

touring test | hymer b534

u-turn

Hymer's B534 makes a comeback, reintroducing the rear lounge A-class motorhome – but with a couple of innovative surprises to add to the mix

every european manufacturer knows that the brits love a rear lounge layout



Words & Pictures | Peter Vaughan



IT was the *Which Motorhome* Awards lunch and Mauro Degasperri, Hymer's affable Export Manager, was clearly excited. Not only had he just collected trophies for 'Quality' and 'Best Luxury Motorhome (under 3.5 tonnes)' for the new B544, but he seemed sure of repeat success in 2012. Already. And with a motorhome that no one outside Hymer had yet seen.

We haven't seen such confidence from Hymer for some time, but then arguably the brand lost its way in recent years, trying to be all things to all men, instead of concentrating

on its bread and butter – the once mighty B-Class. That's especially true in the UK where best-selling layouts disappeared from the range and the marque seemed lost amongst Brownhills' bewildering array of more affordable brands. Meanwhile, sister marque Bürstner was gaining ground here and another Hymer group firm, Dethleffs, was becoming dominant at home.

But the new B544 – and the new 2011 B-Class range as a whole – was a massive return to form, and Mauro's smile said that he knew we'd like the B534. But then every

European manufacturer knows that the Brits love a rear lounge layout, even if they don't – quite – understand why. This wasn't just the return of a layout – and a model number – well-known from Hymer's past glory days though, but he whispered, it would include a couple of new ideas.

More details could not be prized from his lips, but when we published the first photos in our March issue they revealed the hideaway rear travel seats and the electrically adjustable garage space. And just days after that magazine went on sale

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we were probably the first in the world to try life aboard a new B534...

special delivery

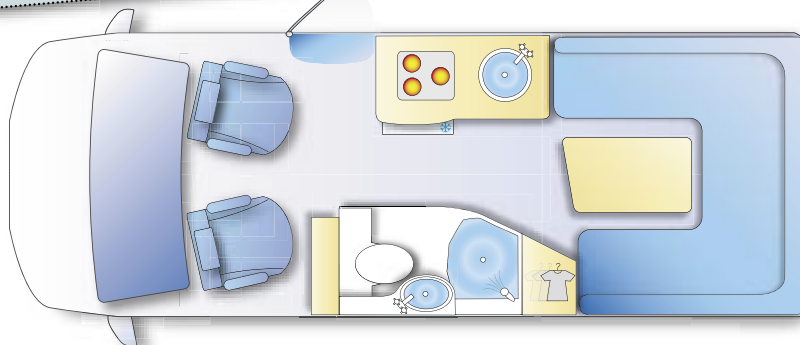
Our test vehicle was a left-hand drive prototype that had been driven from Hymer's Bad Waldsee factory in the far south of Germany to importers Brownhills' Newark HQ - clocking up 1398 kilometres along the way - so that we could test it and you could see it at the NEC in February. UK deliveries - with right-hand drive - will commence any time now. But apart from the position of the steering wheel, and a lack of carpets, this is pretty much the same B534 that £75k or so will buy you.

And on the outside only the location of windows and habitation door mark it out from the latest (front lounge) B544. It's a similar size, and we're now familiar with the rather boxy outline, introduced to create a class-leading drop-down bed in the A-class cab. At launch, Hymer's practicality-ahead-of-beauty approach seemed risky but time has lessened the shock factor of the new B-Class' styling and this example's optional Champagne bodywork and racy 17-inch alloy wheels create a butch bravado that seems wholly in keeping with a Teutonic icon.

It not only looks good but classy too. The build-quality is faultless and those Hella headlamps are a bespoke touch that renders other A-class motorhomes' one-size-fits-all lighting a bit obsolete. Then there are the coach-style mirrors, and while the bonnet provides the usual letterbox-like engine access, Hymer do at least recognise the need for regular topping up of the windscreen washer reservoir, and site the filler accordingly. Then there's the cab door, which shuts with the solid 'thunk' of an

this month's layout

rear u-shaped lounge



upmarket car. Not only that, but the door triggers an automatic step to make access effortless for the less athletic customer. Indeed, the only missing feature (found on some prestige A-classes, like the Niesmann Arto) is double-glazed side windows.

But we could only stand and admire the B534 for so long. What we needed to do was get driving, get packing and get camping. And our initial excitement was dulled somewhat by truly vicious crosswinds as we headed back down the A1. Even the wheelarch-filling wide rear track and the wider-than-standard 255 rubber were no match for the combined effects of storm-force gales and breeze-block-esque bodywork. But while the first few miles were hardly relaxing, it was immediately apparent - once again - that Hymer have set new standards in on-road refinement for motorhomes. The latest B-Class subdues engine noise better than any rival A-class or coachbuilt that we've ever tried.

And once the weather gods had finished venting their wrath, we could also appreciate that this Hymer has more than adequate 'go' from its standard 2.3-litre Fiat engine and it handles with aplomb. But then not only

the rear lounge/overcab bed layout is a favourite with us brits



FOR

- SUMPTUOUS REAR LOUNGE
- GARAGE OPTION
- REAR TRAVEL SEATS
- BUILD-QUALITY
- HIGH-CLASS KITCHEN WORKTOP
- LATEST FRIDGE WITH REMOVABLE FREEZER
- WELL-DESIGNED WASHROOM
- SUPERB DROP-DOWN A-CLASS BED
- GENUINE FOUR-BERTH
- AGUTI CAPTAIN'S CHAIRS
- DOUBLE FLOOR
- CAB SOUNDPROOFING
- USEFUL SECOND ON-SITE SEATING AREA IN CAB

AGAINST

- PRICE
- LACK OF LOW-LEVEL KITCHEN STORAGE
- SINGLE-GLAZED CAB WINDOWS
- REAR TRAVEL SEATS REDUCE STORAGE
- SMALL TOP LOCKERS WITH OPEN SHELVES BELOW
- CAB RADIO CANNOT BE USED ON SITE





FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £72,775

PRICE AS TESTED
£77,065

BERTHS 4

TRAVEL SEATS (INC DRIVER) 2
(optional 4 as tested)

DIMENSIONS 6.50m L,
2.35m W, 2.90m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT
1.98m

MAXIMUM WEIGHT
3500kg (upgrade to
4250kg available)

PAYLOAD 450kg

BEDS Drop-down cab
double 1.93m x 1.45m
(headroom 0.82m),
rear all-over double
1.99m x 1.77m/1.90m
or over-garage single
1.99m x 0.77m and
low-level single 1.99m x
1.02m/1.15m

FRESH WATER
130 litres (inboard)

WASTE WATER
90 litres
(underfloor, insulated)

LEISURE BATTERY
95Ah

MAINS SOCKETS 4

BASE VEHICLE

**FIAT DUCATO WIDE-
TRACK CHASSIS-
COWL**

ENGINE 2.3 Multijet
130bhp

MPG 25.2

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING Dometic
3-burner hob with
spark ignition, Smev
oven/grill/rotisserie

FRIDGE Dometic
8-Series 110-litre three-
way with removable
freezer compartment

GAS 2 x 13kg

HEATING Truma Combi
6 gas/mains blown-air
(standard for UK)

BOILER Truma Combi 6
gas/mains



does the body feel far more rigid than some A-classes, Hymer also fit Goldschmidt front springs in their attention to detail that verges on OCD.

return of a legend

If truth be told, we were always much bigger fans of the B544 – with its palatial lounge – than its sister B534, as the latter's rear seating always felt just a bit too confined. That's no longer the case here, though, with the offside settee stretching the tape measure to 1.90m (6ft 3in) and even the shorter nearside sofa being long enough to act as a day bed for the average British woman. The windows are not big enough to give you the goldfish bowl feel of some end lounge models, but combined with stylish net curtains you can enjoy a little more privacy in here. There's a big wind-up sunroof overhead too, and a vast array of mostly LED lighting. Uniquely, the rear wall has two separate windows with a bar between them – a bit like a 1950s VW split-screen camper in reverse!

What matters most, however, is that the rear lounge simply feels 'right'. The pale upholstery – a mix of light sand and gold – looked horribly impractical, but as my little German Spitz seemed determined to prove, its Alcantara-style finish wipes clean far more easily than you'd dare hope. And while

some European manufacturers have developed UK-only rear lounge models only to fall at the hurdle of seating comfort, you could spend a whole winter's day here – reading, snoozing, watching TV – and never regret your choice of 'van. With matching scatter cushions and a well-placed TV on a swivelling arm, this lounge is pretty much perfect. There are even little shelves on which to rest a drink, while heating is ducted 'twixt backrests and walls and the radio's tunes are repeated back here despite the lack of any obvious speakers. Shame then that you can't have the radio on on-site because to do so means turning the ignition on, which in turn switches on the daytime running lights. Make sure you get the radio re-wired before you take delivery!

There's a second seating area up front, in the shape of two – very shapely – Aguti captain's chairs, which rotate to face the rear. At first, this seemed a bit of a waste of time (as it is in most rear lounge layouts) but actually it would seem a waste not to use such superb seats when you're stationary. They make a great place to don your boots before a hike, or if your kids are playing a game at the Hymer's slide-this-way-and-that permanent table, why not relax with the Sunday papers in an armchair – if they'll let you. After all, there's room here for a



➡ We fancied a bit of sea air to blow away the post-Christmas blues but it's surprising just how few North Norfolk sites are open in February. We wanted a base near Cromer but even several sites that claimed 'all year' status couldn't take us because of waterlogged ground. Wyld Flowers at East Runton (a Camping and Caravanning Club members only CS site) could accommodate us, though, on one of only two hardstanding pitches – great value, too, at just £8 a night.



The Beach Car Park at West Runton is motorhome-friendly and a great place to enjoy the view, a half-hour clifftop walk from Sheringham.

1st stop



Few tourist attractions were open so early in the year but The Victoria at Holkham offered a superb two-course lunch (and a pint) for £15.95.

2nd stop



Marston Quay is a great place to stop with plenty of space, though access through the village is quite tight. Seal-sighting trips run from here too.

3rd stop



Stop at Cley-next-the-Sea to see the windmill and stock up at the fabulous Picnic Fayre Delicatessen (great cake!) and Cley Smokehouse (kippers etc).

4th stop



The house was closed but the grounds of Felbrigg Hall (National Trust) are open all year and are an ideal place to exercise your four-legged friend.

5th stop



coffee cup adjacent to either seat and daylight and artificial lighting are, again, plentiful. With the full-width A-class cab the front end of this motorhome also feels massively more spacious than rivals that retain a standard Ducato cab.

surprise number one

Now you may be thinking that kids would be unlikely to feature in a B534, what with its rear lounge layout and thus lack of travel seats, but that’s where the first of its new ideas comes in. Lift off the base and backrest cushions of the side-facing parts of the rear seating and you’re faced by a pair of chairs crouched down as if they’re hiding.

Deploy a couple of levers, and in seconds they’ve risen out of their boxes and are ready for passengers. It’s a trick that we’re sure to see repeated by other manufacturers as it does seem to be the best of both worlds – automotive-type passenger seats (complete with integral three-point seatbelts) on the road and domestic-style settees for lounging around on site. Of course, they do eat into storage space but a space soft bag could go in the foot space when they are folded away and they are an option, so you can go without if you never carry passengers, or just have one if you need a three-berth. In that case, go for a seat on the offside where there’s much better forward vision. Oh, and a brief passenger ride revealed a surprisingly comfortable ride considering you’re sitting so far aft.



surprise number two

While the side-facing seats have their secret, the transverse part of the rear lounge has its own surprise. This time you need to venture outside to discover it, though, where you’ll find a clue in the shape of 1.15m by 0.55m garage doors, one on each side. These open to reveal a full-width storage area with heavy duty flooring, tie-

QUALITY COUNTS



The way every cupboard closes, the feel of every fixture and fitting, and the whole ambience of this motorhome feels expensive – more £150k Liner than mainstream £50k coachbuilt.

OK, this early prototype – rushed over from Germany for our test – wasn’t quite as whisper quiet in terms of conversion noise as the B544 we tested in the December 2010 issue, but in terms of mechanical refinement it beat the £200k Dethleffs Premium Liner we tested recently – and every comparably priced motorhome on the market.

Hymer are back at the top of the class.

down hooks, a light – and enough headroom (0.69m) to accommodate all manner of barbecues, outdoor chairs, folding bikes etc. But if you want to carry ‘real’ bikes just press a button and the internal height of this vault becomes 1.17m in a few seconds. Now it’s a proper garage.

Of course, raising the garage headroom does rather change the look of the interior too. The rear windows are now hidden and the spacious wrap-around lounge becomes a transverse three-seater dinette alongside a raised single bed. You could quite happily use your B534 like this, though, when the weather’s good enough to be outside more of the time or for a few nights en route to a base where you’ll unload your cycles and get pedaling – remember you’ve still got the second seating area in the cab. Like the rear travel seats, it’s an option and again it just adds to the B534’s versatility.

choices at bedtime

With the rear in garage mode there’s an ever-ready single bed – a good-size and comfortable, if rather firm – above your bikes, while another (slightly wider) single can be created at seat height. Lower the garage back to seat level and the whole lounge can then be turned into one ginormous double.

But this is an A-class and beds made from seats will always come second to the drop-down bed in the cab. And here is where Hymer’s decades of A-class-building





experience comes in. The bed is easy to raise and lower but most of all it is generously proportioned with good headroom and the sort of mattress that has you snoring before your coiffure has even made contact with your pillow. In short, it's as good as any fixed bed but takes up no space at all when you're not using it.

in the middle

In between seating and sleeping – both in floorplan and timescale – come the kitchen (on the offside) and the washroom and wardrobe (on our nearside). And the galley, just aft of the Baur habitation door (with electric step, concertina flyscreen and deep fixed window), continues the theme of high-quality fittings along with a splash of innovation.

Here, the novelty is Dometic's latest 8-Series fridge – a modern, black-fronted installation with three-way operation (but not automatic energy selection). Its cleverness is concealed within, where the freezer compartment is simply removable. Slide out what is basically just a shelf with door attached and you have more fridge space when you don't need a freezer, which is probably quite a lot of the time.

The hob is another Dometic fitting and seemed a top-notch item, while alongside the fridge is a familiar European fitting – a Smev combined oven and grill, with rotisserie. That doesn't leave much room for storage below the countertop – just a large cutlery and utensils drawer – but additional worktop space is provided by a flap at the galley's right-hand side. The worktop itself is one of those posh marble-like surfaces that you see in £100k motorhomes and domestic designer kitchens; it even has a lip to catch spillages.

And while the large stainless-steel sink appears to lack a draining board, underneath its removable cover is the best portable drainer we've seen, incorporating a frame to support vertically stacked plates and cutlery while the tray beneath catches the suds.

Across the wide central corridor is a typically thorough Hymer washroom, complete with bench-type toilet (with wheeled cassette), plentiful storage with

WHICH motorhome says ★★★★★

Beautifully built and great to drive, it's a mix of traditional and modern, while innovative options add versatility.

OPTIONAL

BASE VEHICLE

Elegance Pack fitted to test vehicle (£4290 compared with £6350 if options purchased individually) – includes climate control air-con (£1690), driver and passenger airbags (£890), cruise control (£290), increased front axle weight (£490), Champagne coloured bodywork (£2990)

ALSO AVAILABLE

3-litre 157bhp engine (£1900), Comfort-Matic automatic gearbox (£1800)

shelves and fiddle rails, two large mirrors and a separate shower with wooden duckboard. The long of limb will be able to stretch their size nines into the shower area while sat on the throne, but there's still just enough dry floor to step out onto when you've finished your hose down. The use of space is spot on and the washroom door closes with a solidity that just re-affirms your belief in Teutonic engineering.

That just leaves the details. Details like a wardrobe with two removable/height-adjustable shelves, and a double floor that hides various cubbyholes (including one with a fitted shopping bag) and access to the boiler drain, the inboard fresh water tank (for cleaning), and even the waste water valve (so it doesn't freeze up). There's more storage too in the high-level lockers that surround the rear lounge. Their duo-tone doors with leather-like contrasting panels and positive locking catches feel built to survive a hundred years of opening and closing, but they are unnecessarily small due to the incorporation of (much less useful) open-fronted shelves below. You'll need to be careful that items parked on those shelves do not become missiles when you have to brake hard.

But those cupboards aside, we rather fell for the charms of this new Hymer and whilst Mauro's invite to our next awards is not yet in the post, we'll be surprised if he's not there.

INSURANCE QUOTE

Based on this motorhome being kept at a Peterborough (PE35) postcode and being driven by a married couple aged 55 with full No Claims Discount on their car, Safeguard would quote a premium of: **£740.16** with a total excess of £250. Policy automatically includes breakdown and European cover

www.safeguarduk.co.uk
0800 977 5953



RIVALS



PRICE FROM
£75,836

HOBBY TOSKANA EXCLUSIVE 750 RL BASED ON Fiat Ducato Al-Ko tag-axle

NOTES The Hobby won our Luxury Motorhome (over 3.5 tonnes) class in the *Which Motorhome* awards this year and like the Hymer it offers style and luxury, plus a rear lounge layout and four travel seats. It too has a drop-down bed (electrically operated here) but this is positioned over the rear lounge. Well worth a close look if its size (8.05m) doesn't put you off.

WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE June 2011



PRICE FROM
£58,800

FRANKIA FF2 BASED ON Fiat Ducato Al-Ko

NOTES Here's another high-class German import with a rear lounge and a healthy dose of innovation. The cleverness here is best shown by the backrests of the settees which rise out of the way to create two superb single beds. The washroom is novel, too, with a basin that slides up to create more space on the loo. FF4 adds rear travel seats in the U-shaped lounge.

WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE Not tested



PRICE FROM
£49,685

ADRIA CORAL S 670 SLL BASED ON Fiat Ducato wide-track

NOTES OK, the Adria is rather conventional in this context but it does combine continental design flair with an extraordinarily spacious rear lounge – and at a competitive price. Another low-profile, the Coral's half-dinette means it can also offer four travel seats and three berths. With the optional coloured cab it's a stylish new model this season.

WHICH MOTORHOME TEST DATE November 2010