

PILOTE EXPLORATEUR G730FC



Words & pictures by Jonathan Lloyd

FRENCH FANCIES

A pair of luxury island-bedded A-class 'vans do battle as MMM's moustache-twirling Monsieur checks out their Gallic charms

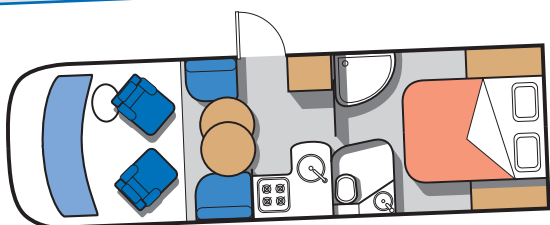


With the exception of the occasional incident involving incinerated British lamb, I'm very fond of the French and their attitude to life in general. What is even more appealing for la famille Lloyd is the sheer number and variety of campsites available in la belle France - just perfect for motorcaravanning. This may well account for the high number of French camping-cars - not just French-registered motorcaravans, but those actually manufactured in France.

Two such manufacturers, which are held in high regard by purchasers throughout Europe,

are Pilote and Rapido. Although both do produce value-for-money, entry-level offerings (via Mooveo and Itineo), they are also well known for their high-end A-class offerings. Value for money is often erroneously equated with budget buys boasting anorexic prices, but in actuality, value for money was just as evident here - even with windscreen prices of around seventy grand. In fact, it might pay dividends when reading this test to remember that both these featured motorcaravans are built up to a quality standard and not down to a price.

Both combatants are offered with the steering wheel appropriately positioned for Bulldog Drummond (on the right).



LAYOUT PLAN

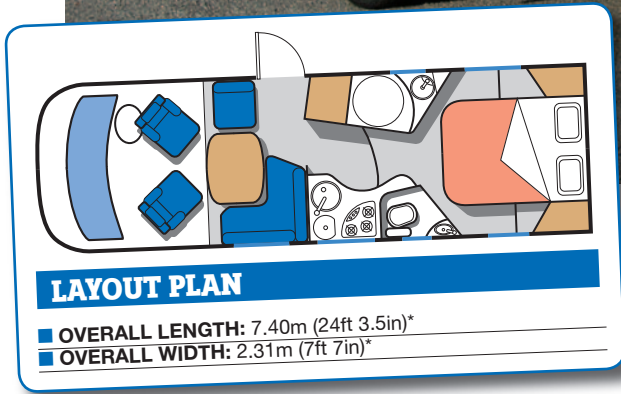
- OVERALL LENGTH: 7.44m (24ft 5in)*
- OVERALL WIDTH: 2.36m (7ft 9in)*



1 The latest Ducato fascia is very well designed - here with Fiat's storming 160 Multijet engine

2 Mercedes Sprinter base oozes class and offers 184 horses

RAPIDO 992MH



Disappointingly, the conversions themselves were not handed for Blighty, so both the single cab door and the residential entrance door were on the 'wrong' side. Hardly a major problem, but to not have a driver's door that is usable by the driver seems a bit galling after spending so much dosh. Homologation rules are frequently cited as the reason for this,

which, I think, is piffle. Whilst there is no denying that the legislation exists, some manufacturers manage to at least give our drivers a door, either by offering two cab doors on all their models or by offering two variants for buyers.

Each motorhome is around 7.40 metres (just over 24ft) long, so they are quite manageable on most roads, but probably not suitable for use as a sole vehicle. However, as is usually the way with A-class motorhomes, they actually feel bigger than they are. This phenomenon is largely down to the fact that the cab is the same width as the rest of the body, so it feels more

integrated. Also, the further forward positioning of the windscreen (over a chassis cab coachbuilt) adds perceived length to the saloon.

These 'vans offer two interpretations of the island bed layout, which itself has really grown in popularity. It's easy to see why, especially when one factors in the target market of these motorcaravans. Aimed at 'empty nesters,' they are both designed to offer comfortable motorcaravanning for extended holidays. Indeed, we're told that some have already been bought by people who spend up to six months away each year and/or spend the winter in sunnier climes. However, it was also envisaged that the owners, whilst spending the majority of time away as a couple, may also wish to motorcaravan with friends or family - grandchildren probably - hence the additional drop-down A-class cab bed and forward-facing rear travel seats found in both 'vans.

Each 'van boasts a front lounge/diner with swivel cab seats. Amidships is home to the kitchen and the far rear features a separate bedroom with permanent island double bed, plus en-suite facilities.

MOTIVE POWER

So much for the similarities, what about the differences? These are, in part, applied to the underpinnings. The Pilote runs on a front-wheel drive Ducato, with Al-Ko rear chassis, pulled along by Fiat's range-topping 160 Multijet engine and a manual six-speed gearbox. The Rapido is pure Mercedes Sprinter, and a biggie at that: it has Merc's top-tackle V6 184 horsepower engine, powering twin rear wheels via five-speed fully automatic transmission.

Each motorhome has an upgraded chassis, the Pilote being plated at 4005kg MAW, the Rapido at 4600kg. Both allow for a generous



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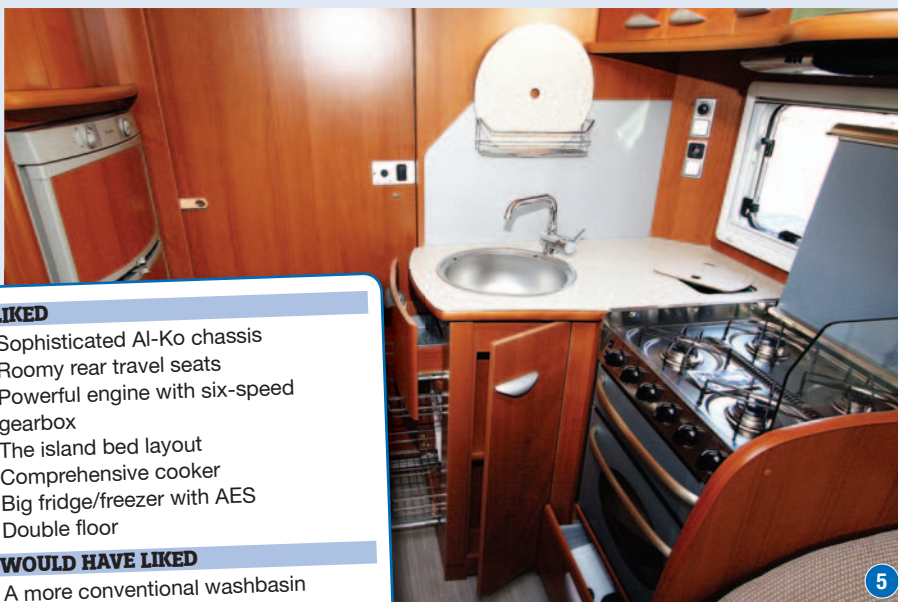
PILOTE EXPLORATEUR G730FC



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I LIKED

- Sophisticated Al-Ko chassis
- Roomy rear travel seats
- Powerful engine with six-speed gearbox
- The island bed layout
- Comprehensive cooker
- Big fridge/freezer with AES
- Double floor

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A more conventional washbasin
- Less obtrusive table
- Windscreen wipers handed for the UK

I DISLIKED

- Noisy, 'jumpy' washroom tambour door

3 Transverse lounge still manages to offer two fully belted travel seats

4 Well-finished cabinetwork and classic fabrics pervade the Pilote's interior

5 Slot-in Brit-friendly cooker pushes all the right buttons

payload, though the Rapido's - at close to 1000kg - should satisfy even the most over-equipped motorcaravanners amongst us.

The Pilote offers slightly better access to the engine via the bonnet than the Rapido, whose letter box-style aperture looked like some sort of sadistic joke. One presumes that anything more complicated than checking the oil will require the removal of the front cross member and/or the top of the dashboard. Why don't A-class designers think about the mechanics who have to work on them?

ROAD MANNERS

Early musings suggested that the lower slung Pilote, with its sophisticated independent rear suspension and wider track, would hold the road better than the Merc-based Rapido, which has a narrower track and rear cart springs. Actually, there was no discernible difference in road holding at normal driving speeds and I preferred the slightly softer ride of the Merc. Press-on miles revealed the Pilote to be the more forgiving during (deliberately induced) sudden changes of direction or on over enthusiastic entry to bends, with the resulting late braking on the apex. However, these situations were engineered and shouldn't be the normal driving style of owner-operators.

The principal differences regarding grip and traction will not be apparent on the road, but off it. Though it wasn't put to the test on these particular examples, experience has shown that the Rapido's twin rear-wheel drive will be much better at exiting from muddy rally fields or campsites than Pilote's front-wheel drive set-up.

Going forwards held no fears, though the mirrors on the Rapido were adjusted so as to be looking too close to the bodywork for me (tools required to alter this) and neither Rapido nor Pilote has seen fit to include any wide-angle lenses.

Going backwards was a different matter. Both had a reversing camera (colour) and monitor fitted as standard, though Rapido's chosen location for the monitor (suspended from the overcab bed) made it difficult to see the image. In contrast, Pilote has mounted the monitor on top of the dashboard, to the right of the driver. This not only enabled easy viewing of the high quality image, it was in approximately the same eye line as the exterior mirrors, so one would be able to check in these at the same time.

Mercedes' 'prope' automatic (via a torque converter) transmission was the bee's knees and allowed the vehicle to proceed smoothly even when dawdling - important if manoeuvring in confined spaces. Fiat has promised automatic transmission for right-hand drive Ducatos, though, at the time of writing it still hadn't appeared: Comfortmatic is an auto-changing manual gearbox and as such, is unlikely to be as silky as the Sprinter's traditional unit.

Fiat's six-speed box provided a ratio for every occasion and the gearchange itself was smooth, effortless and precise. This, combined with shed-loads of torque, made for relaxed progress and a fair turn of speed when hustled. It actually felt peppier than the more powerful Merc, though the Sprinter's V6 was that quiet it was almost inaudible.

How fast do you want to be able to go in your motorcaravan? No, it's not a stupid question. We love to pootle around empty country lanes at the pace of a 90-per-cent-discharged electric milk float, but on the motorway (especially when using the motorcaravan for work) I usually cruise at

70mph if the weather and traffic conditions allow. Imagine my surprise then to find myself languishing in the overtaking lane after pulling out in the Rapido to pass a truck, which was moving at a snail's pace. The Mercedes rapidly accelerated from 30 to 55mph and then the speed governor cut in. This left me with egg on my face - as all the V6's get up and go, got up and went when the 'van hit the 'magic' 56mph.

The dealer's representative wasn't aware that one was fitted, but thought that they were a legal requirement on any vehicle over 3500kg MAW. I hadn't heard of that one, but if a limiter is now compulsory, or is likely to become so, then it will have some serious implications for prospective owners of heavier motorcaravans.

It was reassuring to see that Rapido has bothered to hand the 992's three windscreen wipers for Blighty. The Pilote had one less anyway, and they weren't correctly handed, with the predictable result that there was a considerable screen area not cleared in front of the driver.

Unusually for me when away testing, the weather was unseasonably warm so I didn't have any need to use the on-the-road heating provision for rear passengers that both manufacturers provide. My experience of these systems that is that they do work, but are slow to warm the vast volume of the interior from cold. Before setting off on a journey in very cold ambient temperatures, we always preheat our 'van's interior with the domestic heating system.

LOUNGE AND DINE

Both 'vans have two Aguti swivel captain seats which are quite literally the best seats in the house. They swivel to face permanently mounted tables. This was round in the Pilote (oval when extended), or rectangular in the Rapido (square when extended). While Pilote seats four comfortably, Rapido will accommodate five with sufficient elbow room to dine in comfort. Both tables were stable in use, though when both were folded, the Rapido's was the less intrusive (easier to get my bloated body past).

The Pilote's settees are short inward-facing units, whereas the Rapido's convertible L-shaped sofa on the nearside and seat opposite, offer a bit more flexibility. The Rapido sofa converts to a (rather cosy) double forward-facing, belted seat for travel. Pilote accommodates one rear passenger on each side for travel, giving much more room for those of us built for comfort rather than speed. This is accomplished by adding backrest cushions to the end of the kitchen cabinet run to provide a high back for the nearside passenger and by a clever slot-in headrest and support for the offside occupant.

Cabinetwork in both is well executed and looked durable and stylish. The Rapido was trimmed with (extra-cost) leather upholstery, while the Pilote had what was described as 'Capuchino' fabric, a subtle oatmeal/coffee-coloured striped tweed. Don't worry if neither appeals, both converters offer a wide range of fabrics

Fit and finish was better than the industry norm and when comparing furniture, there really was nothing to choose between these 'vans.

COOKS QUARTERS

Pilote and Rapido may both be Continental motorcaravans, but (reassuringly) owners will not have to make do with a minimalist Continental kitchen. Both importers (Hayes Leisure: Pilote and Brownhills: Rapido) have specified a Brit-friendly kitchen, though the

RAPIDO 992MH



I LIKED

- Traditional automatic transmission
- Windscreen wipers handed for UK
- Twin rear-wheel drive
- Island bed layout
- Separate toilet room with 2nd basin
- Versatile lounge seating
- External storage drawers

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Roomier travel seats
- Improved access to engine
- Better location for reversing camera monitor

I DISLIKED

- Daft speed limiter

6 Cabinetwork quality is as good as its rival

7 Optional leather upholstery added extra class to the Rapido lounge

8 Kitchen is more stylish than the Pilote's, but lost out slightly in the equipment stakes

On Test Pilote Explorateur G730FC & Rapido 992MH

Pilote's extra hob burner and separate grill and oven (as opposed to the Rapido's single dual-function unit) just nudged it ahead on the equipment stakes. Storage in both kitchens is well developed and cooks should enjoy 'creating' in a stress free environment.

Plenty of artificial and natural light plus fans for nasty niff extraction completed the inventories.

Actually, that's not true; I forgot to mention the domestic-sized, two-door fridge/freezer that each 'van has located across the aisle from the rest of the kitchen. Both are fitted with the Dometic RM 7655L, which has a useful 150-litres of coolth space and AES (Automatic Energy Selection) too!

Despite the fact that there was a clash between the door to the far rear kitchen base unit and the door to the bedroom, we scored



HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA PILOTE EXPLORATEUR G730FC

PRICE

- From: £58,510 OTR (left-hand drive)
- As tested: £59,610 OTR (right-hand drive)

BASICS (*manufacturers' figures)

- Berths: 4
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including driver)
- Warranty: 2 years base vehicle and caravan, 5 years water ingress
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: A-class coachbuilt using alloy main frame and aluminium-clad sandwich panels. Double floor
- Length: 7.44m (24ft 5in)*
- Width: 2.36m (7ft 9in)*
- Height: 3.00m (9ft 10in)*
- Wheelbase: 4.16m (13ft 8in)
- Rear overhang: 2.20m (7ft 2.5in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 4005kg
- Payload: 715kg (after full tank of fuel and 75kg allowance for driver)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Fiat Ducato Al-Ko chassis cowl
- Engine: 3.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 157bhp
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all-round with ABS and EBD
- Suspension: All round independent
- Features: Electric nearside cab window, electrically-adjustable and heated mirrors, remote central locking, cruise control, driver's airbag, colour reversing camera and monitor, radio/CD player, Aguti cab seats, cab air-conditioning, alloy wheels

INSIDE

- Layout: UK offside entrance door, forward lounge, amidships kitchen, rear bedroom with permanent island double bed, wardrobes, en-suite toilet/washbasin, separate shower cubicle
- Insulation: Floor 38mm, walls 25mm, roof 30mm
- Interior height: 2.02m (6ft 7.5in)

KITCHEN

- Sink: Stainless steel round bowl with chopping board cover. No drainer
- Cooker: Smev slot-in cooker with four-burner hob, grill and oven, all with electronic ignition
- Fridge: Dometic RM 7655L AES two-door fridge/freezer. Capacity 150 litres



WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford swivel-bowl, electric flush cassette
- Basin: Surface-mounted green glass bowl, with monobloc mixer tap
- Shower: Located in bedroom. Separate walk-in cubicle with opaque glazed doors

BEDS

- Fixed Island double
- Length: 1.85m (6ft 1in)
- Width: 1.30m (4ft 3in)
- A-class in-cab double
- Length: 1.85m (6ft 1in)
- Width: 1.32m (4ft 4in)
- Headroom: 750mm (2ft 5.5in)

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water: Inboard, 130 litres (28.6 gallons)
- Waste water: Inboard, 130 litres (28.5 gallons)
- Water and space heater: Truma Combi boiler with blown-air, mains-gas operation
- Leisure battery: 2 x 95 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity two 13kg cylinders
- Lighting: 12V Halogen downlighters throughout. Reading spotlamps in lounge and bedroom. Task lighting over kitchen. Awning light
- Sockets: 230V x 3, 12V x 2

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Fitted to test vehicle
- Base: Right-hand drive price includes 4005kg chassis upgrade
- Conversion: As above, includes mains operation of Combi boiler (£1100)
- Other options
- Base: Passenger airbag (£211), Comfortmatic auto-changing gearbox (£TBA)
- Conversion: None

E&OE



9 The island bed will be the main reason to buy

10 En-suite facilities include loo and designer washbasin on the offside

11 A separate walk-in shower lives opposite

the Rapido kitchen just ahead by a gnat's whisker, though would also be perfectly satisfied with the the Pilote's galley.

BATHING SPACE

Ah, now then, here we have another idea that's growing in popularity: this is the inclusion of two facility-rooms en-suite to the master bedroom. These efforts exceeded expectations. The one thing we, as a family need in a washroom is plenty of elbowroom; there was loads of that here. Which is the most suitable for you will be down to the grouping of the facilities.

The Pilote has a washroom with surface-mounted (feature glass bowl) washbasin and loo together, with a walk-in shower cubicle on t'other side. Rapido's variation on the theme includes an inset vanity basin in the same room as a walk-in shower cubicle, with the



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HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

RAPIDO 992MH

PRICE

- From: £62,036 OTR
- As tested: £71,344 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturers' figures)

- Berths: 4
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including driver)
- Warranty: Base vehicle and conversion 2 years, water ingress 3 years
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: GFR clad sandwich construction A-class coachbuilt
- Length: 7.40m (24ft 3.5in)*
- Width: 2.31m (7ft 7in)*
- Height: 2.86m (9ft 4.5in)*
- Wheelbase: 4.32m (14ft 2in)
- Rear overhang: 2.05m (6ft 8.5in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 4600kg
- Payload: 970kg (after 90 per cent fuel, fresh water, gas cylinders plus 75kg allowance for driver)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Mercedes-Benz Sprinter chassis-cowl
- Engine: 3.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 184bhp
- Transmission: Five-speed traditional automatic gearbox, twin rear-wheel drive
- Brakes: Discs all round with ESP, ABS, ASR
- Suspension: Front: Independent Rear: Rigid axle
- Features: Electrically-adjustable and heated exterior mirrors, radio/CD player, 'wood' dash trim, auxiliary driving lights, driver's airbag, remote central locking, cab air conditioning, cruise control, speed limiter set to 56 mph

INSIDE

- Layout: UK offside entrance door, forward lounge, amidships kitchen, rear bedroom with permanent island double bed, wardrobes, en-suite shower and vanity basin, plus separate room containing toilet and hand wash basin
- Insulation: Floor: 40mm, walls: 30mm, roof: 30mm
- Interior height: 1.95m (6ft 5in)

KITCHEN

- Sink: Stainless steel washing sink with separate draining sink
- Cooker: Cramer three-burner stainless steel hob, combined grill/oven. All with electronic ignition
- Fridge: Dometic RM 7655L two-door AES fridge/freezer. Capacity: 150 litres



WASHROOM

- Toilet: Dometic electrically controlled vacuum-flush toilet with portable waste tank
- Basin: Small quadrant washbasin in toilet cubicle. Large round stainless steel vanity basin adjacent to shower
- Shower: Separate cubicle with opaque glazed doors and wooden duck board

BEDS

Permanent rear island double

- Length: 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- Width: 1.40m (4ft 7in)

A-class in-cab double

- Length: 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- Width: 1.35m (4ft 5in)
- Headroom: 760mm (2ft 6in)

EQUIPMENT

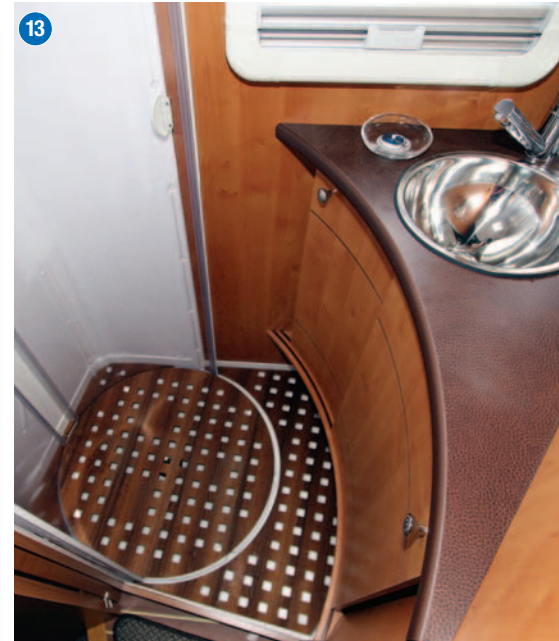
- Fresh water: Inboard 120 litres (26.4 gallons)
- Waste water: Underslung 100 litres (22 gallons)
- Water and space heater: Truma Combi boiler with blown-air, mains-gas operation
- Leisure battery: 2 x 90 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity two 13kg cylinders
- Lighting: Halogen downlighters throughout including task lighting in kitchen. Reading spotlamps in lounge and bedroom. Multi-LED lighting in shower room and toilet compartment. Awning light. Illuminated cocktail cabinet. Two filament-bulb luminaires in garage
- Sockets: 230V x 4, 12V x 4

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

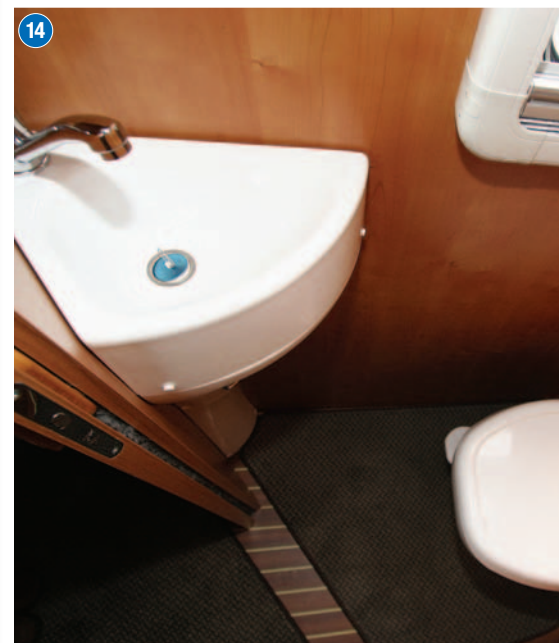
Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: Upgrade to 184bhp V6 engine (£2100), automatic transmission, (£2111), cruise control (£302)
 - Conversion: Leather upholstery (£1362), flyscreen door (£198)
- Other options
- Base: Passenger airbag (£364)
 - Conversion: Towbar and motorbike rack (£2194)

E&OE



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12 Bedroom matches its rival for space and comfort

13 En-suite facilities consist of a walk-in shower with vanity basin adjacent

14 Toilet cubicle offers a second washbasin

PILOTE EXPLORATEUR G730FC



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15 Generously-sized A-class drop-down bed completes proper four-berth accommodation

16 A remote switch controls the electrically operated gas changeover/isolation valve

17 The modestly sized garage offers two access doors



toilet plus an additional hand-wash basin in a separate cubicle opposite.

Either arrangement would suit our family - someone always wants to use the loo when I'm in the shower. I guess the domestic-style designer glass bowl in the Pilote will re-ignite the argument about whether you want to re-create your home in your motorcaravan, or camp in it?' As no one offers a motorcaravan with a tin bath hanging on the wall outside, there isn't a motorcaravan available that reproduces my partner's favoured home bathing arrangements. Mind you, she's a tough, no-nonsense Northerner!

Are we alone in finding that many of those full-height grey plastic tambour-style doors, as fitted to the Pilote's washroom, keep coming of their tracks? And that they are not as discreet (sound deadening) as a solid door?

The Rapido's loo is a vacuum-operated type similar in function to those found on aircraft. In use they are as easy to operate as a conventional wash-down Thetford cassette loo and usually provide a better flush.

BED TIME

The main boudoir is at the far rear of both 'vans. Mark my words, these designs with island double-beds are going to become the benchmark for larger motorcaravans equipped with permanent sleeping facilities. At just the right height and with plenty of 'walk-around' room, they are so much better than corner beds that trap one partner against the wall, or those that require oxygen and crampons to reach them.

Both bedrooms feature half-height wardrobes on either side of the bed head with high-level lockers bridging the gap. The Rapido has a removable top to each nightstand (handy, if fairly shallow, storage). The Pilote has a magazine/spectacle rack for each bed occupant.

Old hands can skip this paragraph, but for the benefit of new converts, I'd better just point out the advantages and disadvantages of a permanent bed over those converted from lounge bench seating. Because permanent beds don't have to do double duty as seating, the most appropriate grade of foam can be chosen to ensure a comfortable night's sleep. Further, as the mattress is one piece (not made up from a variety of seat squabs and backrests), there are no uncomfortable joins or gaps. Both featured 'vans also have sprung bed bases. The principal disadvantage with a permanent double bed layout is that the bed takes up a lot of living space, but is only in use for about a third of each twenty-four-hour period.

In each 'van a sliding door separated the bedroom and en-suite facilities from the main saloon, but only the one in the Pilote had a key-operated lock.

STORE ROOM

The Rapido has a large full-depth, slide-out drawer in the foot of the bed, perfect for storing spare bedding or rarely used clothes. The Pilote has a similar storage area but this is accessed by lifting the bed base - not a difficult operation as it has gas-strut assistance.

Both 'vans have about the half the area under the bed available that can be accessed from the interior. The other (rearmost) half and the space under the nightstands creates low height 'garage' areas.

And very good this storage is eminently suitable for the small-frame or folding bicycles, inflatable boats, or just general camping paraphernalia. Neither was tall enough for motorbikes unless, of course, yours is a mini

moto or monkey bike. Each has all-important tie down cleats, plus a full-size door on each side.

The low frame Al-Ko rear chassis used on the Pilote has enabled the inclusion of a double floor which, as well as providing a protected area for the tanks, offers full-width storage via exterior access doors and through the garage.

Of course, Rapido owners won't be short of storage space for all those essentials either as, in addition to the garage, there is a well engineered and capacious slide-out cargo box in each side skirt.

LIFE SUPPORT

Generous water tanks, two 13kg gas cylinders, two leisure batteries, 230V operation of the Truma Combi boiler - both motorhomes have all this. What more do you want?

Perhaps a telly? Good then, that both manufacturers have included dedicated cupboard for storing the idiot's lantern above the fridge/freezer. Both have a sliding and rotating mounting system, but sadly, there was nothing mounted on them!

Both 'vans offer an outside shower - the controls for the Pilote's are behind an access flap in a sidewall, the Rapido's are located in the garage.

Particularly appealing, was the one-touch three-point locking system on the Rapido's windows and the sliding cocktail cabinet in the Pilote.

Fed up with having to go outside to turn the gas on or off (or to change over a cylinder) when it's raining? If you go for the Pilote, you'll find it has a remotely-switched, electrically-operated changeover and isolation valve fitted as standard.

CONCLUSION

Both the featured 'vans fulfilled their design brief and then some. Either proved eminently suitable for weekends away or winters abroad, plus everything in between.

Generous payloads should allay any fears about overloading, but there will be driving licence implications for some. Double check that you are licensed to drive a vehicle of these weights (see the Buying a Secondhand Motorhome section for information).

Practical layouts, stylish finishes, a comprehensive inventory of standard equipment, use of quality materials throughout and a commendably high standard of build, are the factors that combine to ensure that both the Pilote and Rapido offer good value for money.

It quickly became apparent that both Pilote and Rapido deserved their reputation as builders of high quality motorcaravans.

Ultimately, the choice of which 'van is for you will most likely come down to which base vehicle you prefer. However, our tendency to lean towards the Mercedes Sprinter-based (automatic) Rapido would be quickly cancelled out if all are to be fitted with a fixed speed limiter.

VEHICLES LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

Pilote Explorateur G730FC: **Hayes Leisure**, Walsall Road, Darlaston, W Midlands, WS10 9SS (tel: 0121 526 3433; Web site: www.hayesleisure.co.uk)

Rapido 992MH: **Brownhills Leisure World**, A1/A46 Junction, Newark, Nottinghamshire, NG24 2EA (tel: 0845 603 3394; Web site: www.brownhills.co.uk)

RAPIDO 992MH



18 Occupants of Rapido's drop-down cab bed benefit from an opening rooflight

19 Black box in garage is the portable waste tank for the vacuum operated loo

20 One on each side - slide-out storage drawers are well engineered and extremely useful

