



REVAMPED REGENT

La Strada Regent L on Mercedes Sprinter 313CDI

Self-confessed La Strada enthusiast, Roger Mechan, tries the latest Regent - much the same on the outside, but featuring a radically different interior

If I was asked to speak on La Strada at a parish council meeting I would have to declare an interest in the subject under discussion, and leave the room. Ann and I have been owners of a Regent L, from German manufacturer La Strada, for nearly four years and in that time we have traversed high hills and high streets without having to worry what was around the next bend, or breaking into a cold sweat whenever we wandered deep into the centre of Barcelona at rush hour. At 2.03m wide and 5.65m long we have only ever had one mishap, and that was when I tried to squeeze past some scaffolding surrounding a house in a Spanish village. I am still trying to translate some of the things I was called during that incident.

Our La Strada tin box, with its plastic top hat, has a decent kitchen, ample storage, and a rear bench seat that unfolds into a large, comfortable bed. I do, however, find the bathroom cramped, and making up the bed for the umpteenth time on an extended tour becomes a chore. So I admit I was the first in the queue when the new La Strada Regent L, with its full-width rear bathroom and redesigned interior with A-class-style drop-

down bed, was shown for the first time at Earls Court.

It's difficult to form a firm opinion when surrounded by crowds of others all anxious to be where you are - and I thought I would reserve judgment until I could get my hands on an example for testing. My first impressions were that the configuration offered a radical departure from what we had been used to in our own 'van. For example, there appeared to be less storage and we felt not only would the drop-down bed be difficult to get out of, it would put the lounge out of commission when being used. I finally managed to get my hands on the new model. Now I was going to find out how accurate my first impressions were.

The on the road price of the basic Regent L is £36,563. For this you get Mercedes' 2.2CDI 82bhp engine and precious little else in the base vehicle department. I would suggest the optional 129-horsepower motor (at an extra £2162) is the one to go for if you are to arrive at your holiday destination before the day you're due to return. If you want electric windows, mirrors, central locking, radio/cassette or even a cigarette lighter, then

you will have to pay extra.

Our test vehicle had the beefier (129bhp) engine and progress along the M5 motorway into the all-consuming mists of Dartmoor was smooth and relatively quiet; the only on-road problem in the living area was with the sliding toilet door. This is supposed to be held closed by a lined recess into which it slides. Unfortunately, this didn't work and when the door slides open the noise could make you wonder if all the cupboards have fallen off the wall. A simple latch would solve the problem.

Although there were only 180 miles on the odometer it was obvious this 'van could ply its trade all day, without complaint, at 80mph - were it allowed to do so, of course. Wind noise was minimal and conversations could be conducted at normal levels. The dash-mounted gear lever was silky and precise in operation and the ride was firm and comfortable. Pushing the vehicle harder than one normally would through bends was achieved without drama, and the multi-adjustable seats with their padded arms ensured we arrived at our destination fresh and ready for action. Strangely, the front passenger seat squab is shorter than the

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A comprehensive set of levers ensures a comfortable driving position can always be obtained.



We found there was more than ample space for two to eat, and, with the cab seats swivelled, a comfortable amount for four.

driver's and I found it a little uncomfortable when being driven.

I did have to learn - quickly as it happened - that if I pressed the accelerator hard when in first or second gear there was a lag before the turbo cut in - then the 'van shot forward rocket-like towards the rear of the vehicle in front. Thanks to Mercedes' excellent brakes, there's a chap who drives a Ford Focus near Exeter who has no idea how close he came to having his day ruined!

Inside and out

Although the roof is a GRP addition, other than having a few holes cut into the metal, this 'van looks much the same as the delivery van that shoots past you on the motorway. This is well worth bearing in mind when you read what is to follow. I have to admit to earwigging a bit at shows and it was

interesting to hear how many people actually want their motorcaravan to look like a commercial van. Apparently, it revolves around not wanting to attract unwelcome attention when the vehicle is left unattended. Well, other than a few dashing blue stripes on the bodywork, could this La Strada pass off as any one of the thousands of delivery vans on the roads? It could from a distance, but take a look through the side windows and there is no mistaking what this vehicle is meant to be.

Within this relatively small motorcaravan is an L-shaped lounge and a kitchen with enough room to get past the cook when en-route to the across-the-rear bathroom. The bathroom has a toilet, fixed washbasin and a separate shower that occupies the whole of the rear corner. Add a large A-class-style bed above the lounge and further sleeping

accommodation on the ground floor and it is obvious this machine won't be spending its life delivering mackerel to Manchester.

My first 'show-induced' misconception surrounded the pedestal table. I thought it was sturdy and impressive on its aluminium leg, but would prove a barrier when moving from the cab to the living area. Not so - the table slides along easy-glide runners and can be turned and adjusted. Sliding the passenger cab seat forward provides sufficient space to make front-to-rear access simple. With the cab seats swivelled and the table angled and fixed there is ample room for four to eat. If you wanted to remove the table when travelling or lounging it could be stowed in the underfloor storage area at the back of the 'van.

Comfort time

With the table removed there is plenty of floor



Looking from front to rear shows how the 'van has its clearly defined areas. Front lounge and raised floor in the rear with 'across the back,' separate-shower bathroom.



The swivelling, sliding table-top allowed easy front to rear access.



Rear seat passengers are afforded leg room by the removal of the side cushion. There is one three-point belt and one lap belt.

space for four to stretch out in the swivelled cab and lounge seats. The lounge seat backrests are rather upright and the seat squabs vary in depth from 450mm to 340mm. However, the corner cushion has been cleverly shaped to provide good back support and one can sit here comfortably, even when the overhead bed has been deployed. I felt there was marginally more headroom when sitting in the cab seats with the bed down but, either way, it allows one person to go to bed and the other to stay up -without disturbing each other. When you do decide to switch off the lights and retire, you will have to duck through a gap 1.25 metres high to get through into the kitchen and, from there, climb into the bed. Sounds tricky but, to be honest, we didn't find it a problem.

Rear seat passengers travel sitting on the forward-facing section of the lounge seats and have the use of one three-point and one lap-only seatbelt. To make space for the offside passenger's feet, the longitudinal sofa cushions are removed and a gap is created with the aid of a hinged flap: simple and effective.

There are only two swivelling downlighters in the lounge, located on the underside of the bed and towards the cab area. One more to the rear offside of the lounge would have been useful. To the right of the sliding door, on the nearside, is a cupboard with metal-



Looking from the back reveals the headroom available and shows clearly the way the bed is cantilevered to ensure it fits close to the ceiling.



The lounge can still be used when the bed has been lowered although if you're tall the top of your head will brush on the underside.

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Combined two-burner hob and sink proved to be a space-saving design. Kitchen storage ranges from cutlery and towel drawers to something suitable for pots and pans. An innovative, slide-out unit will take all the jars, cans and bottles you might need.



Across-the-rear bathroom has an electric-flush loo and a shaving-friendly basin and mirror.

effect sliding doors. The cabinetwork throughout the 'van is of a very high standard and I thought these doors were a cheap-looking addition. Ann and her friends strongly disagreed with my view, so I remain in a minority of one. This cabinet has a shelf above it that would take a small television, but you will have to pay extra to have blanks removed on the nearby control panel and the correct power and aerial sockets inserted in their place.

Cook and wash

To maximise space in the kitchen, La Strada has installed a two-burner gas hob immediately next to the sink and drainer and hidden them under a smoked glass cover. The trick is that both hob and sink are built into the same stainless steel unit. It is a surprise when you first see it but with a small gas oven and grill under, this ensemble is more than adequate. An extractor hood with two downlighters above and a large metal splashback at the rear completes this potentially capable cook centre. There's only one 230V socket in the 'van as standard and it's located on the wall in the kitchen, to the right of the sink.

There is a tall, vertical panel to the rear of the forward-facing lounge seats. Food preparation surfaces, storage cupboards and drawers are located on the back of it. Kitchen storage consists of two small cupboards (one with cutlery tray). The slightly deeper cupboard could take a couple of pans. There's also one large overhead cupboard. An ingenious, angled unit with four shelves slides

out from alongside the bathroom door. Light comes via a roof vent in addition to two fixed downlighters, which illuminate your culinary achievements. Despite the fact you step up 220mm from the lounge to the kitchen there is ample headroom in the latter. This kitchen is imaginative, effective and roomy for such a narrow 'van and, with an 80-litre three-way Dometic fridge on the nearside, it has all the facilities we would need for short or long holidays.

Cleaning up

One of the major changes La Strada has introduced into the Regent L is a full-sized bathroom with separate shower. This unit runs across the whole of the back of the 'van. On the offside is a Thetford swivel cassette toilet that affords plenty of legroom when used with the shower doors open. On the back wall, with a large mirror above, is a stainless steel basin with mixer tap. Above the mirror are two fixed downlighters. In my Regent L the basin is on the offside wall and, owing to the angle of the wall mirror, I cannot get my face near to the sink to shave. This basin/mirror combination is fine, allowing a good view while scraping the stubble.

Occupying the nearside corner is the shower. This is not simply a broom cupboard with a siphon pump, but a decent-sized cubicle with an illuminated cupboard in the nearside wall for storing all those soapy essentials.

Once the tri-fold, rigid shower door is closed there is ample room to move around under the mixer tap controlled showerhead.

Thankfully, the Regent benefits from large capacity tanks, so you don't have to be in and out in five minutes. Two coat hooks have been fitted on the shower wall for hanging wet clothing. The only downside here is the single,



Fitting this separate shower into a panel van conversion is a remarkable achievement.



These rubber 'hands' support the mattress.....



.....and once it's in place, the bed proves to be spacious and comfortable.

small drain, which could make the evacuation of shower water difficult - especially on a sloping pitch.

More than once in our 'van I have felt the southerly wind when occupying the Thetford throne. This has happened when Ann has opened one of the rear doors of our La Strada, giving direct access to the washroom! There is no such problem with the new version. A wooden panel seals in the whole of the rear, so there is no need to practice waving to the multitudes as they gaze at you in amazement. With room to move around and perform all the necessary functions, this bathroom makes excellent use of the available space. If I have to find fault it would be with the small amount of storage space. This could be rectified as there is an empty area under the sink that looks as if it's crying out for a cupboard to be fitted.

Crashing into bed

The drop-down bed is a revelation in my view, but let me get the reservations out of the way first. The bed is articulated around one third of the way along. This allows the rear two-thirds to rise up out of the way to give caravan headroom whilst the remainder slopes down above the cab seats. There is a grab handle on this latter portion which, when pulled, should lower the bed with the aid of four gas struts. Unfortunately, in its current



Lowering the table turns the lounge seating into a small bed. An overlay improves overall comfort.

form, and on this vehicle, it didn't work like that. There is a bit of carpentry required on the kitchen cupboard adjacent to the bed, as when the bed is lowered it catches on the side of this unit. To lower the bed, in this 'van, one stands in the kitchen and pulls down on the aft end of the bed. I found the only way I could raise the bed was to stand in the lounge and push it up with my back, whilst Ann stood in the kitchen to prevent it from snagging on the aforementioned cupboard.

When it did come down, the bed did so with quite a bang. It would have certainly bruised the top of your head if you had been underneath it at the time. I couldn't decide if this was because the gas struts were not up to the job or if I was using too much force. I understand La Strada is aware of the problem and it will be rectified.

Once down, the bed is wonderful. Large, exceptionally comfortable and with plenty of headroom. It's not in the least claustrophobic. Under the sturdy mattress are 72 rubber supports that not only create space for air to flow through, but provide superb support that moves when you do. If they made a bed like this for the home I'd have one. I thought when I saw the vehicle at the Earls Court show that it could get very hot in this bed during the summer, but now I'm not so sure. There are two opening side windows and one roof vent and, with the excellent headroom, I think I would try it for a season before investing in air-conditioning.

I am led to understand that there is a

folding ladder to use for getting into the bed, but personally I wouldn't bother with it. There are two conveniently-placed platforms in the kitchen that make hoisting one's bulk into bed a doddle. Getting out, though, is another matter and may require the services of the ladder after all.

I assume from the configuration of the halogen reading lights in this area that one is supposed to sleep with one's feet facing the cab, and lean against the rear of a couple of the cupboards to read before going to sleep. If that is correct, a couple of problems present themselves. One, the reading lights are not recessed and are easily damaged. Two, unless you can execute a perfect back-flip you have to turn 180 degrees to get your legs over the aft end to get out.

There is an answer to this problem; sleep the other way around. There is more than enough headroom to do so and it makes sliding out of bed without disturbing your partner a simple undertaking. As an added bonus there is no chance of your pillows dropping off the end of the bed when you're asleep. The downside is you have no reading lights at the cab end of the bed. What this area needs to make it perfect are four recessed swivelling downlighters (similar to those on the underside of the bed), one in each corner. Don't get me wrong. I love this 'bedroom', but it would be all the better with a little tweaking.

Whilst all this has been going on upstairs, the downstairs resident has been quietly



Open the back doors of the Regent for access to underfloor storage and open shelves.

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arranging the lounge cushions, lowering the table onto its bedtime pedestal and climbing into a comfortable, but short, single berth. I tell you, for its size this 'van performs wonders.

Journey's end

My Regent L does not have a drop-down bed and cupboards occupy the space above. I was certain when looking at the new layout that there would be insufficient storage space for all our gear. I couldn't have been more wrong. Open the back doors of the 'van and there is underfloor storage and, above the large gas locker, two large open shelves. Inside there are cupboards above and below the fridge and a substantial wardrobe alongside it. A large, shelved cupboard adjacent to the bathroom door is complemented by a small amount of storage under the lounge seats (although the bulk of this space is taken up with the battery and charger). Under the kitchen floor is a large, hinged flap which, when opened, reveals a further wet locker.

I know from experience how hardwearing La Strada's cabinets and upholstery are, and how tight fitting our cabinetwork has remained after four years and 56,000 miles. A lot of hard work has obviously been put into designing the layout of the new vehicle, which has clearly defined and well-proportioned areas that achieve the correct balance between form and function. Each area has a sense of space that really does belie the size of the metal box into which it has been put. The base vehicle is mean on the basics when you consider that the competition can provide electric windows and CD players as standard. The trouble is that other base vehicles don't have the La Strada on the back of them.

There are design problems with an overhead bed that needs sorting and a lack of storage in the bathroom. Additionally, when you start adding on all the extras you may consider essential, price could also



become an issue. We like the flexibility a panel van conversion gives us, both in venturing away and in our daily lives. A closer examination of the Regent L dispelled all my pre-conceived criticism concerning layout. I

know I would be hard pushed to find another van conversion that gives as much as this one. So, would I change mine for the new version? Absolutely, I shall simply have to work harder to afford it! □

In brief

Base vehicle: Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 313CDI panel van

Engine type: 2.2-litre common-rail turbo-diesel

Output: 95kW (129bhp) @ 3800rpm (optional)

Gearbox and drive: Five-speed manual gearbox, rear-wheel drive

Make and model: La Strada Regent L

Body type and construction: Panel van with GRP high top

Conversion NCC badged as EN1646 compliant: No

Electrical equipment: Mains hook-up feeding RCD and MCBs; charger and 120 amp hr gel leisure battery; one UK-type 230V switched socket; one 12V socket in cab

Lighting: Sliding doorstep courtesy light, two swivel halogen downlighters in lounge, two halogen downlighters and two extractor hood-mounted downlighters in kitchen, two swivel halogen wall lights in drop-down bed area, two halogen lights in bathroom, automatic lights in shower cupboard and wardrobe

Cooking facilities: Two-burner hob and sink combination unit with glass lid and cooker hood above, separate gas oven with integral grill

Refrigerator: Dometic RM 4281LM, three-way with half-width freezer compartment, capacity 80 litres

Water heater: Truma 3402 Combi, gas only operation

Space heater: Truma 3402 Combi, blown-air unit, gas only operation. Four outlets in lounge, one in bathroom

Fresh water tank: Inboard, 90 litres (19.79 gallons)

Waste water tank: Outboard, underfloor mounted, 85 litres (18.69 gallons)

Gas locker capacity: Two 7kg cylinders

Rear restraints: One forward-facing seat with one three-point and one lap seatbelt

Additional features: ABS (anti-lock braking

system), ASR (traction control), ESP (electronic stability programme), first aid kit, warning triangle, 20mm polyethylene insulation, false floor with storage compartment, PVC flooring, carpet in seating area, electronic control panel, digital clock

Dimensions (*data supplied by importer)

Overall length: 5.65m (18ft 6in)*

Overall width: 2.03m (6ft 8.5in)*

Overall height: 2.90m (9ft 6in)*

Interior height: From lounge floor to underside of drop-down bed, 1.80m (5ft 11in) at front rising to 1.85m (6ft 1in) at rear

Bed dimensions: Roof bed (double) 2.00m x 1.40m (6ft 7in x 4ft 7in), lounge bed, (single) 1.75m x 1.15m (5ft 9in x 3ft 9in)

Max authorised weight: 3200kg*

Load capacity: 380kg* standard model before options

Price (all prices include VAT)

Standard model (82bhp): £36,563 (on the road)

As tested: £40,005 (on the road) – see options below

Warranty: Three years base vehicle, three years caravan

Optional extras (*starred items fitted to test vehicle)

Base vehicle options: Chassis upgrade to 3500kg (£1230), 95kW (129bhp) engine (£2162)*, 115kW (156bhp) engine (£3505), battery upgraded to 100 amp hr (£39), radio/cassette (£352), radio/CD (£606), pre-wiring with 2 speakers for radio (£110)*, cigarette lighter (£13), heated windscreen and rain sensor wipers – tinted glass (£706), headlamp wash (£290), lockable glove box (£26), electrically-heated and operated mirrors (£202)*, central locking (£378)*, Sprintshift automated manual transmission (£874), cab air-conditioning (£1520), heated driver's seat (£136),

heated passenger seat (£136), tinted glass with filter band windscreen (£148), instrument panel with soft feel (£190), service computer assist (£124), Ultrasonic reverse sensor (£689), anti-theft alarm (£204), 100-litre fuel tank (£232), front fog lamps (£141), cruise control (£305), alternator upgraded to 150A (£387), towbar (£426), winter tyres (£135), four season tyres (£135), alloy wheels (£734), driver's airbag (£367), passenger airbag (with driver airbag only) (£604), electrically-operated cab windows (£287), walnut-effect dashboard (£259), radio/mobile phone aerial (£161)*

Caravan options: Lockable flap in passenger seat box (£150), insulated cab doors (£92), lift-out carpets for cab (£95), lift-out carpets for doorway and kitchen area (£141), panoramic roof light (£826), 230V heating water heating (£267), compressor fridge (£235), fridge fan (£94), full oven with grill (£429)*, time switch for blown-air heating (£209), gas bottle level indicator for two bottles (£211), additional 230V socket (£111), additional 12V socket (£111), 50W solar panel (£726), gas alarm (£196), rear camera (£831), radio aerial for high top (£106), automatic satellite TV system (£2727), GPS navigation system (£1560), GPS navigation system/rear camera combination (£3660), insulating screens for cab windows (£99), wind-out awning (£618), bike rack for two bikes (£347), surfboard rack (£259), non-metallic paintwork (colour change) (£1888), metallic paint (£1913), leather upholstery driver and bench seat (£1972)

Vehicle kindly supplied for evaluation by:

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