

A pair of bijou Brits provides relaxing-inthe-rear opportunities. Both are well under six metres long

There are lots of good reasons for buying motorhomes under six metres (19ft 8in) long - not least of which, is that they are generally easier to drive on any road. Recent years have seen a

revival of interest in this sector of the market, and all the main producers have staked their foothold in the territory. However, size comes with a stark tradeoff: the smaller the 'van, the less can be crammed into it by way of creature comforts. Compact 'vans impose severe constraints on both designers and customers, therefore it is doubly important to think through exactly what the customer can't live without - or, indeed, with... You get one chance to build a 'van and layout mistakes are expensive to put right.

Small tends to emphasise basics rather





than bling. In a way, it gets back to how campervans once were, before somebody thought of island beds and marble Jacuzzis. We can - some of us - remember how beds were made up of everything but the kitchen sink, with bottoms of cab seats, infills, seatbacks, even scatter cushions pressed into service - usually, to fall apart in the middle of the night. And when 'van interiors were so cramped and uncomfortable that

we spent every waking minute sitting outdoors - even when it was snowing!

Go back to that? No reason to. Small need not be primitive: with ingenuity, new and intriguing solutions can be offered within tight spaces. The Auto-Sleeper Nuevo II EL and the Vantage

Cub TR are interesting cases in point. Within

the traditional rear lounge format, both manufacturers have come up with small 'van models which offer luxury camping and squeeze every inch of space until it squeaks.

Two good-looking motorcaravans, offering contrasting solutions to the balancing act of space and comfort. Which works best for you? Is it the more conventional coachbuilt Nuevo, or maybe the more radical Cub high top panel van conversion? Like all 'vans, each has pluses and minuses - and different sets of priorities. See which appeals most, as we go through this head-to-head comparison...



LAYOUT PLAN

OVERALL LENGTH: 5.68m (18ft 7.5in)
OVERALL WIDTH: 1.97m (6ft 5.5in)

The Nuevo II EL is powered by the Peugeot Boxer, with 2.2-litre engine delivering 100 bhp (130bhp optional); ample for any compact 'van. This cab offers cruise control, ABS, traction control, height-adjustable steering wheel, electrically operated windows, electrically adjustable and heated mirrors, driver and passenger airbags and remote central locking. As always with Auto-Sleepers, the package offered lies at the relatively luxurious end of the market.

The Vantage Cub TR is powered by the Ford Transit, with 2.4-litre motor, delivering









- 3 View forward from the lounge shows nearside galley, with storage and washroom opposite
- 4 The small rear lounge is tucked aft of the wardrobe and sink. Inset: Easy-to-assemble table takes four at a pinch, or two messy eaters
- 5 Swivelled cab seats and small table create a useful coffee lounge

115PS through its rear-wheel drive. Plenty of grunt, delivering a lively acceleration and comfortable cruising power, but a little bit more 'commercial' in its sound and appearance. Just as its five gears feel clunkier to the hand, compared with the Peugeot version. However, this is a Tranny characteristic: think robust and indestructible, capable of carrying White Van Man at mindless speed through any choice of route for 250,000 miles plus...

The cab goodies in the Ford are a little more basic: driver's airbag, ABS, radio/CD player, remote central locking, electric windows and wing mirrors. Less flashy, but there's everything you need, and generally where you need to find it in a hurry. And with the Ford, you have a choice of two cab seats, or seating for three, which can be useful for carrying an extra passenger.

# ON THE ROAD

Small 'vans are generally fun to drive, with no need for a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. Both models passed the driveability test with flying colours. The Nuevo II EL handled like a big saloon car with its light clutch, brakes, steering and gearchange; there's plenty of power for smooth acceleration in town, or overtaking effortlessly on open roads. Also, reversing up the steepest slope I could find, there were no bunnyhops: an ideal drive for old-timers looking for something a little easier to handle.

Disappointingly, on the road we experienced a cacophony of squeaks and rattles from the living area, some of which should be cured by a tea towel laid beneath glass lids or round oven shelves. More worrying, road noise was so intrusive from the nearside that I stopped in a lay-by to check my doors and windows: all were properly closed. So at least on the test 'van, this level of road noise needs investigation. If nothing else, it's not what you would expect from a quality (£45k) model, which should be several cuts above the cheap and cheerful.

In stark contrast, the living space of the Vantage Cub TR was almost totally silent on the road - no finer commendation can be given for Vantage's obsessive care in both design and fitting. It was no noisier than driving a car and every bit as easy to handle. The Cub TR's slim width also takes away all edginess from fighting through town traffic, or meeting a lorry coming in the opposite

direction down a country lane.

Likewise, the
Tranny engine will let
you keep up with any
traffic - or out-sprint
it, if the mood is on
you. Why else is it so
beloved of White Van
Man? Okay, so it's a
tad noisy, but the wife
will soon learn to raise
her voice to talk over
it - even when you
switch on the radio!

For pure driveability, the Nuevo II EL was smoother, silkier and would probably edge the fuel economy stakes.

# I LIKED

- Colour scheme
- Ambience feeling of quality and homeliness
- Swing-wall shower space
- Microwave oven for this ready-meal cook
- Small shelves within the wardrobe
- Coffee table option

# I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Something to break up the starkness of the rear wall
- Feet-up lounging

# I DISLIKED

- Head-splitting unpadded shelf in cab
- Knee rolls on settee edges
- Underslung and non-insulated fresh water tank

However, this takes nothing away from the comfortable and more functional Transit cab, or its performance. On the road, however, the hands-down winner is the Cub, which sounds exactly as the habitation quarters of any high quality 'van should sound when moving... ...not just muted, silent. If you hate distracting noise, this one is for you.

# **LOUNGE AND DINE**

In any compact 'van it's a major design achievement to offer both a coffee lounge and a main lounge, but the Nuevo does exactly that. Cab seats pivot to face a small pedestal coffee table (which stows in the rear of the wardrobe), for that much-needed mid-morning beverage. While on site, the same pedestal supports the coffee table's big brother - holding a dining table which could squeeze in four - that is, if they keep their elbows down. This tabletop also stows (clips firmly) into the forward wall of the wardrobe and passes the easy-usage tests, being both stable and easy to carry.

The Nuevo lounge looks snug: two inward-facing bench seats, with high quality Reflex foam upholstery - firm, but comfortable in typical, durable Auto-Sleepers fabric. Above, discreet overhead lockers are well out of the way of careless nappers - well, nearly. Low-Wattage LED lighting completes the typical rear lounge nest-effect at night. One grumble: the stark rear wall (instead of the seating in a U-shaped lounge) gives a Spartan look, which seems out of place. Okay, a second grumble: those of us who like to lounge with our feet up discover the settees are only long enough for a 'dormouse,' not a normal-sized human. Yes, I know we should keep our feet on the floor, but...

The Vantage Cab TR offers a complete rethink on layout. Vantage Motorhomes' owner/designer is, himself, a six-footer and a fan of feet-up lounging. Having listened to his customers as well as himself, he concluded that 80 per cent of campers' time is spent in the lounge/sleeping space, and that comfort is their main priority. Because of this, the entire design pivots around lounge settees, which are long enough to accommodate the biggest of feet and longest of legs. Not only does the result look good, it needed a crowbar to lever this tester off a settee and back to work.

An important point of contrast in the two models: both look great, in the quality of the internal woodwork, but Vantage has applied the know-how from its domestic furniture business to produce a wrap-around foiled

finish over all wooden surfaces. Unlike the thin final veneer used by some in the industry (which needs beading, screw caps and is easy to damage), the Cub's wooden surfaces are not only superb-looking, but very tough. Not just the devil, but also real durability, is in the detail. This includes using best-quality hinges on all doors.

Lighting is by six overhead, and four under-locker, soft-glow low-Wattage LEDs, while seating fabric is edged in leather, to reduce wear and







# I LIKED

- The obvious degree of care, which has gone into both design and build
- Top quality conversion components
- Comfortable feet-up lounging for big guys
- Flexibility of choice for bed construction
- The variety of table uses indoors & out
- The radical kitchen, and the space this frees up for living
- The philosophy of talking through each customer's needs

# I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Slightly higher backrests in lounge
- Single seats in cab bench seat leaves passenger sliding sideways in corners (optional)

# I DISLIKED

Sharp bottom corner to wardrobe

6 Looking forward to where the - laterally-installed kitchen defines the living space

7 The rear lounge is spacious, inviting and seriously comfortable 8 Dining kit includes a small coffee/snack table

tear. As with the Nuevo, there is a choice of coffee/dining tables, plus two tripods (and three different size pedestal legs), to let the tables be used *al fresco*, for a barbecue, or sunny-day sprawl.

Two goodlooking interiors then, but the Cub edges it, both in quality and space.

# **COOK'S QUARTERS**

The Nuevo kitchen is gorgeous. There's a four-burner hob (with Chinchilla glass lid), a Spinflo gas oven and grill below, and a sizable rectangular stainless steel sink (also with a glass cover, but no drainer). A Daewoo microwave and the trademark Auto-Sleepers crockery and wine glass cupboard complete this scene. There's also a useful foldout extension work surface (where workspace is often at a premium) and a small cutlery drawer. The worktops, like the dining/coffee tables, are light cream in colour, and there's a Brabantia waste bin affixed to the door. A modern, luxurious kitchen area - only spoiled by the presence of just one 12V and one 230V socket.

In the Cub, kitchen placement is a complete departure from most layouts: to make the space for the longer settees/beds, the kitchen has been fitted transversely behind the cab seats. The downside is the fact that you can't get through from the cab to the living space without climbing out, and in again. The upside? This creates a bigger caravan-style living space by freeing up the whole lounge area. It might seem a love it/hate it choice but, after a couple of hours inside, I changed my mind, from doubter, to enthusiastic fan.

The Cub kitchen offers a small stainless steel sink and a two-burner hob: no oven, so you may have to carry the kind of small electric oven, which many of us do. Below the hob is a spacious (90-litre) compressor fridge - big enough to hold ample food for any trip. Beneath the sink, a cupboard, which opens to show a neat wooden cutlery drawer and two shelves. Taking up the end of one settee,



9 Well equipped, the galley is enticing enough to get even me cooking

10 Gorgeous washroom, with its swing-wall washbasin panel, makes a separate shower



# **HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA**

# **PRICE**

■ From: £44,495 OTR ■ As tested: £54,435 OTR

# BASICS (\*manufacturer's figures)

- Berths: 2
- Three-point belted seats: 2 (including driver)
- Warranty: Base and conversion 2 years
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: Yes
- Construction: Low profile coachbuilt, alloy clad sandwich construction with GRP/ ABS mouldings. Caravan entrance on UK nearside
- Length: 5.63m (18ft 5.5in)\*
- Width: 2.32m (7ft 7.5in)\*
- Height: 2.88m (9ft 5.5in)\*
- Wheelbase: 3.00m (9ft 10in)\*
- Rear overhang: 1.67m (5ft 6in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 3300 kg
- Payload: 505kg (as tested)

# THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Peugeot Boxer SWB chassis cab
- Engine: 2.2-litre turbo diesel, producing 130bhp
- 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: Remote central locking, electric windows and mirrors, driver and passenger airbags, adjustable steering column, traction control, radio/CD player, tinted glass, captain's seats, dashboard trim, overhead shelf, door bins, central storage locker

# INSIDE

- Layout: Swivelling cab seats ahead of nearside kitchen, offside wardrobe and washroom, twin-sofa lounge in rear
- Insulation: 25mm PET all round ■ Interior height: 1.98m (6ft 6in)

# **KITCHEN**

- Sink: Rectangular stainless steel bowl, no drainer, chrome mixer tap and hinged Chinchilla glass lid
- Cooker: Spinflo four-burner hob, separate oven/grill

# **AUTO-SLEEPER NUEVO II EL**

■ Fridge: Thetford three-way with SES (Smart Energy Selection). Capacity 88 litres

# WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford C200 swivel-bowl cassette with built-in flush water tank
- Basin: Oval fixed bowl, mixer tap, storage cabinet above
- Shower: Swing-wall creates shower compartment, double-drain tray, anti slip mat

# BED

Lounge double

Length: 2.08m (6ft 10in)

■ Width: 1.28m (4ft 2.5in)

# **EQUIPMENT**

- Fresh water tank: Underslung, 91 litres (20 gallons)
- Waste water tank: Underslung, 60 litres (13.2 gallons)
- Water and space heater: Truma Combi boiler, gas/mains operation
- Leisure battery: 110 amp hr
- Gas: 2 x 7kg cylinders
- Lighting: Circular ceiling-mounted light in lounge, kitchen and washroom, 4 swivelling halogen lamps in lounge, 2 spots in kitchen
- Sockets: 230V: 2. 12V: 1

# **OPTIONAL EXTRAS**

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: Upgrade to 130bhp engine (£940)
- Conversion: None
- Other options

  Base: Cab air-con & alloy wheels (£1222)
- Conversion: None

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# **HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA**

■ From: £36,950 OTR (Note: Conversions are also available on used base vehicles with prices from £39,950 OTR)

■ As tested: £42,650 OTR

# BASICS (manufacturer's figures\*)

- Berths: 2
- Three-point belted seats: 3 (including driver)
- Warranty: Base vehicle 3 years, conversion 2 years
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: High top. All-steel body with factory high roof. Caravan entrance - side sliding door - on UK nearside
- Length: 5.68m (18ft 7.5in)\*
- Width: 1.97m (6ft 5.5in)\*
- Height: 2.70m (8ft 10.5in)\*
- Wheelbase: 3.75m (12ft 3.5in)\*
- Rear overhang: 997mm (3ft 3in)\* ■ Maximum authorised weight: 3500kg
- Payload: 600kg (After allowance for weight of driver, 100 per cent fuel, 90 per cent

fresh water and gas)

# THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Ford Transit LWB panel van
- Engine: 2.4-litre TD producing 115PS
- Transmission: Five-speed manual gearbox, rear-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round with ABS
- Suspension: Front: independent on coil springs. Rear: rigid axle on leaf springs
- Features: Double cab passenger seat, driver & passenger airbags, ABS, remote central locking, radio/CD player, mud flaps front and rear, door bins, bottle holders, cab air-con

# **INSIDE**

- Layout: Transverse kitchen towards nearside & directly behind cab, offside washroom, storage & wardrobe, U-shaped rear lounge
- Insulation: 15 mm foam-compacted Thermoseal
- Interior height: 1.95m (6ft 5in)

# **KITCHEN**

- Sink: Round stainless steel bowl with chromed mixer tap, no drainer
- Cooker: Cramer two-burner hob

# VANTAGE CUB TR

Fridge: Waeco 12V compressor type with full-width freezer compartment. Capacity 70 litres

# WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford C400 bench-type, electricflush with wheeled cassette
- Basin: Fixed corner unit with mixer tap
- Shower: Integral shower with tray floor, mixer tap, trigger-equipped shower head

# BEDS

Lounge singles

Length: 1.92m (6ft 3.5in) ■ Width: 870mm (2ft 10in) Alternative double

Length: 1.92m (6ft 3.5in)Width: 1.74m (5ft 8.5in)

# **EQUIPMENT**

- Fresh water tank: Underslung, insulated, 72 litres (15.8 gallons)
- Waste water: Underslung, insulated, 50 litres (11 gallons)
- Water heater: Truma Ultrastore boiler, gas-mains operation
- Space heater: Whale Space Heater with blown-air, gas-mains operation
- Leisure battery: 2 x 100 amp hr
- Gas: 2 x 3.9kg cylinders
- Lighting: Six-LED 'soft-glow' ceiling lights in lounge, kitchen, washroom, 4 underlocker reading lights
- Sockets: 230V: 4. 12V: 1

# **OPTIONAL EXTRAS**

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: Thatcham Cat 1 alarm (£450)
- Conversion: Electric step (£350), Avtex TV/ DVD player with bracket and aerial (£500), Fiamma 3.0-metre awning (£650), 85W roof-mounted solar panel (£750)

# Other options

- Base: Tracker vehicle location system (£450 + £95 per year), alloy wheels (£600), reversing sensors (£300), cruise control (£200),
- Conversion: Remi Front cab blinds (£450), heater to fresh water tank (£150), living area air-conditioning (£1700), bike rack (£300), summer room for awning (£500)

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there's another cupboard holding a goodsized waste bin and a wine rack, or space for pots and pans. There's also has an extension work surface, designed to be used with the side door open - leaving everything to hand from outside, and great for barbecues. Best of all, a ring-style handle on the work surface pulls up to deploy a rising-rack of three mains sockets, exactly where they're needed. More ingenuity is at work.

The kitchen space provides the starkest contrast in these two 'vans. The Nuevo offers the conventional working area, the Cub uses its kitchen to define the start of the living space in the 'van. In both cases, the quality of fittings is superb. Are you a trailblazer, or an orthodox camper? My own fear was that I would miss having internal access to the cab that was, until I clobbered my head (yet again) on the killer plastic shelf above the Peugeot dash. No need for further thought!

# **BATHING SPACE**

The Nuevo washroom is superb. Surprisingly spacious, it's kitted out in tasteful woods, chrome fittings/handles and white plastic. Then the killer punch: if you swing out the washbasin unit, it pivots round to form a shower door. Slip inside here (and do the same with the plastic panel opposite) and you have a shower, which should contain water spraying out - even from substantial me.

The Vantage Cub goes for good quality and functional: a fair-sized room, with Thetford bench toilet, and a washbasin angled to let it be used without you butting open the door when you bend forward. A trigger showerhead serves in this integrated toilet/shower. Two nice oval mirrors are set into wall at human, rather than dormouse, height. Excellent quality towel rings and other goodies are fitted.

If you revel in the trendy/luxurious, the Nuevo has it. If you treat your ablutions as simply something to use, then the Cub offers a perfectly sound package.



11 The galley is compact, but full of sensible ideas

12 The washroom is basic, but bright, and with excellent quality fittings

# AUTO-SLEEPER NUEVO II EL



- 13 The double bed is easy to assemble, but knee-roll bulges intrude
- 14 Good-sized drawers are a welcome feature
- 15 Trademark Auto-Sleeper crockery and wine glasses live in a dedicated cupboard





## BEDTIME

By definition, rear lounge models usually provide easy bed making. The Nuevo has two slatted platforms which slide out from either settee to make the base for the bed: arrange seat and backrest cushions to your own preference. The resultant bed is perfectly adequate in size (6ft 9in x 4ft 2in), with easily reached reading lights. However, why has Auto-Sleepers gone 'retro' and produced seats with prominent knee rolls? Have the designers ever tried to sleep on 'em? Sure, you can turn the cushions upside down, but they still reflect the bulging edges. One out of ten, for that one...

At night, the Cub comes into its own, with a truly ingenious solution. It can be used with two single beds that are amply long enough for the tallest guy to stretch out on. Alternatively, a series of classy-looking bed boards can be fitted onto rails - mounted on the fronts of the settees - to give you (with various cushion combinations) a joined bed for head-and-shoulders, or for torso, or three-quarters-body. Ideal, if one of you needs to investigate the loo in the middle of the night, as there's no need to climb over the other. Finally, if you use every bed-board and seatback cushion, you can have a fine super-sized double bed.

Choice can be important, in sleeping. Many people prefer single beds: some of us like to use them, when it's hot. The Cub lets you have a conventional double, or any variant of two singles - a superb piece of design thinking.

Finally, it's worth saying that those who fidget on 'hidden peas' all night should avoid knee-roll cushions like the plague.

# STORE ROOM

The Nuevo is well provided with locker space. A large locker for bedding is provided overcab, with two smaller side lockers for books etc. There are four overheads (one stows the dedicated crockery), one in the lounge and a further overhead above the hob (with a grey finish to match the microwave). There is a large underbed locker on the nearside (which can be accessed externally) and a small external locker under the loo hatch; no, there wasn't a missing cassette!

In the Cub, a large overcab locker holds both tabletops and bedding (or all the unused cushions at night, keeping them out of the way). There are six neat overheads, all with doors supported by gas struts. There is a marvellous floor-to-ceiling pantry between washroom and wardrobe, with four shelves (designed to hold cereal boxes without crushing them), a compartment for holding the bed boards and a large plastic chopping board. The kitchen has good cupboard space, and there is a huge storage space under the nearside settee. There's also a shallow linen storage space above the space and water heaters on the offside. Inside the rear doors (draught proofed and double glazed), there's a large 'boot box' for stowing ramps, cables etc. This fits below the end seat of the lounge.

Both 'vans have adequate wardrobes - in the Cub this is cantilevered above the end of the offside settee, with plenty of space left beneath for the most restless long-legged sleeper to turn. It looks a little odd, but it works. Both models offer surprisingly good space for storage in compact 'vans.

# **LIFE SUPPORT**

Nuevo water tanks are underslung and noninsulated, so this could create a problem for winter camping. Internally, there is thermostatically controlled blown-air and water heating, powered by either gas and/or mains electricity. There are two 230V and one 12V sockets, along with a TV aerial socket and a combined TV aerial and booster. A decent-sized 110 amp hour leisure battery should work well if you are pitching without mains hook-up. The double-glazed windows all have concertina blinds and flyscreens, as has the large Heki rooflight.

In the Cub, underslung water tanks are winterised: to be absolutely sure, you could fit a small thermostatically controlled heater into the fresh water tank. Cub is fitted with the new Whale blown-air heating system, which can be run on gas or mains electricity A Truma Ultrastore boiler heats water. There are four 230V sockets and one 12V, while two 100 amp hour leisure batteries are routinely installed - complete with a solar panel. Double-glazed windows have concertina blinds and flyscreens, and there is a choice between concertina blinds for the cab or external silver screens (with fold-down outer skin to leave a silver mesh sun screen to the windscreen).

# CONCLUSION

In the world of motorhomes, there is no such thing as one size fits all. One man's meat is very often another man's poison in terms of taste, and the choice between these two models will reflect instinctive personal preference, as well as specific needs.

If you like your motorcaravan interior plush and conventional, you are likely to prefer the Nuevo washroom and kitchen from the start - and why not? It's a cracking little 'van, which makes good use of limited space, something you can show your friends with pride. But wear a hard hat if, like me, you're a tall driver... ...that unpadded overhead shelf!

If you are intrigued by the thought of a bit of trailblazing, the many qualities of the Cub will quickly appeal. It's built with great attention to detail and quality. It's also constructed by a small producer which prides itself on making every 'van to order - having live-in tested the design beforehand. The radical kitchen design gives better internal space, and nothing rattles, while the option of changing the bed layout offers a huge advantage for those of us wanting single beds, and using our 'vans winter and summer.

Here there's also a choice between a now-large-scale producer, which has an excellent reputation for quality - albeit with some wobbles in recent years - and the new kid on the block, who is determined to stay small and focus on meeting customer needs: someone who will work with you, to - hopefully - provide a 'van which truly suits.

Both offer fair value for money, with the Cub having a clear edge here. If you're looking at compact, rear lounge-based 'vans less than six metres in length, here are two that should be on your must-see list.

# VEHICLES LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

Auto-sleeper Nuevo II EL

**Brownhills North East,** Durham Road, Birtley, County Durham DH3 2QZ (tel: 0845 6055 473:

web site: www.brownhills.co.uk)

Vantage Cub TR

# Vantage Motorhomes,

New Market Green, New Market Approach, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS9 0QJ

(tel: 0113 240 9797;

web site: www.vantagemotorhomes.co.uk)









17 The pantry will hold your cornflakes without crushing them

- 18 Rear access to below seat locker and useful 'boot box' for cables and the like
- 19 You can get your feet up to watch the TV



