

shopping around

You can now get the classic French bed layout in a van conversion that's small enough to take to the supermarket. Is this the ultimate in down-sizing? And should you choose Rapido or Mondial?



AT A GLANCE

RAPIDO V56
BASED ON FIAT DUCATO LWB
PANEL VAN 120 MULTIJET
FROM £41,000
Rapido have offered this layout for as long as anyone, but they are new to vans. The V56 joins the V53 in a new-this-season range. Have they got it right first time?



AT A GLANCE

MONDIAL FB
BASED ON PEUGEOT BOXER LWB
PANEL VAN 120HDI
FROM £41,535
Swift's Mondial is a sister model to Autocruise vans with grey (instead of silver) bodywork and different interior trim. Equivalent Autocruise pioneered this layout.



COMPARED
FRENCH BED
HIGH-TOP FIAT
PANEL VANS

ON THE OUTSIDE ★★★★★

Van conversions always look so much neater than coachbuilts somehow, thanks to their automotive styling and 'one-piece' construction. And this one, with its silver-coloured bodywork and subtle burgundy graphics, is very smart. The bespoke Rapido grille/front bumper - a distinctive and unique touch - and integral foglights look fantastic and are definitely worth the extra investment if outward-appearances are important to you - although in that case I'd probably also have a set of alloys rather than the standard wheeltrims.

The mains point, colour-coded fridge vents and the water point are on the nearside, while the sliding door is on the UK offside (thus depositing passengers into the road when parked in the street).

ON THE ROAD ★★★★★

Another van conversion bonus is its on-road stability. Without having to worry about a large luton being pushed through the air, you have the full benefit of all this Fiat's 120 horses - and it's more stable too. Its six-speed gearbox is easy-to-use, and the V56 gets air-conditioning in the standard specification, along with cruise control, a spare wheel and ABS. Unfortunately, you don't get a passenger airbag (that's an extra), but there is a pair of armrests for each of the cab occupants, and two three-point seatbelts for the rear bench seat. For entertainment there's a Pioneer MP3/CD/radio with an external USB point.

ON SITE ★★★★★

This V56 feels really spacious, especially considering its limited dimensions (under six metres long) and fixed bed layout. Opposite the sliding door is a half-dinette, which faces the swivelled cab seats. A single inward-facing seat, unusually, hides the top-loading gas locker, which is easy to load and leaves the level gauge extremely visible. There's a step leading from the lounge down to the kitchen and washroom (both on the offside) and the wardrobe and fixed bed (nearside).

The dining table is wall-mounted and is supported by one leg that can be positioned according to your wish. Concertina blinds pull across all the cab windows at night, and there's a loose dark-coloured carpet which matches that in the living quarters. The décor is half-cream Alcantara-style with darker fabric panels in the centres. The woodwork is mid-tone with contrasting cream panels and wood-look/chromed handles. Fabric

panels are mounted onto the sliding door for a more homely feel, and there's lots of light and ventilation too, thanks to the Heki rooflight above the dinette area and the door's large window.

ON THE BOIL ★★★★★

This is far from a large galley, but it's adequate if you don't mind missing an oven and grill. The square stainless-steel sink doesn't offer a draining board, but to its left there is a flip-up work surface that partially covers the sliding door. This restricts general access while in use but the kids will be able to slip underneath if they wish.

Between the sink and the washroom wall's glass splashback is the two-burner Smev hob which, like the sink, has a glass lid. The generous 106-litre Dometic fridge is across the aisle, below the half-height wardrobe - interestingly Swift reverse this and put the fridge above the wardrobe. There are two spotlights over the main kitchen unit and there's lots of storage, making this a useful, if cramped, little galley.

ON-BOARD STORAGE ★★★★★

Storage is surprisingly plentiful in the kitchen, with two high-level lockers - one of which is shelved - and another two empty cupboards at low-level (again, one has a shelf). There's a drawer for cutlery, although you'll have to add your own tray.

Two high-level lockers sit above the lounge - all with positive locking doors. And there's a good sized open shelf over the cab with a reasonable lip (this is best suited to bedding for the front dinette bed).

You'll find the battery beneath the bench seat, but there's still a good chunk of room for other belongings that you'll only occasionally require. There is no front access, so to get into this area you'll need to remove all the sofa's cushions. You may not need to use this area at all, though, as there's a huge amount of room below the fixed bed.

The main access to the under-bed space is via the rear doors, behind which the toilet emptying hatch is also situated. You can also get to the under-bed storage area by the lifting bed frame, but this isn't terribly easy. There are also four high-level lockers in the bedroom. And let's not forget the washroom, where there's a cupboard beneath the washbasin and another top-hinged locker above the toilet.

ON TO BED ★★★★★

The main sleeping area is, of course, that fixed 'French' double at the rear. There's

FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £41,000
PRICE AS TESTED £42,729
OPTIONS FITTED Metallic paint and front foglights (£1236), passenger airbag (£306), wood-effect dash (£187)
BERTHS 4
TRAVEL SEATS 4
DIMENSIONS 5.99m L, 2.05m W, 2.55m H
INTERIOR HEIGHT 1.90m (max)
MAXIMUM WEIGHT 3300kg
PAYLOAD 495kg
BEDS Rear fixed double 1.90m x 1.19m, dinette transverse double 1.85m x 1.00m
FRESH WATER 91 litres (underslung)
WASTE WATER 90 litres (underslung)
LEISURE BATTERY 100Ah
MAINS SOCKETS 1

BASE VEHICLE

FIAT DUCATO LWB PANEL VAN
ENGINE 2.3 Multijet 120bhp

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING 2-burner hob
FRIDGE Dometic 106-litre
HEATING Truma Combi 4 gas only blown-air
BOILER Truma Combi 4 gas only

FOR

TRUE FOUR-BERTH ACCOMMODATION
 DISTINCTIVE STYLING WITH RAPIDO GRILLE
 EASY-ACCESS GAS LOCKER
 BUILD-QUALITY
 MORE SPACIOUS WASHROOM
 OPTIONAL LEATHER TRIM

AGAINST

BASIC KITCHEN WITH NO GRILL/OVEN
 DIFFICULT INTERNAL UNDER-BED ACCESS
 NON-SWIVELLING SPOTLIGHTS IN LOUNGE
 ONLY ONE MAINS SOCKET
 SLIDING DOOR ON CONTINENTAL SIDE

BUY IF...

...YOU WANT A SPACIOUS-FEELING VAN CONVERSION WITH A COMFORTABLE BED, GOOD LOOKS AND A QUALITY FEEL - AS LONG AS DON'T MIND THE LIMITED KITCHEN FACILITIES

a window at the head end, which would make it a little uncomfortable to sit up and read in bed without a bank of cushions. There are two spotlights here, and the heater controls are at the foot end. There's also space to put a flatscreen TV on the back of the wardrobe wall. Another good point is that the amount of mattress that's cut off to aid access to the washroom at its inside front corner is minimal, thanks to the washroom's silver roller-shutter door that doesn't need opening space.

To make up the front bed you will need to remove the table completely, before pulling out a wooden section beneath the bench to create the bed frame. The necessary infill cushions can live on the rear bed during the day, and these have a hard base enabling them to be self-supporting between the gas locker and the front bench base. You can then sleep two people across the 'van in complete comfort.

ON THE LOO ★★★★★

As is common with this layout, the washroom is quite long and narrow, especially as the wheelarch intrudes slightly. Just inside the door there's a circular Perspex washbasin with a mixer tap that doubles as a showerhead. This doesn't have a wall-mounting though, so it's hand-held showers only. And the shower curtain is, out of necessity, a clingy fabric type. There's a nice duckboard, though, over the single plughole.

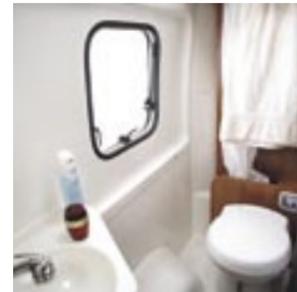
Above the tap is a soap dish and a well-positioned tall mirror, and the opening window is frosted. A towel rail and two hooks complete the line up, along with the Thetford swivel cassette toilet. There's even a small recess for the toilet roll. All-in-all, a better washroom than you expect in a panel van conversion.

ON QUALITY ★★★★★

Rapido's build-quality is usually amongst the best, and just because this is a van conversion doesn't mean that the attention-to-detail has suffered. Nothing was broken or scratched, falling off or impractical, and it has the feel of a quality camper without being over-engineered.

ON VALUE ★★★★★

At just over £40,000 this motorhome seems to be very competitively priced, especially considering its specification level and build-quality, along with its prestige brand name. Certainly you can spend more with rival makes.



ON THE OUTSIDE ★★★★★

The Mondial FB goes for a dark grey metallic exterior with the original Fiat front end; again alloy wheels are an extra - at £608. The bodywork has a silver stripe down the side, as well as 'Mondial' graphics at roof-level on both sides. The offside has the mains point, waste water tap and water filler, while the nearside offers the sliding opening door and an LED awning light.

ON THE ROAD ★★★★★

The Mondial's nose is fronted by a Peugeot lion rather than a Fiat roundel, but although the engines are slightly different (it's a 2.2-litre HDi turbo-diesel here, rather than the Fiat's 2.3 Multijet) it produces the same number of horses - 120. So driving-wise there's little difference in performance, and being the same body size/shape there's no change to the excellent handling either.

As this example features the optional Driver's Pack, the Mondial has cruise control, as well as cab air-conditioning, an alarm and reversing sensors. Unlike the Rapido, it doesn't include any wood trim adornments, but it does have a passenger airbag - both of which are extras on the Rapido.

Once again, you get a fitted blind for the cab, but this time for the windscreen only - the side windows have push-button curtains so you'll perhaps want some insulated screens in winter.

ON SITE ★★★★★

Despite the interior layouts being almost identical (they are virtual mirror images of one another as the Swift's sliding door is on the UK nearside), the Mondial somehow feels more homely than the Rapido. The lounge is smaller, though, due to the lack of that inward-facing seat just inside the sliding door.

The curved internal step (with its built-in ambient light to stop you falling over it) leads up to the lounge. Two scatter cushions are provided for the bench seat, and the wall-mounted table can also be used outside as there's an extra rail positioned on the rear of the kitchen unit for use when the sliding door is open.

The cabinetry is duo-tone wood with a silver stripe running through it, and is completed with chromed handles. This compliments the light fabric walls and the fawn velour fabric with grey, brown and green inserts - a scheme that is copied by the floral-patterned scatter cushions and panels on the cab seats. The carpet is split into three sections - one for the cab (with its

rubber mats to prevent wear and tear whilst driving). They press stud into place.

Ventilation is generous too, with a Heki sunroof and another smaller rooflight above the bed. The control panel is above the door, where there's a small open pocket with an adequate lip.

ON THE BOIL ★★★★★

There is much more worktop space in this Mondial. Not only is there a fold-up shelf like the V56's, but there's also a long stretch of worktop to the left of the dual-burner hob. This has a mirror above it, so if you perch on the end of the bed, you can use this space as a dressing table. There are two 230V sockets here.

Another bonus here over the Rapido is the grill - although this Smev unit is not an oven as well. There's a removable bin on the kitchen unit's front end, and a Waeco compressor fridge. This does only hold 80 litres, but compressor fridges do have advantages - they get down to the correct temperature more quickly, and they can be used on more acute angles if you can't find a flat surface to park on. You don't need to remember to change between different power sources either.

ON-BOARD STORAGE ★★★★★

Surprisingly, one of the two upper kitchen cupboards - both of which have folding doors to aid access - holds a flatscreen TV, as well as a 230V and a 12V socket. The other locker has plate and cup racks, and there are two more large cupboards below the work surface, as well as two drawers. The top one of these you're bound to use for cutlery, but you'll have to buy your own insert.

Two high-level lockers are above the lounge but these are quite shallow and neither is shelved. The largest lockers are above the bed - there are three of them, but again none offers shelves. Above the fridge is a fold-up door to another small locker, and below the fridge is a low-level wardrobe, which is half-height with two shelves at the rear. The power supply unit takes up the lower one of these, but the upper one is empty.

Internal access to the under-bed storage area is easier than in the Rapido, thanks to the metal bed base with gas struts, but you can also open up the rear doors to access the same area. This is a huge open space, despite the wheelarch and the boiler, which intrudes slightly. The mirror-fronted washroom cabinet is narrow but it's large enough for your toothbrush and

FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £41,535

PRICE AS TESTED £42,730

OPTIONS FITTED
Driver's Pack - cab air-con, cruise control, alarm and reversing sensors (£1195)

BERTHS 3

TRAVEL SEATS 4

DIMENSIONS 6.00m L, 2.26m W, 2.55m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT 1.90m (max)

MAXIMUM WEIGHT 3500kg

PAYLOAD 594kg

BEDS Rear fixed bed 1.86m x 1.06m, front lengthways dinette bed 1.70m x 0.90m (max)

FRESH WATER 66 litres (underslung)

WASTE WATER 50 litres (underslung)

LEISURE BATTERY 100Ah

MAINS SOCKETS 3

BASE VEHICLE

PEUGEOT BOXER LWB PANEL VAN

ENGINE 2.2HDi 120bhp

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING 2-burner hob, separate Smev grill

FRIDGE Waeco 80-litre compressor fridge

HEATING Truma Combi 4 gas/mains blown-air

BOILER Truma Combi 4 gas/mains

FOR

GRILL IN KITCHEN

MORE KITCHEN WORKTOP

EXTERNAL POSITION FOR THE TABLE

OPTIONAL DRIVER'S PACK

MORE HOMELY DÉCOR

AGAINST

SHORTER/NARROWER FIXED BED

SMALLER FRIDGE

ONLY A THREE-BERTH

FLIP-UP WASHBASIN

SMALLER WASHROOM

SMALL WATER TANKS

BUY IF...

... YOU WANT A MORE HOMELY MOTORHOME WITH A BETTER KITCHEN. THE WASHROOM IS THE COMPROMISE THOUGH.

toothpaste, and there's a lipped shelf in here too.

ON TO BED ★★★★★

This is only a three-berth 'van, but the main sleeping area is again that large French bed at the rear. There's a window behind the short two-piece headboard; one half removes to reveal the handle for the rear doors. The side window here, like all the Mondial's windows, has a narrow wooden sill that looks very smart indeed. There's a single swivelling spotlight for the offside bed occupant, and this is the sleeping place of choice as the nearside sleeper also has that cut-off corner to contend with - although again this is kept to a minimum thanks to the roller-shutter washroom door.

The Truma Combi controls are at the foot of the bed for convenient night-time tweaking. The front dinette turns into a lengthways single bed by pulling the seat base forward and rearranging the cushions.

ON THE LOO ★★★★★

This is a tiny washroom, but then you've got to make room for that extra kitchen worktop space somehow. The flip-down washbasin may be a compromise too far for some people, despite it being space-saving. There's plenty of space to use the Thetford swivel cassette toilet, though, and there's a separate showerhead with a height-adjustable rail and two soap trays.

The shower curtain is fabric and does get in the way of general use, however, so I'd expect this to be removed if you weren't planning to use it regularly. There's a single drain-hole and a small opening roof vent, as well as a hook for your flannels, a towel rail and a matching toilet roll holder.

ON QUALITY ★★★★★

Flip-down washbasins - like the one used in the Mondial - feel a bit cheap, and as a whole the finish doesn't feel quite as solid as the Rapido. However, this is a more homely and plusher-looking environment.

ON VALUE ★★★★★

There is nothing in it here as far as price is concerned, and the specification level is very similar too. They have the same engine power, a similar layout, and good quality control - although you do get a few extra niceties on the Swift's Peugeot base if you opt for the Driver's Pack, and the external table rail is a great idea. But then again, in the Rapido you've got the extra seat and a much better washroom.



alternatives

If you want a French bed van conversion then these are the only choices, though that situation is sure to change. We hear that Adria will add this layout to their popular Twin range for 2012.

You may also wish to consider van conversions with a transverse fixed bed. Adria kicked off this market with the original Twin and the versatility of its fold-up 'fixed' bed means that it can carry bicycles on board. If you're considering the Twin, then also take a look at the Autocruise Pace and Rapido V53, as well as the Tribute 665.

Then there are sub-six-metre compact low-profile coachbuilts with French bed layouts, such as the Bürstner Nexxo t 569 and Chausson Flash S2.



WHICH motorhome says

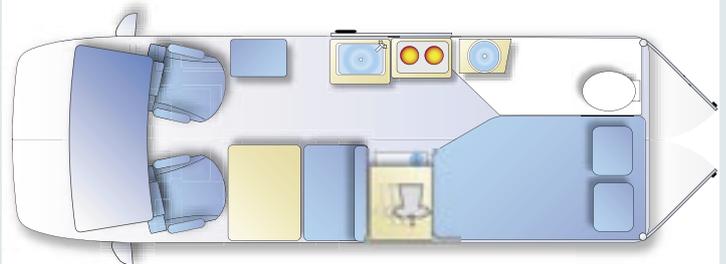
RAPIDO V56 ★★★★★
 SWIFT MONDIAL FB ★★★★★

Both of these van conversions are likeable for their on-road capabilities and practical living areas. The extra worktop in the kitchen is most welcome in the Mondial, but there is the compromise of the small washroom. The washroom in the Rapido is excellent, however its cooking facilities are limited. The Rapido's lounge is bigger too, with the extra seat that hides the easy-to-access gas locker.

Price-wise these motorhomes go head-to-head, and their base vehicles are indistinguishable except for the badges. There's no easy internal access to the bed in the Rapido, whereas the metal bed base in the Swift is easy to lift. In the end – tough decision though this is – the nod goes to the Rapido. The washroom is much better, the fixed bed bigger, the full double bed at the front adds versatility for friends or family – not just little kiddies – and the larger fridge capacity would be useful too. But really both of these motorhomes are well-priced, well-built and well-equipped. You can't go wrong.

RAPIDO V56

Currently there are just two 'Vans' in the Rapido high-top range; both were introduced for this season. The alternative V53 has a transverse fixed bed with the washroom and kitchen between this and the sliding door. The lounge remains the same, however, so your preference for this or the V56 will depend purely on where you want the bed. Of course, Rapido are better-known for their low-profiles and A-classes, but their Van range is just as well built and marries well with the French-companies existing range.



MONDIAL FB

There are four layouts in the Mondial range, with only the EK being based on the shorter, medium-wheelbase Boxer (measuring 5.41m long rather than 6.00m). The FB is the only one to offer a fixed bed, though – the RL and the EL both have rear lounges, whereas the EK has a rear L-shaped kitchen with a washroom beside. There are also Autocruise-badged equivalents, built in the same factory. The Autocruise Alto has the same layout as the Mondial FB.

