

CHALLENGE



DICK

To begin his new series of articles, TV star **Dick Strawbridge** heads off in an Auto-Sleeper Executive for a taste of life in a modern motorhome. But not all goes to plan...



I'M a pretty adventurous, outspoken chap so when I was invited to spend some time in a modern motorhome and to say what I thought of the experience, obviously the answer was 'yes'. I'm no stranger to travelling or camping, as a youth our family holidays were tenting, caravanning and eventually we moved on to a static caravan in beautiful County Fermanagh.

A military career didn't teach me how to rough it; I actually learned how to be comfortable. As a young subaltern, serving in Germany in the early 80s, my troop decided any fool could be uncomfortable, so we converted our general purpose trucks into rather comfortable 'motorhomes' complete with folding bunk beds, sofas and a cooker.

During cold winter exercises these were the envy of those who got to see them (our discretion meant no one ever complained).

Having said all that, I had no experience of the modern nomad's motorhome. I've seen them on roads all over the UK and marvelled at them towing cars, seen motorbikes and bicycles on racks, canoes on top, but my most reoccurring thoughts were to wonder how anyone ever parked them, particularly the massive RVs.

So MMM arranged for me to pop into Marquis Motorhomes in Northampton to borrow a motorhome of their choice. I'd been filming for BBC's *Coast* in Barrow-in-Furness and had my hatchback loaded with what I thought I'd need to make my new home from home.

My initial impressions were of the sheer number of vehicles; it was a sea of white. On closer inspection the makes of the base vehicles stood out rather than the type of motorhomes. This is probably because I'm an engineer and have built and taken apart countless cars, vans and lorries.

It appeared here was a predominance of Peugeot followed by Mercedes and a few VW. On reflection it made sense, the Peugeot diesel engine is a great workhorse so for value it would be popular and obviously the quality of the Mercedes chassis would have a following, whereas the VW is known for 'campers', which are not in the same category as the motorhomes I was looking at.

To be honest I was a little shell shocked and rather pleased I didn't have to choose which one to drive away. Julie (Julie Russell, Marquis' marketing executive) came to my rescue as I was looking around and led me to an Auto-Sleeper Executive that was being



enough to withstand 21st century traffic and road conditions. The material fatigue that comes with the flexing of the body is significant and I know if I were buying a second hand vehicle I'd go over it with a fine toothcomb as I was aware that problems with seals and water ingress could be an issue.

Keys in hand I transferred duvets, pillows, sheets, cooking equipment, computers (!) and chargers and prepared to head off.

I've driven a lot of different vehicles from articulated lorries to tanks, so I am a confident driver (usually I'm only ever allowed in the driving seat when there is a lot of space around me and everyone feels safe). As expected, the vehicle was really easy to drive with great visibility in the wing mirrors.

It took a couple of miles to come to terms with the extra width but my journey to east London was comfortable and fun. I made liberal use of the cruise control and the six-speed gearbox and trip computer allowed me to try and keep my mpg reasonable, if anything it would have been too easy for my speed to creep up, the engine was definitely powerful enough.

Confession time, my passenger and companion for the adventure lives within a secure old building with a walled car park, so I decided to park outside rather than negotiate the tight gate and trying to fit into a car parking space – not quite cowardice more convenience!

However, it's a fair cop. I deserved the ticket, thank you officer.

As I write this, the camper is outside in a car parking space it fits, and the gates are really rather wide.

EXPLORING THE NEW FOREST

Having every conceivable mod con in the motorhome, I decided my first night needed to be out in the very beautiful British countryside, completely wild away from the maddening crowd.

A quick map recce, and the New Forest was beckoning; I have passed through many times and stopped in a number of hotels so I knew it was lovely. The drive was fun and it was interesting that quite a number of fellow motorcaravanners waved, it reminded me of when I used to drive a Morris Minor around. I'm a country boy and very aware of the country code, but I'm ignorant of the regulations for where it is permissible to park a motorhome. I was raised believing it is 'better to beg forgiveness than to ask permission' so we ended up in a truly magical location surrounded by trees and near a stream that was peaceful and well off the beaten track.

My father was never a stickler for levelling our caravan so I adopted his 'near as damn it' approach when we parked up. Life is too short to get out the inclinometer on the iPad, and it's only a small inconvenience if the sink doesn't fully drain.

We settled down to life in the motorhome and as I like my cooking I set about preparing supper, with slow roasting marinated pork belly in the oven and a glass of wine in hand we played with the boiler, fridge, telly and every button we could find.

checked before it was handed over to me. I had masses of questions to ensure I could use the vehicle to the best of its ability, but my first impression was that it was full. The surfaces were all clear and it looked pristine, but every bit of space was being used, lots of storage, and everything was obviously designed based on years of experience.

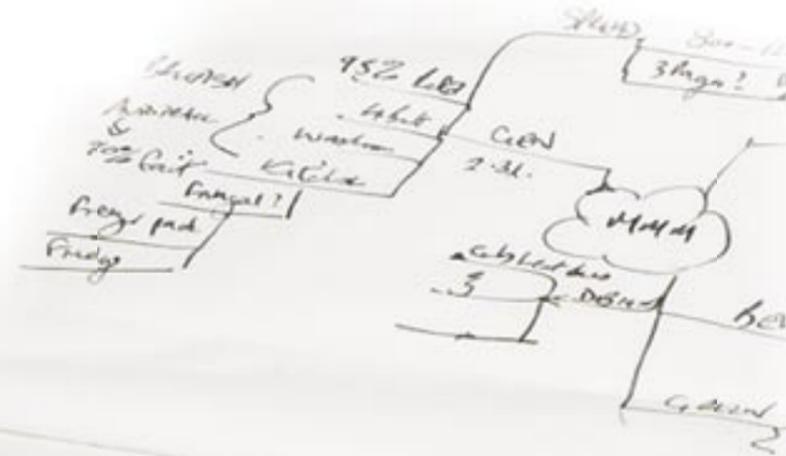
I spend my life surrounded by artistic and creative people and I think some of it must have rubbed off as I couldn't warm to the material used for the upholstery, I wasn't surprised by it, as something similar appears in every picture of a motorhome I've ever seen, but it felt positively dowdy. I have to also admit, I smiled to myself as I was shown the rather bijou shower and loo and thought that it must have been designed for emergencies. How wrong I was...

BEHIND THE WHEEL

Before leaving, I walked around and chatted to Julie about the other motorhomes to try and understand the cost drivers and what the choices are for someone deciding to purchase their own motorhome. I love the fact that these motorhomes were of UK manufacture. OK the chassis were imported, but it's great to see we still have some industry.

My Auto-Sleeper was of monocoque construction as opposed to being coach built. I must admit I like the idea of a bespoke solution for making motorhomes that appears to ensure the integrity of the caravan unit. Safety and durability must be of concern when spending such a lot on a motorhome. The idea of popping a large box on a chassis did raise thoughts of how to secure it and make it strong

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Having come to terms with our accommodation we had a very civilised evening and supper was extremely tasty, though the intermittent smoke alarm going off during the cooking, even though the roof light was open, was a little annoying. For the avoidance of doubt I didn't burn anything, I was just cooking, and the stir fried vegetables and noodles were not (particularly) smoky. Opening the door did solve the problem, but it was dark outside...

When some people move into a hotel room they spread their possessions around, turning the room into a disaster area, others hang up clothes and put things away. I am of the latter category, which is just as well as life in a motorhome needs things put away or you lose control very quickly, which is an issue when it comes to bedtime.

And bedtime made me question why such a lovely motorhome has such a rudimentary bed. VW campers have the 'rock and roll' springs and sofa beds that are easily deployed. But our system, even with a relatively clear living area, took a lot of co-ordination. The bed cushions were also not very comfortable and the pull out sections' legs were a little flimsy and barely survived a night of romance! (ED: Auto-Sleeper has modified the bed and strengthened the supports).

The morning started with braving the shower. It was completely functional and shaving and showering was dead easy, sadly the loo roll didn't survive - I didn't think to take it off the holder and hide it, but don't worry we had spares.

There is something very special about the smell of cooking bacon when outdoors, so breakfast of toasted muffins, creamy scrambled eggs and crispy smoked streaky bacon with juice and coffee was exactly what we wanted before heading off for a lovely walk in sunshine. It was late morning before we were ready to continue our exploration that took us to the seaside at Milford-on-Sea. A little exposure to the bracing sea air and it was definitely time for a late lunch. Having done a cookery demo and talk at the Milford food festival I knew 'The Marine' on the sea front was exactly the right place for a leisurely lunch. We hadn't planned to have the seven course taster menu but it was a lovely couple of hours.

As we came out I could positively hear the bed calling for an afternoon nap. I love the complete independence and even though we opted for another walk, the point is we could have, if we wanted to; I think I understand what it must be like being a snail.

Having spent an evening alone in the wild, the second night was to be on a site so we opted for the Camping and Caravanning Club's Setthorns site in the forest near New Milton. I had pictured a campsite with showers and toilet blocks. However, I was digesting the sign saying only motorcaravans with chemical toilets were allowed to stay and the penny was dropping when I met Alan who explained where to go and showed me the water and electricity connections - the toilet was not just for emergencies then!

I don't think we saw anyone else that evening, but that didn't matter, in fact such evenings could easily become a habit. Good company and all facilities within easy reach, who knows where I could end up, though I must say if I had my own motorhome I could see some customisation happening!

Next issue, Dick takes on his first MMM challenge. As the well-known presenter of the popular TV series Scrapheap Challenge, we felt it appropriate to challenge Dick to build something that he would have found useful on this first motorhome trip. But he must build it out of spare parts, scrap or salvaged parts. If you have an idea for a motorhome challenge for Dick, email it to us at mmm@warnersgroup.co.uk

