



ON TOUR WITH A...

... 2006 Auto-Trail Grande Frontier A-7300

With the wind pumps (not windmills) at Kinderdijk.



TOURING TRIVIA

WE STAYED AT:

- Delftse Hout campsite, Korftlaan 5, NL-2616 LJ Delft (Z-H), Holland (tel: +31 (0)15-2130040; web site: www.delftsehout.nl)

WE VISITED

- De Schaapskooi (restaurant), Korftlaan 3, 2616 LJ Delft (tel: +31 (0)15-2134495; web site: www.schaapskooi.nl)
- Madurodam (four per cent scale model landscape), George Maduroplein 1, 2584 RZ Den Haag, Holland (tel: +31 (0)70-4162400; web site: www.madurodam.nl)
- Euromast (observation tower), Parkhaven 20, 3016 GM Rotterdam (tel: +31 (0)10-4364811; web site: www.euromast.nl)

WE SAILED WITH

- P&O Ferries from Hull to Rotterdam (tel: 08702 423322; web site: www.poferries.com)



Words & pictures by Dave Batten-Hill

The Netherlands beckons, as Auto-Trail's award-winning A-class crosses the North Sea

On paper, the Auto-Trail Grande Frontier A-7300 is a lot of motorhome; its specification is such that a lot of paper is needed to describe it. But, as between the cup and the lip, there can be many a slip between the reading and the reality. Would this be so of the Grande Frontier? A trip to the Netherlands put it to the test.

GRANDE DESIGN

That the Grande Frontier is a lot of motorhome in the flesh – or rather in the glass fibre (and aluminium) – is beyond doubt. It's high, wide and... yes, handsome. Far from being merely the sum of its parts, it gives the impression of singularity, in the finest sense of the word. The dynamic approach applied is detectable from any angle; it exists in the vehicle's overall shape and in the details that distinguish it. These, from the roof's bold mouldings to the neatly recessed headlights, underscore the Grande Frontier's integrity of design. Such integrity continues in the interior, where curvilinearity holds sway: sharp-corner bruises will be unlikely.

That 'spaciousness' is a Grande Frontier watchword is immediately obvious and this is highlighted by the realisation that the A-7300 is a two-berth. A question raised its head: to whom will a 7.43 metre, 4.6 tonne, two-berth appeal? We found a one-word answer. Choose the word from 'hedonists', 'egocentrics', 'voluptuaries' or 'indulgents'; whichever way you cut it the gist remains... stoics needn't apply.

Working on the basis that experiencing a little gratuitous luxury never did any harm, we set off, Rotterdam bound, for the ferry terminal.

FOREIGN SOIL

P&O Ferries' *Pride of Hull*, at 215 metres long, is no small steamer - but slotting the Grande Frontier onto its lower car deck, among the 18-wheelers, took application. Leaving the A-7300 to its own devices, we explored the vessel. Eschewing the various entertainments - a live show, two cinemas, a casino, and a Langan's Brasserie - we repaired to our compact but comfortable en-suite cabin.

The next morning, a scandalously early alarm call had us up and ready to set tyres to Dutch tarmac and there's where the Grande Frontier's user-friendliness came to the fore. Given a commanding viewpoint and being cosseted by the immensely comfortable Aguti Pilot seats, we found riding in the broad cab pleasurable enough. The Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 416 chassis cab's five-cylinder turbo-diesel engine knocks out 156bhp and it talks the torque at a lowly 1400-2400rpm. Six speeds-worth of Sprintshift automatic transmission, panoramic vision, and reversing camera as standard, all add up to a relaxing drive. Traversing the autoroutes from Rotterdam's Europoort to Delft represented 29 easy miles. That said, a welcome provision and a desperate need appeared simultaneously. The huge glass cliff let into the Grande Frontier's nose and the cab's big side windows soon gave us an insight into how a sun-dried tomato feels - the air-conditioning was essential. More seriously, driving on the right highlighted the need for wide-angle blind spot sections in the cab mirrors.

A notable point about the A-7300's cab was its interior trim. The Mercedes-Benz dash is surrounded by tailor-made GRP mouldings, their satin black finish being repeated on the door panels. Apart from making no sound, they made no irritating reflections in the windscreen.

The shakedown trip completed, we pitched at Delft's modernistic Delftse Hout campsite and sought compensation for our rude awakening in a delicious meal at De Schaapskooi (the Sheep Pen). Locally hailed as the area's romantic restaurant, it served lamb chops that were melt-in-the-mouth tender. The Schaapskooi's setting, within easy walking distance of the campsite, made it an ideal spot for first-night nourishment.

Setting up the Grande Frontier for sleeping was a simple procedure. Assembling the bed was merely a matter of folding the cab seats, moving two small cushions aside and swinging the A-class cab bed down. Doing so left us with a chest-height, transverse double, complete with integral fabric screens. Speaking of screens, the windscreen blind initially resisted all attempts to unfurl it. Then came the revelation; we discovered the switch. Pressing this rolled the motorised blind down smoothly - very *Goldfinger*.

Our first evening on Dutch soil was a touch chilly, which was no problem, given that we had Eberspächer Combitronic heating. We tweaked its thermostat and soon had a pleasant interior temperature and as much hot water as we needed. Next, we chose to sample the Grande Frontier's washroom. Richly wood-panelled, with a granite-effect integrated washbasin, fluorescent-flanked mirrors, a sizeable wardrobe, a cylindrical, separate shower, and its very own padded free-standing stool, it wanted for nothing. A dedicated dressing table came in for lavish praise. Moreover, the washroom was roomy, occupying the entire tail of the vehicle.

And so to bed, once again, and very comfortable it was too - the one-piece mattress

I LIKED

- Bold, integrated design
- Quality construction
- Recessed awning
- Spare wheel mounting arrangement
- Curvaceous interior
- Restrained trim
- Practical kitchen
- Excellent washroom
- Effective heating
- Easy bed making
- Electric windscreen blind
- Effective transmission

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Wide-angle cab mirrors
- Bigger water tanks
- A night table/shelf

I DISLIKED

- High noise level in cab (see text)

FROM THE TOP:
High places: Euromast has an extension on top, complete with panoramic lift

Delftse Hout campsite is situated in pleasant countryside a short bus ride from the centre of Delft.

Cool coachwork at Ice Magic.





being devoid of the joins that can plague multi-section beds. All this berth lacked was a spot for night-time essentials; sitting glasses of juice (and so on) on a tray on the left sofa demanded caution - and was no substitute for a night shelf.

INSIDE INFORMATION

The next day dawned bright and clear and the preparation of a leisurely brunch showed why the kitchen scores highly. The L-shaped, granite-effect worktop has no need of extensions and the domestic-style cooker's glass lid adds to the already ample workspace. 'Ample' also describes the available storage space. The L-section carries a massive cutlery drawer, complete with a moulded inner liner - and beneath, a slide-out wire basket readily

accepts a huge quantity of rations.

Up above, a rank of lockers mimics the shape of the kitchen; its leading end features a large, curved, double tambour-doored locker which appears strong enough to house a microwave oven. Next door are lockers with wire crockery racks.

Across the gangway the fridge-freezer stands next to a further slide-out (with six, position-able wire racks). Two further lockers stand above the fridge-freezer, and the leading corner cupboard holds a locker for a flat screen TV. Below it, yet another locker holds a bi-pod table, two corner shelves and a dedicated locker for bottle storage. At the trailing end of the left sofa is a half-height, shelved corner cupboard. Kitchen or lounge storage? That doesn't matter - it's useful.

SAIL PLAIN

Not one of the 19 windmills at Kinderdijk has ever ground corn. They are water pumps, keeping water in check being a Netherlands necessity. The drive to Kinderdijk gave the Grande Frontier further challenges. A 2.98-metre high vehicle of the A-7300's weight is bound to have a high centre of gravity, but body roll was fairly well controlled and the vehicle would settle into a long, loping pitch - soon damped out - when faced with the joins in the Dutch autoroutes' many bridges. Also, the area has *dremfels* (speed bumps) and these revealed an Achilles heel. Crossing them at an angle at walking pace could set the A-7300 rolling substantially. Dealing with these traits simply involved driving intelligently, and in keeping with the vehicle's characteristics.





FAR LEFT: Looking forwards from the L-shaped kitchen, the caravan door is just beyond the fridge.

LEFT: The interior is spacious for a couple, and the across-the-rear bathroom offers opportunities for hedonistic bathing.

RIGHT FROM THE TOP: Room for rent: 'Heaven' is one of Euromast's top-level suites.

A tasty dish is flambé cooked at De Schaapskooi restaurant.

Pocket-sized version of Stena Discovery at Madurodam.

BELOW FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Aguti Pilot seats make the cab extremely comfortable

Comfortable correspondent: the overcab bed is splendidly sumptuous. Note the dedicated lighting.

Kitchen layout is exemplary. The multi-fuel cooker offers domestic-style facilities.

Modesty incarnate: the drum-shaped shower cubicle features integral lighting and top rate fittings.



Away from the traffic-harming (sorry, traffic-calming) measures, the A-7300's mass was very well managed by the chassis' hardware. Disc brakes all round pulled the Grande Frontier up square and true and the power steering allowed for easy manoeuvring while still giving good feedback. The Sprintshift transmission worked admirably. Left to its own devices, it coped well on the level, while manual gear selection curbed its tendency to hang on to a lower gear on even modest inclines. The 'van gave a good account of itself during motorway cruising. The only downside was that the busy-sounding, five-cylinder engine is mounted well back and that means it intrudes into the cab. Apparently, the test vehicle's stablemates are fitted with superior sound insulation materials.

Further aft, the conversion was commendably free of creaks and rattles.

SHORT MEASURES

Rotterdam's immense urban sprawl is built between a grid of waterways. This means there are bridges ranging from the modest to the magnificent. Windmills appear round the unlikeliest corners. Boats by the roadside, more than a few classic cars, and bicycles by the bucket-load, give a lasting impression.

This was reason enough to visit Madurodam, the Netherlands' miniature representation of itself. Spread over 18,000 square metres, this fascinating model landscape features four per cent scale replicas of famous buildings: models of the airport, the ferry terminal, and much, much more are there.

At Madurodam's entrance, a life-size figure of Hansje Brinker, the legendary Little Dutch Boy, struggles unsuccessfully to keep the water in the dyke. Inside, a model oil tanker bursts into flames every thirty seconds, to be extinguished by a fire tug's water jets. There are cathedrals, palaces, a fairground, a skidpan... you name it, it's there. It's certainly enough to keep a four per cent scale Grande Frontier in photo locations for a decade. But the odd part is the presence of life-sized crows and ducks – one expects 'the attack of the giant killer wildfowl'.

Nearby, was the Magic Ice exhibition. Donning padded waistcoats from a stack near the entrance was made essential by the hall's ambient temperature of 10 below. However, once inside, it was the magnificent sculptures that took one's breath away. These, made from 2000 ice blocks weighing 230 tons in total, were initially chain-sawed into shape. Their Chinese sculptors, from the most northerly province of the People's Republic, used chisels to add fine detail. Though nearing the end of their working life, the sculptures retained incredible detail.

MAST TIMES

The next day brought a make-up call for the A-7300. Encountering rain only on site meant



SPECIFICATION

- **Price from:** £64,999 on the road
- **Price as tested:** £65,904 on the road
- **Layout:** Two-berth A-class with drop-down transverse double bed, swivelling cab seats form part of front lounge with unequal-length opposing sofas, L-shaped kitchen, full-width tail washroom
- **Base vehicle:** Mercedes-Benz 416 chassis cowl, 2.7-litre five-cylinder turbocharged diesel engine producing 156bhp, six-speed Sprintshift semi-automatic gearbox (optional), rear-wheel drive
- **Warranty:** Three years base, three years caravan
- **Dimensions and weights:** Length: 7.43m (24ft 4.5in), width (including mirrors): 2.67m (8ft 9in), height: 2.98m (9ft 9.5in). Max authorised weight: 4600kg, payload: 955kg (includes 75kg allowance for driver and full fuel)
- **Belted seats:** Two (driver and passenger)
- **Beds:** Drop-down A-class double: 1.94m x 1.40m (6ft 4.5 in x 4ft 7in), headroom: 920mm (3ft 0in) max
- **Kitchen:** L-shaped kitchen with circular cover over stainless steel sink, Spinflo full-sized slot-in cooker, Thetford 145-litre three-way fridge/freezer
- **Washroom:** Thetford electric-flush toilet, granite-finished GRP washbasin with integral shelf, vanity area with fluorescent lights flanking mirror, two-door wardrobe with three internal shelves, separate cylindrical shower with integrated

fluorescent lighting and curved frosted polycarbonate screen

- **Heating:** Eberspächer Combitronic diesel-fired/230V system provides blown-air space heating and hot water
- **Tanks:** Fresh water: 100 litres, waste water: 81 litres
- **Gas:** Two 13kg cylinders
- **Optional extras fitted to test vehicle:** Sprintshift semi-auto gearbox (we understand that this gearbox has been superseded by a conventional automatic box)
- **Other options available:** Rear cycle rack (£285), 230V air-conditioning (£1245), colour coded roof rack and ladder (£425), 27in wide entrance door (£500), alternative upholstery (£180), round table and boom arm (£175), heated tanks (£95 per tank)

Note: If you are contemplating buying a motorhome with a maximum authorised weight of over 3500kg, then you must check that you are licensed to drive it. 3500kg weight restrictions apply to the driving licences of those who passed their car-driving test after January 1st 1997 (who need to pass a further test), and also to those of 70 years of age and over (where a more stringent medical is required to retain the right to drive vehicles over 3500kg). For more information ask for DVLA booklet D100 at your post office or log on to www.dvla.gov.uk.

that the pre-photo primping merely involved removing yet another insect collection from the front panels. The clean-up procedure allowed closer examination of the Grande Frontier's coachwork. The panel fit was excellent throughout. The cab doors are especially good; making bespoke door mouldings that work is no easy task. It was gratifying to see how the part-recessed awning is housed in a special, GRP moulding. At the tail end, a big gas locker has a neighbouring space, which was convenient for pitching gear. Beneath, a full-width tail locker represents a baby garage's worth of useful space and the spare wheel cover concealed a neat solution to offering an accessible and attractive mounting for the spare.

A 16-kilometre drive south into Rotterdam highlighted the convenience of an auto-box in traffic... and for fine manoeuvring on location. The location was Euromast.

Ascending Euromast is a novel experience. You enter a stainless steel lined lift, and suddenly get the feeling that you've instantly gained a lot of weight. An ensuing feeling of lightness tells you that the four-metre-a-second device, which has made your ears pop, is stopping. Go outside and you're 96 metres up, on Euromast's main viewing platform. And suddenly you're back at Madurodam, or at least it seems that way. Looking down on a stunning view, you're seeing real buildings, trams, buses, cars and



MOTORHOME KINDLY LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

Auto-Trail VR Ltd, Trigano House, Genesis Way, Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire DN37 9TU (tel: 01472 571000; web site: www.auto-trail.co.uk)

people – they just look small. The difference is that the view goes all the way to the horizon.

The view certainly doesn't pall quickly and to take advantage of this, there are rooms to let. 'Heaven', for example, is an appropriately named double room, with all mod cons, tinted glass, and a pilot's eye view.

SITE SIGHTS

Having a base at Delftse Hout offered a twofold advantage, as well as accommodation, of course. The old Rotterdam has gone forever, being severely bombed in World War II. Now, nothing is all that old and the area's a huge, highly industrialised hinterland for the coastal ports. Delftse Hout, conversely, is on the fringe of the rural area; the Netherlands starts to become pretty here. So, the site is semi-rural and, unsurprisingly, it's popular. At Delftse Hout, there was access to both urban and rural attractions, so each day's location scouting started from a convenient centre.

The A-7300's on-road abilities had been proven, save for its nocturnal attributes. After sundown, the vehicle was as good as it had been in daylight. The Hella headlights' miniature front glasses may have misled visually, but in action, they gave a broad spread of white light, dipped beam bathing the upcoming tarmac splendidly while main beam had an immensely long range. Equally,

the LED tail lighting was as flash in operation as it looked in daylight.

What about on site? Again, the Grande Frontier scored heavily. Beneath the entry door is an ignition-controlled quick step for easy access to the interior. This, redolent in rich wood-effect panelling, has a subtle mien, while dark tan vinyl panels add to the aura of warmth. The mixture of autumnal browns and yellow gold in the chenille upholstery add to the slightly masculine feel of the space, and the inside elements worked as well as they looked.

In practice, the internal appointments were effective in all the conditions encountered. When there was a chill in the air, the heating kept it at bay. When the conditions were more clement, the electric Omnivent over the kitchen area served as an effective warm air extractor. And when meals were in preparation, the award-winning kitchen demonstrated why it has scored so highly. The cooker has three burners with ignition, plus an oven, grill and an electric hotplate. With a single-speed extractor of its own and an acre of workspace to its left, it was ready for anything.

Storage space is another constituent the Grande Frontier has in quantity. The washroom's big wardrobe with shelves below, and its side locker and drawer, are overshadowed by the kitchen's huge amount of locker space. Add the 'garage', the under-sofa areas, the head-level lockers and assorted cubbies, and we're talking cubic metres of storage.

In the lounge, the large, comfortable sofas offer more than mere relaxation. Even without a TV in the cabinet, there was entertainment. The rear-view camera's monitor can display the visual output from the dash-mounted CD/radio/DVD player, as well as from the integrated Humax Freeview receiver. Dimmable, mains-powered lights are a welcome addition and at dinnertime the table was gratifyingly firm and more than big enough for two diners.

The only disappointment, at dinnertime, washing-up time, and during personal ablutions, lay in the water capacities' modesty. 100 litres of fresh and 81 litres grey is below par for a vehicle of this class.

GRANDE FINALE

In this context, 'class' is a good word to apply to the Grande Frontier. On this Grande Tour,



The simple, bi-pod table is perfect for two.

it drew many an admiring look. Stylish and imposing, it is as commanding as was the view from its cab. Inside, it offers real luxury.

The Grande Frontier A-7300 took us 450 miles and gave us ten nights' opulent accommodation. The vehicle consumed fuel at the rate of 20.27mpg, the figure improving as the engine became freer over the miles.

Auto-Trail has taken a big gamble in developing and executing the Grande Frontier – embarking on such an exercise is no small matter. The awards the vehicle has won (MMM's 2005 best A-class, the Earls Court 2005 Motorhome of the Year, Which Motorcaravan's 2006 Best Washroom, and the Thetford-sponsored Earls Court Best Washroom 2005), clearly show that the gamble is paying off, as does the number of already-ordered examples.

Will this pay-off continue? Judging by the Grande Frontier we tried, it's safe to say it will. Now where did we put those Premium Bonds? □



The view from Euromast is stunning.