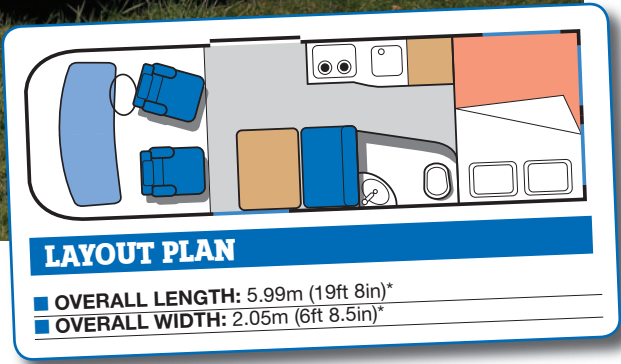


BRAVIA SWAN



HOT HIGH TOPS



Panel van conversions with fixed beds have become hot property lately and as more and more manufacturers weigh in with their versions, we look at one of the original contenders and one of the newest



Ancedotal evidence strongly suggests that Belgian family company, Maesss was the first to introduce the fixed bed design featured in this month's pugilistic parade. Converted on the previous model Fiat Ducato long wheelbase high top van, the Maesss Mini crammed lounge, kitchen, washroom and transverse double bed into a small space, offering coachbuilt levels of facilities inside an almost-too-small body.

Adria was the first of the big boys to

cotton on to the idea - the Twin becoming the first volume-produced high top with this design and the one that many motorcaravan aficionados recognise as the original.

As a fan of fixed beds, the Twin's layout is one of my favourites, but its design was compromised by the need to place the wardrobe upfront and directly behind the cab. This made the lounge less than user friendly and left it feeling enclosed. Enter the latest

1 Cab featured optional climate control, but seats are downmarket units

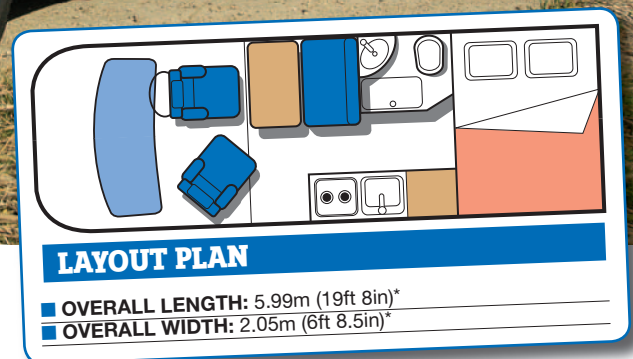
2 The Maesss scores points as it is fitted with captain's seats



Words and pictures by Dave Hurrell



MAESSS MINI 1



Fiat Ducato. Now wider and longer than its predecessor, the long wheelbase version offers enough internal space to shift the wardrobe aft. This leaves the lounge/diner unhindered by a big clothes storage box - the van's increased width improving things still further. In the rear, the transverse fixed double bed benefits too - gaining length.

Meanwhile, and as high top panel van conversions become ever more popular, other manufacturers are joining the club, with Chausson and even mighty Hymer due to offer their take on this layout in the not too distant future. There's also - my spies tell me - a

possibility that returns to the panel van conversion market, Swift and Autocruise, may offer their versions of the design.

So what's all the fuss about? Well, this design manages to offer most of the things that folks want, all in a modestly sized, driver-friendly motorcaravan. This is, in part, thanks to the fact that the long wheelbase Sevel-built (Fiat Ducato, Peugeot Boxer, Citroen Relay) high roof panel van is as near as a knat's whisker to being the ideal shape to convert into a motorcaravan. This is mainly because it's very square aft and wider than the competition.

With swivelling cab seats and a half-dinette upfront (with two three-point seatbelts), central kitchen and washroom, and transverse fixed bed in the rear (with lots of storage space underneath), you get all the most desirable elements of a two berth 'van, in a package that's easy to drive and park. In addition, there are the big side sliding, and twin rear, doors that open to let the great outdoors in; something you do not get with a coachbuilt.

Drawbacks? Well, the main one is that this conversion is only really suitable for people of 'average' proportions - the washroom isn't huge and the bed offers only just over six feet of length.

So what about our protagonists? Well, Belgian Maesss produces a comprehensive range of 'vans with a reputation for good quality and design. Bravia is the new kid on the block, both in terms of product and company. The firm behind the name produces furniture for hotels and offices - its Slovenian nationality and proximity to Adria saw it decide to start making motorcaravans. A spot of 'head hunting' then saw Bravia with the right employees to do the job; it's probably no coincidence that the Bravia Swan is a bit of a 'twin' in more ways than one.

MOTIVE POWER

Right, if you're new to this game you'll not know too much about the Fiat Ducato - however, I'll be brief, if only to try and make sure the old hands don't fall asleep.





BRAVIA SWAN



3 The interior is light thanks, in part, to two Heki rooflights

4 Lounging is better on the more comfortable cab seats

5 There's room at the table for four, using all the seats

Fiat's Ducato is the most converted motorcaravan base vehicle in Europe (both for coachbuilts and van conversions) bar none, while stable-mate Peugeot Boxer is almost identical, being built on the same production line at the Sevel plant in southern Italy. The latest version offers a superb range of powerful diesel engines, is very comfortable to drive and benefits from many clever features - lots of storage solutions in the cab being especially useful to motorcaravanners. Brakes and steering are exemplary, while the dash-mounted gearlever and right-hand-located handbrake make it easier to get from cab to living area and back. Problems with this new model have included water finding its way under the bonnet, and a reported judder when reversing up inclines. The water ingress was caused by poor sealing of the base of the windscreen and the central join of a plastic moulding on the scuttle: action has been taken to rectify this problem with new seals and plastic covers for sensitive items in the engine compartment.

The Ducato's radical looks are not to everyone's taste, but I like them. However, the downside of the Ducato's 'Roman' nose is the fact that it helps make the vehicle longer - overall - than its equivalent predecessor. The news is not all bad though, as though the long wheelbase version is not small, it still comes in at under six metres long and this, among other things, means it attracts cheaper ferry fares.

Three engines are on offer here, with a choice of 100, 120, or 157 horsepower. The Peugeot Boxer-based Bravia comes as standard with the 2.2-litre 100bhp unit, the Fiat Ducato-based Maesss, the 2.3-litre 120bhp motor. Gearboxes are different too: the Bravia has a five-speed, the Maesss the latest six-cog unit.

ROAD MANNERS

Aside from a bigger engine, the Maesss scores points as it's fitted with Fiat's captain's seats. Both multi-adjustable and with built-in belts, these pews are the best that Fiat offers and very comfortable, featuring twin armrests. The Boxer-based Bravia's cab seats are devoid of armrests and the seatbelts are conventionally mounted. Also, only the driver's is height-adjustable. Even so, Bravia's pews are very comfy. Cab facilities in the Maesss include optional air-conditioning and factory-fitted radio/CD player. The test Bravia counters with a good quality after-fit stereo

and climate control that'll set you back £295 and £1295 respectively.

Both 'vans are great to drive with sharp steering and 'roller skate' handling introducing a fun element to progress on the tarmac. The test Bravia is the first example to make to the UK and was left-hand drive: production models will have the steering wheel on 'our' side. Flexibility is a feature of both engines - fifth gear in the Bravia and sixth

I LIKED

- Great driving base vehicle
- Drawer storage in kitchen
- Washroom window
- Lounge 'kiddy' bed
- The ability to sit up in bed
- Heki rooflights
- The price
- Removable bed base

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A better fridge
- UK handing for the conversion

I DISLIKED

- Slightly harsh engine note when pushed
- Lack of lighting at both ends of the bed

in the Maesss are quite high ratios, but both engines pulled well, even at low velocities. Both engines are also willing performers - the most noticeable difference between the two being the Bravia's smaller unit's tendency to harshness when pushed. The 2.3-litre unit fitted in the Maesss benefits from an extra 20 horses and is much smoother, making it the best choice for this size of motorcaravan.

Both 'vans feature two, three-point belted seats in the rear. Mounted on strong steel frames and with the washroom walls to the rear to back them up they merely add versatility to the design - carrying daytime passengers could be part of the plan, and mean that both 'vans might be more realistic as everyday transport.

LOUNGE AND DINE

In both 'vans, the cab seats turn to face the rear and form a spacious feeling lounge in partnership with the half dinette. Again, the Maesss' captain's seats shine - their 'spring forward' at the pull of a lever, backrests making the job of swivelling them all the more easier. Of course, and unlike in some other 'vans, it's still easy to swivel the seats in the Bravia, thanks to the Ducato's wide cab.

Brown furniture dominates both interiors, with the Maesss cabinetwork a cut above quality-wise. The Maesss features padded linings to ceiling and sides - the Bravia makes do with hard stuff.

The Bravia scores well in the natural light stakes as its linings are pale in colour and a Midi Heki rooflight lets in even more natural illumination. The Maesss linings are - strangely - coloured black, while there's just a roof vent above. Even so, big widows, and plenty of light getting in through the cab glass, ensure that things are not too gloomy. Both lounges offer seating for four, although the rather upright forward-facing seats will mean that these 'vans' normal two residents will be best off relaxing in the cab chairs.

Mealtimes see both Bravia and Maesss diners eating off good-sized, wall-hung tables. There are no tabletop extensions on offer in either, but the cab passenger seats slide far forward enough for their occupants to eat - albeit at an angle to the tables. Four can dine reasonably well in both 'vans, with a couple best sat in nearside cab seat and forward-facer for a cosy meal.

COOKS QUARTERS

Packing so many features into a relatively small vehicle inevitably produces compromises and the main ones are in the kitchens.

Located partially across the side sliding doors' openings, these galleys are typically Continental in design - think minimalist - and aimed at an outdoor lifestyle. The advantage here is that - when the weather is good - cooking with the door open will be a 'fresh air' experience. Two-burner hobs (spark ignition on Bravia, but not Maesss) and drainer-less

MAESSS MINI 1



I LIKED

- Willing engine
- Six-speed gearbox
- Good build quality
- Captain's seats
- Generous counter top in washroom
- Flip-up worktop in kitchen
- UK handling of conversion

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Cassette blinds
- A removable bed base

I DISLIKED

- Storage in the kitchen

6 Classy cabinetwork sets the Maesss apart from its rival

7 The captain's seats are the place to be when lounging

8 The driver's seat and forward-facer make a cosy dinette for two

On Test Bravia Swan & Maesss Mini 1



9

9 Layout places kitchen in the UK offside, as conversion is Continentally handed with side door on our offside

10 Galley scores points with convenient drawer-based storage

11 The washroom features wood finishes and a welcome window

sinks grace both galleys, although production Bravias will get a mini grill unit, located below the hob. To the rear, and below the wardrobes, decent-sized fridges complete the 'white goods' - the Maesss comes up trumps with a bigger, better-specified fridge. Bravia owners will fire up their cooler on gas pushing the igniter button, while peering through a little porthole inside to check the flame. Silly me, I thought Dometic had ceased making these rather old-fashioned units years ago!

There's not much work surface in either galley, but glass lids over cooker and sink help while the Maesss' lift-up work surface will be replicated in production models of the Bravia.



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HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

BRAVIA SWAN

PRICE

- From: £33,495 OTR
- As tested: £35,160 OTR

BASICS

- Berths: 2/3
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including driver)
- Warranty: See importer for details
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No (compliance applied for)

CONSTRUCTION (*manufacturer's figures)

- Length: 5.99m (19ft 8in)*
- Width: 2.05m (6ft 8.5in)*
- Height: 2.58m (8ft 5.5in)*
- Wheelbase: 4.03m (13ft 2.5in)*
- Rear overhang: 1.00m (3ft 3.5in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 3300kg*
- Payload: 495kg* (After the vehicle in working order)

THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 2.2-litre common rail turbo-diesel producing 100bhp
- Transmission: Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round
- Suspension: Front: Independent Rear: Rigid axle
- Features: Remote central locking, electric windows, driver's airbag, height-adjustable driver's seat, trip computer, twin door bins, central storage compartment over-cab shelf

INSIDE LAYOUT

Swivelling cab seats ahead of nearside half-dinette, offside kitchen, nearside washroom, rear-located transverse fixed double bed, Caravan entrance (side sliding door) on UK offside

- Insulation: N/A
- Interior height: 1.87m (6ft 1.5in)

KITCHEN

- Sink: Smev square stainless steel bowl with hinged glass lid and integral folding mixer tap
- Cooker: Smev two-burner stainless steel hob with hinged glass lid and push-button ignition, (production models will include a Smev mini grill unit)
- Fridge: Dometic RM4230 three-way with push-button ignition. Capacity 70 litres

Storage in both kitchens consists of lockers above and cupboards below. However, the Bravia scores big-time - with two capacious drawers to the right of its big, floor-level cupboard. Sadly, the Maesss has not a drawer in sight.

BATHING SPACE

Midships mounted and modest in size, both washrooms offer electrically flushed Thetford loos and all the comforts apart from a separate shower compartment.

The Maesss' little room is more 'bright white' in character, its stainless steel basin and longer silver countertop adding to a 'clinical' feel. The practical high-level cupboard in here is the only storage space on offer. There's no window, but a roof vent provides an outlet for moist air: showering facilities are provided by a good-looking shower tray floor and nylon curtain. The basin's tap head pulls out to provide a hand-held showerhead. The Bravia washroom features some 'wood' to its walls and furniture, giving it a warmer feel. Storage

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford electric-flush swivel-bowl cassette
- Basin: Circular plastic bowl set into Corian-style counter
- Shower: basin tap pullout head, nylon curtain, shower tray floor with one outlet

BEDS

- Lounge single
- Length: 1.63m (5ft 4in)
 - Width: 940mm (3ft 1in) max
- Rear fixed double
- Length: 1.86m (6ft 1in)
 - Width: 1.40m (4ft 7in)

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water: Inboard 105 litres (23.1 gallons)
- Waste water: Underslung 94 litres (20.6 gallons)
- Water heater: Truma Combi boiler, gas-only operation
- Space heater: Truma Combi with blown-air, gas-only operation
- Leisure battery: 70 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity 2 x 11kg cylinders
- Lighting: Circular filament lamps to lounge ceiling and washroom, fluorescent lamp in kitchen, adjustable spot lamps to lounge and bedroom
- Sockets: 230V: One (Continental type in kitchen), 12V: None (production models will include two UK type 230V sockets)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: Climate control (£1295), Radio/CD player (£295), wheel trims (£75)
- Conversion: None fitted

Other options

(prices unavailable at time of writing)

- Base: Metallic-colour bumpers, metallic paint, alloy wheels, passenger airbag, electric mirrors, cab air-conditioning, climate control,
- Conversion: Electric step, heated waste tank

E&OE

in here is good, with a large high-level locker, plus a big cupboard below. The basin is made from thick, solid plastic and set into a classy 'Corian-style' worktop that's adequate, but smaller than its rival's. Showering facilities follow the same route as the Maesss, but the tray floor looks less attractive - its matt grey finish appearing a tad dingy. Of course, it'll probably be less prone to scratching than its rival's high gloss item.

The icing on the Bravia washroom's cake is the presence of a window that makes this room feel less claustrophobic.

Both bathing spaces are plenty big enough for average-sized folk - there's room to stand at the basin and sit on the loo with the door closed.

BED TIME

This is the reason to buy. Customers for either of these 'vans should have a fixed double bed at the top of their motorcaravan shopping list.

You'll also need to have a tape measure at the ready - as much for measuring your

12 Interior is a touch dark, thanks to black linings and a lack of Heki rooflights

13 Kitchen is good looking, but lacks any drawers

14 The Bright white washroom is nicely equipped, but lacks a window

height as for checking the length of the beds. If you're much over six-foot tall these motorcaravans will not fit your bill as neither of the beds breaks the 6ft 2in barrier.

However, both ride on sprung stave bases with comfy mattresses and padded walls to the heads. The Maesss has a window on one side, so sleeping heads to the nearside will be the norm. The Bravia has no windows in its rear flanks giving a choice of orientation at night. Sitting up in bed to read and slurp tea is easier in the Bravia, as its overhead lockers are less obtrusive, at least at the forward side of the bed. Towards the rear, a transverse overhead locker is more bulky. It's the fixed



HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

MAESSS MINI 1

PRICE

- From: £ 33,555 plus on the road charges.
- As tested: £POA

BASICS

- Berths: 2
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including driver)
- Warranty: 2 years base vehicle, 3 years conversion
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No

CONSTRUCTION (*manufacturer's figures)

- Length: 5.99m (19ft 8in)*
- Width: 2.05m (6ft 8.5in)*
- Height: 2.58m (8ft 5.5in)*
- Wheelbase: 4.03m (13ft 2.5in)*
- Rear overhang: 1.00m (3ft 3.5in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 3500kg*
- Payload: 800kg

THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 2.3-litre common rail turbo-diesel producing 120bhp
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round
- Suspension: Front: Independent Rear: Rigid axle
- Features: Remote central locking, electric windows and mirrors, cab air-conditioning, captain's seats, heated rear windows, radio/CD player, driver's airbag, trip computer, over-cab shelf, twin door bins, central storage locker

INSIDE LAYOUT

Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside half-dinette, nearside kitchen, offside washroom, rear-located transverse fixed double bed. Caravan entrance (side sliding door) on UK nearside

- Insulation: 15mm all round
- Interior height: 1.86m (6ft 1.5in)

KITCHEN

- Sink: Cramer square stainless steel bowl with hinged glass lid and swivelling mixer tap. No drainer
- Cooker: Cramer stainless steel two-burner hob with hinged glass lid. No ignition
- Fridge: Dometic RM7361 three-way. Capacity 88 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford electric-flush swivel-bowl cassette
- Basin: Stainless steel bowl with mixer tap set into counter
- Shower: basin tap pull-out head, nylon curtain, shower tray floor with one outlet

BED

- Rear fixed double
- Length: 1.88m (6ft 2in)
- Width: 1.35m (4ft 5in) max

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water: Inboard 126 litres (27.7 gallons)
- Waste water: Underslung 80 litres (17.6 gallons)
- Water heater: Truma Combi boiler, gas-only operation
- Space heater: Truma Combi with blown-air, gas-only operation
- Leisure battery: 205 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity 2 x 13kg cylinders
- Lighting: Circular filament lamps to lounge and bedroom ceilings, single-tube fluorescents to kitchen and washroom, swivelling halogen spotlamps to lounge and bed head
- Sockets: 230V: One (Continental type in kitchen), 12V: None fitted

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: (Prices on application) 2.3-litre, 120bhp engine, cab air-conditioning

■ Conversion: None

Other options

- Base: Contact importer for details
- Conversion: Contact importer for details

E&OE



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18



17

- 15 *There's room to sit up in bed and sleep either way round*
- 16 *The front 'kiddy' bed is a useful feature*
- 17 *An underfloor storage cavity is useful for smaller items*
- 18 *Big storage space in the rear can be made bigger by removing the bed bases*



beds that make these motorcaravans a very attractive proposition: ever ready, they provide particularly cosy sleeping areas.

Unlike the Maesss, which is a pure two berth, the Bravia offers a third berth made from the lounge seating. The table lowers from the gap between the forward-facing seat and the swivelled cab seat and, with the backrest dropped in, a short single bed is created. Of course, at just five-foot four inches long, it's only suitable for a child or tiny adult.

STORE ROOM

Almost as characteristic of the breed as the fixed double bed is the storage space beneath. Both 'vans offer large spaces beneath their fixed beds that offer lots of room for bulky kit, even extending to such items as folding bikes and barbecues. Neither 'van features the clever lifting alloy bed base of rival, Adria Twin, but the Bravia is arranged with two mattress supports that can be lifted out to leave a full-height space for load lugging.

In the main living areas, overhead lockers populate the lounge and bedroom, while the raised floors in the lounges feature lidded storage spaces ideal for shoes and other small items. Both wardrobes are half-height affairs, situated aft of the kitchens and above the fridges, they should be perfect for shirts, coats and jackets. Payload is, of course an issue and in spite of being built on a 3300kg MAW chassis, the Bravia still manages a decent payload figure that's well over 400Kg. The Maesss is built on a 3500kg MAW chassis and quotes an impressive 800kg.

LIFE SUPPORT

Unsurprisingly, space and water heating is provided - in both Bravia and Maesss - by Truma. Combi boilers deliver hot H2O to sinks and washbasins, and blown warm air to outlets in the main living areas and the washrooms. Sadly, both units run on gas only, so making the most of your mains hook-up is out.

Lighting provision consists of a combination of ceiling-mounted circular fittings, fluorescent strips and swivelling spots. Things are very similar in both 'vans, but I have liked to have seen lights at both ends of the Bravia's bed as, unlike the Maesss, you can sleep with heads at either end. Overall, the lighting systems in both Bravia and Maesss are best described as adequate, rather than impressive. There are all sorts of interesting motorhome lighting solutions on offer these days, but here things are a touch boring - maybe just a touch cheap and not too cheerful.

Water systems follow the expected Continental route of large fresh tanks under forward-facing seats and waste tanks underslung. Waste tank drains are big and easy to operate, although a certain amount of grovelling underneath is required. Bravia - thoughtfully - provides a support bracket that allows its outlet hose to lower and drain its tank fully.

There's plenty of room for gas in both rear-located, lockers with Maesss quoting 13kg, Bravia Continental-sized 11kg cylinders. Both lockers are got at through the rear doors, thus the converters have avoided chopping flipping great 'oles in the vans' flanks.

Finally, blinds in the Bravia are full-fat cassette items - the Maesss makes do with inferior pull-down items, with none at all fitted to the rear windows.

CONCLUSION

The starting point for liking or loathing these 'vans is the desire to own a vehicle that's more compact than a low profile coachbuilt, but still offers a sensibly-sized fixed double bed. So capable is this design, that it may harvest owners from crops of people moving both up and down the motorcaravan size ladder.

Those moving up may be fed up with the small amount of storage space (especially for bulky kit) their camper offers: one of these 'vans could be the next step - with a fixed bed the other main reason to buy. Anyone who's spent time shuffling cushions to make up the bed will appreciate a motorcaravan that offers an ever-ready sleeping space *and* a decent lounge-diner.

Down-sizers will be looking for a smaller 'van that still offers all the facilities of their larger coachbuilt. Some will be searching for something that still offers a realistic payload in a vehicle of no more than 3500kg MAW: as they hit 70 years of age it becomes much more difficult to hang on to your old - seven-and-a-half-ton - car licence. That this design of 'van is capable as a 'full-blown' motorhome was proved by my recent meeting with some new Adria Twin owners. Downsizing for reasons of size and licensing, they still spend their winters motorcaravanning in Morocco!

With these two, the devil is in the detail and, of course, the price.

The original (supposedly) the Maesss Mini 1 is very nicely screwed together and has better quality furniture. The Bravia displays genuine Adria Twin heritage, with cheaper furniture and a lower spec chassis as standard. However, it still appears well screwed together and offers advantages over its rival. More flexible storage in the rear, drawers in the kitchen and a washroom with a window figure, as does the opportunity to sleep either way round and sit up to read in the fixed bed.

The Bravia has the extra bed upfront, something that'll appeal to those wanting to take the occasional grandchild away.

Next on the kit list comes the Heki rooflights and the grill in the galley.

Price-wise too, the Bravia has the edge with even a spec-ed up version offering good value. One possibly big fly in the Bravia's ointment is the Continental handling of the conversion - unlike the Maesss, the Bravia has its side sliding door on the UK offside. The Maesss is dearer and this is reflected in the fact that it uses better quality materials. It's a possibility, however, that its high price tag is due to the fact that it's built in Belgium: labour costs in the Bravia's country of origin, Slovenia, are probably much cheaper, leading to the lower price. Even so, I'd recommend you look at all the 'vans offering this layout before you make your final decision.

VEHICLES LOANED FOR

EVALUATION BY:

Bravia Swan, Bravia Motorhomes, Slapton Hill Farm, Slapton, Towcester NN12 8QD (tel: 0870794 0111; web site: www.bravia-mobil.com)

Maesss Mini 1, Saffron Motorhomes, Tattershall Bridge Road, Tattershall Bridge, Lincoln LN4 4JH (tel: 01526 345000; web site: www.saffronmotorhomes.co.uk)

MAESSS MINI 1



19



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21



22

19 In the bedroom, lower lockers make it difficult to sit up in bed

20 Two in-floor lockers grace the lounge

21 Plenty of room for outdoor gear in the rear

22 Even under the skin, the Maesss is nicely screwed together

