

# DREAM MASTER

## Devon Monaco on LWB 2.5dCi Renault Master

*The permanently sleepy Jonathan Lloyd reports on a panel van conversion featuring a permanent double bed*



Just where are we? Recently, Monaco wasn't to be found in its usual place, nestling between Nice and San Remo and adjacent to the sun-kissed Ligurian Sea. Instead it was in deepest Yorkshire where it was cold, wet and very overcast most of the time, though one local (recognising a soft southerner when he saw one), explained that the lashings of hailstones accompanied by gale force winds were... *'nowt but a bit of a damp breeze!'*

Still, even if we couldn't agree over the weather, at least we both knew that Devon is in County Durham.

The 'Monaco' referred to above is a motorcaravan rather than a principality. Similarly, 'Devon' refers to the motorcaravan converters rather than to the county. Just to muddy the waters further, Devon Conversions (then Devon Motor Caravans) really used to be in Devon, though it hasn't been down south for many a year. All clear? No? Well never mind, just concentrate on the fact that the Devon Monaco is a very good motorcaravan indeed.

### OVERVIEW

Panel vans with permanent beds are still unusual enough to be noteworthy, though, in common with their coachbuilt cousins, they are gaining quickly in popularity.

Monaco is Devon's first sortie into a layout featuring a permanent bed and the company has chosen the long wheelbase Renault Master high top panel van as the ideal candidate for such a conversion. Good for them, it's an absolute dream to drive and is sadly underused by UK converters. In fact, the only other Master panel van conversions I can name are also by Devon, the short wheelbase Camargue and long wheelbase Monte Carlo.

### DEPENDABLE DEVON

I'm a huge fan of Devon conversions. They aren't perfect, and sometimes we disagree strongly over design decisions. In fact, as my partner prefers a coachbuilt, I'm unlikely to purchase one, so just why do I find them so appealing? Well, there are

four main reasons. Firstly, the furniture is built to withstand the rigours of proper camping. Secondly, Devon offers conversions on vehicles other than the (in my opinion) uncomfortable to drive Sevel family (Ducato, Boxer etc). Thirdly, test motorcaravans provided by Devon have always been immaculately prepared. Finally, the most important reason why I like Devon conversions is that when I have them on test, they always perform exactly as intended. Cupboards shut, cookers cook, fridges cool, heaters heat, lamps light, and... well, you get the picture. Over the last twelve years of testing motorcaravans for MMM, I have always been able to depend on a Devon.

### EXTERIOR

According to the blurb, this one was in Cosmic Grey, though any of the current Renault finishes and colours are available. These include both 'supergloss' and metallic pearlescent paints. The high top Master's shape is fairly easy on





*General view rearwards showing the Pullman dinette, the kitchen and the permanent transverse bed. Finish to cabinetwork is Devon Apple. All cupboards and lockers have positive locking catches.*



*View forwards showing the lounge/diner. Note the difference in floor level. The cab seats adjust every which-way and proved to be supportive without being over firm.*



Instead of taking a not very informative photo of the fixed bed mattress, I decided to look above and below. Above are some of the many high-level lockers, two of the four spotlamps, the panoramic rooflight, and adjacent electrical consumer unit and management panel....



...Below the fixed bed mattress are sprung slats and oh-so-useful storage cavern. This area can be also be accessed via an internal door.



Traditional Devon seat-to-bed conversion forms an additional single berth from the dinette.



Resulting bed measures 5ft 11in x 1ft 11in. Note table storage.

the eye, especially when one bears in mind the usefulness of the interior volume. Renault has added interest to the basic van by including raised side 'window' panels. A black rubbing strake on each side is both practical and attractive and a coloured edge moulding each side of the roof echoes the theme. Incidentally, if you do decide to go jousting in a Monaco and happen to catch a lower panel, these can easily be replaced, as they are separate from the main side panels.

Master's purposeful front is augmented by big doe-eye headlamps, which make it look endearing. There I go again, always putting forward an anthropomorphic perspective - sorry.

Anyway there it is, the basic body shape is better than many and that's before Devon has added windows, a sprinkling of squiggle side stripes and some highly original graphics. Devon's graphics are always just so different to the usual badges and legends. Original, thoughtful, inspiring and amusing. Spot on!

**INTERIOR**

Layout first, starting at the far rear. This is home to a permanent mid-level transverse double bed. Mid-level, as it is just that, higher than one made from converting the dinette seats, but lower than those atop a motorbike garage. Amidships has the kitchen on the nearside and the wardrobe plus washroom opposite. Finally there is the (full-height) nearside sliding entrance door with the single Pullman dinette located forward on the offside.

Furniture was all solidly constructed and finished in Devon Apple. The choice is yours over the soft furnishing fabrics and there are plenty of contemporary and traditional patterns to choose from. Even leather upholstery is available if you wish, though it is (unsurprisingly) an extra cost

option. Walls were finished in a textured (coarse face) fabric with contrasting feature panels around the windows and doors. Underfoot was a wipe-clean vinyl floor covering, over which the whipped-edge removable carpet can be positioned when required.

**SLEEPY?**

As the permanent bed is the Monaco's raison d'être, we'll start there. Although it is higher off the floor than a bed made from converting dinette seats, it certainly wasn't in crampons and oxygen territory. Access and egress was made easier by a wide (and carpeted) slide-out step. The chosen system of bed springing, a one-piece reflex foam mattress on a sprung-slatted base, suited me, and I'm sure most folk would find it to their liking.

The somnolent also benefit from two reading lights each, one at either end, plus (in the test vehicle) a panoramic rooflight overhead. The romantic can sleep under the stars then, without catching pneumonia!

Actually, purchasers have the choice of where the (extra cost) panoramic rooflight will be. Some like it where it is on this demo model, others prefer it further forward over the seating area. Can't make your mind up? Have two then. It's possible, though you'll have to get the purse or wallet out again and give the fantastic plastic another airing.

The cavern underneath the permanent bed is probably as popular with purchasers as the bed itself. It has easy access, for storage of bulky goods, via the rear barn doors. An additional access door opens into the interior's central aisle. Power, both 12V and 230V, makes an appearance here, together with a fluorescent light.

The Monaco is really aimed at couples, though a third person would sleep comfortably

in a single bed made from the swivelled driver's seat and the forward-facing rear passenger seat. Those familiar with Devon conversions will know the bed make-up drill. Others can glance at the accompanying photos.

What did irritate me was the very approximate fit of the dividing curtain. It's a grand idea in fantastic material - but, oh dear, shame about



Oh dear! Dividing curtain needs to be shaped to fit around the kitchen. Super fabric though.



*Well-equipped kitchen has more cupboard space and worktop than most panel van conversions.*

the CMT. As an enthusiastic furniture restorer and traditional upholsterer myself, I can almost hear my mentor saying... 'which bit of *always make a paper pattern don't you understand?*' It's true, you know, even with computer-aided design and manufacture. Still puzzling over CMT? It stands for cut, make and trim.

**FANCY A SIT DOWN?**

Monaco's lounge accommodates three comfortably, though the occupant of the

swivelled cab passenger seat has to point inwards if they want to put their feet on the floor. This is necessary as the caravan floor is much lower than the cab floor. For diners, Devon has addressed the problem by raising their floor level. As well as making it more comfortable to sit, the raised floor level allows another storage locker underneath it.

The cab seats are fully adjustable, so it would be surprising if you couldn't make yourself comfortable, both on the road and on site.

Two of the opening side windows didn't, as in each case the central lock had been replaced by a permanent closure block. My assumption was that, as this 'van had been to a show, these blocks had been fitted to prevent idiots opening them and hurting innocent bystanders. Wrong! One was a response to the changes in requirements regarding the minimum distance between the boiler flue and an adjacent opening window. T'other because a slider wasn't available in that size at time of build. They are now available, I'm told.

**HUNGRY?**

Assuming one has exercised a bit of forethought, the 12V compressor fridge (electric operation only) is big enough to contain a good range of comestibles, and the mains-only microwave will assist in cooking and reheating. (Yes, I've heard that people dry their socks in them, but really!)

Smev supplies the four-burner electronic-ignition hob, which worked brilliantly, and a gas-operated grill that turned out to be only suitable for those with plenty of time on their hands. Despite raising the height of the supplied grill pan by balancing it on an upturned enamel plate, the darn thing still failed to grill properly. In fact it was so ineffectual I gave up, popped the lukewarm nosh in the microwave and 'nuked' it instead.

That having been said, overall the kitchen is a proper working environment - and not just something that aspires to be one, but ultimately fails.

Monaco's galley has plenty of storage and worktop, plus the amidships location, adjacent to that lovely big side sliding door, which ensures that it is a pleasant place to work in. (In my case more faffing about than work.)

Oh, I nearly forgot, if your preference is



*Apart from increasing levels of comfort, the raised floor to the dining area also provides an opportunity for further storage. Top left is the 'safe' under the driver's seat - one of a pair.*



*Secure gas locker holds two 4.5kg cylinders.*



*Amidships washroom was big enough to use and yet didn't take up too much of the interior space. It was good to see a towel rail and toilet roll holder.*



Wet shower hose returns into the wardrobe interior, so you must make sure it is wiped dry first! ▷



for absorption refrigeration, or you just want the option of gas operation of the ole Chablis cupboard, then Devon will fit a Dometic (12V, 230V, LPG) one for you instead of the Waeco compressor unit installed in 'our' 'van.

**A FRESHEN-UP?**

Offside and amidships is the location of the washroom. Size-wise it is more than adequate, and this, together with a sensible no-frills design, ensures that one doesn't need to be a contortionist to wash. There are no projections to bang your elbows on and Master's almost vertical sidewalls suggest that claustrophobics won't feel hemmed-in at head height.

The foldaway basin is a sensible size, and contained within its cabinet moulding are a soap dish and toothbrush holders. The mixer taps have to do double duty, so the tap faucet pulls out to become the showerhead. So far, so good... Except that after showering, the wet hose then had to be pushed back into its orifice, which subsequently wetted some of the clothes in the wardrobe. Devon commented that they warn purchasers about this - and further, few of their customers actually use the shower. Far better, in my (not very) humble opinion, would be to isolate the hose from the contents of the wardrobe, or use a system that doesn't intrude in the wardrobe.

**MOD CONS**

Monaco is a veritable home on wheels, with

most (if not all) of the mod cons associated with a more permanent residence made from bricks and mortar. Of course, Monaco gives you the extra advantage of being able to transport your home to the wilds of Scotland, the sun-kissed Iberian peninsula, or perhaps to more exotic locations such as Africa and Asia.

A 230V hook-up is standard, together with a consumer unit and leisure battery charger. Sufficient 230V power sockets are sprinkled throughout the salon.

Hot water and space heating is courtesy of a Truma Combi boiler which heats the domestic hot water by gas or mains electricity, and distributes gas-heated warm air through the 'van by using a 12V fan-assisted blown-air matrix. It's an excellent system - and far quieter than some diesel-fired units I've been lumbered with recently in test 'vans.

The leisure battery is a big 'un; presumably, all its 110 amp hrs are required to give a reasonable operating time for the fridge when not on hook-up. It is often overlooked by people debating whether or not to buy an electric-only fridge that the quoted current draw is not continuous, as operation of the compressor is intermittent... providing of course that you haven't left the door open!

Thermal insulation is by air-gap and Thinsulate. The latter is a modern material which, when used in panel van conversions, is said to be far superior to the old GRP wool and block styrene - because it has better insulation properties, and

can be persuaded to go around corners easily (so it fits better). Also, I'm given to understand that it is less likely to crumble or degrade over time.

Both fresh and waste water tanks are mounted underfloor, so it's best to consider the Monaco as a three-season motorcaravan for UK use. Both tanks have LED lamps to indicate tank levels. Fresh water has four indicators, the waste water just one - showing 80 per cent full (all that is needed for the waste).

**MASTER AND COMMANDER?**

I've so enjoyed driving the Renault Master since its launch more than four years ago. Over that period, continuous development has seen it evolve from a good vehicle into a great one.

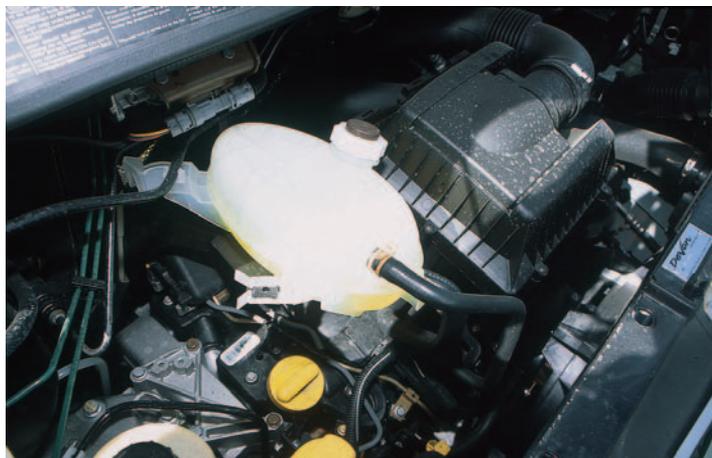
The six-speed gearbox had a slick and precise change and (as I've remarked before) contains a ratio for every occasion.

Master's steering has a high degree of power assistance. Wheel twiddling required only a very deft touch.

Picky picky me: I wasn't a huge fan of the red bar columns that indicated engine coolant temperature and fuel level. I'd rather they had been coloured green when the readings were OK, only turning red and flashing when driver awareness was required (low fuel or high temp). Also, an option to adjust the rake and/or reach of the steering column would have been advantageous for very short or very tall drivers. Fortunately I'm neither, so it was perfect for me.



Master's 'driving environment'. I think that's the cab to you and me. First rate design and execution. A minor moan concerns the sea of charisma-free grey plastic.



Civilised power unit does everything really well.



What overwhelmed me, or more properly (and with gooder grammar), what became apparent during the driving experience, was just how civilised and unfussy the Master is to drive. Hills were climbed with ease, road bumps were ironed out by the responsive suspension and the 2.5-litre dCi engine was first class.

Perhaps it felt a little less rocket-assisted than when I experienced the same engine fitted into the (smaller and lighter) Trafic, but it still pushed all the right buttons, and delivered performance with good fuel economy.

Brakes benefit from discs all round, ABS, and electronic brake load distribution. Emergency stops will be assisted by 'Brake Assist', which (according to the blurb) boosts brake power in emergencies. It is claimed by Renault that this is the first time such a system has been fitted to light commercials. If (as I suspect) the system merely allows over-pressure for a very short time, then it has been available for some time on a competitor's products.

Master's only downside is that fans of rear-wheel drive may have to look elsewhere – as this is (currently) only available on the more expensive twin-rear-wheel version (launched alongside Renault's new Mascott range of light trucks).

I found only one fault on the base vehicle. This concerned the cruise control; it wouldn't stay engaged unless you kept your finger on the dash-mounted rocker switch, thus rather defeating the object! Nothing more serious than a duff switch, I reckon. As Devon reported that it had worked OK on the way up to the show from where I collected the 'van, I assume that it had been 'played with' by naughty showgoers.

Part of the instrumentation included a computer, which gave readouts for elapsed mileage, fuel used, range left, current fuel consumption and exterior temperature. Hours of fun and very informative. Despite touring in a very hilly area, I still managed an overall consumption figure of 28mpg. Bowling down the motorway at or below the legal limit in sixth gear should stretch each drop of derv still further.

**SAFETY FIRST, AND SECOND AND THIRD!**

Perhaps it's anno domini, or watching my grandson grow up, that has hammered home the idea that safety and security should always be prime considerations in the design and build of any motorcaravan (in fact, of any vehicle). The Monaco is, I suggest, a grand example of how safety can be combined with style and

eye appeal. The nitty-gritty details of the safety inventory can be read below.

**TEN SAFETY AND SECURITY FEATURES FITTED AS STANDARD**

- Fire extinguisher
- Two lockable storage areas
- Base vehicle features safety cells front and rear
- Driver airbag
- Electronic engine immobiliser
- Insurance approved intruder alarm
- Auto-lock to doors above 15kph option
- Renault and NCC approved conversion
- Positive locking catches on cupboards and locker doors
- Polarity indicator on consumer unit

**TARGET MARKET...**

...Anyone who wants a motorcaravan featuring a permanent transverse double bed with a large storage area underneath.

Up to now, purchasers have included scuba divers, classic car owners/ralliers, and other enthusiastic partakers in sports and activities that

require a large amount of bulky and heavy kit to accompany them.

It is highly likely that those wintering on the Iberian Peninsula may also feel that this 'van will fulfil their requirements perfectly.

If the previous lack of an automatic transmission is the only fly in the ointment, then the good news is that a six-speed electronic auto is now available. Although not a gift, it shouldn't cost a king's ransom either (an expected £940, including the dreaded VAT).

**EXTRA, EXTRA, READ ALL ABOUT IT!**

Our Monaco had a number of extra cost options fitted, which whilst being most welcome, did bump the price up by over 9 per cent. These included a passenger airbag, cab air-con, cruise control, electric mirrors and windows on the base vehicle, and a panoramic rooflight on the conversion. Devon fit the extra tint to the single-glazed glass windows in the rear doors themselves, and this is included in the price for a standard model.

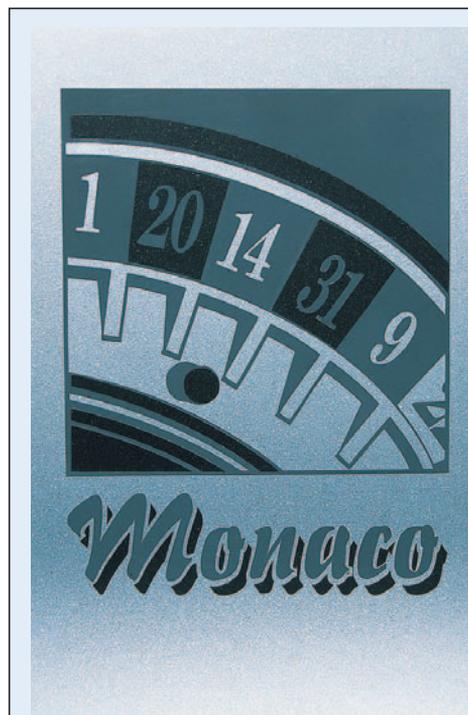
**THERE IS NO PLEASING OLD LLOYDY**

That's me by the way. I couldn't possibly print what some call me. Anyway, I would have put the cassette blinds and flyscreens the other way up so that the blind unrolls from the bottom. They could then have been lowered a little in the morning whilst still preserving privacy. Also, I would have hinged two kitchen cupboard doors on the opposite side so that one doesn't have to reach around the doors when working in the kitchen.

Others certainly disagreed. They would have preferred to leave the blinds as they are. So that they can be lowered slightly to keep the sun out of one's eyes. In addition, my partner suggested that leaving the doors hinged the way they were would facilitate easier loading of the cupboards from the side door. So there! I know when to retreat... and I also know my place. This, it appears, is in the wrong!

**SATISFACTION GUARANTEED?**

Well, Devon certainly tries its utmost to guarantee it. Devon's high number of returning customers, the factory's excellent reputation for providing good after-sales service, and a three-year Renault and Devon warranty should guarantee that if things do require attention, Devon (and Renault) should be happy to help.



**IN BRIEF**

- **Base vehicle:** Renault Master LWB high top panel van
- **Engine type:** 2.5-litre common-rail turbocharged and intercooled diesel
- **Output:** 84kW (115bhp) @ 3500rpm
- **Gearbox and drive:** Six-speed manual, fascia-mounted gearlever, front-wheel drive
- **Make and model:** Devon Monaco
- **Body type and construction:** All-steel five-door high top panel van
- **Conversion NCC badged as EN1646 compliant:** Yes
- **Electrical equipment:** 230V hook-up, leisure battery, consumer unit, management panel and smart charger
- **Lighting:** Fluorescent overhead units and halogen reading lights
- **Cooking facilities:** Stainless-steel electronic-ignition four-burner hob and grill. 230V/800W output microwave oven
- **Refrigerator:** 12V compressor type with full-width freezer compartment
- **Water heater:** Truma Combi gas/230V boiler
- **Space heater:** Truma Combi gas-fired, blown-air
- **Fresh water tank:** 60 litres (13.2 gallons) underfloor
- **Waste water tank:** 36-litres (8 gallons) underfloor

Owners of coachbuilt motorcaravans frequently complain to me about the difficulty in getting replacement body panels and mouldings, some quoting a frightening delivery time of four months for spares on models currently in production. As the Monaco is standard Renault in the coachwork department, a minor accident shouldn't result in a

major period off-road waiting for parts.

**PLACE YOUR BETS PLEASE**

The principality of Monaco has a reputation as being a haven for high-rolling gamblers, a fact celebrated by the unusual 'roulette wheel' graphics on the Monaco motorcaravan. Let it

be made crystal clear though, this is where any similarity between the two Monacos ends.

The Devon Monaco is a safe bet and is likely to give years of pleasure from the initial investment. A similar amount invested at a casino is unlikely to provide the same benefits. (Unless of course you know something I don't!) □



- **Gas locker capacity:** Two 4.5kg/3.9kg cylinders
- **Rear restraints:** One forward-facing travel seat with three-point inertia-reel seatbelt
- **Additional features fitted to test vehicle:** Three sleeping berths, permanent transverse double bed, double-glazed windows (excluding rear doors and cab), blinds and flyscreens, panoramic rooflight, insulated internal window pads for cab, washroom (with fold-away sink, moulded cupboards, mixer tap, shower head, bench-style manual-flush cassette toilet, towel rail, toilet roll holder), fire extinguisher, cab seat swivels, two safes, radio/CD player with additional controls on steering column stalk, engine immobiliser, intruder alarm, remote control central locking, electric mirrors and windows, heated rear windows, cruise control, cab air-con, twin airbags, on-board trip computer

**DIMENSIONS**

- (\*data supplied by manufacturer)
- **Overall length:** 5.89m (19ft 4in)\*
- **Overall width:** 1.99m (6ft 6.5in)\*
- **Overall height:** 2.58m (8ft 5.5in)\*
- **Interior height:** 1.88m (6ft 2in)
- **Bed dimensions:** Permanent transverse at rear 1.88m x 1.22m (6ft 2in x 4ft 0in), dinette single 1.80m x 584mm (5ft 11in x 1ft 11in)
- **Max authorised weight:** 3500kg\*

- **Load capacity:** 1050kg\*
- PRICE** (all prices include VAT)
- **Standard model:** £31,029 (on the road)
- **As tested:** £33,633 (on the road) see options below
- **Warranty:** Base vehicle and conversion three years

**OPTIONAL EXTRAS**

- (\*fitted to test vehicle)
- **Base vehicle options:** Cab air-con (£840)\*, six-speed automatic gearbox (£940), 3.0-litre 140PS engine (£1410), cruise control (£587)\*,

- electric windows/mirrors (£323)\*, metallic paint (£353), rear parking sensors (£206), passenger airbag (£259)\*
  - **Caravan options:** Heki panoramic rooflight (£595)\*, wind-out awning (£558), bike rack (£225), TV aerial and flat screen TV (£699), solar panel (£699), electric step (£376), leather upholstery (£822)
- Devon Monaco kindly supplied for evaluation by: Devon Conversions Ltd, Mainsforth Road, Ferryhill, County Durham DL17 9DE (Tel: 01740 655700; web site: www.devonconversions.com)*

