



BARRONS BLAZER

Barrons Firebrand on LWB Peugeot Boxer 2.2HDI

Designed in Lancashire, and built in County Durham by Devon, can the Firebrand take on the current crop of Continental budget van conversions?

Andy Stothert adjudicates

Now I know I'm barking, and perhaps I'm barking up the wrong tree here (as there are just so many to bark up in the motorcaravanning world), but has the campervan conversion scene gone absolutely bonkers in the last few years, or is it me? I thought campervans were all about a simpler life, escaping the rat race, mobility, outdoor living, travel, and above all, the cheap option when buying a motorcaravan.

Apparently not.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CAMPER

Taking things back-to-front (sports page mentality), the price comes first. Van conversions a cheap option? Good grief, no. This was driven home to us a couple of years ago whilst browsing the outdoor shows for a replacement for our 250,000-mile Ford Transit camper. As you can imagine, we'd been away from the market (and everywhere else) for a while and were expecting to pay around £20K for a properly kitted-out short or medium wheelbase high top.

And we liked what we were seeing - a host of

multi-coloured alloy-wheeled seductive looking campers - but, on closer inspection, my small wallet suffered a series of quite large convulsions when the prices became apparent.

All we wanted was something simple but comfortable, whilst what we were seeing were long wheelbase high roof Peugeot/Fiat/Citroen conversions with price tags of nearly £40,000. Incredible. The most amazing thing was that nobody seemed to be batting an eyelid, and when I accosted one of the salesmen, hinting that maybe they were taking the (liquid) mickey, I got that baffled look which said they were not on the same wavelength, tuning dial, nor planet even.

Then there's all that simplicity stuff, the outdoor life, and mobility? Perhaps I'm just living in a parallel universe? 'No, no', the salesman said, 'we can't shift 'em without leather interiors, central heating, plasma TV (whatever that actually is), omni-directional TV aerials, Heki rooflights, satellite receivers, satnav, water heaters, MP3 players, multi-berth CD changers, and climate control. If you don't fit all that lot nobody will want them nowadays. You've got to

keep up with the aspirations of the modern sophisticated customer.'

A pile of bovine excrement? Maybe, but that told me. 'There are windows for ventilation' (I'm saying), 'opening doors, watching the sunset for entertainment, listening to the birds, walking, warm sleeping bags on cool evenings with a good book. What about that lot?'

Blank looks again. As for those huge, clear-plastic-covered holes in the roof (which let heat out when it's cold, and behave like a greenhouse when it's hot), gilt-effect taps, embossed headrest motifs, wood-effect dashboards, ovens, microwaves, computerised control panels... Well, all I can say is help, let me get off! I go motorcaravanning to escape all this, and be (almost) at one with nature. As I said; barking, absolutely barking!

Then lo and behold, French conglomerate Trigano realised that not everybody wanted a van conversion that costs a fortune and arrives with all that unnecessary equipment. And the Tribute was born. And it sold, in significant numbers - to careful, boring people like me, but actually, not



The big wide door allows easy access. The electric step isn't really necessary if you're averagely fit.



The Peugeot cab is identical to its Fiat stablemate. Differences all occur under the bonnet.

me. (See MMM April 2005's Owner Report (pp173-178) for what I bought.)

The success of the Tribute made everybody sit up and take notice, and the Firebrand is a British response to the Italian-built interloper. Barrons decided it wanted to offer customers something with a similar bias to the Tribute, at a similar price, but try to make it a bit more user-friendly. Devon Conversions has been building simple, practical van conversions for years, so it was a logical choice to produce this Barrons design at a price well below £30K. Barrons show no shame in admitting that it's very similar to the Tribute, and that this is where it's aimed, so the first question is, can it compete with the foreigner?

FLASH FIRE

The short answer is yes - it can compete with the Tribute and, not only will it 'cut it' with the cut-price Trigano, but I suspect some folk who are thinking of parting with nearly forty thousand for the all-singing-all-dancing models may reassess their

needs. In standard form, at £27,995, as a white 'van, it looks fairly plain, so if you need a bit of flash in y'r life then the SE model, tested here, is equipped with that big hole in the roof (the Heki rooflight), alloy wheels, a silver paint job (including the bumpers), electric step, and one of those most excellent rooftop tree detectors, which double as a not-quite-so-excellent TV aerial. None of these things make the Firebrand that much more usable as a motorcaravan, and add £2000 to the price - which represents a lot of meals out, or decent bottles of wine, or however it is you dispose of your ill-gottens. Anyway, now we've established my credentials as a tight grumpy old man who likes the idea of a practical, usable campervan for less than £28K, and who wouldn't pay for the extras, we'll get on with the detail of it....

LIGHT MY FIRE

The Firebrand is based on the Peugeot Boxer factory high roof van, fitted with the 2.2-litre PSA (Peugeot/Citroen) eight-valve HDI engine,

whereas the usual power plant in these long wheelbase 'vans seems to be the 2.8-litre lump (or for Fiat conversions the sixteen-valve 2.3JTD engine). Are you keeping up with all this mumbo-tech stuff? It is quite important to some, so bear with me please.

Unfortunately it gets worse, too, for the Peugeot (as in the Firebrand) with 2.2-litre engine has a lower ratio final-drive than the Fiat 2.3JTD or any of the 2.8-litre base vehicles (no matter whose badge be upon it), so in any given gear, at any particular speed, the engine will be revving a bit harder. Traditionally, this would be bad news for performance, economy, and engine life, but in this case isn't, because the 2.3-litre vans (and 2.8 with a coachbuilt body) are slightly over-gearred when loaded. The net result is that Peugeot motorhomes fitted with the 2.2-litre HDI engine are very agreeable things to drive, and that they will pull in top gear from 40mph (unlike the 2.3JTD Fiats which struggle until 50mph arrives). A big bonus of 2.2HDI propelled vehicles



The beauty of a panel van conversion with front lounge is the way it brings the outside in through that big side door.



The lounge is a pleasant place to be, with plenty of space for entertaining.

is that they are unlikely to need a down-change to 4th on the long motorway hills - which the 2.3JTD Fiat sometimes requires. (And then you find yourself talking to the engine, willing it on. You don't? It must just be me again then.)

Overall the 2.2HDi Firebrand is perfect for the bumbling economical kind of driving which suits the motorcaravanning lifestyle, yet at 70mph on the motorway the difference in the gearing isn't really apparent, unless you look at the rev counter. It's a win-win situation really, but there is one fly in the engine oil, in that the Peugeot 2.2-litre engine isn't as smooth nor silent as the bigger Fiat ones.

All this is a bit academic in the end, as Barrons says that there are no options with the

base vehicle - a Peugeot 2.2HDI it will be - so whilst overall this will suit most folk, if the bigger engine is a must, then you may have to look elsewhere. Just to confuse you even more though, I asked the sales people if they were prepared to lose a sale by not offering any engine options, and got a very considered; 'no, we may be able to get the odd 2.8-litre if pushed'. So, make of that what you will.

SMOLDERING LOOKS?

This is the paragraph where I should tell you how good looking the Firebrand is, and it is, in a silver-delivery-van-with-alloy-wheels kind of way. In fact, in SE version with the 'posh pack' fitted, it looks almost exactly like all the other mega-

money van conversions fitted with alloys and a silver metallic jacket. The only difference is the Firebrand's more restrained price. If I've got to get finicky I would say that I actually prefer the way the Firebrand's plastic rubbing strips on the sides have been left in a 'natural' plastic shade rather than being painted to match the body colour and bumpers, but I also think the graphics are a bit naff. The white one looks like a white van with windows in it, decorated by a set of very shiny wheel trims which might very well have been nicked off something American and huge.

THE BLUE FLAMES

This is purely a personal thing but I really like this bright (but not too bright) unfussy mainly blue interior. The 'woodwork' is a light oak printed ply which looks (and is) modern and simple. The layout consists of a big front lounge behind the cab with a six-foot-long sofa on the offside and two single seats opposite, with external access between the single seats through the big sliding door. The forward-facing single seat is fitted with a three-point seat belt and sits on a metal base, though the head restraint above isn't mounted on anything so substantial. Behind the lounge is the kitchen on the offside, with the washroom and wardrobe on the nearside. The corridor between the kitchen and washroom leads to the rear doors, of which the offside door is still accessible and usable. Going back to the front again, both cab seats swivel to face the lounge area, and above the cab is the usual bedding cupboard.

LIVING FIRE

With the cab seats swivelled, the lounge area takes up over two-thirds of the interior space in the Firebrand, meaning that, in theory, seven full-sized people can sit in here, in varying degrees of comfort. The driver's seat, which has height adjustment, makes a comfy lounge seat, the passenger seat is a touch too high, and both reside on a floor level about six inches higher than the floor in the main body of the 'van. The long



The long sofa on the offside is one of the best I've tried. Here we can see how much higher the cab seats are, owing to the change in floor level.



The backrest of the seat behind the passenger seat drops to create a very handy coffee table. What a simple but good idea.



There's good dining for two, but no more.

There's only two burners and a grill in the kitchen, but they should prove adequate for most simple culinary tasks.



sofa is also a touch too high to be really comfy, but because the squab isn't too deep and the sofa has a cunning backrest rake adjustment system, this turned out to be one of the most comfortable motorhome seats I've ever placed my bum upon.

It's funny how the little things sway your overall opinions, but this sofa/bed mechanism won me over, and there were going to have to be a shed-load of faults to change my mind about the Firebrand. There were a few, too - like some bits of trim not quite stuck down properly, just a few too many undisguised screw-heads showing, and some already chipped stick-on edges. That said, this vehicle had just returned from ten days of being pulled to pieces by all and sundry (and their kids) at the NEC show, so some of these are forgivable.

Where was I? Oh yes, the front single seat, opposite the sofa, has a clever touch, in that the backrest folds and creates a large, secure, out of the way (but also in the thick of things) coffee table. A simple idea to make life easier.

The belted forward-facing seat next to the sliding door also proved to be fairly comfy too, even though it looked too small.

The dining table is stored between the rear wall of the washroom and the rear door, but I, young, fit and strong (in no particular order or truthfulness) found it a bit awkward to extract. The lightweight freestanding table is big enough for two to eat off, but no more, and it can't really be placed anywhere else to make it accessible for more than two anyway.

DREAMS ON FIRE

The Barrons' brochure suggests that sleeping arrangements consist of either two singles or a double bed, but I'd like to know who was holding the tape measure. A politician possibly? Measurements given are two singles 6ft 3in by

2ft, and a double bed 6ft 3in by 5ft 4.5in. My tape measure came up with 6ft by 1ft 11in, and 6ft by 5ft 8in.

To make up the big double requires a fair bit of unfolding, sliding and rearranging of cushions, but nothing strenuous or complicated, and it is much, much, better than the main competition (Trigano Tribute). The two singles are plainly just too narrow to consider. However, what isn't



The rear offside door remains accessible. I did find the table a bit difficult to retrieve from the bathroom wall.

mentioned in the brochure is that a bed measuring 6ft by 3 ft 10in can be made in an instant just by sliding out the big sofa. A bit cosy maybe, but very easy. And if that length of 6ft is putting you off, worry not, because there is room at the cab end for the feet to stick out beyond the bed if necessary. All in all we haven't seen a better solution to making a big bed out of this layout, no matter what the price.

BURNT OFFERINGS

The kitchen area of the Firebrand is one of its strongest assets, but at the same time one of its weaknesses. It's a strange combination of loads of room to do it in, but not a lot of stuff to do it with (as the actress said to the bishop in a cathedral). The cooking equipment consists of a two-burner hob, with piezo push-button ignition, and a separate Smev grill unit mounted below. A few years ago this would have been considered to be pretty much the norm for a campervan, and it will suffice for most situations, but I have a gripe with this particular grill unit which isn't very user-friendly, nor that efficient either. The brochure claims it's a 'mini grill/oven unit', but as the burner is on the top, and the casing only a few inches deep, then describing this as an oven is stretching the language a little. And I've noticed that we regularly use three out of the four burners on our hob unit when we're doing something special with beans.

The sink is a matching stainless steel item with glass lid, but has no drainer. This does free up quite a long run of work surfaces for food preparation, and just as important floor space to access it. Overall, cooking simple meals in here will be a no-hassle activity (unlike many much larger motorhomes).

The usual fridge of choice for van conversions, the three-way electronic ignition 55-litre Dometic,



A useful run of lockers? Don't you believe it. They are just too small to carry your crockery.

is fitted under the worktop right at the back where it's both accessible and opening it doesn't interfere with anything else that's going on. The kitchen splashback, which covers the whole wall behind the cooker, sink, and work surfaces, is a very practical extension of the worktop material, and not only is this sensible and practical, but it should prove hard wearing too.

Kitchen storage space looks to be quite reasonable, with a decent cutlery drawer and two large cupboards under the worktops, but the bigger one, especially, could do with a shelf or two to make the space more usable. Up top, above the kitchen, are three very mean-sized lockers, which, crucially, aren't tall or deep enough to hold an average sized dinner plate in any direction. There doesn't appear to be any reason why these upper lockers couldn't be those few inches bigger, and this would make them much more useful.

FIREWATER

The washroom in these panel van conversions is more often than not their Achilles Wotsit.



An instant double bed can be made by just sliding the sofa out or, as here, the whole lounge area can be turned into a king size bed with headboards for both.

Especially when you're paying forty grand and start comparing it with the palatial ablutions to be found in some similar priced coachbuilt 'vans. The problem is cramming everything into the rear corner against curving walls and over that deep wheel arch.

In the Firebrand the necessary room has been found by making the washroom that little bit wider than is normal practice. We had differing opinions on this – Marion thought it made the corridor too narrow (and the bathroom door snagged on the fridge by the way), whilst I didn't think it was a problem, as it's a 'dead' area anyway. But the extra width undoubtedly makes

the bathroom feel more spacious than the competition, plus there's plenty of room to use the loo and get your head over the fixed sink. I didn't try the shower, which shares the outlet with the sink tap, but would think it will prove just as farcical as most of the others I've used in campervans, though adequate in emergencies.

There's a five-way roof vent above the bathroom but a window would be nice too. The white plastic fittings look modern and water-resistant, but (like all the others) feel a bit flimsy when you start opening doors.

Storage in the washroom is acceptable, but a small, high-level cupboard for the daily essentials





For a panel van conversion this is a reasonably spacious washroom, bright too.



The wardrobe. Needs shelves to be useful for scruffs like us. ▷



The only way to get at the under-sofa space is through these hatches. The only outlet for the space heater is here too, so don't expect a warm bathroom in the morning.



This drawer is not only a good storage solution but also a very simple part of the bed-making support.

would improve things. The lighting in the bathroom, two halogen spots in the ceiling, is really quite extravagant, particularly when the other light fittings in the Firebrand are considered.

THE REST

The very first thing you notice when entering the Firebrand is the lack of a living room carpet. We had several changes of mind about whether this is good or bad. Every little bit of grit, muck and grass shows up on the vinyl floor, but it's a matter of just running a brush through to sweep it all out. It looks nice, but feels cold, and the thin plastic will be vulnerable to damage. Not that it really matters though, for if you want a carpet (and in the end we decided the benefits outweigh the drawbacks) then getting a removable carpet



The auxiliary battery. Big, bright, and stored securely.

made up is a simple task nowadays - but, for what it costs, you'd think the optional push-pack would include removable carpets.

The wardrobe? It could do with shelves for those with a casual approach to covering their bodies, but getting at the gas locker, which is underneath the wardrobe and accessed through its floor, would then be more difficult. With a wardrobe full of clothes, access to the gas will never be simple, but at least you don't have to go outside to turn the gas on, and a cylinder 'change' won't involve having to move them.

What else? The upper lockers above the lounge area are as stupidly small as the ones above the kitchen, and lighting, throughout, whilst being just about adequate, isn't luxurious. Tanks are underneath, space heating is provided by an Eberspächer diesel-fuelled unit (with a silencer fitted on the exhaust I noticed), and water is heated by the adaptable mains and gas Truma Ultrastore.

So, overall, the Firebrand is well kitted out. Slightly baffling is the lack of cab curtains, with insulated interior screens being supplied instead (for those who camp in really cold weather). Why baffling? Well curtains are easier to use and don't take up any of y'r precious storage space, but baffling mainly because of the lack of any insulation whatsoever under the Firebrand's floor, and this, along with uninsulated, exterior-mounted, fresh and waste water tanks, suggests that the Firebrand isn't really suited to cold weather camping - so curtains would have done.

FIRED-UP, OR DAMP SQUIB?

Overall, still a silly name, but a sensible motorcaravan at a sensible price. □



Gas locker - in the base of the wardrobe. Space efficient, but hard to get at come the inevitable cylinder change, and when the wardrobe is full. All part of the fun.



IN BRIEF

- **Base vehicle:** Peugeot Boxer LWB factory high roof panel van
- **Engine type:** 2.2-litre turbo-diesel
- **Output:** 104bhp at 3600rpm
- **Gearbox and drive:** Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Make and model:** Barrons Firebrand
- **Body type and construction:** All steel, high roof panel van
- **Conversion NCC badged as EN1646 compliant:** No (but we are told production models will be)
- **Electrical equipment:** 230V hook-up with RCD, MCBs, leisure battery, and charger
- **Lighting:** Fluorescent lights to living area, and kitchen, two halogen downlighters in washroom, two halogen downlighters in cab, adjustable spotlight in lounge, Krypton bulb light over rear doors
- **Cooking facilities:** Smev two-burner hob, Smev grill unit, both with push-button ignition
- **Refrigerator:** Dometic RM4213S, three-way, capacity 55 litres
- **Water heater:** Truma Ultrastore gas/230V, capacity 10 litres
- **Space heater:** Eberspächer Airtronic diesel-fired blown-air

- **Fresh water tank:** Underfloor, 59 litres (13 gallons)
- **Waste water tank:** Underfloor, 36 litres (8 gallons)
- **Gas locker capacity:** Two 4.5kg/3.9kg cylinders
- **Rear restraints:** One three-point inertia-reel seatbelt fitted to forward-facing seat on nearside
- **Additional features:** Electrically-operated cab windows and door mirrors; central locking; fire extinguisher; swivelling cab seats; washroom with swivel-bowl cassette toilet, shower and washbasin; roof vents above kitchen and bathroom

- (6ft 0in x 1ft 11in), full width double 1.83m x 1.73m (6ft 0in x 5ft 8in), or partial-width double 1.83m x 1.17m (6ft 0in x 3ft 10in)
- **Max authorised weight:** 3300kg*
- **Load capacity:** 650kg*

PRICE (all prices include VAT)

- **Standard model:** £27,995 (on the road)
- **As tested:** £29,995 (on the road)
- **Warranty:** Three years on base vehicle and conversion

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

(*fitted to test vehicle)

- **Caravan options:** SE pack consisting of alloy wheels, silver metallic paint, colour coded bumpers, electric step, Heki 2 rooflight, Status TV aerial (£2000)*

Barrons Firebrand kindly supplied for evaluation by:

Barrons Motorhomes, Chapel Lane, Coppull, Lancashire PR7 4NE. (tel: 01257 793377; web site: www.motorhomedeals.co.uk)

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DIMENSIONS

(*data supplied by manufacturer)

- **Overall length:** 5.60m (18ft 4.5in)*
- **Overall width:** 2.02m (6ft 7.5in)* excluding mirrors
- **Overall height:** 2.52m (8ft 3in)*
- **Interior height:** 1.86m (6ft 1in)
- **Bed dimensions:** Two singles 1.83m x 585mm

