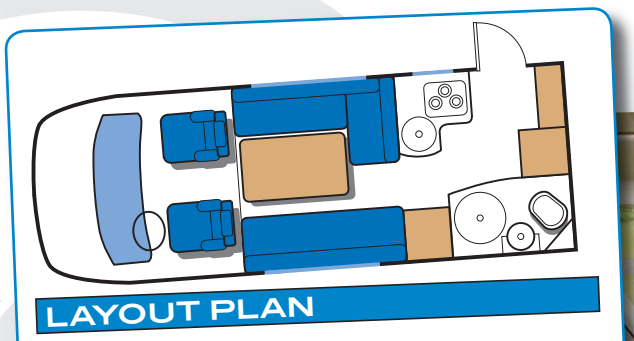
HYMER B-CLASS 544

A-CLASS CLASSICS

Hymer B-Class 544 and Rapido le Randonneur 927F

Archetypal integrated motorhomes offer full-fat accommodation within compact dimensions

The A-class is, for many, the ultimate example of the motorhome breed. Fully coachbuilt by the converter on a chassis cowl that arrives at the factory sporting just front inner wings, dash and cab floor, it allows motorhome makers to express their own particular styles completely. Indeed, only dash, steering wheel and road wheels betray the commercial vehicle origins of the chassis. Great looks and potential pride of ownership are powerful arguments for getting your hands on an A-class, but there's more to these beasts than aesthetics. A fully coachbuilt body that extends its full width to the front of the vehicle allows excellent utilisation of interior space - the word integrated sums up living area as much as it does the way the 'van is built. The wide cab allows pilot and



LAYOUT PLAN

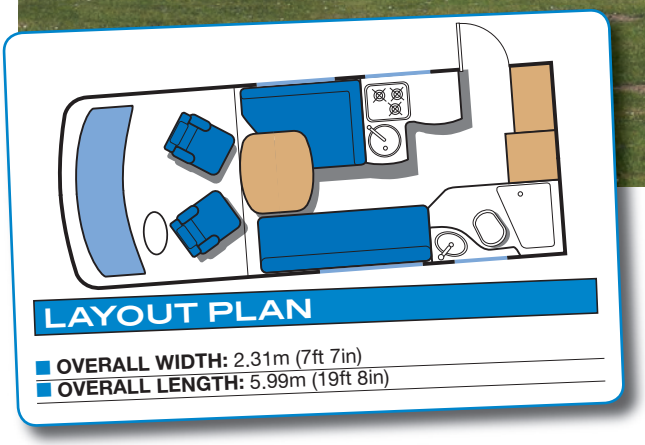
- **OVERALL WIDTH:** 2.27m (7ft 5.5in)
- **OVERALL LENGTH:** 6.39m (20ft 11.5in)

***RIGHT:** Isri captain's seats make Hymer cab comfy but the wipers remain set for left-hand drive.*

***FAR RIGHT:** Rapido cab features air-conditioning as standard and wipers handed for the UK.*

Words & pictures by Dave Hurrell

RAPIDO LE RANDONNEUR 927F



LAYOUT PLAN

- **OVERALL WIDTH:** 2.31m (7ft 7in)
- **OVERALL LENGTH:** 5.99m (19ft 8in)

navigator's seats to swivel easily to join the lounge when pitched, while up above there's (almost always) a transverse double bed that needs only a sharp tug to see it descend in an instant at bedtime.

Although there are plenty of gargantuan A-class 'vans on the market, placing a good chunk of the living space in the cab gives an opportunity to produce a motorhome that offers very comfortable and extensive facilities within a modest body length.

This month we look at two such 'vans - both in the six-metre class, they offer superb, comfortable, fully featured accommodation for two or more.

Hymer's fame is based on building A-class motorhomes and the German company's B-Class range mixes cutting-edge style with quality and good design that makes it very popular with experienced motorhomers. Many aspire to owning a Hymer and once this dream is achieved, they stick with the brand.

Rapido specialises in producing fully equipped, top quality camping cars with traditional interiors, and the 9F series of A-class models is very popular with folks who appreciate their French style and value for money.

MOTIVE POWER

Fiat's Ducato dominates the European motorhome market and both candidates this month derive their motivation from it. Ducato good points here include the excellent 2.8-litre turbo-diesel with equally excellent brakes, steering and gearchange. One (not so good) feature of the marque, over-lofty cab seats in relation to the top of the windscreen and cab floor, is corrected in both the Hymer and the Rapido. The fitting of captain's seats (Isri in the Hymer, Aguti in the Rapido) and the tall A-class windscreens improve cab comfort and usability by almost 100 per cent. Driver and passenger get a superb view and seats are height-adjustable to give comfort for both, no matter

I LIKED
- Isri captain's seats
- Cab air-conditioning
- ABS
- Big lounge-diner
- Excellent drawer-based storage in kitchen
- 'Designer' washroom with clever shower
- Capacious double-floor design
- Winterised status

I WOULD HAVE LIKED
- Electric cab mirrors
- Central locking
- Driver's airbag
- Big fridge-freezer

I DISLIKED
- More cab/conversion noise than rival
- Backrest cushions that play no part in bed making

***FROM THE TOP:** The Hymer's cab door, like the caravan entrance, lacks central locking.*

The Hymer front end is perfect for party animals with loads of space for entertaining.

View to the Hymer's rear shows the big lounge/diner, with L-shaped kitchen and washroom beyond.

Mealtimes in the Hymer can be lavish affairs with seating aplenty and a superb, big table.

what their stature. Those big screens need wiping of course, and Hymer adds an extra blade to total three. Very good you may think, until you realise that they remain positioned for left-hand drive. Rapido may only provide two wiper blades but it values its UK customers enough to reposition them for us - here more of the screen is wiped on the driver's side.

Commendably, both 'vans featured ABS and ASR traction control for safer and easier progress. Cab air-conditioning is a welcome feature too as was the radio/CD in the Rapido. The absence of airbags in both 'vans was a disappointment, as was the discovery that they weren't on the Rapido options list. You can have airbags in the Hymer, but only as part of a package that includes seats with integrated belts (standard belts are wall/base mounted). This comes in at a wallet-bashing £2119.

Big external mirrors give a good view to the rear in both cases (there's no through vision rearwards), but the Hymer's manually adjusted versions are sure to annoy if more than one person drives. Rapido fits electric mirrors as standard (the options list, and 233 quid, will see your Hymer so equipped).

Both Hymer and Rapido have undergone major surgery chassis-wise as specialist maker Al-Ko provides the rear end of both frames. These galvanised units offer independent rear suspension, wider track, and, importantly, an overall lower frame at the rear. A less lofty motorhome is, among other things, the result.

ROAD MANNERS

The joys of the A-class include the driving experience. Once you've got used to the fact that the screen is further away than usual and the wide-at-the-front body (which is usually no wider than a 'standard' coachbuilt), driving these beasts is a dream. A panoramic view through the big screen, and the feeling of space in the cab, is sure to put you in a holiday mood as soon as your wheels leave the driveway.

Whatever A-class you aspire to own I'd consider cab air-conditioning an essential; as wonderful as that big windscreen is, it's also a very effective mobile suntrap. Cab doors (passenger side only) make for easy access from the kerb on these Continentally-handed 'vans (the caravan entrance is on the UK offside) with the Rapido's having a stylish automotive look and remote central locking that also operates the caravan door. The Hymer cab door needs a key to lock it and is much more 'caravan' than 'car' (once again the dreaded options list, and £586, will see your Hymer locked electrically).

On-road characteristics are very similar in both 'vans - both a pleasure to drive. With the same rear chassis and engine, handling was excellent and smart-ish progress was easily achieved in these modestly sized 'vans. I found I had to keep an eagle eye on the speedo to avoid catching the attention of the almost inevitable 'safety' cameras. Both 'vans were sensibly fitted with the lower ratio top gear, meaning they pulled effectively in fifth from around 45mph. The Fiat can feature an 'overdrive' top ratio that seems attractive from the point of view of noise and fuel economy but this often leads to constant, tiresome gearchanging when encountering even the smallest incline or lightest headwind.

Engine and conversion noise was kept within acceptable limits in both 'vans with the Rapido ahead by a nose here - its motor more muted and its cupboards a tad less vocal in the rear.

With more than two berths on offer in both 'vans, the presence of belted travel seats in the

rear is a blessing, if not an essential feature. Both have two three-point belts on the forward-facing section of the dinette with lift-out sofa sections allowing the offside passenger to sit. Belts are adequate but neither offers a steel frame up the back with automotive-standard head restraints. The Rapido steals a lead here with a more padded seat back that conceals the belts' hard steel top mount more effectively.

LOUNGE AND DINE

Once pitched and hooked up, it's very easy (thanks to the wide cab area) to swivel both Hymer and Rapido cab seats to face, and join in with, the lounge. Interior layout in both consists of an L-shaped diner with sofa opposite.

It's here that the Hymer takes advantage of its slightly larger body length to offer a bigger relaxing and eating space. 400mm of extra linear room makes a big difference and the Hymer's lounge/diner is a corker. As with many Continentals, the table is big and fixed. However, its top slides fore-and-aft and side-to-side making it easier to move around, including to and from, the cab. Nine friends can be seated in comfort for a get-together making this 'van superb for entertaining. There's good news at mealtimes too as five can dine well on that big, solid tabletop.

The Hymer's interior ambience is fresh and modern without being too Teutonic in character. Stockholm soft furnishings include very comfortable 'squidgy' backrest cushions, while good-looking Lugano Pear cabinets add to the overall effect. Lighting, both natural and artificial, is good too, with Hymer's own wind-up rooflight above and ceiling lighting and reading lamps aplenty.

The Rapido's interior decor is the opposite, being warm and traditional with rich maple cabinets and warm-red Barcelone fabrics. Lighting is equally good with a big wind-up Heki rooflight and very traditional, gold reading and ceiling lamps.

In the lounge the shorter length is most noticeable. The sofa is every bit as big as the Hymer's but extends to the rear alongside the kitchen. The dinette follows the Hymer's example but is smaller and with a smaller table. Seven can sit here in comfort, but at mealtimes the table is small enough to be perfect for two and adequate for four. Rather than sliding, the tabletop folds in half and swivels, but it's still fixed and falls short of the Hymer's more user-friendly design.

All in all these are two excellent motorhome lounges that take very good advantage of the A-class cab. Motorhome party-people will love the Hymer - they'll just need to drive a slightly longer motorhome.

COOK'S QUARTERS

L-shaped dinettes are backed up by equally L-shaped kitchens.

The Hymer's good-looking wood is here partnered with translucent green plastic and silver tambour-doored lockers above, and a range of drawer-based storage below. This set-up provides plenty of user-friendly space with the big drawers being particularly easy to use - grubbing around on hands and knees peering into the backs of cupboards will never be an issue here. One opens to reveal a twin-bin recycling system and the cutlery drawer is big enough for much more than just knives and forks. Up top, matching circular hob and sink add style, with the hob featuring the electronic ignition often missing on even upmarket Continental motorhomes. Sadly there's no

RAPIDO LE RANDONNEUR 927F

I LIKED
- ABS
- Compact body length
- Cab air-conditioning as standard
- Remote central locking
- Radio/CD as standard
- Aguti captain's seats
- Big pull-down bed
- Easy to make, big single bed
- Excellent kitchen
- The price

I WOULD HAVE LIKED
- Driver's airbag
- Bigger shower compartment
- Better table design

I DISLIKED
- Smallish diner
- Lack of a double floor

***FROM THE TOP:** Rapido's version of the cab door is good-looking and centrally locked.*

With a shorter overall length, the Rapido can only manage a truncated version of the L-shaped lounge/diner

The dining side of the Rapido may be smaller but the sofa is long and great for lounging.

Mealtimes in the Rapido are restricted by its smaller, less versatile table.

drainer (again, often a Continental non-starter) and working surface is confined to the hinged hob top and inset sink lid on offer.

Opposite is the fridge with more storage below and Smev oven above. These days it's quite a shock to find an upmarket motorhome without a big fridge-freezer and, even though 97 litres of capacity ain't bad, you somehow feel nervous about the amount of chilled food - and of course cold beer - that can be carried. But, of course, there's Hymer's - increasingly infamous - options list; just 536 English pounds will see your 544 equipped with Dometic's 'big freeze' - the 150-litre AES range-topper. Apparently you have to buy the beer too!

And so to the Smev oven above. And that's all it is - there's no opportunity for bread scorching on offer but plenty for head scorching, as this unit is so high up that cooking anything that involves fat or a sauce could see you needing danger money. Thank goodness the oven too is an option; I'd save the £401 it costs and, probably, what's left of my hair too.

Being French, you'd maybe expect Rapido's approach to culinary activities to be more forthright and you'd be correct. The galley here is L-shaped too but better design sees it trounce the Hymer in all but storage provision. The longitudinal side of the kitchen's main unit is wide enough to accept an oven and here we find a standard-fit (on UK models) example. It's a Smev - similar to the Hymer's - but mounted at a sensible level it can be used safely. There's a grill here too, but don't expect high-speed golden toast in the morning as the burner's a bit of a slouch. (I know because my own 'van has a similar oven fitted and I picked up a toaster for under six quid - it burns bread much faster!) Above, the three-burner hob has spark ignition, but it's rectangular, while the circular sink still offers no drainer. Killer blow here is the big slab of worktop to the right of the hob.

The slightly longer kitchen unit allows an excellent work surface without impeding the sink or hob. Set into the back wall is that desirable fridge-freezer. A standard-fit item, this unit boasts automatic energy selection (AES) and a total of 150 litres of chilled and frozen space. All I have to do is buy the beer!

Storage here is good too with lockers above and drawers below. There's a pullout larder with

***ABOVE TOP:** Hymer's galley offer great drawer-based storage but is short of worktop.*

***ABOVE:** Hymer's designer washroom is a star, with a clever shower and super storage.*

MMM HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA – HYMER B544

PRICE
- **From:** £51,295 OTR
- **As tested:** £54,191 OTR

BASICS *(*manufacturer's figures)*
- **Berths:** 3/5
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (including driver)
- **Warranty:** 2 years base vehicle and conversion, 6 years water ingress
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No
- **Construction:** Alloy-clad sandwich construction A-class coachbuilt with ABS mouldings and alloy skirts
- **Length:** 6.39m (20ft 11.5in)*
- **Width:** 2.27m (7ft 5.5in)*
- **Height:** 2.85m (9ft 4in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 3.40m (11ft 2in)
- **Rear overhang:** 2.03mm (6ft 8in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3500kg*
- **Payload:** 455kg* (after driver (75kg), 100 per cent capacity gas, fresh water, fuel)

THE VEHICLE
Fiat Ducato Al-Ko chassis cowl
- **Engine:** 2.8-litre common-rail turbo-diesel producing 127bhp
- **Transmission:** 5-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted with ABS, discs all round
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent. Rear: Independent
- **Features:** Cab passenger door with electric window, Isri captain's seats, adjustable steering column, flip-up map holder, lockable glove compartment

INSIDE
- **Layout:** Swivel cab seats and A-class double bed ahead of L-shaped dinette with sofa opposite. L-shaped offside kitchen, nearside rear corner washroom with separate shower compartment
- **Insulation:** Floor 41mm, walls and roof 30mm
- **Interior height:** 2.00m (6ft 7in)

KITCHEN
- **Sink:** Circular stainless steel unit with monobloc mixer tap, inset worktop cover
- **Cooker:** Circular 3-burner Smev hob with electronic ignition and hinged glass lid. Smev oven (no grill) with electronic ignition and internal illumination
- **Fridge:** Dometic RM7401L, three-way. Capacity 97 litres

WASHROOM
- **Toilet:** Thetford swivel-bowl electric-flush cassette
- **Basin:** Circular basin with monobloc mixer tap
- **Shower:** Circular compartment utilises part of washroom floor. Twin sliding rigid curved doors, monobloc mixer showerhead and riser rail

BEDS
A-class drop-down double
- **Length:** 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- **Width:** 1.40m (4ft 7in) max
- **Headroom:** 720mm (2ft 4.5in)

Dinette double/single
- **Length:** 1.96m (6ft 5in)
- **Width:** 1.00mm (3ft 3.5in)

Sofa single
- **Length:** 1.95m (6ft 5in)
- **Width:** 710mm (2ft 4in)

EQUIPMENT
- **Fresh water:** Inboard. 120 litres (26.4 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Inboard. 100 litres (22 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Truma Combi C6002 gas/ mains operation
- **Space heater:** Truma Combi C6002, blown-air, gas only operation
- **Leisure battery:** 90 amp hr
- **Gas:** Capacity 2 x 11kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Halogen downlighters: two in cab, two in lounge, one adjacent to caravan door, three in washroom. Four adjustable halogen spotlights in lounge, vertical 'mood' lights at rear end of kitchen unit and corner of wardrobe. Fluorescent task lighting in kitchen
- **Sockets:** 230V: three (adjacent to caravan door, in kitchen, TV locker); 12V: three (in cab, TV locker, washroom)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS
Fitted to test vehicle
- **Base:** Cab air-conditioning (£1113)
- **Conversion:** Comfort Pack 1 - consists of cab blinds, flyscreen door, static cornering lights, pre-installation for radio - (£850), L-shaped seating instead of dinette (£459), additional infill cushion (£73), oven (£401)

Other options
- **Base:** Cab seats with integrated belt, plus driver and passenger airbag (£2119), rear air suspension (£2039), electric mirrors (£233), fog lights (£201), xenon headlights (£1153), alloys (£609), towbar (£810)
- **Conversion:** Leather upholstery (£3395), rooflight above A-class bed (£139), roof fan (£293), roof rails and ladder (£578), bike rack (from £201), living area air-conditioning (£1539), steady jacks (£212), reversing camera (from £841), satellite TV system (from £2310), remote central locking (£586), alarm (£459), safe (£177), 2 x 50W solar panels (£1226), additional 12V/230V socket (£58), second leisure battery (£231), outside gas point (£139), 150-litre AES fridge-freezer (£536)

built-in baguette bag and dedicated wine bottle storage (those French know how to live) but no waste bin, which takes the shine off things a bit.

For me, the Rapido kitchen takes the laurels. With oven and grill at a sensible height, big fridge-freezer and that all-important worktop, it'll please the more ambitious cook and be less frustrating in which to work.

BATHING SPACE

A totally different approach to 'little room' provision sees the Hymer put its best foot forward with one of the company's most stylish offerings.

'Designer' is, for once, an apt title for the B544's washroom. The only recognisable feature in here is the ever-present Thetford swivel-bowl loo; the rest is stylish, practical and all-round stunning in presentation. Lynchpin of the design is a semi-integrated shower compartment. This unit features twin, semi-circular doors; these enclose an area including part of the general washroom floor, thus saving space. There's a deep, circular basin, big mirror and super range of cupboard and shelf-based storage complete with sensible fiddle rails - no cosmetics should leap out at you when doors are opened. Although windowless, this room is light, and bright too, as Hymer has cleverly fitted one of its big, wind-up rooflights above. This not only maintains privacy, it lights the room superbly. When open it provides loads of ventilation that's almost rainproof as, like its twin above the lounge, its top winds up vertically, staying parallel to the roof. Although bright white, this washroom does not appear too clinical, as cupboards and lockers are executed in the same wood finish as the rest of the 'van's furniture.

The Rapido continues its traditional trends in the washroom. The ubiquitous Thetford throne is surrounded by joinery that hides lots of useful storage, both above and below the vanity basin. This is set into a brown, almost leather-like countertop with plenty of space to put down cosmetics in use. Indeed, as in the kitchen, the Rapido provides more washroom 'worktop' than the Hymer. A good-sized window lets in plenty of natural daylight, and ventilation for steam is taken care of by a

MMM HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA – RAPIDO 927F

PRICE
- **From:** £47,090 OTR
- **As tested:** £47,330 OTR

BASICS *(*manufacturer's figures)*
- **Berths:** 3
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (including driver)
- **Warranty:** 2 years base vehicle and conversion, 3 years water ingress
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No
- **Construction:** GRP-clad sandwich construction A-class coachbuilt with ABS moulded panels
- **Length:** 5.99m (19ft 8in)*
- **Width:** 2.31m (7ft 7in)*
- **Height:** 2.84m (9ft 4in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 3.2m (10ft 6in)
- **Rear overhang:** 1.78mm (5ft 10in)
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3500kg*
- **Payload:** 440kg* (after the vehicle in working order, driver (75kg), gas, fresh water and fuel tanks at 90 per cent of capacity)

THE VEHICLE
- Fiat Ducato Al-Ko chassis cowl
- **Engine:** 2.8-litre common-rail turbo-diesel producing 127bhp
- **Transmission:** Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted with ABS, discs all round
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent. Rear: Independent
- **Features:** Passenger cab door with electric window, remote central locking (including caravan door), ASR traction control, electrically-operated mirrors, rear on-road heating, radio/CD player, cab air-conditioning, cruise control, Aguti captain's seats

INSIDE
- **Layout:** Swivel cab seats and A-class drop-down bed ahead of L-shaped dinette with sofa opposite, L-shaped offside kitchen, rear nearside corner washroom with separate shower compartment
- **Insulation:** Floor, walls and roof, 25mm
- **Interior height:** 1.98m (6ft 6in)

KITCHEN
- **Sink:** Circular stainless steel unit with monobloc mixer tap, inset worktop lid
- **Cooker:** Three-burner stainless steel hob, with electronic ignition and hinged glass lid. Smev oven/grill unit with electronic ignition
- **Fridge:** Dometic RM7655L AES fridge/freezer. Capacity 150 litres

WASHROOM
- **Toilet:** Thetford swivel-bowl electric-flush cassette
- **Basin:** Vanity unit with monobloc mixer tap set into countertop
- **Shower:** Separate compartment with mixer tap, showerhead and riser rail, single outlet tray, fitted pullout clothes airer

BEDS
A-class drop-down double
- **Length:** 1.88m (6ft 2in)
- **Width:** 1.35m (4ft 5.5in)
- **Headroom:** 800mm (2ft 9in)

Lounge single
- **Length:** 2.00m (6ft 7in)
- **Width:** 940mm (3ft 1in)

EQUIPMENT
- **Fresh water:** Underslung and insulated. 120 litres (26.4 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung. 100 litres (22 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Truma Combi 6002 EH gas/mains operation
- **Space heater:** Truma Combi 6002 EH blown-air, gas/mains operation
- **Leisure battery:** 90 amp hr
- **Gas:** Capacity 2 x 11kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Two adjustable spotlights above cab, five in lounge, two halogen downlighters in kitchen, two halogen task lights built in to cooker hood, three halogen downlighters in washroom (one in shower), two ceiling lamps within A-class bed area, auto illumination in wardrobe, awning light
- **Sockets:** 230V: three (two in kitchen, one in TV locker); 12V: two (in cab and TV locker)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS
Fitted to test vehicle
- **Base:** Cruise control (£240)
- **Conversion:** None fitted

Other options
- **Base:** Towbar (£910), motorcycle rack (£1210), fog lights (£160), 146 bhp engine (LHD only) (£740), automatic gearbox (127bhp and LHD only) (£2090)
- **Conversion:** Roof rack and ladder (£470), leather upholstery (£1100), box for second leisure battery (£80)

***ABOVE TOP:** Rapido cooks are well treated in an excellent kitchen.*

***ABOVE:** Fully featured Rapido washroom only needs a bit more shower-space.*

***FROM THE TOP:** Hymer drop-down double bed is easy to deploy but it lacks the space of its rival.*
A desirable double floor hides lots of storage beneath your feet in the Hymer.
Double floor houses Hymer's tanks in a frost-free home.

rooflight above (that'll also be useful when the window blind is closed). The separate shower fits in with the traditional approach well, being entirely conventional. It's usable too though, with rigid, bi-fold door and a deep tray. Only those of larger stature may find trouble in here as the compartment narrows on one side.

Both washrooms are very good but the Hymer's bound to get the style council's vote, while its larger shower is a better bet all round.

BEDTIME

A-class cab beds take the lead and will probably be most used by the couples that are likely to buy these motorhomes.

The lever-operated seatback adjuster of the Hymer's Isri cab pews makes it very easy to fold backs forward and out of the way of the descending cab bed. The release of a single clip and a sharp tug sees this transverse double berth lowered and ready for occupation. An interior-sprung one-piece mattress sits on a sprung-slat frame and is approached by a short wooden access ladder.

The Rapido's bed is equally easy to deploy (the Aguti cab seats also fold forward at the twist of a knob) and features the same method of access and sprung-frame base. The only difference is the Bultex foam mattress favoured by Rapido is a tad more yielding.

The main differences here are dimensional and the Rapido bed is more spacious (although it's an inch shorter with a smaller overall width) as the mattress is squarer and headroom greater by 4.5 inches. This increases in-bed comfort and makes access easier.

The Hymer's one reading light is bettered by the two in the Rapido but both have lights at only one end of the bed - good side-to-side levelling of the 'van on pitch will be essential if you always wish to sleep heads to the 'correct' end.

Downstairs, Hymer offers two beds in the lounge and claims three berths here, although the reality of this means that two will be far more sensible in practice. Big downside is the aforementioned seatback cushions. Owing to their 'squidgy' nature they're useless at becoming part of the beds and so have to be stashed elsewhere. Six large ones and two or three little 'uns need to be lugged and dumped - presumably in the cab. Doing this once during the test was quite enough for me, I can assure you! The single nearside downstairs bed is the easiest to make as once you've lugged just three of the cushions it's ready to use. On the other side, a second single could be made by doing the same thing with the lengthways dinette seat. If you wish to make up the double on this side the table joins in, descending (with a hefty push) on its telescopic base to form part of the bed base. Now infills are required, and its at this point that you could be forgiven if you developed a strong dislike of motorhome cushions - at times during the test the interior did a seemingly good impression of an upholstery workshop! Best as three-berth, the Hymer can still accommodate four if you leave those pesky infills at home.

The Rapido cuts to the usable motorhomes chase by offering a maximum of just three berths. The pullout base of the lengthways sofa combines with its backrest to make a bigger-than-domestic-sized single bed. Only the long foam wedge that gives this cushion some angle has to be wrestled into the cab before lights-out.

If you desire, or need, more than three berths the Hymer will be your choice. The Rapido offers superior beds, albeit in fewer numbers.

STORE ROOM

The Hymer's design and construction gives an edge in storage provision. Inside, the usual high-level lockers and reasonable wardrobe are present and correct but it's this 'van's double floor construction that makes it different to the Rapido. A rot-proof sub floor sits below the living area floor and helps create a double floor cavity that offers large amounts of space for bulky and/or heavy kit. This is accessed by lift-up doors in the Hymer's flanks and is perfect for the likes of tools, outdoor furniture and barbecues. It also provides a clean and convenient home for the spare wheel. There's also another external hatch that leads to big undersofa storage. Payload is reasonable (455kg), so carting holiday kit without overloading should be easy.

There's no double floor lurking beneath the Rapido but it counters with two big slide-out drawers and a large area under its side sofa. Inside, it's the wardrobe that's of note as it includes a stack of shelves as well as the usual hanging space within. Again, payload is acceptable (440kg) but the Rapido's storage space is less versatile than the Hymer's.

LIFE SUPPORT

Plenty of fresh water on-tap and good waste capacity means both showers can be used in anger - the Rapido features a second outside unit that can be very useful in hot weather. The location of the Hymer's tanks within its heated double floor cavity gives it the edge when motorcaravanning in winter. The Rapido makes do with underslung tanks but, as the fresh water tank is insulated and heated, only the waste tank should be vulnerable in cold weather.

Good heating is vital and will be the life-blood of these 'vans in cold weather; both feature the more powerful version of Truma's Combi space and water heater. The Hymer tested had the (optional extra) mains water-heating element fitted to the Combi.

Rapido, however, fits the Truma EH version as standard. The EH stands for electric heating and not only does this unit heat water using mains power; it does the same for blown-air space heating too. I've tried this unit in anger in another vehicle and can heartily recommend it. During UK off-season motorhoming it works superbly well and is particularly good on low setting - keeping winter chills at bay at night.

CONCLUSION

In this guise and at this size, I can definitely recommend either of these two motorhomes. A pleasure to drive and - thanks to their relatively compact size - easier than many to park. They both make very good use of their A-class characteristics and internal space.

The Hymer's iconic status and reputation for quality recommend it, as does its winter-proof double floor, superb lounge-diner and 'designer' washroom. People who like entertaining could find the 544 perfect, even if they find it difficult to get the kitchen to provide a banquet for their guests.

The Rapido scores with its shorter overall length but pays for this advantage with a smaller lounge. However, its A-class bed is more spacious and its kitchen far more cook-friendly. Only the rather small shower lets the 927's very capable washroom down.

Last, and by no means least, is price. The Hymer relies to a great extent on its lengthy options list to bring its specification anywhere near the Rapido's standard spec. Once the sums are done you discover that the Rapido weighs in with a £6861 price advantage over its German rival.

RAPIDO LE RANDONNEUR 927F

***FROM THE TOP:** Rapido A-class bed is spacious with more headroom than its rival. There's no double floor beneath the Rapido but it still offers two big storage drawers in its flanks. Outside shower is a feature of the Rapido standard kit list.*

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