Sci-fi enthusiasts, my fellow Time Lords, and saloon bar sages will know that Dr Who’s TARDIS was an acronym of Time and Relative Dimensions in Space. It is hoped that I’m not spoiling anybody’s viewing by suggesting that Dr Who’s TARDIS was fictitious. Manhattan’s Tardis is not only real - it’s here in our time dimension, and it doesn’t look like an old police phone box.

So where is Manhattan? Would you believe Sandy, in Bedfordshire? Manhattan Motorcoaches is a young innovative company, and the first British manufacturer to develop a panel van conversion with a slide-out this century. In my opinion, where Manhattan has blazed a trail, other British manufacturers are bound to follow, because the concept is brilliant.

A slide-out is our sort of motorcaravan extension! We have long since ditched wind-out awnings, free-standing awnings, Safari Rooms, gazebos, windbreaks, and other flapping and immobilising irritants!

Previously, slide-outs were only really available (with a few rare exceptions) on American RVs. This was a pity, as a slide-out significantly increases the amount of space on site, with no corresponding increase in size on the road. How to have your cake and eat it?

This slide-out uses the original sliding door and door! See also docking light.
(and aperture) to create an extra 1.5 cubic metres of space, which becomes home to the convertible sofa.

A new GRP door and frame has been created on the offside. This clever moulding reproduces the Fiat’s side panel contours, and has been finished in silver metal flake paint to match the rest of the (steel) van. Actually, it was possible to detect a difference in appearance between the GRP door and the rest of the coachwork. (This may have been caused by the difference in material rather than by inaccurate matching.)

Extending and retracting the slide-out is a manual operation, requiring a good shove, but nothing too arduous. However, Manhattan is planning to offer a powered version in the near future.

In order to accommodate the slide-out mechanism, a false floor has been fitted to the lounge area. This reduces the available standing height by a couple of inches.

Aesthetic attractions
Ducato’s inset headlamps tend to make motorcaravans based on the Fiat look ‘piggy-eyed’. This one didn’t, saved by the greater visual impact of the metallic silver coachwork (complete with its colour coordinated bumpers and mirrors), and the placing of the stylish Manhattan legend in look-alike carbon fibre raised lettering on the leading edge of the bonnet.

Tardis is undeniably a good-looking beast. Minimalist graphics and sprayed-to-match hook-up cover and business bits for the fridge and boiler maintain colour integrity. It’s care over these details that turns a good-looking motorcaravan into something that deserves approval from the aesthetes amongst us.

Cheap wheel trims look - well, cheap! Without something, though, motorcaravans can look unfinished. Rather than using those awful white £15.99 specials, I prefer to see Fiat’s vented steel wheels unadorned, providing the hub covers are present to tidy up the bolts (as they were here). Finances permitting, a set of alloys will really ‘big it up’, as they say.

The choice of unglazed rear doors was an inspired one, and should improve security. The only fly in the ointment was Fiat’s dubious build quality around the shut lines. This is the name given to the gaps between adjoining body panels, and one can only assume that some of the front panels had endured a mammoth row, as they were trying hard to get as far away from each other as possible.

Interior layout
Manhattan decided to opt for luxury for two, rather than being over optimistic with the number of berths. In my case on this test, it was opulence for one. The cab seats swivel to make maximum use of the available internal volume. A socket is provided in the floor for the island leg table.

Immediately behind the cab on the nearside is the wardrobe, and on the offside, a storage unit. Behind these are the slide-out and sofa, and opposite, the entrance door. A split kitchen takes up most of the rest of the visible space. Further to the rear, the door in the end wall opens to reveal a full-width changing room with WC, basin, and separate showering cubicle.

Interior finishes
The solid hand-built furniture is constructed out of 15mm ply, so it should be very durable. The finish is called antique pine. Cupboard and locker doors have broad hardwood frames. Brass-finish positive-locking catches
kept all the contents safe. The designers have chosen a tambour door for the under-sink cupboard, successfully endowing the catering quarters with some individuality.

The chosen soft furnishing fabric is in a modern geometric pattern. The choice is yours, though, just ask if you want something different. I felt (though Manhattan disagree) that the trimmer needs to ensure that the pattern on the fabric is the same way up on each cushion (it wasn’t on the sofa). There is often not an easy answer to this. The problem is not so much the pattern, but the nap on the face of the cloth. Any pile velour material is very sensitive to the angle that light hits it, thus any surface that is aligned differently looks a totally different colour and sticks out a mile!

The white and grey shadow-pattern vinyl-faced wall board was a wise choice and looked so much more upmarket than the grey corded material so beloved by panel van converters. It should wipe clean too, especially useful for monumentally clumsy campers such as I.

This particular demo ‘van had a fitted carpet. For production models, Manhattan has sensibly decided to replace it with hardwearing vinyl tiles and whipped-edge removable over-carpets.

The sum of all the various fabrics and finishes was an ambience that was both light and airy, without being harsh or clinical.

Cooking
Quite a high priority has been given to the kitchen, and it shows. The cooker is a Smev stainless steel unitary model. Four burners on top, a grill/oven, plus electronic ignition are standard features. The oven is a proper thermostatically-controlled model, not one of those warming efforts. (I’ve always found them to be worse than useless, as the temperature gradient inside is too steep.)

Adjacent to the cooker is an inset stainless steel sink and drainer with chrome monobloc mixer tap. Below the sink there is a dedicated cutlery drawer, and above the hob a high-level crockery cupboard. The high-level fridge and a clever slide-out pantry are across the aisle.

Further storage is provided by a pair of cupboards, and also by the under-sink area. Speaking of which, under the sink a bottle trap has been provided for the waste. Bottle traps should ensure that no pongs from the waste tank pervade the atmosphere, and they are also easily removed to clear any blockages should a rogue baked bean make a bid for freedom.

The cooker hood/extractor fan speedily removed cooking odours. Two speeds for the fan offered a choice of suction power, and inbuilt halogen downlighters provided useful illumination. An opening window was a source of natural light and/or additional ventilation if required. A slide-out worktop would have been a useful addition to the kitchen facilities, but overall the kitchen was a delight to work in.

Dining
Only two cheers here as I found the table too low and too far away to reach comfortably from the swivelled cab seats. It was also rather wobbly. Using seat swivels that did not allow fore and aft movement of the swivelled seat exacerbated the problem. My suggestion would be to locate the leg socket further forward and not put the top plate on top of the carpet (better to place this on the solid floor). The thick pile carpet makes it difficult to stop the rock.

Dining table in situ. Cab seats have only one armrest and, more importantly, couldn’t be moved closer to the table.

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Lounging
The two-seater settee was really comfortable. Feet-up lounging for one was possible. A window or two in the side of the slide-out might have enhanced the lounging experience. If I’d brought a telly, it would have sat on the storage unit adjacent to the door. Instead, I chose to listen to the fitted Blaupunkt stereo radio/cassette. This provided good reproduction of speech, classical and popular music. It was rather frustrating to find that one needed the ignition on to power up the unit. Surely all such ICE boxes should be wired outside the ignition in a leisure vehicle? That’s ICE as in ’In- Car Entertainment’, not as in Martini on the rocks. Try to keep up!

Heki rooflights have effectively cured the blues caused by dull, dingy and depressing days. The light just floods in. I wouldn’t buy a new ‘van without one. They’re terrific.

Heki rooflights have effectively cured the blues caused by dull, dingy and depressing days. The light just floods in. I wouldn’t buy a new ‘van without one. They’re terrific.
Welcome warmth was provided by the Truma Combi boiler. There are two blown-air outlets in the lounge and their output was thermostatically controlled. Unwelcome draughts issued from around the slide-out frame. A rubber seal was missing on the test 'van. (Apparently its absence was due to some tight timetabling and a shortage at the wholesalers.)

Above all, lounging in the Tardis had that deliciously indulgent feeling of space.

Showering
What a joy to find such a well-specified changing room in an 18ft panel van conversion. It’s full-width and fully equipped. The swivel-bowl electric-flush loo, a small basin, and separate shower cubicle meant a relaxed toilet. The shower cubicle has wipe-clean GRP walls, a soap tray and an opening rooflight. A steady, well-regulated flow of water was achieved using the monobloc controls. There was plenty of space in the ‘dry’ half of the room for clothes. A low-level, top-access locker over the wheelarch can be used for the storage of toiletries. On this example the interior trim of the locker needed further attention as bare metal could be seen. Also, the infill window surround didn’t fit - this has now been upgraded.

Sleeping
Just pull on the handle on the front of the sofa and bingo! A comfortable double bed thus unfurls, effortlessly and efficiently. The front dinette, kitchen and rear changing room were all accessible with the bed extended. There was also a useful amount of dressing/undressing space, often a scarce commodity in van conversions.

Storing
We’ve already looked at the kitchen, so internally that only leaves the useful overcab locker, and the storage unit adjacent to the entrance door.

Externally, fresh water is in an uninsulated underfloor tank and waste water likewise. Each tank has a push-to-read level gauge located next to the consumer unit above the fridge.

The rear doors open to reveal a blank wall with a storage cubbyhole and two hatches. The larger of these accesses the gas cylinder compartment and the smaller one the cassette for the Porta Potti. The gas compartment was, in the main, well-constructed. Boasting a metal liner, cylinder restraints and a low-level vent, it was only let down by the grommetless intrusion of two water pipes. To make matters worse, the

Cockpit and travel
Toys first. The docking lights in the sides, the reversing lights, plus the camera and monitor have blown any excuses for bumped bumpers out of the water! The camera automatically turned itself on when reverse was selected. It has a manual override and the facility to have a real or mirror image displayed. The screen has an overlay with a series of converging dots on it to indicate distance. It was a useful aid to vehicular placement, and like most good ideas, blissfully simple.

The inclusion of the slide-out had no effect at all on roadholding. A warning buzzer reminds you to retract it before moving off! On site, somebody did actually ask me whether it was OK to drive along with the slide-out extended?

The version of the Ducato 14 that Manhattan currently use is bereft of electric windows and mirrors. No problem there, but I did miss the rev counter that is in the higher spec models.

The introduction of common-rail injection technology has transformed Fiat’s 2.8-litre turbocharged diesel power unit. It is so much smoother than its predecessor. NVH (noise,
vibration, harshness) have all been significantly and noticeably reduced. Most motorcaravans powered by any of the Fiat 2.3TD or 2.8TD units are flyers, though, especially when in a ‘slippery’ van conversion such as this. My local haulier claims a 10 per cent improvement in fuel consumption with the JTD model over the superseded i2TD models, even though all his operatives are rumoured to have their right foot cast in pure lead.

It wasn’t mph or mpg that impressed me the most, just its ability to poottie quietly along country lanes without the need to constantly change gear. Peaceful and quietly heroic.

Before I drown under a tide of rhapsodic affection, the conclusion...

Conclusion

As in most motorcaravans, there were some minor details in this very first production model that needed (and are receiving, we are assured) further development. However, the slide-out concept, and its realisation, is a leap forward in modern motorcaravan design. All normal van conversions are now going to feel cramped!

I really enjoyed my time with such an innovative and clever motorcaravan, and my partner has suggested that we put it on our shortlist. It’s British-converted too. Hooray. But finally, I should add that if you don’t like meeting people, you should refrain from purchasing a Tardis. Throughout my ‘ownership’, I conducted more guided tours than the staff of Buckingham Palace. All who were visited were impressed. Enough said?

In brief

Base vehicle: Fiat Ducato 14 long wheelbase panel van
Engine type: 2.8-litre JTD common-rail four-cylinder turbocharged and intercooled diesel
Output: 93.5kW (127bhp) @ 3600rpm
Gearbox and drive: Five-speed manual all-synchronous gearbox, fascia gearchange, front-wheel drive
Make & model: Manhattan Tardis
Body type & construction: High roof all-steel panel van with nearside slide-out and GRP offside entrance door. 25mm high density foam insulation
Conversion NCC approved: No
Electrical equipment: 230V hook-up, leisure battery, PMS consumer unit with RCD and three MCBS
Lighting: Main salon: five fluorescent tubes, two halogen kitchen downlighters. Shower room: two fluorescent tubes and halogen spot light
Cooking facilities: Sinev electronic ignition four-burner hob, grill and oven
Refrigerator: Electrolux three-way, electronic ignition, 70-litre capacity
Water heater: Truma Combi gas-fired boiler with 40/60 degree Celsius temperature control
Fresh water tank: Underfloor, 60 litres (13.2 gallons)
Waste water tank: Underfloor, 40 litres (8.8 gallons)

Space heating: Truma Combi gas-fired boiler providing blown-air via two outlets in lounge and one in shower room.
Gas locker capacity: Two 4.5kg butane or equivalent
Rear restraints: No travel seats in rear
Additional features: Key-code immobiliser, Blaupunkt stereo radio/cassette, reversing camera and monitor, Heki panoramic rooflight, TV aerial

Dimensions

Overall length: 5.51m (18ft 1in)
Overall width: 2.00m (6ft 7in) plus mirrors
Overall height: 2.57m (8ft 5in)
Interior height: 1.82m/1.89m (5ft 11.5in/6ft 2in)
Bed dimensions: 1.88m X 1.19m (6ft 2in X 3ft 11in)
Max authorised weight: 3250kg
Load capacity: 640kg

Price

Standard model: £34 995 on the road
As tested: £35 565 on the road

Optional extras

(starrd items fitted to test vehicle)
Base vehicle options: (a selection only) 3500kg Maxi chassis (£1500), dash air-conditioning (£1600), ABS (£300), driver’s airbag (£500), electric windows/central locking (£500), metallic paint (£340)*, colour coordinated mirrors/bumpers

£230*, electric heated mirrors (£120), motorcaravan suspension and tyres (£150)

Caravan options: 12V roof air-conditioning (£2250), 230V roof air-conditioning (£1150), 64W solar panel (£550), Omnistor 5000 awning (£580), 230V microwave oven (£235), 12V microwave oven (£310), rear door bike rack (£260), rear ladder (£160), roof bars (£150), top box (£300)

Manhattan Tardis kindly supplied for evaluation by:
Manhattan Motorcoaches (sales office only), 35 Upper King Street, Royston, Hertfordshire SG8 9AZ.
Tel: 01763 246030, Fax: 01763 241800.
E-mail: colinblundell@btconnect.com
Web site: www.manhattanmotorcoaches.com

SHOWS FOR MOTORCARAVANNERS

Dealers and other organisers: eight weeks’ notice for this feature, please (a contact telephone number must be included with your entry). Readers: not all shows promise to exhibit motorcaravans - please telephone organisers to check details, particularly before making a special journey.

May 10-12
Newbury, Berks: Leisure 2002 (inc the Thames Valley Caravanning Rally Show) at Newbury Showground (rally from May 9-13) - telephone 01635 227172 (Dealer Development Services).

May 17-19
Midland, Kent: Motor Caravan Jamboree & Leisure Show at County Showground, Detling - telephone 020-8311 6002.

May 24-26
Malvern, Worcs: American & European Motorhome Show at Three Counties Showground (rally from May 23-27) - telephone 01684 311772 (Dealer Development Services).

Jul 19-21
Lincoln, Lincs: Midsummer Music Festival & Leisure Show at Lincolnshire Showground - telephone 01787 391123 (Warners).

OVERSEAS SHOWS

Every care is taken but MMM cannot be responsible for any inaccuracies. If you know of any other such shows, please let us know dates and locations. Thanks. Enquiries should be addressed to appropriate national tourist offices - addresses from phone books or local libraries.

2002

Feb 16-24
Munchen, Germany: C-B-R 2002 (33rd Caravan, Boat & International Travel Market Exhibition) at Neue Messe Munchen - web site: www.c-b-r-muenchen.de

Duesseldorf, Germany: Caravan Salon - web site: www.caravan-salon.de

Aug 30-Sep 8
