



TESTING TIMES...

This month we see Auto-Sleepers' Limited Edition Executive re-launched to help celebrate the iconic British firm's half-century at the motorcaravan-making crease. Meanwhile, Italian Roller Team has reintroduced the Granduca - a mid-range selection of coachbuilts with cutting-edge interiors



50 NOT OUT

One of the stalwarts of British motorcaravan manufacturing, Auto-Sleepers, is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary.

It started making motorcaravans just five years after I was born. Since then the company has gone from modest converter of panel vans to major player in the UK market. Meanwhile, I've gone from being a chubby and bald baby to a chubby and bald bloke!

Today Auto-Sleepers produces a broad range of motorhomes - everything from iconic rising roof campers to substantial coachbuilts. The Marquis dealer chain is also part of the operation, while recent developments have seen the first Auto-Sleeper caravans launched.

Although it could be considered a case of 'batting for the opposition' by a specialist motorhome maker, I look at its move to making caravans in a positive light: all those Auto-Sleeper caravan owners will, of course, soon realise that what they really need is an Auto-Sleeper motorhome. The more I think about it,

the more I can see this move as a brilliant marketing ploy: grab them while they're still tuggers and you've got 'em for life.

All this creativity is probably the result of new thinking, born from a relatively recent management buyout, which means it is now back in British hands.

LANDMARK

Typical of Auto-Sleepers' approach, high quality were the watch words when the firm developed its second coachbuilt motorhome. A high-quality GRP caravan body was the basis for the then new venture.

Described as a monocoque (which is not strictly true - monocoques are technically, self-supporting structures), these motorhomes feature a smooth, fully-moulded GRP shell that owes more to boat-building techniques than it does to caravan construction.

Upsides are all in the customers' favour, with features like strength, longevity and integrity - keeping the weather out - all present. The downside is cost: producing the GRP shell is expensive - possibly one of the reasons Auto-Sleepers stopped producing this type, preferring to concentrate on its more conventional, sandwich construction coachbuilt designs.

But it's the big anniversary that has nudged AS to make another monocoque that fans have been requesting for some time.

AN EXECUTIVE DECISION

But which model to build, and what to build on? Well, choices were narrowed, thanks to the fact that AS no longer uses the

Volkswagen and Ford base vehicles that once formed part of the monocoque range.

The honour fell to Peugeot's Boxer to carry the new GRP coachwork, although you might think that such a prestigious and important motorhome might have been grafted onto Mercedes' equally posh Sprinter - a model that AS still uses.

A classic 'van surely deserves classic layout and that's what you get. The Executive provides a twin-sofa lounge up front, across-the-rear kitchen and corner washroom, and is about as classic as it gets in British motorhome terms.

Although this 'van is compact by modern standards, it still breaks the important six-metre (19ft 8.5in) length barrier by a few centimetres. Shame that, as ferry charges take it into the next price/size category. However, having just booked a crossing, I see that one ferry firm is threatening to throw a stop if you don't include the length-increasing effects of things such as bike racks, so maybe that little bit of extra linearity is less important after all. I suspect that the new GRP body is probably an original, modified at the front to fit the latest Boxer cab.

However, the old model was quite a bit under six metres long: maybe it's the latest Boxer's 'Brucie' chin that stretches the new Executive.

Bigger maybe, but it's just as beautiful as the old one - to my eyes, even more so - the classic coachwork blending well with the Boxer's radical-looking cab.

Entry is gained at the rear nearside, assisted by an electric step and via what must surely be one of the best caravan doors ever made.





Auto-Sleepers' Executive is a 50th birthday present for enthusiastic fans of the marque

There are others as good - Romahomes and some La Stradas - even so, the beautifully-moulded door is a great introduction to what is a very high quality motorcaravan interior.

DRIVING FORCE

Much has been written about the latest Peugeot Boxer - most of it good, some not so. First to reversing judder, and it appears those gearbox modifications have done the trick as the example I drove went backwards while not shaking like a wet dog.

Going forwards also proved pleasurable. The 2.2-litre 130 horsepower motor is standard, and this gets you a six-speed gearbox, while other standard kit includes

traction control, steering wheel-mounted radio controls, passenger airbag and a smattering of 'wood' dash trim.

The trip computer display also includes an engine oil level indicator. Outside alloy wheels add a cool look, while inside cab aircon sees cooled motorcaravanners too.

A comfortable cab, excellent performance and good handling are all usual talents with this base vehicle, while conversion noise, or the lack of, is the important variable. Being made from all that strong GRP you'd expect this 'van to feel solid and you should not be disappointed.

INTERNALS

Discrete badges let you know that this is an anniversary model (there are some outside too), but it's inside that the new Executive parts with Auto-Sleepers' tradition. Dark-coloured cabinets are modern and akin to the latest models, and while the upholstery is very much in the neutral and inoffensive vein - the whole look is very classy indeed.

The view out through large side windows is good, or at least it could be: I found the dark-tinted 'privacy' windows made the interior feel gloomy on a January day. I really must spend more time in the South of France in July...

Those big, deep windows make for slightly low sofa backrests, but apart from that this lounge is a star. Plenty of room for feet-up lounging for two and once the cab seats are swivelled, seating for around 10 good friends. Two tables provide dining options - the smaller one serves at snack/coffee time and can be used from the cab seats.

COOKING AND WASHING

Unsurprisingly, the kitchen is very well equipped: full-sized cooker (with one electric hotplate), microwave, good-sized fridge, plenty of drawers

- even a couple of slabs of worktop. The only thing missing is a drainer for the sink, but the removable nylon drainer/chopping board is a half-decent alternative. Above, a locker contains the signature set of AS crockery.

The washroom is a classic: bench-type toilet (with wheeled cassette), drop-down basin (a better than average example), plastic storage cabinet (rather small, and with a slippery interior) and shower tray floor.

The only surprising thing in here is the substitution of a rigid folding shower screen, rather than the usual nylon curtain. Good idea? Well maybe, but as the screen doesn't protect the window, the blind may suffer from water ingress.

The shower screen aside, this room is capable and functional - I merely wished for different decor in here: some snazzier wallboard might liven things up and match the rest of the interior's more modern vibe.

SLEEPY?

Twin-sofa lounges, habitually, convert very quickly into beds and this one's no different. The sofas aren't long enough to be full-sized singles (5ft 9in long) until the forward armrest is hinged down and an infill cushion added.

Pull a sofa base out far enough to let the backrest drop in (upright) behind and the resultant bed is 6ft 6in long and 2ft 3in wide.

The double is simplicity itself to make: pull out sofa bases and the backrests drop in flat

1 The caravan door is, like the rest of the Executive, moulded in strong GRP

2 Excellent kitchen only lacks a drainer

3 Classic interior layout includes classy modern cabinets

4 The washroom is functional, but lacks wow factor



On the Road

to make a giant transverse double. It was here that I discovered that the bed frames are made from steel. Once, AS made all its bed frames in steel but in more recent times some have been executed in plywood. I hope that steel bed frames are to return and right across the Auto-Sleepers' range.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Storage provision follows expected lines, with plenty of overhead lockers and a decent-sized wardrobe. Two drawers below the wardrobe are an excellent addition, while the lack of a fashionable overcab sunroof means there's a nice big locker there instead.

There's plenty of room under the sofa, but no external access. Sofa-front flaps give internal access, but you can also get in by lifting the sofa bases, something you'll need to do when stowing bulky stuff - chairs for instance. AS used to fit supports to hold the bases up, now there are none.

Even though there's no external access to the under-sofa areas, there is an external skirt-mounted locker big enough for pitching essentials - lead, hose and wedges, maybe your tools too. Payload is generous with around half a tonne on the 3,500kg gross vehicle weight chassis.

'Very impressive' sums up kit. The stand-out, standard-fit item is the TV/DVD player (complete with a satellite dish and receiver), while all-LED lighting includes over-locker mood lights.

Four mains sockets, gas-mains powered heating, an intruder alarm and an electrically-operated wind-out awning complete a menu

that includes items that would be expensive options on many other 'vans. Basic kit is good too: cassette blinds are the pleated type and the cab benefits from the latest Seitz Duette set that are very easy to deploy.

WELL EXECUTED?

In its anniversary year Auto-Sleepers has made a great effort to produce a motorhome that provides luxury accommodation in an instantly recognisable package. Traditional from the outside, this new Executive's interior is filled with plenty of cutting edge kit.

It's not cheap though. However, with some luxury panel van conversions more expensive than before and most Continentals looking very dear (thanks to exchange rates), it probably fits reasonably comfortably into its price slot. Pride of ownership is guaranteed, while owners will probably be those who appreciate the high quality and classic lines of this very British motorhome.

AUTO-SLEEPER EXECUTIVE

- Price: £57,995 OTR
- Length: 6.06m (19ft 10.5in)
- Width: 2.69m (8ft 10in)
- Height: 2.82m (9ft 3in)
- Gross vehicle weight: 3,500kg
- Payload: 490kg
- Tel: 01386-853338
- Web: www.auto-sleepers.co.uk

5 Easy to make single beds use infills

6 Metal bed frames are well engineered



GRANDUCA RETURNS

Roller Team is an Italian brand imported via sister-company, Auto-Trail. Its fame in the UK, is based on offerings of budget coachbuilt 'vans that, for 2011, cover a wide variety of layouts in the six to seven-metre class.

There used to be mid-range models on offer too, but these had disappeared, as the recession bit and money became tight. Indeed, this has become a feature of a market where demand is for entry-level 'vans (sought by those looking for better value) and high-end products (sold to experienced 'vanners with low-yielding capital they may as well spend).

You may think then, that Roller Team is being brave, diving back into the mid-range pool and you'd be right. However, Roller Team is part of the mighty Trigano leisure products group so it probably has enough financial muscle to avoid 'drowning' if things go wrong.

But there's more, as the latest Granducas are much changed and improved. The changes mainly relate to modern interiors, while construction has replaced wood framing with impervious-to-moisture plastic extrusions. The whole claims to provide better insulation and reduce conversion noise (construction features apply to all Roller Team models).

There are four models in the Granduca range - three low profiles and one overcab coachbuilt - all offering fixed beds.

Interiors follow the same theme, with chocolate 'n' cream decor and smart touches such as wall-mounted kitchen taps and centrally-locked drawer stacks.

Fiat's Ducato underpins and motivates with 130bhp power as standard. Prices start at £47,359 on the road, for the corner bed-equipped, low profile Granduca 255P.

I cast my peepers over one of the more interesting models: the 285P is a 7.38-metre low profile that offers twin single beds in the rear. The Granduca 285P starts at £48,993 OTR.

ROLLER TEAM

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