

PILOTE F60 DG



RAPIDO VAN V53



VANS WITH VA VA VOOM

Two recently launched Franco-Italian high-tops feature permanent rear beds

Words & pictures by Jonathan Lloyd



Neither one thing nor the other," a potential purchaser was heard to opine in a derogatory manner about the Rapido, as it stood alone in the middle of a sea of 'me-too' overcab coachbuilts at

Brownhills' palatial Newark head quarters.

I guess he meant that, in his view, it wasn't desirable because it was neither a highly manoeuvrable van conversion (think pop-top Volkswagen size), nor was it a palatial coachbuilt. That said, I would certainly look at this genre of PVCs (the saloon bar smart-talk abbreviation for panel van conversions) as also being 'neither one thing nor the other' but this time judging it to be an advantage rather than a downside.

Don't such crossover vehicles offer all the comfort of a coachbuilt, but in a much more manoeuvrable package than a traditional coachbuilt motorhome?

And there's more: the all-steel body offers a safety cell type of enclosure around the rear travel seats, rather than a flimsy skin of aluminium and some – not particularly impact-absorbing – Polystyrene insulation.

We'll take a cook's tour around the outsides first. Both looked pleasing to the eye with their savvy metallic paintwork and urban-friendly, urbanely-appealing grey and red graphics. Yep, it is true that they would both be equally at home in the town or country, though a closer gander reveals that only one is smiling at you.

Rapido has made such a good job of replacing the standard Fiat 'startled frog-style'

grille with a new smiley front, that it took a while for the penny to drop as to just why it looked a little different! Rapido hasn't just changed the mouth either, the whole front bumper and spoiler has been re-modelled with a different below-the-number-plate vent, plus

the addition of some really bold soft triangular-shaped vents at the lower extremities. Each of these is home to a useful auxiliary driving lamp in its own stylised nacelle. Bravo Rapido – c'est magnifique!

So, the Pilote's a dork in the looker stakes then? No, but it does look the same as any other Ducato-based van conversion with a colour co-ordinated snout.

Pragmatically, you may be glad you've opted for the Pilote when you give it a prang a few years down the line, only to find out that the spares department ain't 'smiling' no more.

Subjectively, I thought the black surround of the Rapido's toilet cassette access door to be better integrated with the charcoal grey Ducato lower mouldings than the white surround favoured by Pilote. It's a shame then, that both motorhomes persevered with white fridge vents.

Off we go...

ROAD MANNERS

Both are based on the same van, with the same engine and same gearbox, so first, we'll deal with what they had in common. Both were comfortable to sit in, plus all controls fell easily to hand.

Performance was brisk from the 120bhp engine and the six-speed gearbox offered a ratio for every occasion. Considerate drivers, not following the Paris-Dakar rally, should manage an overall fuel consumption figure north of 30mpg. Motorway cruising at the legal

limit was a relaxed affair.

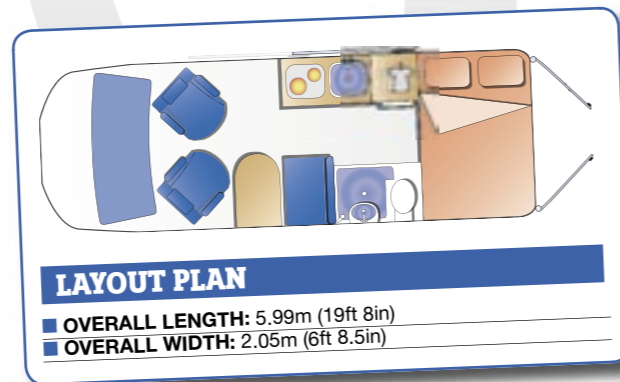
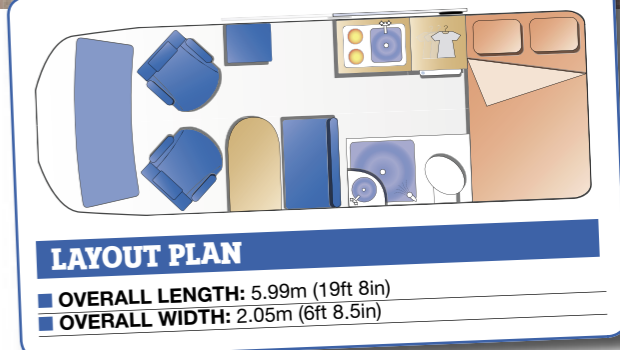
When the time and road conditions will allow, I try to indulge in a spot of competitive inclined reversing to see if the motorcaravan concerned will proceed backwards with the expected dignity. This time I failed to find a suitable slope or even a tranche of deep gravel. Sorry!

The most important real mechanical difference between les deux was that the Pilote arrived with Al-Ko air assistance for the rear suspension, whereas the Rapido had just the standard leaf springs. Unfortunately the suspension airbags on one side of the Pilote failed to stay inflated for longer than a few seconds so I can't tell you what sort of a difference they make.

And before my road test editor crowbars in a sarcastic comment, the leak (on the driver's side) wasn't anything to do with my allegedly excessive avoirdupois – it was like that when I picked it up – honest! The lender of the Pilote, SMC in Newark, was very apologetic and they did try re-inflating it but without any joy!

Of course the real advantage of air-assistance systems over full-air suspension systems is that the leaf springs are retained, so in the event of a leak, the vehicle can still be safely driven.

On both our contenders the layout is not



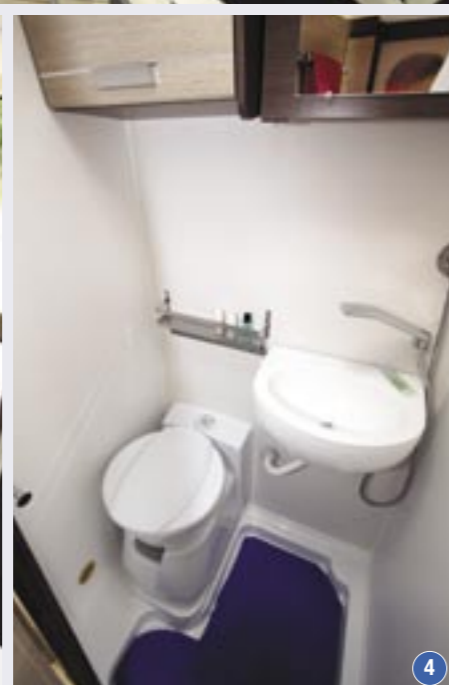
handed for the UK on right-hand drive models. The most significant implication of this is that the sliding door is on the UK offside.

I don't think this matters as much on a large coachbuilt, but feel that it needs to be taken into consideration on these size and type of motorcaravans, because their manoeuvrability and dedicated rear travel seats make them more likely to be used as an 'everyday car' and may even be someone's sole vehicle. Thus, owners will have to take care not to discharge little 'Chardonnay and Tarquin' into the traffic when going on the school run.

It was reassuring to note that both converters specify a spare wheel in an underfloor carrier instead of opting for the can of goo that is supposedly the 'perfect solution' to a badly holed tyre.

Folks will have read some time ago in MMM about the exciting new Euro 5 Ducato

PILOTE F60 DG



1 & 2 The Pilote's lounge is the more open of the two, but only seats four

3 The Pilote kitchen features a separate hob and sink

4 The washroom's sliding washbasin allows optimum use of available showering space

engines, but as usual there has been a time lag between the first left-hand drive press demonstrators appearing and right-hand drive motorcaravan-spec vehicles arriving in Blighty showrooms. During the intervening period there has already been considerable confusion over what is actually coming over to us.

Despite initial claims to the contrary, it now looks as though the new 2.0-litre motor offering 115bhp (replacing the old 2.2/100bhp) won't be available in right-hand drive because the steering gets in the way. Instead, right-hand drive PVCs will commence with the 2.3-litre, 130 and 150 Multijet II Euro 5 engine, with the 180bhp Comfort-Matic as an extra-cost option. As announced recently, the two smaller engines may be available with the Comfort-Matic robotised manual gearbox too. Contact individual manufacturers for specifics and prices.

That said, if you want a left-hooker, then it may be possible to specify the (supposedly very economical) 2.0 Multijet. It really depends on what Pilote and Rapido decide to do and what Fiat will offer them at a bulk discount.

Have you lost the will to live yet? Think I have, let's move on to...

LOUNGE AND DINE

Slide back the side entrance doors and there are the living areas! Both lounges are similar in concept, but with important differences. One isn't any better than the other, they just have different priorities.

Pilote has opted for a more open feeling, but only seats four, whereas the Rapido has upped the seating quotient to five with the inclusion of a jump seat. This is also required to help make the forward bed, but I'll include more on that later.

In left-hand drive examples, the Rapido's cab seat swivels right around to line up with the jump seat to make a sumptuous chaise longue – definitely the best seat in the house! On right-hand drive versions the failure of Rapido to hand the conversion for the UK has resulted in the steering wheel preventing the cab pew next to the jump seat swivelling the full 180 degrees around. This is something I'd find really annoying.

According to my trusty tape measure the Rapido's forward-facing double rear seat is slightly closer to the pointy-end than the Pilote's, but not by much.

Pilote places the television above the head restraints, which is really the obvious place for it, even though it would be difficult for all four potential occupants to have a good view of

PILOTE F60 DG

I LIKED

- Contemporary vibe to finishes and fabrics
- Long-load carrier
- Sliding basin in washroom
- 230V operation of Truma boiler
- Civilised base vehicle

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Conversion handed for UK
- Combi hob/sink to enable more worktop
- Working air suspension

I DISLIKED

- Nothing

RAPIDO VAN V53

I LIKED

- Smiley front
- Jump seat
- Washroom
- Civilised base vehicle, with radio/CD/MP3 player

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Conversion handed for UK
- Ceiling lights instead of 'holes'

I DISLIKED

- Steering wheel prevents driver's seat from swivelling fully

'Deadenders' and 'Britain's Got No Talent'.

Rapido neatly swerved around any criticism of the television's placement by not including anything at all. A large open storage area is placed behind the backrest though, which I presume, is for the table during transit and when making the forward bed.

With respect to the lounges, both performed very well. Of course, having that large sliding door adjacent added to their appeal, especially in the Pilote because the dining table can be used alfresco by attaching it to the bracket on the outwards wall of the kitchen base unit.

It's odd that the Rapido, with its larger seating complement, has the smallest table! It's unlikely to be a deal breaker though, as most of these motorhomes will be used by couples - occasionally accompanied by a friend or grandchild.

During the day it's hard to assess the effectiveness of the lighting in the main salon, though the Pilote won hands down because the Rapido's three ceiling lights were 'absent without leave' – leaving just a trio of holes.

I was surprised to see Pilote still fitting halogen bulbs when LEDs seem to be *de rigueur*... they do give a lot of light though.

A general point about this genre of camper is that few motorcaravan converters who retrofit plastic double-glazed side windows to panel vans think about the rear passengers. These as opposed to those who convert glass single-glazed 'window van' derivatives.

Everybody I've ever 'passengered' (recently arrived awful piece of US management speak – enjoy!) made the same comment. Why have they fitted a hinged window next to the rear passenger seat?

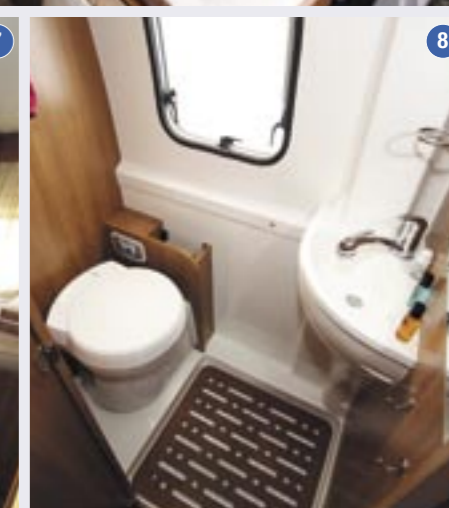
It cannot be opened when you're on the move, whereas a sliding one could offer fresh air for rear passengers. In my own motorcaravan it gets mighty hot in the back on a long run. But to be fair – unlike in my aging carriage – these combatants both have air-conditioning fitted as standard, which should be a big help.

COOK'S QUARTERS

It's remarkable, quite remarkable, the amount of usability both converters have built into such a small footprint. Both the midships-located kitchens extend forwards into the side door aperture, turning the galleys into a pleasant place for chefs - especially on warm days when the door can be opened.

The Rapido's base unit has to be shorter because the jump seat reduces the amount of door aperture available.

RAPIDO VAN V53



5 & 6 The Rapido's lounge seats five thanks to a jump seat mounted in the side doorway

7 The Rapido's kitchen is the narrower, but combi hob/sink makes good use of space

8 The Rapido's washroom is the bigger of the two and also features a window

PILOTE F60 DG



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Both feature a two-burner hob, a stainless steel sink, the same three-way fridge and an additional hinged worktop. The Rapido's hob and sink are combined in one unit, whereas the Pilote's are separate.

I'd be perfectly happy with the Rapido's kitchen, it is very good in a 'Continental' kind of way (no grill, oven or sink drainer). The Pilote's, with its greater volume of storage and useful metal shelves, just gets the honours.

That said, the Rapido's combi sink/hob is a much more efficient use of space, and if Pilote had used similar it would have doubled the available worktop.

BATHING SPACE

The Rapido's washroom is bigger than the Pilote's and also benefits from an opening window, which the Pilote lacks.

Décor is 'warmer' in the Rapido, as the Pilote's is all finished in a rather clinical bright white. On the other hand the Pilote's walls may be more resistant to water damage than the wood veneers on some of the Rapido's.

Although the volume of available space in the Pilote washroom is smaller, it has made better use of it, principally by including a rather clever sliding washbasin and a hinged (angled) mirror. My partner has a deep dislike for fold-away/drop-down basins so prevalent in the industry, but thought this sliding one was a clever and usable alternative.

The 'comfort stations' themselves were of different manufacture, though both featured a wheeled cassette. Pilote uses the Dometic ceramic-lined bowl offering, Rapido the more popular Thetford alternative.

'Role playing' revealed the Rapido's washroom to be more suitable for my less-than-sylph-like frame.

BEDTIME

Presumably no-one would consider buying either of these motorcaravans if they weren't looking for this type of PVC, with a low-level permanent (in the Pilote permanent-ish) transverse double bed.

9 A useful cargo net at the head of the bed. Reading lights are halogen

10 Lounge bed sees the table drop to help give support

11 The heating control is conveniently mounted at the bed's head

12 The lounge bed is a decent size, thanks to the jump seat

Although the mattresses are shorter than the bed lengths, this wouldn't be a problem for me as the pillow would be on the hard bit, but for those like my partner, who sleep without a pillow, it might be.

Both have a sensibly placed reading light for each occupant, but only the Pilote has a 'cargo net' on the headboard for the book and specs. The Rapido fights back - placing the Truma Combi heater control within easy reach of the recently awake, so the heater can be turned on without getting out of bed. Lovely!

It's in the make-up and type of front bed where the important differences between these two motorcaravans lie.

The Pilote lounge converts into a longitudinal single bed of modest length, whereas in the Rapido the lounge makes full use of that jump seat, combining it with the forward-facing pew to form a reasonably-sized transverse double. At a pinch it would accommodate two svelte adults, but is more suitable for one adult or a brace of nippers/lanky 'yoofs'!

Although the Rapido's forward bed is bigger than that in the Pilote, it does render both cab seats unusable after conversion. The Pilote's arrangement retains use of the swivelled driver's seat, for early risers or insomniacs.

Whilst lying on my back on the Rapido's bed and without moving, I counted 27 visible plastic screw caps - which, I guess, could be some sort of record.

Early in this section I described the Pilote's rear bed as permanent-ish - all will be revealed in the next section...



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HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

PRICE

- From: £41,995 OTR
- As tested: £41,995 OTR

BASICS

- Berths: 3
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (incl driver)
- Warranty: Base vehicle and conversion 3 years
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: All-steel high roof body
- Length: 5.99m (19ft 8in)
- Width: 2.05m (6ft 8.5in)
- Height: 2.52m (8ft 3.5in)
- Wheelbase: 4.03m (13ft 2.5in)
- Rear overhang: 1.01m (3ft 4in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 3,300kg
- Payload: 500kg
- Insulation: Closed-cell, bonded-in thermal sheeting
- Interior height: 1.90m (6ft 3in)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Fiat Ducato long-wheelbase panel van
- Engine: 2.2-litre turbo-diesel producing 120bhp

- Transmission: 6-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Discs all round
- Suspension: Front: Independent on coil springs Rear: rigid axle on leaf springs with air assistance
- Features: ABS, EBD, driver and passenger airbags, cab air-conditioning, electrically-operated windows and mirrors, central locking, radio/CD/MP3 player, fire extinguisher, spare wheel

KITCHEN

- Sink: Stainless steel bowl with mixer tap. No drainer
- Cooker: Stainless-steel 2-burner hob, electronic ignition, hinged glass cover
- Fridge: Dometic three-way, manual energy selection. Capacity 75 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Dometic ceramic-bowl, electric-flush, with wheeled cassette
- Basin: Slide-away moulded bowl, combined mixer tap and shower head
- Shower: Moulded tray floor

PILOTE F60 DG

BEDS

- Rear fixed double
- Length: 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- Width: 1.37m (4ft 6in)
- Lounge single
- Length: 1.69m (5ft 6.5in)
- Width: 930mm (3ft 0.5in) max

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water tank: Inboard, 120 litres (26.4 gallons)
- Waste water tank: Underslung, 80 litres (17.6 gallons)
- Water/space heater: Truma Combi boiler with blown-air, gas-mains operation
- Leisure battery: 105 amp hr
- Gas: 2 x 13kg cylinders
- Lighting: Main salon lamp has halogen or LED mood lighting, 3 halogen reading lights, 2 fluorescent lamps, LED awning lamp
- Sockets: 230V: 1, 12V: 1

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Fitted to test vehicle: None
- Other options available: Please contact dealer for details

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

PRICE

- From: £41,665 OTR
- As tested: £41,665 OTR

BASICS

- Berths: 4
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (incl driver)
- Warranty: Base vehicle and conversion 3 years
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: All-steel high roof van
- Length: 5.99m (19ft 8in)
- Width: 2.05m (6ft 8.5in)
- Height: 2.52m (8ft 3.5in)
- Wheelbase: 4.03m (13ft 2.5in)
- Rear overhang: 1.01m (3ft 4in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 3,300kg
- Payload: 565kg
- Insulation: Closed cell, bonded-in, thermal sheeting
- Interior height: 1.88m (6ft 2in)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Fiat Ducato LWB panel van
- Engine: 2.2-litre turbo-diesel producing 120bhp
- Transmission: 6-speed manual gearbox,

front-wheel drive

- Brakes: Discs all round
- Suspension: Front: Independent on coil springs. Rear: rigid axle on leaf springs
- Features: ABS, EBD, cruise control, driver's airbag, cab air-con, electrically-operated windows and mirrors, central locking, radio/CD/MP3 player, spare wheel

KITCHEN

- Sink/cooker: Stainless steel combi-unit, 2-burner hob with electronic ignition, sink with mixer tap and glass cover. No drainer
- Fridge: Dometic three-way, manual energy selection. Capacity 75 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford swivel-bowl, electric-flush with wheeled cassette
- Basin: Corner-mounted bowl, combined mixer tap and shower head
- Shower: Moulded tray floor with duckboard

BEDS

- Rear fixed double
- Length: 1.92m (6ft 3.5in)
- Width: 1.29m (4ft 3in)

RAPIDO VAN V53

- Lounge single
- Length: 1.81m (5ft 11in)
- Width: 950mm (3ft 1.5in) max

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water tank: Inboard, 95 litres (20.9 gallons)
- Waste water tank: Underslung, 90 litres (19.8 gallons)
- Water/space heater: Truma Combi boiler with blown-air, gas-only operation
- Leisure battery: 100 amp hr
- Gas: 2 x 13kg cylinders
- Lighting: 3 ceiling lights in main salon (missing, but presumed to be LED). All LED: 2 reading lights above bed head, 1 downlighter in washroom, 2 reading lights in lounge, task light in kitchen
- Sockets: 230V: 1, 12V: 1

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Fitted to test vehicle: None
- Other options available: Upgrade to 180bhp engine with Comfort-Matic automatic transmission (EPOA)
- Conversion: None

PILOTE F60 DG



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13 Commodious and flexible storage. Bikes and long items can easily fit in

14 Air suspension is a worthwhile addition, but one side would hold no pressure

15 Pilote mission control. Heating runs on both gas and mains



RAPIDO VAN V53 LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

Brownhills Leisure World, A1/A46 junction, Newark, Notts NG24 2EA
Tel: 0845-6055470
Web: www.brownhills.co.uk

STORE ROOM

The biggest single storage area in each model is under the transverse rear bed. Rapido calls it a 'garage', though I think 'boot' would be a more appropriate moniker.

The Pilote goes one stage further and features a hinged, lockable forward partition plus folding bed base and mattress. The result of this flexible arrangement is that long packages, rolls of carpet, fence panels and the like, can be easily transported when camping vehicle becomes the family load-lugger.

In fact, the roles could be combined, as canoes and cycles could also be safely carried inside and away from the light-fingered, providing that satisfactory tie-down cleats and restraints were added. A pal of mine who is a keen cyclist had two bikes pinched from his rack, so now always carries his £5,000 touring bike inside his motorcaravan.

I reckon my bike is safe though, as no self-respecting thief would want to nick my ancient 'sit-up-and-beg' steed off the rear rack on our 'van. To services...

LIFE SUPPORT

Both converters decided to site the - internally-accessed - gas locker at the far rear, though on different sides. They each claim that theirs will hold two 13kg Propane cylinders and both certainly looked as though they would.

It's noteworthy how easy the leisure battery and 230V consumer unit can be accessed in the Pilote.

The freshwater tank is in the base of the rear travel seat in the Rapido and under the bed in the Pilote. Both are of sensible size and, because of their internal location, will be less likely to freeze than rival makers' underslung tanks.

A meaty leisure battery arrived with both carriages and the accompanying bump suggested that both roofs are pre-wired to accept a solar panel.

It was pleasing to note that Pilote fits a fire extinguisher as standard. Whichever motorcaravan you buy, please also fit a fire blanket and smoke and CO alarms. All foam and soft furnishing fabrics are claimed to be fire-retardant, though neither sported any

labels confirming this.

Pilote offers 230V operation of the Combi water and space heater as part of its UK pack and for this year, a wind-out, colour co-ordinated awning as well. It is expected that this offer will continue for 2012, but this had yet to be confirmed.

Nothing gets people more animated than patterns on upholstery fabrics and furniture finishes. And these 'vans perfectly illustrate the dichotomy facing all manufacturers.

Put simply it is, "do we go for a more traditional look, featuring wood veneers and predominately cream and brown toning fabrics (as in the Rapido)?" Then there's, "do we opt for a more contemporary feel, with a greater use of strongly contrasting fabrics and locker door finishes (as in the Pilote)?"

Here, both schemes were well-executed; yer pays yer money and takes yer choice...

CONCLUSION

The Rapido Van V53 and the Pilote F60 DG are two great interpretations of a genre first made popular by Adria's Twin.

Ultimately the number of extra bods who might accompany you will be a significant deciding factor. Though of course you could decant them into a pup tent and simply choose the one you really fancy.

Neither had any real weak areas, but as regular readers will know, I never wimp out of making a choice. I preferred the Pilote's interior, but the Rapido's smiley exterior.

The Rapido wins in the washroom and lounge, though the Pilote has a bigger kitchen and more flexible storage. Also, we preferred the Pilote's more contemporary interior, so the F60 DG would be our pick if buying new.

We can't afford to buy new though, so buying secondhand, we'd just look for whichever was available at the right price and in good order. If that turned out to be the Rapido, first job would be to alter the forward under-bed bulkhead, to allow long-load lugging, as in the Pilote.

That chap was right, these 'vans certainly proved to be, "neither one thing nor the other." Ultimately, that is their appeal. ■

RAPIDO VAN V53



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16 More of a boot than a garage, but still a useful storage space

17 Rapido's ceiling lamps were absent without leave

18 Both 'vans' control panels are pre-wired to take a solar panel



PILOTE F60 DG LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

SMC Motorhomes, Northern Road, Newark, Notts NG24 2ET
Tel: 01636-670760
Web: www.smcmotorhomes.co.uk