody in Rapido's dealerships seemed to know for sure.

SPACE AND DISTANCE

No 'van is perfect and you can spend a lot of money, discovering this simple truth. If you switch from a large 'van to a smaller one, you lose a lot of living and storage space. It's a simple equation. We have adjusted far more easily to the lesser space for humans than to the more limited room for kit. Although more patience is required (from me, she says), we actually like the smaller living space.

Storage-wise, we have to limit what we carry. There are fewer overhead lockers (all a decent size though) and limited underseat storage in the rear. So we have cut our cloth accordingly, and travel light. My main regret is that there is no space for me to carry a folding cycle – a bulge in the rear panel would mean mounting a cycle rack so high up that I couldn't lift my bike onto it, so no bike.

Buying miles away from home is always a risk. You need to trust the dealer, because it will cost a mint of money to travel there, only to be told that repairs have to be passed by

the warranty underwriter and it's probably wear-and-tear, so they don't give much for your chances. The guarantees that you buy on used 'vans can be near worthless, because the things which are likely to go wrong are usually excluded. Often, nothing can be done until the 'invisible' underwriter agrees for the work to be done. You may have to go home and then travel back again. Expensively.

We had problems, but by-and-large, the dealer has been helpful. It was the horrendous fuel cost of travelling back and forward (touching £100 a trip), which finally got to us. We chose to abandon our warranty cover, paying for any repairs ourselves at a local dealer. But beware: some dealers refuse to touch a 'van they haven't sold you. This is potentially a major problem.

CONCLUSIONS

We have been lucky. Because of my work as an MMM road tester, I stumbled onto a 'van that's proved to be as good as it looked,

giving us a lovely compact motorhome, with many nice design features that must have been ground-breaking in their day. Our Rapido 710F has galloped out of retirement to start its new life: in just one year we have more than doubled the mileage we inherited, with only the few minor blips described above.

We have adjusted well to the smaller space, but it requires more tolerance from us – well, from me! And we were lucky with a supplying dealer who has – broadly – walked the walk as well as talking the talk. Some, of course, do not.

The greatest benefit is that we now have a 'van which we can take anywhere, on any kind of road, and without a second's worry. It's a real slim-Jim, which has brought the fun back into driving. We've abandoned our gin palace for an as-good-as-new bijou residence without a backward glance. Our gamble has given us a motorhome, which might see us out, even if we live to get a telegram from the Queen.

There is a downside: Dave Hurrell keeps sending me off to do Secondhand Choice features, just so that the MMM team, who will bet on (and drink) anything, can run a book on which of the 'vans I'm going to buy this time! Even more embarrassing, the boss confiscates my wallet and sews up my pockets before I leave to do the job. My level-headed reputation lies in ruins!

They are, of course, wasting their time, as our little Rapido is as near perfect for us as it's possible to get. Mind you, that Hymer C-class 542C, seen on my last gig was very, very tempting...only joking! ■



- 5 The simple kitchen lacks an oven, but features a seemingly 'elastic' fridge
- 6 Pat waits to be fed
- 7 The rear lounge converts easily into a fair-sized and comfortable double bed
- 8 Mark in front lounge, writing for hard-hearted MMM editors
- 9 The washroom is a good looker
- 10 The TV folds away, tucking into a corner of the lounge
- 11 We've had to downsize our kit count, as stowage space is less than in our Hymer



The bulge in the rear panel makes fitting and using a bike rack difficult

FACTS AND FIGURES

- **Conversion:** 2003 Rapido 710F
- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato Maxi chassis cab
- **Power plant:** 2.8 turbo-diesel producing 127bhp, five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Gross vehicle weight:** 3,500kg
- **Payload:** 670kg
- **Layout:** Swivelling cab seats and side seats form front lounge, amidships offside kitchen, nearside washroom, U-shaped lounge in rear
- **Exterior measurements:** length: 5.77m (18ft 11in), width: 2.11m (6ft 11in),

- height: 2.64m (8ft 8in)
- **Berths:** 4 (two belted seats)
- **Bed sizes:** Lounge double 1.97m x 1.33m (6ft 5in x 4ft 4.5in); bunk beds both 1.97m x 590mm (6ft 5.5in x 1ft 11.5in)
- **Length of ownership:** 14 months
- **Supplied by:** Brownhills North East
- **Mileage covered:** 6,000
- **Fuel economy:** 26mpg - 28mpg
- **Accessories/options added:** Hope T-bar rear bumper, flat screen TV and directional aerial
- **Base vehicle service:** £215
- **MOT:** £53

- **Habitation service:** £230
- **Insurance:** N/A
- **Recalls:** None
- **Price new today:** No longer in production
- **Cost of similar aged 'van today:** £24,000
- **What went wrong:** Engine thermostat replaced, fresh water pump seal needed tightening, fault relating to Tracker device, linked leisure and vehicle batteries must be checked during lay-up
- **Further reading:** N/A
- **Contacts:** Brownhills North East, Durham Road, Birtley, Co. Durham, DH3 2QZ (tel: 0845-6055473; web: www.brownhills.co.uk)

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