



# ON TOUR WITH A...

## ...Leisuredrive Occasion

*More than occasional visitors to the Lake District, Andy and Marion Stothert take a compact camper to a very special place*





Words & pictures  
by Andy Stothert

It's November and the Lake District is looking absolutely radiant as nature's last, and perhaps most astonishing, autumnal hurrah announces the onset of winter. It's a glorious landscape at a time of striking colours, misty mornings with that magical stillness in the air above frosty fields. The Lake District in late autumn is the stuff of dreams and amongst all this rampant beauty a small little-known corner of South Lakeland is perhaps the loveliest of the lot. I refer (of course) to the Duddon Valley, Dunnerdale, and the delicious but very little known Lickle Valley. It matters not a jot what time of year you come, for it's always stunning - whatever the Weather Gods have waiting for you - and as a small bonus half the sites stay open all year. Mind you there are only two.

But what you can't really do is enjoy these gorgeous intimate crevices in the scenery whilst using a touring pantechnicon. The roads are all narrow overhanging tortuous twisting little ribbons leading to the equivalent of tarmac precipices, and many have width restrictions too. So, I put our collective foot down when MMM asked us to do the next motorhome test and demanded something small and manageable. 'Please,' I said, 'no more unwieldy trucks or tree-catching coachbuilds'. We, and the places we go, just don't like 'em.

Enter the Leisuredrive Occasion, a high top panel van conversion built on a SWB Ford Transit. Perfect: time to go off exploring...

### AN OCCASION FOR EVERY OCCASION?

Leisuredrive has been building van conversions and supplying kits for self-builders for nearly forty years, and right through those years the same man has been running the business. As a result of this continuity, Leisuredrive has evolved into its market, and sees the key to continued success is a flexible approach: ensuring that what the customer wants, the customer gets. Buyers start with a choice of basic layouts then add or subtract what they want, rather than what the manufacturer decides they should get.

The vehicle presented for testing is the company's demonstrator, and this gives an idea of what is available, but can't really be described as the definitive Leisuredrive Occasion, as such a beast doesn't really exist - there are almost as many Occasions as there are customers. It is



Pitched at Upper Hawthwaite Farm CL

### TOURING TRIVIA

#### WE STAYED AT

■ **Upper Hawthwaite Farm, Broughton Mills.** Tel: 01229 716270. Open all year. Location: OS Landranger 96, grid reference 221895. Caravan Club Certificated Location for adult members only. Excellent facilities including hook-ups, toilet, shower, and hardstandings. Lovely friendly folk too. Great location for strolling in the Lickle Valley and a nice ten-mile return trip on foot to lunch at the Newfield Inn. This is a very popular site and with only five pitches available needs booking in advance at peak times.

■ **Turner Hall Farm Campsite, Duddon Valley.** Tel: 01229 716420. Open April to October. Location: OS Landranger 96, grid reference 234964. Very basic facilities (cold water and toilet) and you may have to share with a sheep or two. No dedicated emptying and filling point, no hook-ups, no nothing. A wonderful place. Dogs (on leads) welcome. Sustenance (liquid and solid) less than half a mile down lane at the Newfield Inn.

#### WE VISITED

■ The beautiful Duddon Valley lies in the south western corner of the Lake District just behind the Coniston Fells and is best accessed by leaving the M6 at junction 36 onto the A590 then following signs for Barrow-in-Furness until the junction with the A5092, where a sharp right takes you towards the promised land. The road into the Duddon Valley is unclassified and is to be found about one mile on the right beyond Broughton at Duddon Bridge.

#### FOOD

■ The Newfield Inn at Seathwaite in the Duddon Valley is open all day every day for simple but satisfying food (tel: 01229 716208).

*The Duddon Valley  
has no lake and no  
tourist attractions, so  
peace and quiet  
is assured*



## On Test Leisuredrive Occasion

quite important that you all remember this, as I systematically analyse, dissect, and, in places, whinge about this particular combination of features and fittings, for in practice they may never appear together again. And what doesn't go down well with us may very well match the needs of somebody else precisely.

### A SUITABLE OCCASION

Well, all those hypothetical frosty mornings with still air didn't materialise as the gales stripped the trees bare and deep, dark, steel blue skies raced across the Duddon's heavenly ceiling. It was very, very, dramatic and very apt as a backdrop for the blue metallic paint of the Transit and its matching GRP high roof fitted by Leisuredrive.

Personally, I prefer a steel roof, but Ford is no longer offering a steel factory high roof version of the SWB Transit, so if you want a short Ford it will have to come with a plastic hat. The new front end on the Transit looks a bit brutal as standard on a white van, but with the bumpers painted, a set of nice wheel trims fitted, a set of heavily tinted flush-fitting windows glued on, some subtle but attractive graphics applied to the sides, and all wearing that blue metallic jacket, this is a very nice-looking vehicle.

### OCCASIONAL DRIVER

This latest snout-lifted Transit differs from the last incarnation in mainly mechanical ways, with a new engine and a lot of detail modifications in all areas of the vehicle. The gearchange now follows the current trend of being dash-mounted and operates via a short stubby rather sensuous-feeling lever.



Sorry about that, but it is, and in truth the housing protrudes rather too far from the now much more Teutonic (some might say sombre-looking) dashboard. Whenever I got behind the wheel of this Transit I kept thinking I was sitting in the latest VW T5 Transporter, and driving it also provided more VW déjà vu moments because it feels very similar.

Whether this was deliberate on Ford's part I don't know, but it is a compliment - the Volkswagen is the nearest thing yet to a

commercial vehicle that drives like a car. The gearchange is, without doubt, the equal of the competition, the handling very predictable, the brakes are reassuringly powerful, and the steering is absolutely superb. Performance from the new 16 valve 2.2-litre 110bhp diesel is generally excellent, but with a final drive ratio chosen for relaxed high-speed cruising (70 mph equates to less than 2500rpm) Ford should really have added a sixth gear to the mix: the gap between 4th and 5th has quite a



**1** The very car-like driving environment of the latest Transit

**2** Front half of the Occasion. Ample headroom and four individual seats bestow it with a spacious feel

**3** Rear half, with wardrobe on the left and kitchen to the right. A couple of cupboards added above the rear doors would fill a vacant space there and provide a bit more storage space

**4** Kitchen unit. Available storage space here is eaten into severely by water, gas and water heater. The furniture is simple and well made

**5** The view from the top of Little Stand, where the dog's ashes are scattered, and where mine will eventually join him. Hopefully, it'll be a while yet

**6** Pack y'r 'van, get up to the Lakes, and put your feet on the scenery



noticeable 'torque-hole' lying within it.

It's inevitable that comparisons are drawn between all the different base vehicles now on offer and having driven them all recently (including a brand new 2.3 MWB high roof Fiat a few days before we picked up the Transit), I've got to admit that, good as the new Transit is, I preferred the Fiat in most respects. That said, I think the Transit is now equal to, or better than, the rest of the competition.

However, this being Leisuredrive, you can have your own special Occasion (though it may not be called that) wearing just about whatever badge you want. In the context of exploring the narrow roads and steep hills encountered in South Lakeland, the Occasion performed faultlessly on the tortuous and steep roads in the Duddon Valley, where it never got beyond 4th gear. However, that 'torque-hole' between 4th and 5th gears made fast progress a bit less of a certainty on the hilly A-road to Broughton-in-Furness from the main Barrow road. Overall though, the little Transit is a very nimble mover and a pleasure to use in inaccessible places. Oh, I nearly forgot - this one came with all sorts of Ford-fitted gizmos and toys (cab-air, auto washers and lights, etc, which I couldn't work out how to use) but a basic model is still available for us careful and stupid sorts.

### LIVING THE OCCASION

The layout in this one has four, fully belted individual seats up front, the kitchen in the rear nearside and a combination of wardrobe and foldaway toilet cupboard on the rear offside. There is (nominally) a double berth in the roof and the four seats all recline to make two single beds downstairs.

Getting all the living stuff into a small camper conversion has baffled and amused motorcaravan designers since the dawn of motorhoming time; Leisuredrive's version(s) will suit some, but not others. The basic layout in the kitchen area includes a two-burner hob, sink without drainer and a basic two cubic-foot fridge (apparently this equates to 60 litres in French). The test model had an oven/grill unit, and a mains-operated water heater added. There isn't a lot of work surface available here, but glass tops on the sink and

hob, together with some dumping space on the top of the toilet cupboard, all added up to a kitchen which was reasonably easy to use. A three-burner hob would be nice and there's room for it, and a drainer too, but this is a small campervan, so compromise is inevitable.

The presence of curtains around the business bits of the kitchen seemed a little strange to me (flying fat etc), but I've no doubt they've been doing it like this for 38 years and nobody's complained until we happened along.

Personally, I can't see the point of a mains water heater with only one sink to feed (when a kettle will do the job admirably), but as I mentioned, this is one of those many items that are optional either way. This one also had a microwave fitted, which we, as non-hook-up campers, view as spawn of the devil and a cupboard lost, but others may see as an essential amenity.

Losing this, and the water heater, would free up more (and much needed) food storage space, but you make your own decisions in these matters - which is good is it not? Water in this Occasion came from a tiny (less than three gallons) portable container in the kitchen cupboard with a submersible pump which had to be withdrawn every time the vehicle moved and by our normal consumption rates didn't quite last us a full day.

Whilst the concept of a removable (and easy to clean) water container is a good idea, this meagre water supply would make extended wild camping problematic. Also, there isn't really anywhere suitable for storing an additional identical container elsewhere in the 'van. But once again Leisuredrive offers an underfloor tank option (at £440) if that is your preference. The provision of gas was also somewhat restricted with a single Campingaz cylinder in a small lockable (but not sealed) container under the kitchen unit, with another similar bottle stored under the wardrobe. A bit naïve we reckon when a gas-guzzling Propex heater and oven are part of the equipment offered.

### OCCASIONAL USE?

The ablutionary facility (the toilet) is brought into use by lifting the worktop above, swinging a door outwards, and voila, the swivel-bowl Thetford loo can then be adjusted to accept your ponderings. However, only after you've closed the curtains around the rear half of the 'van and fiddled with a none-too-easy-to-reach roller blind in the centre aisle, and discovered that the two front seats need moving forward a touch to allow its downward progress. Occasional, or night time use, I think, is what this arrangement was designed for, but having gone to the expense and trouble of fitting a cassette toilet, we thought that perhaps the extra work involved in devising a layout which makes it easily usable would be worthwhile.

The obvious solution, (siting the wardrobe in the opposite rear corner and installing a split kitchen) would cost some rearwards visibility: as usual, you can't get 'owt for nowt' as they say in Lancashire. There doesn't seem to be the option (on a list stretching almost to Yorkshire) of a normal toilet compartment in the offside corner, as has been done previously in some SWB Transit conversions, but the cassette toilet can be jettisoned if you don't want it and you'll save some cash too.

A useless fact, which has just occurred to me (and one you should try to remember if visiting this area), is that until 1974 the Broughton-in-Furness area was in the county

### WE LIKED

- The Duddon Valley
- Food at the Newfield Inn
- Ford Transit's steering, braking, and handling
- Smooth powerful engine
- Quiet high-speed cruising
- Good build quality of conversion
- Exterior looks of whole package
- Comfortable lounge seating

### WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Six-speed gearbox (not an option)
- Swivel to driver's seat (not an option)
- Table position changed (you want it - you can have it)
- More storage space generally (definitely an option with other kit not specified)
- Opening double glazed windows (yes, for a bit more cash)
- Insulation (yep, but more money)
- Blinds in kitchen instead of curtains (comes with the optional double-glazed windows)
- Sofa and single seat option in lounge (a cheaper option)
- Toilet compartment (no, not an option)
- Three/four burner hob (if that's what you want)
- Drainer on sink (no room)
- Lights on ceiling in kitchen area

### WE DISLIKED

- Fussy procedures for using toilet
- Cord carpet wall coverings
- Plain carpet in lounge
- Gas provision and storage
- Small capacity water tank
- Lack of knee room next to gear change for accessing living quarters



## On Test Leisuredrive Occasion



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**7** The two single beds are made by reclining all four seats. Despite the narrow width and apparently bumpy surface they proved very comfy for us two skinny runts

**8** The four individual seats are comfy sitting places, with extra, soft, one-piece padding also making the beds work surprisingly well. The position of the table baffled us, as it isn't really ideally placed for any of the residents

**9** Accessing the toilet is a simple task, but closing all the curtains and the fiddly central blind before using it takes a bit longer

**10** The upper bed is children's territory only at 5ft long, but that access ladder is splendid



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of Lancashire and, come to think of it, so was the Leisuredrive factory near Bolton. Those were the days...

### OCCASIONAL SLEEPER

If I had misgivings about the layout, this is where they were at their most obvious. It just didn't look to me that four of the usual lay-flat seats, all 1ft 10ins wide (less than 600mm), would make two decent beds: especially as they don't line up exactly with each other. That they can't possibly be wide enough was blatantly obvious, that they aren't totally flat when assembled isn't, but do you know what - we slept really well. I think the addition of some extra, soft, one-piece padding, fitted on the basic seats did the trick. So I was wrong about the comfort of the beds, they were fine, and equally wrong about the lounging and dining capabilities of this layout for four.

The existence of the upstairs bed, which is just about big enough for two small children (5ft long), and those four belted seats suggest that the Occasion is intended to make a serious stab at being a four-berth campervan,

and it does look as though it will do the job at first glance.

Unfortunately it's an illusion - for the simple reason that the driver's seat doesn't swivel. The consequence of this is far-reaching as it means the Occasion will only comfortably lounge and dine three occupants. The island leg table doesn't assist either, as it is placed centrally and doesn't actually face any of the seats directly. If only that seat could swivel (the tall handbrake column is in the way) then everything else could be sorted out.

But (another bit of Leisuredrive flexibility) the more usual layout of an offside sofa and single face-forward seat on the nearside is offered, and is £800 cheaper. Those four seats do look nice, and give the Occasion the ability to fill the role of family car when required, but it isn't really a practical four-berth camper, so you wonder about the logic of it all.

On the other hand, the sofa and single seat layout offer more storage space, a feet-up lounge, three travel seats, four dining places and a cheaper price. To add to the confusion (sorry, choices), if you buy the Occasion layout

on a Citroen (only it's called a Calypso) all the seats can swivel and this makes a lot more sense of the four individual seats.

Confused? Me too. I think I'm saying the Calypso is a better option if those four seats are a necessity, while even though the paperwork doesn't confirm this, the 'man from Del Monte' (Leisuredrive), he says yes! We can do this too!

### OTHER OCCASIONS

Other odds and ends we picked up on were that we liked the way Leisuredrive screws the bits together - it all looked neat and there were no errant rattles on the road. The cabinets are simple and modern, but in contrast to this the cord carpet-covered walls are not to our taste, and neither are the fluorescent lights. This Occasion came with a (quite large) flat screen TV, which mounts on the wardrobe wall, but once again the lack of driver's seat swivel, interferes with the layout and meant that only one resident could see the thing. Also, as it couldn't be left on the mounting whilst travelling, it needs some

precious storage space dedicated to it whilst on the move.

Something which concerns us about nearly all panel van conversions is that manufacturers don't take insulation nearly seriously enough, and whilst the Occasion had none it's nice to see that Leisuredrive offers full insulation as an optional extra, including the fitting of (but they're not quite so pretty) double glazed windows. Those smart-looking flush-fitting single glazed windows don't offer much ventilation, and none of it is flyscreened either, so overall they aren't that practical for serious camping. The upper windows, as standard, don't open either, but of course, if you want it to, Leisuredrive can make it happen, for a bit of extra cash.

### VERDICT

The weather was as foul as the place is gorgeous; the food in the Newfield Inn was as mountainous as ever; the view from the site (Upper Hawthwaite Farm) changed by the minute and the wind on top of Little Stand (where our much-missed, four-legged hairy mate's ashes are scattered) blew us off the mountain. What a glorious place. The Leisuredrive Occasion, as presented for test, was a mishmash of conflicting ideas, good looks and somewhat impractical equipment for the sort of camping we do, but there's no doubt that somewhere lurking in the huge pile of paperwork which is the Leisuredrive layout plans lies the ideal campervan for most of us.

### THE DUDDON VALLEY

This is a place where you come to soak up the scenery and walk. There isn't really anything else to do, so this is the most peaceful part of

## SPECIFICATION

- **Price as tested:** £30,690 (Prices start from £23,700)
- **Layout:** Four forward-facing seats (including those in cab) at front; sliding side access door to nearside; kitchen area at nearside rear; cassette toilet and wardrobe at offside rear; slide-out bed above cab.
- **Base vehicle:** Ford Transit SWB high top panel van with 2.2-litre diesel engine producing 110bhp, five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Warranty:** Three years/100,000 miles base vehicle, two years conversion
- **Dimensions and weights:** Length 4.86m (15ft 11.5in); width 1.97m (6ft 5.5in); height 2.59m (8ft 6in). Max authorised weight 2800kg; payload (including weight of driver, full fuel, full fresh water, one gas cylinder) 600kg
- **Belted seats:** Four (driver, front passenger, two forward-facing rear seat passengers - all three-point)

## LEISUREDRIVE OCCASION

- **Beds:** Overcab double 1.52m x 1.52m (5ft 0in x 5ft 0in); two singles 1.98m x 560mm (6ft 6in x 1ft 10in)
- **Kitchen:** Rear nearside corner location with two-burner hob, oven/grill unit, sink (no drainer), Dometic 60-litre fridge
- **Washroom:** Manual-flush swivel-bowl cassette toilet fitted in cupboard in rear offside corner
- **Heating:** Propex gas-operated, blown-air. Mains-operated Elgena boiler, capacity 5 litres
- **Water tank:** Portable container stored in kitchen cupboard with removable submersible pump, capacity 10 litres
- **Gas:** One 2.72kg Campingaz cylinder in locker
- **Optional extras fitted to test vehicle:** None, at price quoted, but just about everything possible is optional or negotiable from basic layout
- **Other options include:** Roof insulation, floor insulation, underfloor water tank

the Lake District. The Duddon Valley stretches from Wrynose Pass in the heart of Lakeland, and within sight of the highest ground in England, down to the miles of golden swirling sands in the Duddon estuary. During its boisterous 15-mile descent, the Duddon is overlooked by a variety of scenes not bettered anywhere in the land.

Walking is the main attraction, with some gentle but glorious strolls to be enjoyed in the Duddon Valley, whilst experienced and well-equipped hill walkers can tackle the biggest hills in England from the upper reaches of the

valley at Cockley Beck.

The Lickle Valley is the next valley south of the Duddon and is a place of complete tranquility. The small but perfectly formed Dunnerdale Fells separate these two Shangri Las and offer a wealth of easy, scenic, but really quite rugged walking, whilst the best place to walk in the Duddon Valley (from an embarrassment of riches) is the mile-long gorge just upstream of Seathwaite - very handy for the Turner Hall Farm campsite. All of the beautiful Lickle Valley is on your doorstep from the site at Upper Hawthwaite Farm. ■

### MOTORHOME KINDLY LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

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