

# Medium to well done

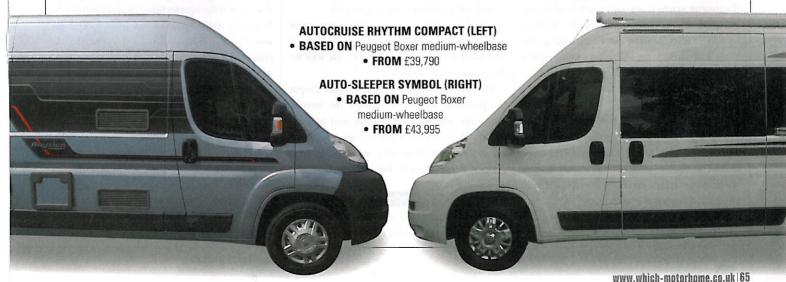
One medium-wheelbase starter, two rather different floorplans, and both in their very latest 2013 guises. Dare we pick a winner?

with total new motorhome sales only mildly threatening to get over the 7000 mark for 2012, that disappointing figure is only partly countered by relatively strong sales of van conversions – with Autocruise, in particular, leading the way.

It's heartening, too, to be able to report that both Autocruise and Auto-Sleepers have upped the ante in an area where buyers have always shown their preference for home-produced products. Here, then, we have Auto-Sleepers' Symbol in its very latest guise, featuring one or two rather radical changes (certainly by Auto-Sleepers' standards). This has always been a favourite in their line-up, as well as a vehicle that can trace its history all the way back to 1998 – almost a year before Swift (who own Autocruise) built their first van conversion.

Somewhat ironically, it's Autocruise that is now the market leader here, based on numbers sold. That's not to say competition isn't fierce, but the Rhythm Compact could soon be on the best-sellers list as it is a shortened version of their most popular camper, the long-wheelbase (LWB) Rhythm.

They might be MWB, but they're very much heavyweight contenders here. The ultimate downsizing (to vehicles that genuinely fit in a car parking space, unlike long-wheelbase versions), or a step too far? These two top guns provide all the answers.



# **Autocruise Rhythm Compact**

FOR • Stylish looks, inside and out • Relatively rattle-free • Keenly priced



New tip-up washbasin works well



Automotive-style fabrics and the rear lounge layout from Rhythm squeezed into a 5.40-metre panel van (instead of 6.00 metres)



Three burners and combined grill/oven



Microwave included in Comfort Pack



Double bed only here; no singles option



Stylish new upper locker doors

# ON THE OUTSIDE $\star\star\star\star$

It's called Autocruise by Swift now and, with the company dropping their Tempo model for the 2013 season, you'd think Auto-Sleepers' Symbol would have the campsite to itself. Not so, as this is a genuine alternative by dint of sharing the same medium-wheelbase Peugeot Boxer start point. The Rhythm Compact is only available in the blue shown here, but I can't see too many folk disagreeing with its overall looks. The colour helps disguise the lack of colour-coding for the front bumper, too.

Most buyers would agree that the Rhythm boasts the smarter graphics, although you'll need to fork out extra if you want alloy wheels. Sensibly, Autocruise keep the waste water outlet, along with all other 'services', on the offside, even squeezing in a TV aerial into the mains hook-up compartment.

# ON THE ROAD \*\*\*

Making the standard issue Rhythm Compact with the 110bhp engine keeps the initial pricing attractive. But, this is the up-specc'd 130 – not just ideal for this head-to-head but also the variant that will account for most orders. Performance is just that bit smoother and more relaxed, and there's also an extra gear.

Also here is the £1445 Comfort Pack – with cab air-con, cruise control and reversing sensors amongst

a host of extras that Autocruise expect to provide with every Compact they sell.

Miles per gallon? It does depend so much on how hard you like to drive and how much weight you're carrying around. There will be little to choose between the two competitors here – and the expectation is that most owners will go gently enough to exceed 30mpg.

Like Auto-Sleepers, Autocruise provide a tracking system. Do note, though, only Autocruise offer an automatic option (by switching to the Fiat Ducato). Another possibly critical factor in favour of the Autocruise is its layout leaves space for maximum driver's seat adjustments (passenger's too).

A final bonus? Truma's Drivesafe regulator means you can use the heating (in gas mode) en route – a nice touch if you prefer to arrive on site with the living quarters pre-warmed.

That leaves just one little glitch to report. Despite the possibility of a view through the interior, Autocruise don't provide a windscreen-mounted mirror – that's because they order a same-spec Boxer for all models. If it's an issue, ask your supplying dealer to fit one (it's easily done).

# ON SITE ★★★★

There's a stark contrast in layout here. The Compact is, as you've guessed, simply a shorter variant of the

standard Rhythm (and budget Rhythm Sport) – with smaller lounge seating, although there's a choice of rectangular or smaller round single-leg tables – depending on whether it's meals or snacks involved.

There's pre-supplied bracketry for a flatscreen TV that should be OK for two folk watching (from either settee or alongside each other on the nearside). And the radio speakers in the ceiling directly over the lounge make more sense than those in the Symbol.

But, there are other changes. Like all 2013 season Rhythms, the Compact reverts to a three-way, absorption fridge (quieter than a compressor model). A distinct added bonus of this Dometic 8-series model (it's the 96-litre variant here) is the ability to remove the freezer section altogether to create a generous larder fridge.

Plus, it's always good to see practical features like the coat hooks just inside the sliding door, the main entrance to the living quarters.

The Compact benefits from a number of 2013 upgrades to all (non-Sport) Rhythms, such as the adjustable Status 530 TV aerial, new furniture finish, and ambient lighting over the reconfigured lockers.

Cost savings? The smaller fresh and waste water tanks point more towards payload considerations, while the leisure battery is just 75Ah – although bear

## **FACT FILE**

PRICE FROM £39,790

PRICE AS TESTED £42,585

**OPTIONS FITTED** Comfort Pack £1445, 130bhp engine upgrade £1350

**BERTHS/TRAVEL SEATS 2/2** 

**DIMENSIONS** 5.42m L, 2.26m W, 2.81m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT 1.89m (kitchen)

MAXIMUM WEIGHT 3300kg

PAYLOAD 470kg

BEDS Double 1.78m x 1.30m

FRESH WATER 66 litres (underfloor)

WASTE WATER 40 litres (underfloor)

**LEISURE BATTERY 75Ah** 

**MAINS SOCKETS 4** 

# **BASE VEHICLE**

PEUGEOT BOXER MEDIUM-WHEELBASE HIGH-ROOF VAN

**ENGINE** 2.2-litre, 110bhp Euro V, front-wheel drive, five-speed manual (standard spec, upgraded to 130bhp, six-speed as tested)

# COOKING/HEATING

**COOKING** Thetford Triplex with threeburner gas hob and combined oven and grill. Sanyo microwave

FRIDGE Dometic 96-litre, with removable freezer

**HEATING/BOILER** Truma Combi 2 blown-air, gas/230V

# **BUY IF**

You're happy with the compact dimensions, especially at the very back





Gas locker steals valuable storage



Peugeot cab or Fiat with automatic

in mind the energy savings from LED lighting. Interestingly, Autocruise have gone for Truma's latest Combi 2 heating system – rated at just 2kW.

# ON THE BOIL ★★★

Auto-Sleepers' contention that an LPG tank, rather than a gas locker, frees up valuable interior storage space is demonstrated rather too well by the Rhythm – where its gas locker takes up to two 6kg cylinders but robs the kitchen of valuable storage.

Sure enough, like its rival, overall kitchen space is pretty tight, too, especially as Autocruise are determined to fit in a full cooker (it's a three-ring hob) and microwave oven (as part of the Comfort Pack).

The shallow shelf in the main floor locker (wouldn't it be so much easier if it were a deep drawer rather than just a cupboard?) accepts the grill pan for travel... at least that's what I concluded. In fact, I'm told it will be quite a bit deeper on production models. There is space for a cutlery tray in the larger-fronted locker, but the rest are only the shallowest of shelves.

# ON-BOARD STORAGE ★★★★

If I've been critical of Autocruise overhead lockers in the past, that's certainly not the case here. The ivory finish to the doors is classy, and they all get positive catches. They're a good size but a shelf in at least one of the lockers would have meant an extra mark.

The main table stows in the space in the overcab area, while the leg clips in a corner of the wardrobe, unobtrusively, and the wardrobe itself is a decent size. It's the nearside settee base that benefits from two-door access (in the 'van itself, and with the rear door open) – this is the one that's uncluttered.

# ON TO BED \*\*\*

If there's compromise in either of these vehicles, it's the beds. Here, there's just the one option – and it doesn't make for the largest of doubles, even with the backrest fillet cushion removed. It's one you need to try, but don't forget to allow for pillow space in your calculations. Me? At only 5ft 6in I found it not just a perfect fit, but perfectly comfortable.

Autocruise have missed a trick in not having the heating controls within reach of the bed. Instead, they're housed with the other main switches in the panel over the sliding door. Plus, whichever way you choose to sleep, you're going to have to squabble over an LED reading light (there's only one each side).

# ON THE LOO \*\*\*

It's all 'Swift Group swish' in here. Practical, too – there's a single overhead light, the mirrored vanity unit is generous, and the shower tray feels solid and gets the practicality of two plugholes.

There's room to use the toilet, although the two flat shelves to the back of here don't seem suited to any particular purpose. The tambour door is a real space saver, and Autocruise seem to have sorted out previous imperfections. And Swift Group's latest take on the drop-down washbasin certainly looks the part. Feels it, too, thanks to good solidity. Overall shower space is at a premium and there's a clingy shower curtain to go across the doorway, while I'm not quite sure of its best location when not in use. Love the showerhead and its trigger operation.

# ON QUALITY $\star\star\star\star$

Autocruise have nailed it with the Rhythm Compact. It's not just about the overall look, but the solid feel to key components (even the 'mock walls' around the windows and plastic panelling to the rear doors). Yes, there are a few aspects where it's been built down to its sub-£40k start price, but overall it's very impressive.

# ON VALUE $\star\star\star\star$

It's one highly attractive starting price allied to an equally attractive specification, especially with the Comfort Pack. As the UK leader in a sector of the motorhome market that's performing well, it's all looking pretty rosy for this newcomer.

# **Auto-Sleeper Symbol**

- FOR Improved proven performer
- · On-board gas tank · Long-term residuals and Auto-Sleepers' renowned back-up
- AGAINST Small offside single bed Initial price
  Flat floor no more



Usable, but the washroom looks dated



Basically the same layout as the previous Symbol but there's now a step down from the cab to the lounge floor



Fridge has slide-out worktop over



Neat loo servicing and table storage



Double bed isn't the biggest



Wine goes under the seat - 4 bottles

# ON THE OUTSIDE \*\*\*

Auto-Sleepers' aim can only be lauded: improve the vehicle, keep the price the same. It was certainly made all the harder when Peugeot announced a £600 price hike for the Boxer van. This first example, in white, looks a little bit of a retro step. But, other colours are available - including four metallics.

What the Symbol of 2013 can boast, however, is an extensive array of features such as wind-out awning, alloy wheels, colour-coded front bumper with LED running lights, reversing camera, mudflaps and more. Much of this, and other kit, comes within the £2500 Premium Pack, fitted here and expected to be ordered by almost every Symbol customer.

Of course, the graphics have been tweaked, and the latest Symbols also gain an external gas point, plus a mains socket in the rear seat base to allow use of electrical items outside the confines of the 'van.

Auto-Sleepers say they want to highlight more of the differences between their 'vans and rivals - like the use of athermic, tinted single-glazed windows from Peugeot, compared to the acrylic units preferred in the lower-priced Rhythm.

# ON THE ROAD $\star\star\star\star$

There's something a bit extra about the Symbol. That's thanks to the extra leaf spring that Auto-Sleepers

demand when they order vans from Peugeot. Another useful fitting is the Al-Ko Air Line system. True, you'll never quite get rid of the van-like driving characteristics but, it's all a definite cut above the norm. In theory, you could order a new Symbol with the 110bhp engine from £46,495 (including Premium Pack), but the demonstrator here is a far better example of what most folk will go for. Expect generous performance from the 130bhp unit. And it's good to see (hear?) that the travel is considerably quieter in terms of rattles from onboard kit than on other recent Auto-Sleepers tested.

There's also the underslung 20-litre gas tank fuelling the living quarters. The benefits of filling up at a fuel station, for a fraction of the price of bottled gas, and with far less likelihood that you'll run out, really does stand out as one of the Symbol's pluses. It also means no more lifting of heavy cylinders, of course.

# ON SITE $\star\star\star\star$

Which Motorhome bottoms felt it first... Auto-Sleepers have long been adherents of reflex foam, and we've always applauded its supportive and hardwearing qualities. In the latest models you may just detect it's that little bit more forgiving, too. There's also a choice of five upholsteries. It's a pity I can't show you the alternative two-tone wood option which was so new it hadn't even acquired a name at the time of reporting - it's going to be a winner.

The Symbol layout may remain the same, but watch out for some significant differences, starting literally at floor level. Gone is the 'double floor' that used to keep everything on the same level from the cab on through. Instead, there's a step down from the cab (inset with LED lighting for night use) - saving on production time, as well as extra materials and weight.

At the other end, it's now Peugeot's own high-roof, adding further integrity - ideal for items like the optional air-conditioning unit.

Even though the cab seats are height-adjustable, they can't really get down low enough to add to the rest of the lounge. However, there is a pedestal leg table (retained from the previous version) that sits between the two. There are also two rear speakers even if their location in the seat and settee bases less than a metre apart seems a strange one.

Full marks to Auto-Sleepers, though, on the personal safety front - with fire extinguisher, smoke and carbon monoxide alarms all on board. And, of course, no Auto-Sleeper is complete without its own crockery set - melamine, these days, and supplied in a coolbag.

# ON THE BOIL ★★★

Shovelling in a decent capacity fridge appears to have been the starting point for a well-specified kitchen.

# **FACT FILE**

PRICE FROM £43,995

PRICE AS TESTED £47,495

**OPTIONS FITTED Premium Pack £2500** 

**BERTHS/TRAVEL SEATS 2/3** 

**DIMENSIONS** 5.42m L, 2.26m W, 2.61m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT 1.84m (kitchen)

MAXIMUM WEIGHT 3300kg

PAYLOAD 404kg

**BEDS** Double 1.88m x 1.47m or two singles 1.96m x 0.61m and 1.73m x 0.59m

FRESH WATER 69 litres (underfloor)

WASTE WATER 40 litres (underfloor)

**LEISURE BATTERY 105Ah** 

MAINS SOCKETS 4

### **BASE VEHICLE**

## PEUGEOT BOXER MEDIUM-WHEELBASE HIGH-ROOF VAN

**ENGINE** 2.2-litre, 110bhp Euro V, front-wheel drive, five-speed manual (standard spec, upgraded to 130bhp, six-speed as tested)

# COOKING/HEATING

COOKING Thetford three-burner hob, combined oven/grill. Daewoo 800W microwave. Dometic extractor fan

FRIDGE Thetford 81-litre

**HEATING/BOILER** Truma Combi 4 blown-air, gas/230V

### **BUY IF**

You've got a shorter partner! Otherwise, all the usual Auto-Sleeper quality hallmarks are here





One rear travel seat is one more than Rhythm



Peugeot with extra leaf spring in suspension

There's also a microwave oven, cooker, sink ...

...Ah, the sink. The general consensus seems to be a combined sink/drainer is the ideal, even on vehicles such as these: an add-on, as here, is a – perhaps unavoidable – second best (although Autocruise cop out by not supplying one at all!). There's also room here for a cutlery drawer and shelved locker directly under the sink. Glasses occupy the kitchen's sole overhead locker – but I can't see them staying here for long; they take up too much space, surely?

The worktop extension pulling out from over the fridge looks a good idea – too high for working at, of course, but having somewhere extra to put stuff while you're preparing meals is always a boon. This is one of two extensions. Other highly welcome fittings include the splashguards, kitchen roll holder and 12V extractor fan.

# ON-BOARD STORAGE ★★★

Full marks to Auto-Sleepers for putting the Symbol's main (free-standing) table just inside the rear doors, as opposed to resorting to the wardrobe.

Overhead lockers are a generous size, all with positive catches, with the first lounge locker after the kitchen housing racking for plates and mugs. As well as the aforementioned kitchen storage for those Dartington crystal glasses, there's wine bottle storage at a sensibly low floor level, in the rear seat base.

Resorting to using Peugeot's high-roof van, as opposed to fitting a high-top, means some of the previous overcab locker storage is lost, but the Symbol is still able to offer more in this respect than the Rhythm. There's also some netting to be added to the space behind the rear seat. It's a useful idea, as is the small lidded locker beneath here.

# ON TO BED \*\*\*

OK, easy bed-making and van conversions tend to go together like cheese and ice cream. Here, the two singles are easier to set up – but there's a problem unless at least one of you is very short. Yes, the main one is a generous 6ft 5in... it's the smaller one (5ft 8in max), that's the issue – and will surely be the determining factor for many would-be purchasers.

Even the double, at 5ft 11in by 5ft 8in, is somewhat restrictive. A few more moments are taken completing this, which is suitably flat, with concertina blinds, cab curtains and LED lighting completing a very cosy night-time set-up.

# ON THE LOO ★★

By van conversions standards, this is a decent washroom – as long as you're OK with fold-down basins, but it doesn't half look dated compared to the Rhythm's. The Symbol's cassette tank exits from the rear of the 'van. It's a good arrangement – it saves cutting a hole in the base vehicle's metal and, at the same time, doesn't involve carting a cassette through the vehicle itself.

The rest of the washroom is well endowed with features like the towel holder, two plugholes in the shower tray, toilet roll holder, vanity unit etc, and there's even an extractor fan. The mirror location won't suit all, though.

# ON QUALITY \*\*\*

Some 50 years of van conversion expertise goes into each Auto-Sleeper. In the coming season, Auto-Sleepers will explain more about the extra work (as well as the fittings) that go into their van conversions. We certainly hope we've caught the drift in this report because, build-wise, they're still up there at the top of the tree.

# ON VALUE \*\*\*

It's not an easy-to-swallow starting price, despite the almost never-ending kit list. But with an Auto-Sleeper, it's almost a question of never mind the initial price, consider its worth in five, 10 or more years' time. Symbol may hold its value that bit better.

# **motorhome says**

# Autocruise Rhythm Compact Auto-Sleeper Symbol



They both might rate four stars, but we're happy to pick a winner. Tinkering with such a long-term favourite was always going to be trouble. But Auto-Sleepers have indeed set about the task with diligence. Superior upholstery, more yielding reflex foam, metalwork for the seat frames, etc. It no longer has the flat floor of its predecessors but Auto-Sleepers have stuffed in the equipment.

We still have issues regarding the safety of that rear travel seat. And the bed-making is that bit more contentious in the Auto-Sleeper. True, it offers the option of two singles, but the finished dimensions of the beds in both vehicles really do need checking out for yourselves.

It's an easy way out to simply go for the more expensive – and hopefully more refined – vehicle. So why is the Rhythm Compact our winner? It simply comes across as the more fully thought-through vehicle. Though it was tempting to sit on the fence. After all, beds apart, if you want the ultimate camper, maybe you won't settle for anything but the Symbol, with its choices of exterior and finishes. Autocruise, on the other hand, have made tougher decisions on what to include on the equipment list. But you could say we're feeling the pinch in 2012, and are falling in line with these more chastened times. Our money – because there's less of it these days – is with the Autocruise. Just.



# **Rest of the range**

# **Autocruise**

It's taken a while in the sorting, but Swift Group's mighty portfolio now boils down to using the Autocruise name solely for van conversions. It's a sector-leading line-up these days, too. As well as the Rhythm Compact, 2013 will also see the unveiling of a new flagship model – the Forte is Autocruise's first camper based on the extra long-wheelbase Peugeot Boxer.

Actually, all Autocruises are also available on Fiat's Ducato, should you want some of the options not offered by Peugeot, including automatic transmission on engines from the 130bhp variant up. Also very tempting is the Rhythm Sport (see last month's road-test), a pared down version of the Rhythm itself that – despite coming on the long-wheelbase Boxer – actually undercuts its Compact sister on price. The Tempo (LWB but with a Symbol-like layout) has been dropped for 2013.



Rhythm Sport is budget LWB camper with simpler interior



Award-winning Windrush is Auto-Sleepers' family camper

# **Auto-Sleepers**

There's been something of a cull across the Auto-Sleeper range for the season ahead – dropping from 30 to 16 models. Within that, there are four high-top Peugeot-based models now – Symbol (tested here), Warwick Duo (rear lounge), Kemerton (front lounge, end washroom) and Windrush (bunk beds) – with all except the Symbol on a long-wheelbase Boxer chassis.

Auto-Sleepers scored over their rival when they announced the four-berth Windrush – Autocruise's rushed response being the Quartet (our long-term test vehicle – see page 78). From Auto-Sleepers, it was the discontinued Stratford that was the obvious direct rival to the Rhythm Compact. But now the only rear lounge on offer is the long-wheelbase Warwick Duo, a direct rival for the standard Rhythm. The Warwick Duo is also sold in dealer special spec by Marquis as the Sussex Duo.

# Before you buy consider these...

# **Murvi Pimento**



Autrocruise aren't the only ones who've taken a strong selling long-wheelbase conversion and brought it down a size. The Pimento, announced last year, is Murvi's Morello on a medium-wheelbase chassis. And it's really rather clever.

Shaving off some of the Morello's length, the Pimento offers almost exactly the same facilities in a similar layout - thus retaining much of that large, inward-facing settee that's such a Murvi favourite. It's compromised slightly by the wardrobe, which hangs over what will be the foot of the bed, but there's still plenty of seating space for two.

The other main compromise is in the kitchen where some space is lost, albeit with equipment levels remaining the same. Indeed, there's a choice of specification here - Smev four-burner hob with separate grill/oven and Dometic 60-litre fridge or four-burner hob and grill with 95-litre fridge.

Start point is Fiat's Ducato, rated at 3500kg, with 130bhp engine. Metallic paint, cab air-conditioning, underslung gas tank, twin-leaf rear suspension, awning and TV set-ups are among the most popular options. Prices start from £44,250, but remember we're talking Murvi quality and pedigree here.

The Pimento has not got the almost never-ending list of awards that its Morello big sister has collected, but then it's not been around as long.



BASED ON Fiat Ducato MWB, 2.3-litre, 130bhp

**BERTHS/TRAVEL SEATS 2/2** 

**DIMENSIONS** 5.41m L, 2.05m W, 2.54m H

**READ THE ROAD-TEST** June 2012

MANUFACTURER Murvi,

www.murvi.co.uk

# **Vantage Med**



A relatively new name on the scene, but one that's been making very favourable impressions. As a converter that sells direct (ie no dealers), Yorkshire-based Vantage specialise in the production of two-berth high-tops on a variety of base vehicles.

The Fiat Ducato-based Med floorplan closely mirrors that of the Autocruise Rhythm Compact, although the lounge here wraps around the rear rather than having parallel seating. This, in turn, creates a 6ft 1in by 4ft 6in transverse double bed.

Vantage also include a table to sit between the swivelled cab seats, as standard (there's even a tripod for setting up a table outside).

Pricing starts at £40,950 for the 130bhp engine model in silver metallic. Keep a close eye on the standard specification, too. It includes such features as Acoustitherm insulation, internal windscreen insulation panel, gas and electric hot water/heating system, gas-strut assisted locker doors with positive catches etc, as well as an extensive list of optional extras.

Sister model, the same-price Cub, is also an interesting alternative - offering a bigger double bed (6ft 3in by 6ft 1in) or twin singles (6ft 3in by 3ft 0in), that extra space here being gained by offering a transverse kitchen behind the cab.



BASED ON Fiat Ducato MWB, 2.3-litre, 130bhp

**BERTHS/TRAVEL SEATS 2/2** 

**DIMENSIONS** 5.42m L, 2.26m W, 2.60m H

READ THE ROAD-TEST June 2010 (Cub)

MANUFACTURER Vantage, www.vantagemotorhomes.co.uk



**Marquis Dorset** 

To all intents, this is an Auto-Sleeper Symbol. And a Symbol of yesteryear, too, because it has retained the flat floor of the original, as well as still using Auto-Sleepers' original high-top for that little bit of extra headroom and storage space. That also means bed sizes that equate to two singles (1.91m by 0.61m and 2.00m by 0.59m; or 6ft 3in by 2ft 0in and 6ft 7in by 1ft 11in) or a double 1.88m by 1.47m (6ft 2in by 4ft 10in).

But, it's exclusive to Auto-Sleepers' own dealer network - 10 outlets throughout England operating under the Marquis Motorhomes banner. The Dorset here is part of the extensive Marquis County range and comes with arguably the most generous list of standard equipment in any medium-wheelbase Fiat/Peugeot high-top conversion. You also get a good choice of exterior colours and interior upholstery finishes.

Typical of any dealer's own special edition version, the Dorset is jam-packed with extra specification, right up to the latest Fresh-light roof air-conditioning unit for the living quarters. Reflecting this, prices start at some £1500 over its Symbol cousin, at £49,495.

Other than that, this is simply a Symbol in its most top-end level of trim - with a bit of additional exclusivity.



BASED ON Peugeot Boxer MWB, 2.2-litre, 130bhp

**BERTHS/TRAVEL SEATS** 2/3

**DIMENSIONS** 5.42m L, 2.26m W, 2.87m H

**READ THE ROAD-TEST** May 2010

**DEALER** Marquis Motorhomes, www.marquismotorhomes.co.uk