

Automatic FOR THE PEOPLE?



Automatic-loving Rachel Barker gets the keys to the award-winning Auto Campers Leisure Van. The question is, will she master its manual gearbox...?

PHOTOS RACHEL BARKER

Some campervans fill you with an instant sense of calm when you slide open the door. A relaxing lounge in soothing tones, a perfectly chilled Chablis waiting in the fridge, the soft sounds of Classic FM piped through the speakers. Lovely.

The sporty, vibrant Leisure Van from Auto Campers makes a different impression. It's a total burst of energy. It makes you want to dash out and book a kitesurfing lesson, or some other activity out of your comfort zone, just so you can drive it there. I clocked up half of my daily 10,000 steps just standing back to admire it.

A previous version of the Leisure Van won Campervan of the Year at *The Motorhome Awards 2015* and with such an endorsement we couldn't wait to take it for a test drive.

The test van was based on the 2.2-litre Ford Transit Custom. With a pop-top roof and optional roof bed it's a four-berth

campervan and one of three options from Auto Campers, which also includes hi-line and lo-line roof versions, depending on your number of passengers and desired headroom.

Inside the campervan are two single cab seats (the driver's on an optional swivel base), and a fixed, reclining double seat in the third row position with three-point seatbelts. Auto Campers has sensibly opted not to squeeze a third passenger seat into the middle, so it's nice and spacious.

With twin opening doors and the means to attach two awnings, not only can you enter the van from either side, you can extend the footprint of your living space and take full advantage of warm summer breezes drifting through the van.

We collected the Leisure Van from Reading on a rather oppressive, overcast day and while the campervan's sleek,

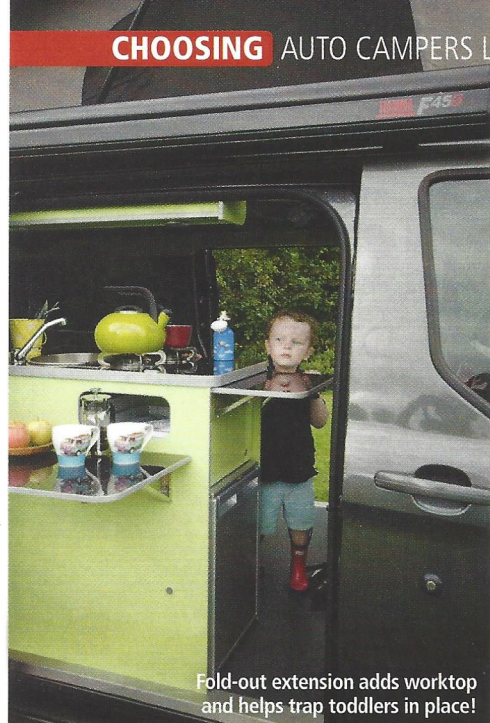


shiny design certainly brightened its surroundings, it's fair to say that all warm summer breezes had already drifted through the van and far into the next county.

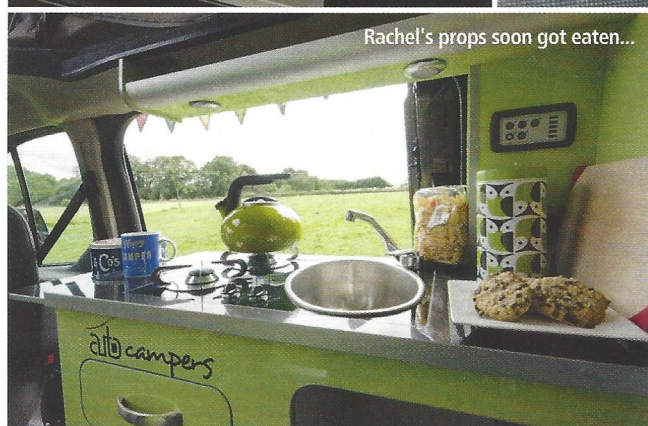
For the first time in a campervan, I was the designated driver. Work commitments meant my husband couldn't make the test drive so I was flying solo. Solo, that is, except for my two-year old son, 14-year old niece and my parents-in-law (ages undisclosed), who travelled in the convoy vehicle.

The Leisure Van's passenger seats are superb so, theoretically, I could have taken three of them with me, but (a) choosing which person to leave behind would have been unwise for diplomatic relations and (b) I knew I'd benefit from the extra levels of concentration afforded by driving alone.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am used to driving automatics. The whole



Fold-out extension adds worktop and helps trap toddlers in place!



Rachel's props soon got eaten...



Lime green interior adds a snazzy splash of colour to the interior (you can also get white and orange)

gear stick/clutch combination has always seemed like an unnecessary complication and I'm more than willing to take the easy option. And this has never been a problem in hired campervans as my husband is happier behind the wheel. I knew this drive would require a bit more focus than usual, though.

So I'll start by thanking the (long queue of) drivers along Reading Road in Winnersh who waited very patiently as I edged sheepishly out of Roy Wood Transits (fervently hoping the staff had retreated inside), and promptly stalled. Twice.

The drive

Immediately I was doing this campervan a disservice. Because it is not a sheepish campervan. Far from it. Our test van was a sleek magnetic grey with a lime green and charcoal interior. It is bold. Dynamic. I thought it was super cool.

Back to the road, and once safely up

to sixth gear on the motorway with no imminent junctions or <shudder> roundabouts, I could now focus on the drive itself. I needn't have worried about driving a larger vehicle; there is nothing unwieldy about the Custom. It feels slick and compact. Apart from the classic Ford console being stretched across a wider space, the cabin doesn't differ much from that in a Focus. It's nicely refined with front and rear parking sensors, an optional reversing camera, auto-sensing wipers and lights and a good selection of controls on the steering wheel. Likewise, the steering was light and the gearbox surprisingly smooth.

The elevated driver's seat is adjustable and feels extremely comfortable. In fact, this is the only seat I've driven in that didn't aggravate an old back injury – miraculous. The powerful heated seats probably helped, like having a fresh hot water bottle for the whole journey.

In the context of my recent lack of

manual driving experience, the high pedals and absent footrest in the narrow footwell did give my left Achilles a rather strenuous workout, but other drivers might not notice.

The 2.2-litre engine itself was relatively quiet, but the conversion was surprisingly rattly – it sounded like the seat mechanism wasn't as stable as it could be, or perhaps the fold-out tables needed to be more cushioned. Either way, I found Jeremy Vine was booming out of the speakers at a rather emphatic volume when we came to a stop (crucially remembering the clutch at the last minute).

We were staying at the lovely Bishops Green Farm campsite near Newbury. It's a great spot to take your campervan if you're looking for a small, peaceful site with an excellent amenities block and friendly staff. Not many kitesurfing opportunities, though.

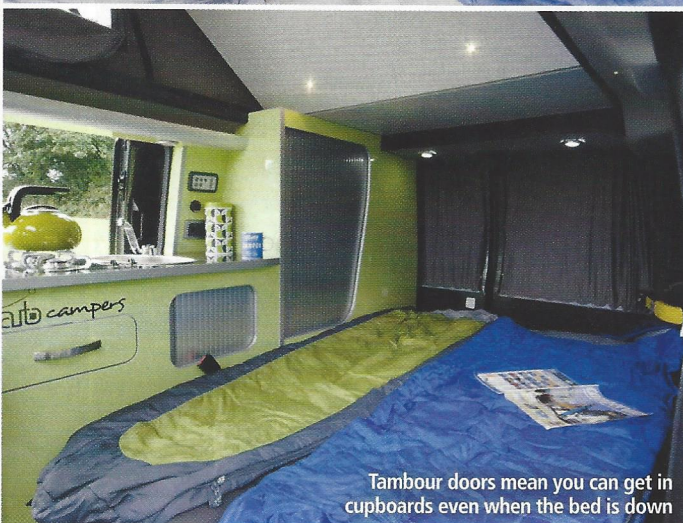
What followed were a happy couple of hours familiarising myself with the Leisure Van and photographing its nooks and crannies (before the rest of the family turned up and ate all the props).

A stylish interior

Inside the van, Auto Campers offers a choice of white, orange or green high gloss furniture, complemented by a classy

I'm not convinced that my bunting particularly enhanced the Leisure Van's sporty credentials, but who can resist a fluttering of brightly coloured flags to brighten up your pitch?





Spacious pop top easily has enough room for two adults

Tambour doors mean you can get in cupboards even when the bed is down

metallic black laminated worktop. And having unknowingly taken along a whistling kettle, biscuit tin and sleeping bag all in varying shades of lime, it was most fortuitous to have the green furniture option.

I'm not convinced that my bunting particularly enhanced the Leisure Van's sporty credentials, but who can resist a fluttering of brightly coloured flags to brighten up your pitch? And the van's interior captured attention wherever we stopped; few people could resist sneaking a glance at the snazzy interior.

How does it work?

Of course, one cannot camp on aesthetics alone. When you're staying in a compact campervan – whether for a day or a week – ease of use is paramount. Anything time-consuming or complicated can seriously detract from the experience.

This was where the Leisure Van gained the most points in my book. Every mechanism was straightforward to operate; it all worked first time. Opening the bed out was a dream – pull a lever and slide the bed out until it's flat. That's it. The backrest worked similarly and could be reclined at several positions or pulled totally flat. No reaching for

different sizes of infill cushions or requiring the help of a partner with an engineering degree just to make the bed.

Raising the roof was equally simple. Release two straps above the cabin and push the roof upwards. Gas struts help lift the roof and maintain its position at full height. If you have the optional roof bed like we did, just pull it down. Now you do need a bit of strength in your arms for this bit, but as someone still floundering with the smallest weights at my gym class, I managed it fine.

Reaching the roof bed is perhaps a bit ungainly, as you have to climb onto the front cab seats, rest on one of the two corner platforms and hoist yourself up. Or you can purchase an optional ladder, which would be particularly useful for children or those of shorter stature.

Space for living

My favourite aspect of the Leisure Van was the twin side doors. From a practical perspective you can obviously enter and exit from both sides, and reach into the all-important fridge from your picnic blanket. But the impression of space and light it adds to the van should also not be underestimated; it really feels like you're living outside – just in far more comfortable surroundings than a tent.

SPECIFICATION

Auto Campers Leisure Van

Base vehicle Ford Transit Custom Trend

Drive Front-wheel drive

Engine 2.2-litre Euro 5 engine

Power 125bhp (current vehicles: Euro 6, 170bhp)

Economy 33mpg (estimated)

Gearbox 6-speed manual

Number of travel seats 4

Berths 4

Leisure battery capacity 115Ah

Payload 400kg

Length x width x height 4.97m x 2.08m x 2.10m (roof down)

Standard equipment Base vehicle has single driver's cab seat and single swivel passenger cab seat, electric windows, twin side doors, rear barn doors, second row fixed seats, privacy tint windows, auto sensing wipers and lights, front and rear parking sensors, steering wheel controls, Ford Sync and cruise control. Conversion has extra-wide fixed double rear travel seat with reclinable seat function, 2-ring gas hob and gas box, stainless steel sink, underfloor fresh and waste water tanks, 100W solar panel, 50-litre compressor drawer fridge, cab silver screens and blackout curtains, LED lighting, multi-position table system, flip-up kitchen worktop

Optional equipment Front air conditioning £720, reversing camera £300, 200kg payload upgrade £600, roof bed (on pop-top) £500, swivel driver's seat £400, Dometic 972 portable toilet £100, Webasto Air Top 2000 blown-air diesel heating £1000, 2.6m cassette awning £500, multi rail for drive-away awning attachment £200, external shower point £150, bike racks from £300, bonnet stripes £60

Warranty 3 years Ford warranty, 1 year Auto Campers warranty, 1 year appliance warranty, 1 year Ford Assist

Price from £36,500 for a pop-top, £32,000 for a lo-line

Price as tested £42,500

AUTO CAMPERS LEISURE VAN

PROS

- ✓ Twin opening doors
- ✓ Choice of stylish interiors
- ✓ Easy-to-operate mechanisms
- ✓ Large boot space
- ✓ Automatic option coming 2017 (hooray!)

CONS

- ✗ Basic kitchen
- ✗ Narrow footwell with high pedals
- ✗ Bit rattly when driving

Of course the optional 2.6-metre cassette awning also provides shade from the sun (or rain), and the attachment for a drive-away awning is a valuable extra.

Inside, the rear passenger seats are set back, creating a sociable living space to put the table up between the rear and front cab seats when swivelled. The driver's seat swivels easily, once I'd worked out how not to trap my fingers, and then offers great legroom.

The rear passenger seat can be set in 12 recline positions, which I thought was fab (I must admit I didn't use all 12 but it certainly made for a more relaxing sofa). This pivoting back section also means you can sit up and read in bed mode.

The LED lights in the cabin can be operated independently, and the diesel Webasto heater can provide a powerful blast of warm air when you return from your mountain hike or off-road cycling (or you just want to test out all 12 seat



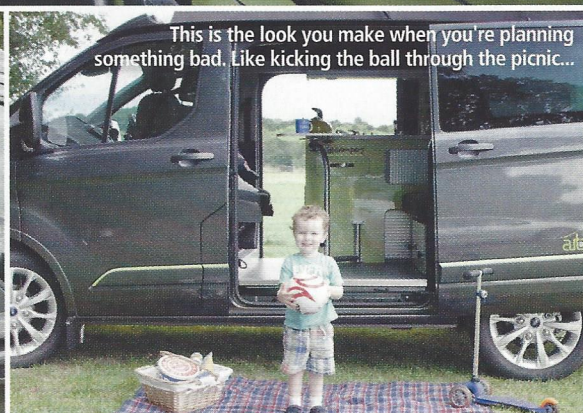
"Mum, can I eat another prop?"



Rear shower is ideal for showering after surfing, or hosing off muddy dogs!



Every awning should sport some bunting!



This is the look you make when you're planning something bad. Like kicking the ball through the picnic...



Wardrobe is shelved - which is much more useful than a hanging rail

reclines with the latest copy of *Campervan*) in the cooler months. Only the front cab has the optional air con.

Sleeping arrangements

If you're travelling in a party of one or two, you have two good sleeping options. As well as being easy to operate with a reclining backrest, the downstairs bed is a very good-sized double. It also has access to the fridge and most of the storage cupboards when converted. If you want to retain some floor space downstairs, you might opt to sleep in the upper suite. With vents on both sides, a window at the front and flexible reading lights, it's a comfortable space with enough height to not feel claustrophobic.

Time for tea

The kitchen is where other vans of a similar size offer more options. Visually, it's appealing and does include the basics. There's a sink with cold water and a chrome-finished tap, a two-ring burner, cutlery drawer, two cupboards and a 50-litre drawer fridge. On the downside, there's no grill or water heater, and little work surface inside, although there's a flip-top table attached to the outside. And having a top-loader fridge inevitably means whatever you're looking for will always be buried under the massive

bolognese defrosting at the bottom.

The intention is that being accessible from both sides of the van, the kitchen offers the ultimate in flexibility and enables some *al fresco* cooking. This is true to an extent; for simple snacks it's a nice feature and it's handy to be able to grab the kettle from the stove and milk from the fridge without climbing into the van. The flip-top worktop extension outside can be used as a serving tray, but it feels a bit flimsy to conduct any vigorous food preparation, so there's still not much usable work surface. If you really want to prepare and cook a more substantial meal outside, you'd probably take along a camping table and bbq.

What about my stuff?

The kitchen cupboards are a decent size, though, thanks to the 40-litre fresh and grey water tanks being located under the floor to free up space. There's also a storage drawer under the double seat and a cupboard for the optional portable loo. A wardrobe with tambour doors sits towards the rear of the van and offers hanging space or hinged shelves. The best storage, though, is behind the tailgate, which opens to reveal a large boot space and dedicated locker for four outdoor chairs. We fit a huge amount of outdoors equipment in the boot.

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I maintain that even if a compact campervan has the space to sleep four people, you'll always struggle for storage if you're away longer than a weekend. But the Leisure Van makes good use of space and if you're planning to be away longer, just add a drive-away awning and decamp items there overnight.

Whether you're heading away for a weekend of relaxation in your campervan or using it as a base for a day of extreme fishing, you want everything to be easy. You don't want to spend your time fiddling with complicated mechanisms or contorting yourself into awkward positions just to make the campervan habitable. This is an excellent example of a campervan designed for ease of use. With its slick and stylish interior and space for your gear, you can head off and focus all your concentration on your kitesurfing. Or your manual driving skills.

campervan VERDICT

A fantastic compact campervan. It's stylish but eminently practical and the twin sliding doors are a great feature. The storage and awning options make it an ideal campervan if you're taking part in outdoor pursuits or sporting events, and even if you don't spend much time in it during the day, it's the one you (and most of your fellow campers) will want to return to come the evening.