

Still going strong



John Wickersham charts the life of his self-built motorhome's base vehicle

As most van conversions and coachbuilt motorhomes are based on light commercial vehicles, they should, in my opinion, provide a reliable working life for a good 20 years.

Few motorhome owners notch up high annual mileages, unlike those using their vehicles for business who work them far harder. For that reason, the 'working' life of a base vehicle supporting a motorhome is expected to exceed the normal working life of its commercial 'brother'.

This month, I am going to provide a run-down of my own motorhome's 14-year life to date.

PURCHASE

In 1999, I ordered a Fiat Ducato 2.8TD Maxi chassis cab in order to construct my own coachbuilt motorhome. Before delivery, its rear suspension was removed and a commercial air suspension system professionally installed instead.

After collection, Waxoyl moisture inhibitor was injected into all chassis members before a GRP shell was mounted and duly fitted-out. The

project embraced several unusual features such as a diesel-fuelled water and space heating system. Today, my motorhome has 58,800 miles on the clock.

I kept a log of fuel bought, pump prices and miles per gallon from the outset. I also recorded details of repairs and component replacements.

There have certainly been some surprises. For instance, the starter battery – which was never 'treated' to a maintenance charge during lay-up periods – ran for nine years! Less pleasing was the steel cross member that is described later on.

SERVICING

Annual servicing is undertaken at a highly-respected Fiat-approved motorhome workshop. Important tasks (eg cambelt replacement) are undertaken in full accordance with Fiat's recommendations.

Having attended many service training courses over the years, I've gained knowledge, acquired practical skills and bought equipment so I can work on habitation servicing and repairs myself.

PERFORMANCE REPORT

So how has my Fiat coachbuilt fared so far? Will it still be a dependable holiday vehicle when it reaches its 20th birthday?

■ **Year 1 (2000)** – I bought my Ducato. Diesel fuel then cost around 73p per litre.

■ **Year 2 (2001)** – the bodyshell was installed and fitting-out progressed well. The evolving motorhome was used all year. Around 5,700 miles were completed in the first 12 months.

■ **Years 3-5 (2002-2004)** – conversion work was completed and final checks were carried out on a weighbridge. A replacement Electronic Control Unit (ECU) was needed on the load reactive air suspension system. The price of diesel fuel was still only 80p per litre. In December 2004, when the diesel heating system was liberally used, 22mpg was recorded.

■ **Year 6 (2005)** – the Eberspächer Hydronic heater needed servicing. When it was checked (above) I was

advised to run it briefly in summer rather than leave it dormant. Several chassis members had surface rust and were re-painted.



■ **Year 7 (2006)** – at 37,000 miles, a new cambelt was fitted. Many motorhomes need a cambelt replacement on account of age rather than mileage. A superficial inspection might suggest a cambelt is sound but flexing can reveal small cracks (below).



■ **Year 8 (2007)** – deep rusting on silencer boxes meant a new exhaust was required before the next MOT (above). Meanwhile, some of the original steel brake pipes needed replacing; good quality non-ferrous piping was fitted (right). Replacing other brake pipes almost became an annual job, probably hastened by winter driving on salted roads. In October, diesel exceeded £1 per litre.



■ **Year 10 (2009)** – after fault-free period, a potentially dangerous event unexpectedly occurred at home on a cold February day. A rear suspension leaf-spring snapped (above). A flaw in the metal was clearly visible.

A replacement had to be traced in order to move the motorhome. A Sheffield spring specialist supplied one which I fitted at home as the opening photo shows.

(Air suspensions are fitted on ambulances, buses, and lorries carrying sensitive loads like aero



engines. Failure of an air chamber's support spring through metal fatigue is highly unusual.) In March, a new VB air suspension was professionally installed (below left) which has performed perfectly ever since.

In June 2009, a corroded front cross member was noted; a replacement was fitted by a Fiat specialist. The cross member on vehicles of this age needs checking. Corrosion might be blamed on the radiator but mine has never leaked.



Replacing the corroded front cross member

■ **Year 11 (2010)** – although this 2.8TDi Maxi was professionally upgraded to achieve a Gross Vehicle Weight of 3,850kg, its braking system has competently served the vehicle. However, it was no surprise that new front



discs were needed after 11 years (below left). More surprising was the corroded sump (below right); finding a replacement for this Maxi took several days. Oil loss when driving can lead to serious engine damage.



■ **Year 13 (2012)** – after a fault-free 2011, during which diesel exceeded £1.40 a litre, body panel corrosion was found in June 2013. Prior to an MOT, checks revealed that holes had appeared near the driver's cab door sill (right); welding work followed. A professional under-sealing operation was completed by Rust Busters (below) and reported in the September 2012 magazine. With hindsight,

under-sealing work should have been undertaken before holes started to appear in the cab.



■ **Year 14 (2013)** – this was a trouble-free year apart from a sudden loss of power steering assistance in March. This was caused by a fractured hydraulic pipe. Power steering pipe has a larger diameter than brake pipe – obtaining the new section took several hours (right).



CONCLUSION

Although this report highlights occasions when things went awry, I have enjoyed countless hours of pleasurable touring and I've no plans to buy a replacement. The engine runs well, the ride is impressive and all the appliances are fine. Its 20th birthday is now six years away.

