

DEVON MONTE CARLO FIXED BED



WILDAX EUROPA



MASTERFUL MACHINES

Both well-established and brand-new conversions find a home inside the latest incarnation of the Renault Master

Words & pictures by Dave Hurrell

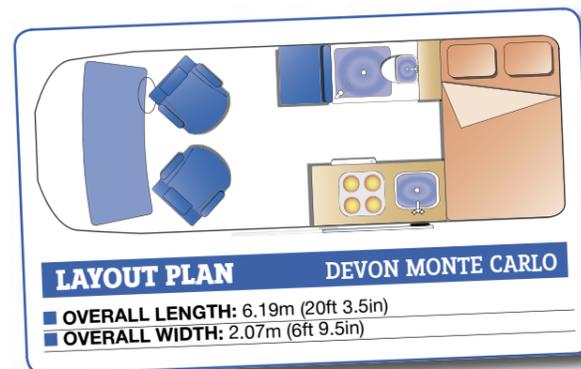


This month's twin test is as much about the base vehicle as it is about the conversions that reside inside. First seen - and touched - by yours truly at the Düsseldorf show, the latest incarnation of Renault's Master has been long waited for. This is because (probably due to the recession) its launch date

was put back... ..and back - leaving us 'anoraks' on tenterhooks. The Master is a super vehicle, but has been rather under-represented as a motorcaravan base. However, hopes are that the latest incarnation will loom larger in the industry, giving customers more options when it comes to choosing their motorhome's motivator.

I jumped at the chance to test two examples of the new Master, made into high top campers: both based on the long wheelbase version of the panel van chassis.

These conversions are different (chosen, in part, to show what kind of accommodation can be squeezed inside), and also come from very different converters: Devon is a long-lived stalwart of the van conversion scene, specialising in value-for-money products



- the Monte Carlo (fixed bed version) is also a stalwart of Devon's range. WildAx is the polar opposite: not only is it a five-year-old youngster, the Europa is the first Renault Master to be converted by the firm.

The new long wheelbase Master is longer than its ancestor, stretching the tape 190mm over the magic six-metre mark. It's also a tad



I immediately warmed to the radical looks of the new Ducato at launch; but with the latest Master I'm not so sure. Oh well, I guess its looks will grow on me...

The big cab doors open easily, and close with a nice clunk: a clue to the Master's excellent build quality. While I was up front, a swift gander under the wings spotted McPherson struts suspending the front axle - something that's different to the old model, where wishbones and inboard springs were employed. Is the new set up better, or just cheaper? I don't know, but this is the same type of suspension as Fiat's Ducato, and (in part, owing to its excellent performance) one of the most common independent front suspension designs around. Aft, and here there are few surprises, as the suspension retains its cart springs and rigid axle, while the rear lights look nice, but unsurprising. The Devon scores points here (at least from a driving point of view) as it features factory-fit, heated glass windows in the rear doors. The WildAx is fitted with a pair of caravan windows - the better for living with - that offer blinds, flyscreens and less condensation.

wider - something that's crucial in the Devon, offering, as it provides a fixed transverse double bed aft. The WildAx goes a different route, using the considerable amount of internal space to feature a big comfy rear lounge as the star of its show. Both 'vans place kitchens up front on the nearside, washrooms opposite, although the Devon fits in an offside dinette too, possibly as its fixed bed takes up less internal length.

MOTIVE POWER

The new Master has kept its brick-like looks aft (the square shape lending itself well to camper conversion), along with a wheel-at-each-corner stance. Up-front styling however, has changed, with a chunkier, and to my eye, more aggressive look. Muscular wings, a 'toothy' grille and big banana-shaped light enclosures all conspire, while the deep plastic bumper/valance looks a bit 'jowly.' I must say,



are height-adjustable, further contributing to achieving a comfy driving position. The dash is much improved over the old model's rather plain visage, with more curvy bits and the plethora of storage spaces (including an overhead shelf and door pockets with bottle slots) that are always usefully welcome in a motorcaravan. Sat in the driver's seat, I peered myopically at the radio, wondering why it had no display. It took me several minutes to discover that the aforementioned is mounted up near the cab ceiling (well, I'm nearly 55, and you should see my school reports). Another discovery: said display also incorporates Tom Tom satnav, and it's a standard fitting. Cor!

To the cab, and once aboard it's the (adjustable) steering wheel that stands out, as it's smaller than the old model, making the driving position feel more car like. Seats



1 New Renault cab is a nice place to be, and with standard satnav even better

2 Small wheel makes the new Master more driver-friendly

DEVON MONTE CARLO



3 Monte Carlo's front end fits a half-dinette

4 Kitchen and washroom give way to transverse double bed in the rear

5 No feet-up lounge, but seating for three and a neat two-seater dinette

ON THE ROAD

Before moving off, it's back to the driving position, and here prospective customers should check that, in the WildAx, they can get the driver's seat far enough back (the washroom wall is directly behind) - far enough for me, but I'm only five-nine and with just a modest 'Yorkie' gut. In the Devon there's a half-dinette behind, so no problems there.

First impression on taking to the blacktop is that the Master is still a touch truck-like, compared to the Fiat Ducato's (and Peugeot Boxer/Citroën Relay) superb cab ergonomics. Having said that, it's still very good, and - with the smaller steering wheel - much better than the old model. Apart from the brakes, which are touch-the-pedal powerful, all the controls are heavier than the Fiat - in fact, probably on a par with my own Ford Transit. Once you get used to them, all is fine. All engines are now 2.3-litre four-pot devices (available in both Euro 4 and 5 emissions-compliant versions), offering 100, 125, or 150 horsepower options. Performance from the 125 horsepower motor fitted to both Devon and WildAx, proved very good, and the engine proved to be smooth and reasonably hushed. Strangely, both vehicles suffered from a lazy throttle when lifting off to change through lower gears. At first I thought it was an operator error - me not getting me hoof completely off the pedal. But no, revs were slow to die from first to second, and second to third. Testing the Devon first, I also thought that there might be a fault with this vehicle. No again, as the WildAx's Renault displayed the same quirk. Mmm, could be a software glitch...

Good news for motorway lovers is the gearing, which produced 70mph at just over 2000rpm in top (sixth) gear. This should make long main road trips more comfy and hopefully bode well for good fuel economy. Bear in mind, though, that most other situations will see more use of the lower ratios. Handling is good, but I got the impression (in both these lightly loaded vehicles) that the suspension is a tad stiffer than the old Master - a bit more compliant than the Fiat, but firm nonetheless. Turning round also betrayed a rather modest steering lock - cue expletives and a bit of unscheduled kerb climbing.

An impression - much like the previous model - is of a vehicle that's also very well

DEVON MONTE CARLO

I LIKED

- New cab interior
- Standard satnav
- Smaller steering wheel
- Neat dinette for two
- Well-equipped kitchen
- Functional washroom
- Comfy fixed bed
- Big rear storage area
- Gas/mains powered hot water/heating

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A tighter turning circle
- Flip-up worktop in kitchen
- More modern washbasin
- Fuller, thicker curtains to rear doors

I DISLIKED

- Engine's strange throttle response
- High-set toilet

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I LIKED

- New cab interior
- Smaller steering wheel
- Well-equipped kitchen
- Clever slide-out sink
- Good-sized kitchen worktop
- Big comfy lounge
- Pop-up TV

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A cutlery/utensils drawer
- More modern washbasin
- Easier-to-use support for double bed

I DISLIKED

- Engine's strange throttle response
- Toilet recessed under washbasin

engineered, and should prove reliable: my esteemed editor tells me that regular servicing and the replacement of windscreen wiper blades were the only things needed during his several-years ownership of a Renault Master-based camper. Nuff said.

LOUNGE AND DINE

It's in the lounging department where the WildAx excels. The interior design is dedicated to providing a big relaxing space as its reason-to-buy feature. Unusual, are the high backrests that make for excellent back support and comfort. The test 'van came with optional leather upholstery, something that (along with a lack of curtains) made the interior look very modern, but feel less than cosy. However, the standard fabric (in warmer colours) should see things feeling nicer. It's here that I must mention the fact that this WildAx Europa was the very first one to be built and as such, a prototype - finished just in time for last October's NEC show. Because of this, there were no dining facilities available. However, once completed, meals will be taken from two - pedestal-mounted tables (single legs, in floor sockets) that edge-link together to make a very big surface. The two - unequal halves - will then provide versatile arrangements: smaller, and smallest tables, designed for modest meals, and/or drinks and snacks.

Needless to say, table stowage solutions were also yet to be provided. I would expect to discover that a dinner party for four will be a pleasant experience in here.

There's plenty of room for feet-up lounging for two - the pop-up TV locker at the foot of the offside sofa ideally situated. When entertaining, seven folks should be able to get seated. The cab passenger seat swivels too, but this is likely to be more useful as cook's resting place than anything else.

The Devon approaches lounging and dining in a completely differently way, and it has to, with its fixed rear bed eating up a lot of the internal space. Swivelling cab seats take pride of place up front - the driver's proving difficult to turn, thanks to a snag with the handbrake: I'm assured that a simple mod will cure the problem. Once twisted, the seats face a single forward-facing seat that also provides three-point belted travel for one.

Seating for three is the result, while a wall-hung table (conveniently stowed in a slot against the wall) is easy to deploy. The table helps create a dinette for two, along with the rear

WILDAX EUROPA



6 The front of the Europa sees nearside kitchen, with offside washroom directly behind the cab

7 Plenty of room in the new Master to let a big rear lounge layout work well

8 The lounge is made all the more sumptuous by high backrests



HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

DEVON MONTE CARLO FIXED BED

PRICE (with VAT at 17.5 per cent)
 ■ From: £37,840 OTR
 ■ As tested: £39,954 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)
 ■ Berths: 3
 ■ Three-point belted seats: 3 (incl driver)
 ■ Warranty: Base vehicle and conversion 3 years
 ■ Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
 ■ Construction: All steel high roof panel van
 ■ Length: 6.19m (20ft 3.5in)*
 ■ Width: 2.07m (6ft 9.5in)*
 ■ Height: 2.57m (8ft 5in)*
 ■ Wheelbase: 4.33m (14ft 2.5in)
 ■ Rear overhang: 1.02m (3ft 4in)
 ■ Gross vehicle weight: 3500kg
 ■ Payload: 950kg (estimated)*

THE VEHICLE
 ■ Chassis: Long wheelbase Renault Master panel van
 ■ Engine: 2.3-litre (Euro V compliant) turbo-diesel producing 125bhp
 ■ Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
 ■ Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round with ABS
 ■ Suspension: Front: independent on coil springs. Rear: rigid axle on leaf springs
 ■ Features: Driver and passenger airbags, cab air-conditioning, radio/CD player with steering column-mounted controls and auxiliary input, remote central locking, electric windows and mirrors, Tom Tom satellite navigation system, door and dash-based storage includes cup and bottle holders, overhead shelf/cubby, height-adjustable seats, heated rear windows

INSIDE
 ■ Layout: Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside dinette, washroom, nearside kitchen, transverse fixed bed in rear. Caravan entrance - side sliding door - on UK nearside
 ■ Insulation: Thinsulate all round
 ■ Interior height: 1.86m (6ft 1in)

KITCHEN
 ■ Sink: Stainless steel bowl with hinged glass lid and folding mixer tap, no drainer
 ■ Cooker: Smev half-height stove with hinged glass lid, four-burner hob, grill and oven, all with electronic ignition
 ■ Fridge: Dometic three-way, with manual

energy selection and removable freezer compartment. Capacity 90 litres

WASHROOM
 ■ Toilet: Thetford bench-type, electric flushing, wheeled cassette
 ■ Basin: Drop-down plastic unit with mixer tap
 ■ Shower: Integral: single-drain shower-tray floor, nylon curtain, basin tap head pulls out to provide shower head

BEDS
 Lounge single
 ■ Length: 1.75m (5ft 9in)
 ■ Width: 610mm (2ft 0in)
 Rear fixed double
 ■ Length: 1.88m (5ft 9in)
 ■ Width: 1.33m (4ft 4.5in) max
 ■ Headroom: 880mm (2ft 10.5in) max

EQUIPMENT
 ■ Fresh water tank: Underslung 77 litres (17 gallons)
 ■ Waste water tank: Underslung 38 litres (8.3 gallons)
 ■ Water and space heating: Truma combi boiler with blown-air, gas-mains operation
 ■ Leisure battery: 110 amp hr
 ■ Gas: 2 x 4.5kg cylinders
 ■ Lighting: LED reading lamps: 2 in cab, 1 in lounge, 2 in bedroom. Twin-tube fluorescents: 1 in lounge, kitchen, bedroom, washroom. Single-tube fluorescent in rear load area
 ■ Sockets: 230V: 3 (in lounge, kitchen, rear load area). 12V: (in lounge, kitchen, rear load area)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS
 Fitted to test vehicle
 ■ Base: Designer Pack - cab air-conditioning, passenger airbag, alloy wheels, rear parking sensors, front fog lamps (£1727), metallic paint (£387)
 ■ Conversion: None
 Other options
 ■ Base: None listed, but all Renault options available on request
 ■ Conversion: None

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seat and swivelled driver's pew. All works fine, although the rear seat comes lower to the table than its counterpart. I'd probably add a height-boosting cushion to the rear seat. Seating - not really lounging - for three in this three berth 'van is fine, although the third person will have to dine from a tray. Of course, as the sun will always be shining, you can always eat outside...

COOK'S QUARTERS
 Both kitchens approach the job in a very similar way. Both stand partly in front of the side sliding door, both offer full-featured cookers, decent-sized fridges and drainerless sinks. Fridges look the same, but the Devon's steals a slight lead with a touch more space and removable (allowing more beer in) freezer box. Both also sport stylish good looks with push-button energy selection and sexy blue interior lighting. Cookers too, see Devon edging the gig, as its Smev item gives four burners and separate grill and oven, to the WildAx's (still excellent) three burners and integral oven/grill. To the sinks, and here things get more interesting. It's the hinged glass lids over cooker and sink that furnish the Devon galley with worktop - the WildAx gets more creative, placing a big slab of worktop where you'd expect to find the sink. But where is it? Open a drawer at the end of the unit and out slides the sink. Fixed sink and flip-up worktop, or fixed worktop and slide-out sink - which is better? I go for the solid worktop and slide-out sink, as flip-up surfaces are rarely strong enough for prep (chopping and the like) activities. Well done WildAx, a clever idea.

Finally, whichever 'van you buy, don't forget to obtain a decent-sized plastic tray to use as a drainer.

BATHING SPACE
 To the washrooms, and like the kitchens, both are very similar.

The WildAx offers an easy-to-use tambour door (the Devon's is conventionally hinged), but once inside you discover the same equipment as the Devon. Bench-type cassette loos and drop-down washbasins are partnered with single-drain shower tray floors. The WildAx bathing space has the more upmarket look, as its moulded GRP outer wall, with nicely inset window, is very nice indeed. The WildAx too, offers a separate shower mixer/head set-up to the Devon's pullout, basin tap/showerhead.

However, in the WildAx, the section of wall carrying the washbasin protrudes into the

space above the toilet, making sitting on the loo awkward. Devon's toilet is also set a tad high off the floor for comfort. Above, sensible wooden storage cabinets offer mirrored doors in both.

BEDTIME
 In the Devon, slumbering (for a couple) could not be simpler: don jim-jams and jump into the fixed rear double. Folding steps give access to a bed that's quite high off the floor, but nowhere near as lofty as the average coachbuilt's over-garage sleeping space. There's decent headroom in here, and a Midi Heki rooflight provides plenty of natural illumination and ventilation. There are no windows in the sidewalls, so you can sleep either way round. There's not really enough room (under the high-level lockers) to sit upright in bed, but there is enough to get propped up and drink the morning brew. Curtains cover the rear windows, but they could be a touch thicker and fuller to give more effective blackout. This bed's comfy too, as a thick foam mattress rides on wide sprung wooden slats.

The third berth is constructed from the forward-facing rear seat: first the driver's seat (swivelled to face forwards) is slid forward and its backrest angled forwards, then the rear seat base (with strong steel frame) slides forward and flattens to provide a modest single bed, suitable for a kid or smaller adult. The occasional trip with a grandchild would seem to be this bed's forte, although the Devon would suit a family with one child, until it was into its teens.

As a pure two berth the WildAx offers something the Devon does not - namely a double, or two single beds (all 6ft 5in long). All are made from the lounge, all are arranged lengthways. The double is created by sliding an infill board into the aisle space (I'd prefer to see easier-to-use, pull-together supports) and adding the rear backrest.

Two singles are made simply by removing the

10 Kitchen is well equipped but lacks permanent working surface

11 The washroom is entirely conventional and serviceable, but the toilet sits a tad high

12 Fixed rear bed is a comfy place to be

13 The biggest double bed. Just remove the centre section to create singles

14 Another conventional washroom. Here its the recessed toilet that could prove less than ideal

15 Star of the kitchen is a clever pullout sink

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

WILDAX EUROPA

PRICE (with VAT at 17.5 per cent)
 ■ From: £42,995 OTR
 ■ As tested: £45,285 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)
 ■ Berths: 2
 ■ Three-point belted seats: 2 (incl. driver)
 ■ Warranty: Base vehicle and conversion 3 years
 ■ Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
 ■ Construction: All steel high roof panel van
 ■ Length: 6.19m (20ft 3.5in)*
 ■ Width: 2.07m (6ft 9.5in)*
 ■ Height: 2.49m (8ft 5in)*
 ■ Wheelbase: 4.33m (14ft 2.5in)
 ■ Rear overhang: 1.02m (3ft 4in)
 ■ Gross vehicle weight: 3500kg
 ■ Payload: 500kg (estimated)*

THE VEHICLE
 ■ Chassis: Long wheelbase Renault Master panel van
 ■ Engine: 2.3-litre turbo-diesel producing 125bhp
 ■ Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
 ■ Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round with ABS
 ■ Suspension: Front: independent on coil springs. Rear: rigid axle on leaf springs
 ■ Features: Electric windows and mirrors, remote central locking, driver and passenger airbags, radio/CD player with remote display, auxiliary input and steering column-mounted controls, height-adjustable seats, door and dash-based storage includes cup and bottle holders, overhead shelf/cubby

INSIDE
 ■ Layout: Swivelling cab passenger seats ahead of nearside kitchen, offside washroom, U-shaped lounge in rear
 ■ Insulation: Acoustitherm all round
 ■ Interior height: 1.87m (6ft 1.5in)

KITCHEN
 ■ Sink: Stainless steel bowl in pull-out unit, separately-mounted mixer tap, no drainer
 ■ Cooker: Spinflo half-height stove with hinged glass lid, three-burner hob, grill/oven, all with electronic ignition
 ■ Fridge: Dometic three-way, with manual energy selection and full-width freezer compartment. Capacity 85 litres

WASHROOM
 ■ Toilet: Thetford bench-type, electric flushing, wheeled cassette
 ■ Basin: Drop-down plastic unit with chromed mixer tap
 ■ Shower: Integral: single-drain shower-tray floor, mixer, riser rail, shower head

BEDS
 Lounge double
 ■ Length: 1.96m (6ft 5in)
 ■ Width: m (4ft 9in)
 Alternative singles
 ■ Length: 1.96m (6ft 5in)
 ■ Width: 635mm (2ft 1in)

EQUIPMENT
 ■ Fresh water tank: Underslung insulated heated, 100 litres (22 gallons)
 ■ Waste water tank: Underslung insulated heated, 100 litres (22 gallons)
 ■ Water and space heating: Truma combi boiler with blown-air, gas-mains operation
 ■ Leisure battery: 2 x 100 amp hr
 ■ Gas: Underslung tank, capacity 24 litres (approx 12kg)
 ■ Lighting: All LED powered. 'Rope' lights to cab/living area step and above overhead lockers. Kitchen: 5 downlighters, 1 adjustable spot. Washroom: 2 downlighters. Lounge: 6 downlighters, 4 adjustable spots
 ■ Sockets: 230V: 3 (2 in kitchen, 1 in lounge). 12V: 2 (in lounge, TV locker)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS
 Fitted to test vehicle
 ■ Base: None
 ■ Conversion: Leather upholstery (£1895), TV (£395)
 ■ Base: Cruise control (£260), air-conditioning (£730), reversing camera (£300), metallic paint (£330), automatic gearbox (£1000)
 ■ Conversion: Bike rack (£220), awning (£700), 70W solar panel (£500), towbar (£250)

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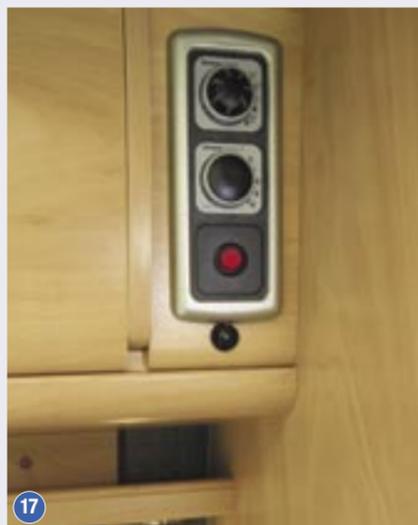
DEVON MONTE CARLO



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17

backrests, and its here that their unusual nature comes to the fore. Most lounges have much lower backrests, and this is usually because they have to be the correct width to help make (as infills) the double bed. However, here they're simply backrests and have no other function. Storing these big items (maybe in the cab) would be awkward, so WildAx plans to make them flip up out of the way at bedtime, coming to rest under the overhead lockers. The prototype 'van had yet to get this feature, but if it works, it should be very convenient. With all in place, I can see single bed fans loving the WildAx: simply lift the backrests, place sleeping bags and jump in.

STORE ROOM

To overhead lockers, and the WildAx is very unusual in providing all of them (and including the wardrobe) with tambour doors. Indeed, tambour-doored lockers are a feature of all WildAx 'vans. Boss, Duncan Wildman, tells me this is because they cause less on-road rattles, I however, see the benefits of having no potentially head-bashing open locker doors in the way. The kitchen has no drawers, but features a pullout larder with cutlery tray top. There are also two big cupboards. The wardrobe is very modest, while bulky stuff finds plenty of room beneath the lounge seating (through the tops), with access to spaces externally, (via the rear doors) finding a home for leads, hoses, wedges and the like. Inside, drop-down-door access, would be a good idea (I'm told this is a possibility), as the seat cushions are rather heavy.

The Devon's fixed bed will be a reason-to-buy feature, but the massive storage provided below will be another. Aside from the intrusion of the gas locker (and leisure battery box) this space is unencumbered, providing room enough for all types and sizes of gear - even folding bikes and mobility scooters. Again there's a small wardrobe, while overhead lockers populate lounge and bedroom. Spaces up under the front floor are good for small items - tool kit and the like.

Lastly, both offer slim overcab lockers ideal for flatter items - in the WildAx, probably the

ideal place to stow the - yet to arrive - tables. These 'vans being the first built, both payloads were estimated - the disparity between supplied figures demonstrating same. However, with a least half a tonne of capacity, plenty of load lugging should be possible.

LIFE SUPPORT

Both 'vans feature good levels of kit - a standout feature is the provision of Truma's excellent gas-mains powered combi space/water heater as standard. Tanks are all underslung - the WildAx arriving with them insulated and heated as standard. WildAx provides a gas tank too (approx 12kg net), while the Devon takes just two 4.5kg cylinders in its locker.

All LED-powered lighting, high quality pleated blinds (with flyscreens) and good leisure battery capacities complete both 'vans' life support systems with aplomb.

CONCLUSION

This month's twin test serves to demonstrate the qualities of the new Renault Master as an excellent base vehicle for motorcaravans. An improved driving position, new cab and modernised styling enhance the qualities of what was already a high quality base vehicle that lends itself well to conversion. The 2.3-litre motor is smooth and willing - provided with power output options that should suit the needs of most motorcaravans.

To the conversions, and here it's Devon that - long-time Renault Master loyalist - has applied, and applied well, one of its popular conversions - a design that should be high on the list of anyone looking for a fixed bed high top. WildAx's Europa is a very different kettle of fish, and the prototype offering was inspected while still needing some fine tuning. Even so, the concept is sound - the spacious interior of the long wheelbase Master lending itself well to a big lounge-based design. I look forward to seeing the Europa with all its promised features installed. I also look forward to, and hope to see, more 'vans (of all types) based on the new Renault Master chassis. ■

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19



15 Lounge single bed is short-ish, but a useful feature

16 Underbed storage is huge and only compromised by the gas locker

17 LED lighting and gas/mains powered heating are standard

18 Small-ish underseat lockers can be got at through the rear doors

19 Pop-up TV locker, LED lighting and gas/mains powered heating impress

DEVON MONTE CARLO LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

Devon Conversions, Mainsforth Road, Ferryhill, Co. Durham DL17 9DE (tel: 01740 655700; web site: www.devonconversions.com)

WILDAX EUROPA LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

WildAx Motorhomes, Eastgate, Elland, West Yorkshire HX5 9DQ (tel: 01422 372111; web site: www.wildaxmotorhomes.com)