

THE ENTRIES

VAN CONVERSIONS UP TO £34,000

Adria Traffic 3 Way	£26,500
Adria Twin	£33,326
Bravia Swan A	£33,999
Danbury Surf	£33,242
East Neuk Fifer Touring MWB	£31,495
East Neuk Fifer Touring SWB	£28,495
Mondial GT	£33,995
Trigano Tribute 550	£30,719
Trigano Tribute 650	£31,745

VAN CONVERSIONS OVER £34,000

Auto-Sleeper Symbol	£37,085
Auto-Sleeper Warwick	£37,095
Danbury Family Four	£35,948
Danbury Royale (Twin)	£39,311
Horizons Unlimited Cavarno 2	£38,546
Murvi Morello	£41,252
Murvi Piccolo	£37,384
Timberland Endeavour X1	£38,995
Timberland Endeavour X1X	£38,995
Volkswagen California SE	£39,262
Westfalia Nugget	£34,275

COACHBUILTS UP TO £36,000

Bessacarr E510 Compact	£35,295
Blucamp by Rimor Sky 22	£29,842
Carado T135	£26,995
Compass Avantgarde 115	£26,495
Dethleffs Eurostyle A63	£33,995
Elddis Autoquest 120	£25,995
Elddis Autoquest 145	£28,995
McLouis Lagan 202 SE	£33,352
McLouis Lagan 250 SE	£33,206
Roller Team Auto-Roller 500	£29,336

COACHBUILTS £36,000-£45,000

Autocruise Startrail	£42,995
Auto-Sleeper Sigma EL	£42,916
Bürstner Quadro IT 674	£43,465
Ci Mizar Elite	£41,459
Eriba Car Emotion 653	£41,990
Hymer Van 522	£36,371
Marquis County Devon	£43,135
McLouis Tandy 650	£44,919
McLouis Tandy 672	£44,033
McLouis Tandy 673	£44,072
Swift Voyager 695	£43,825
TEC FreeTEC XS 594	£37,000

COACHBUILTS OVER £45,000

Autocruise Oakmont	£51,555
Auto-Trail Frontier Arapaho	£61,730
Auto-Trail Frontier Delaware	£54,537
Bessacarr E789	£58,495
Knaus Sun TI 700MG	£50,995
Lunar Roadstar 800	£52,590
Marquis County Berkshire	£48,660
McLouis Tandy 640 SE	£46,530
TEC FreeTEC 718 UK	£49,000
TEC RoTEC 662	£48,000

A-CLASS UNDER £60,000

Hymer B508 CL	£50,654
TEC I-Tec 680G	£56,000

A-CLASS OVER £60,000

Concorde Charisma 890M	£154,999
Niesmann + Bischoff	£85,999
Arto 74 LE GB	



The magnificent seven, from l-r: Elddis Autoquest 120, Concorde Charisma 890M, Bessacarr E789, Auto-Sleeper Sigma EL, Hymer B508 CL, Timberland Endeavour X1 and East Neuk Fifer Touring SWB

DESIGN & DRIVE 2008

THE CLUB'S ANNUAL COMPETITION FOR MOTOR CARAVANS ATTRACTED A RECORD ENTRY. DESIGN BY GEORGE HINTON, DRIVING BY MICHAEL LE CAPLAIN

FOR THE second consecutive year Elddis stormed to success in the Club's Motor Caravan Design & Drive competition thanks to its budget-priced Autoquest 120 coachbuilt. Stablemate, the Autoquest 115, was triumphant last year, and the 120 ensured that the Durham-based

Explorer Group once again walked away with the overall prize in the 9th staging of these prestigious awards.

Indeed, the 2008 competition was a triumph for Britain as a whole, with homegrown designs dominating five of the seven classes – only the two A-Class categories providing

Continental success (not surprising, considering there are no British-made A-Classes). In addition to the Explorer Group, other UK manufacturers smiling were East Neuk, Auto-Sleepers, Timberland and the Swift Group (courtesy of the Bessacarr marque).



East Neuk Fifer Touring SWB

CLASS 1 VAN CONVERSIONS UP TO £34,000

1st East Neuk Fifer Touring SWB

2nd East Neuk Fifer Touring MWB

3rd Mondial GT by Swift Group

Entries for this class more than doubled to nine this year, largely due

to the plethora of high-value-for-money long-wheelbase Fiat panel van conversions, mainly from importers Adria, Trigano (two) and newcomer Bravia from Slovenia, but also from the Swift Group, which has returned to the van conversion market in style with its Autocruise-built Mondial GT.

The number was completed by the Renault Traffic camper from Adria and VW T5 Surf camper from Danbury.

The Adria Twin, winner of this class for the last two years, could only make fourth against this opposition, which tells lots about the quality of the top three. In third place was >>

ON THE ROAD

Enjoying something of a whitewash in the class this year, East Neuk's two entries deserved every last driving point they earned. The MWB derivative even managed to feel slightly better damped than the class-winning SWB, those extra inches seeming to temper the X2/50 Ducato's characteristically firm ride, but not to the detriment of its handling or ride.

Neither model rattled on even the test-route's less well-metalled road surfaces, although each did suffer just a little from wind noise around the central roof vent. Over-the-shoulder visibility is hindered in each by the presence of the washroom, but elsewhere there was practically nothing to fault.

The third-placed Mondial GT performed remarkably well, given its paltry 20 miles on the odometer. It rattled a fair bit, but was positively monastic compared to the seriously noisy Adria Twin. Both Trigano Tributes impressed with their vigorous engines, making them the diametric opposite of the chronically underpowered 1.9 Danbury Surf.



East Neuk Fifer Touring SWB

the Mondial GT, which impressed for its general fit and finish, its gimmick (shiny mock-wood inner windowsills for heaven's sake!) and its practicality: the kitchen has a 38in length of worktop and a three-burner compact cooker, while the all-plastic washroom has ample space and a 'proper' door with mortice lock.

East Neuk Campers from Fife impressed the judges last year with some fresh thinking on layout in its compact Fifer Touring, backed with well-crafted execution. This year it achieved the double whammy, entering two versions: last year's

compact short-wheelbase model where rear travel seats convert to a double bed, flaps go every which way to give workable surfaces for the tiny kitchen, then a wall cupboard does the unexpected, pulling across the aisle forming a toilet compartment that you complete with sliding panels once you have slipped inside. Very clever. The medium-wheelbase model uses its extra length to provide a conventional washroom with shower plus some extra storage, so perhaps it's slightly less clever, hence it was placed second, behind its smaller sibling.

CLASS 2 VAN CONVERSIONS OVER £34,000

- 1st **Timberland Endeavour X1**
2nd **Murvi Morello**
3rd **Auto-Sleeper Warwick**

Another hotly-contested and diverse class with 11 entries, built on five different base vehicles: VW T5, Ford Transit, Renault Master, Peugeot Boxer and its Fiat Ducato clone, so it is hardly surprising the top three all came on different chassis. More surprising was that less than 100 points separated the top five, while there were nearly 500 points between the bottom six, so this was also a close contest.

Auto-Sleepers should be very pleased to hit third spot with its Warwick, which was launched just last year and aimed to take the brand in a new direction, less fuddy-duddy and far more stylish and modern. Instead of caravan-style plastic windows, all glazing is in continuous tinted athermic heat-reflecting bonded glass, so the whole look is more limousine than delivery van. Inside it is Auto-Sleepers at its best, with classy fabrics, neat detailing, such as cloth storage pockets on the vertical inner stiffeners that separate the window areas. Again, there is an excellent, no, an amazing kitchen, that boasts not just a dual fuel full cooker but a microwave and extractor fan too, with a rear lounge layout and an excellent washroom.

This has sometimes been called the Murvi Morello class, as that entrant has won it so often. This year, by the slenderest of margins, it was pushed into second place, but that does not devalue the offering one bit. The side-facing lounge is great, even if converting it to a travel seat is a pain, while the kitchen has everything in small scale except the workspace, which goes on forever. Washroom's thoroughly practical too.

Timberland Endeavour X1
exterior and interior

Winning is not unknown to Timberland either, which took the class this time with its Renault Master-based Endeavour X1. Features include a dual-fuel cooker with a 16 x 22in flap providing a modest amount of workspace and the big 96-litre fridge is a pleasant surprise. The compact washroom has a huge drop-down basin as well as a shower.

ON THE ROAD

Many of the driving judges felt the Murvi Morello was the best-driving motor caravan in the whole competition, thanks to its utterly silent interior and apparent rocket power (it actually has Fiat's superb 3.0-litre 157bhp engine under the bonnet). I had it tied on points with the lower-positioned Horizons Unlimited Cavano 2, thanks to its similar levels of performance allied to a particularly silky-smooth ride.

The Timberland Endeavour X1, however, was the match of all of them – and, indeed, its (much quieter) Endeavour XIX sibling. You need to learn to drive around Renault's QuickShift automatic transmission, however: driving in full auto-mode, foot to the floor, elicits unpleasantly (and violently) jerky upshifts.

It's much better to feather the throttle between shifts, or better still, change gear 'manually'.

Elsewhere, Auto-Sleepers' generally impressive Warwick was let down only by wind-noise from its single-glazed side windows, while the design team clearly felt the eighth-placed Westfalia Nugget was ill-conceived inside: to a man, the driving panel thought its on-road performance was top-notch.

Elddis Autoquest 120
– class and overall winner

CLASS 3 COACHBUILTS UP TO £36,000

- 1st **OVERALL WINNER**
Elddis Autoquest 120
2nd **Compass Avantgarde 115**
3rd **Elddis Autoquest 145**

The budget coachbuilds class attracted four entries last year, this time there were 10, six imported. It is significant that in this price class, where specifications are kept to the minimum, the importers fared worst, while our top three all came from the Explorer Group, followed by the Bessacarr. Kitchens were partly the culprits, as a basic three-burner hob and no workspace can't expect to compete in a market that knows a grill and oven are vital if your product is to be considered. Only four imports here had grills and two had mini-ovens.

The Elddis Autoquest 145 has all the essentials for four to sleep and travel in and the ambience isn't bad either for under £30k, with cosy red upholstery and real wood-framed locker doors. There's only a 10in width of kitchen worktop proper, but a 14 x 10in extension flap makes a big difference. A wallboarded washroom is the obvious economy area, but now they've fitted heating and a 'proper' door with lever-handle. A worthy third-placer.

You couldn't get a cigarette paper between the scores of the winning Autoquest 120 and runner-up Compass Avantgarde 115, both low-profile models, but differing in layout. The Avantgarde is classic rear-kitchen two-berth, so benefits from an extra worktop above the dresser, while the 120 layout in the Autoquest has its entrance to the front with a rear lounge. A wee 6 x



10in shelf slides out in the kitchen just when you thought you'd run out of space (the 9 x 25in worktop isn't over-generous), while the cooker features the popular high-speed or wok burner as one of its three rings.

ON THE ROAD

If there were raised eyebrows aplenty last year when an Explorer Group product – namely the Elddis Autoquest 115 – not only won its class but scooped overall honours, then this year's Explorer class lock-out will do little to lower them. Interestingly, my score sheet on the overall winner, the Autoquest 120, is bereft of comments, but its score tally was never less than 50%, and ended up mostly at 75% and above. Consistency and astonishing value for money, then, are its chief strengths, with the 100bhp Boxer engine being sufficiently pokey and refined, and its conversion noise levels and build quality noticeably better than last year. It sneaked ahead of its second-placed Compass sibling by just five points.

By contrast, the handling of both the Bessacarr E510 Compact and Carado T135 proved to be unpleasantly unsettling and rear-heavy, while the chances of the generally impressive McLouis Lagan 202 SE climbing higher than its eventual eighth place were scuppered by its surprisingly poor resistance to cross-winds.

Auto-Sleeper Sigma EL



ON THE ROAD

Three industry big guns slugged it out for the top three spots in this class, but it was the engagingly nimble and surprisingly good-value Voyager 695, spoiled mainly by its noisy conversion and 2.3-litre Multijet engine that felt borderline underpowered, that had to settle for third. New Swift Group sibling, the Autocruise Startrail, bettered its in-house rival by just two points, its brisker performance, still more impressive handling/ride and considerably quieter conversion being chief among its strengths that left the Auto-Sleeper Sigma EL to take a famous victory. Enclosed-feeling cab, and what were almost certainly the worst cab seats in the entire competition aside, I noted its ride quality as 'compliant for an X2/50', its performance as 'brisk as you like' and its cab/chassis noise as 'surprisingly good'. Moving further down the list, TEC's excellent-value FreeTec XS 594 was one of my early favourites, sporting a quite superb ride quality, Hymer Van 522-bashing performance and an almost complete lack of cab or conversion noise.

The new Bürstner Quadro, meanwhile, appeared to have a 6ft budgie in its early-design roof bed, so loud were its constant squeaks and chirrups.

CLASS 4
COACHBUILTS FROM
£36,000-£45,000

- 1st Auto-Sleeper Sigma EL
2nd Autocruise Startrail
3rd Swift Voyager 695

Twelve models entered this class, same as last year, and while the four British-built models may again have appeared to have trounced the imports, the top three foreigners were really hot on their heels. Quite a large Ford-based entry from the Continentals, while the Brits came up with Peugeot, Mercedes and the inevitable Fiat.

The Marquis County Devon represented the three-pointed star, scored very highly on fixtures and fittings and only just slipped out of the top three. These again included oh-so-close scores for third and second that we're talking half a fag-paper separation this time. Swift's Voyager 695 got the short straw, but impressed highly with what amounts to a Kon-Tiki but on a standard Fiat chassis rather than a low-line Al-Ko, at a huge saving.

Nonetheless it was beaten by what is now one of its own, since Swift bought Autocruise out of liquidation last year, having bought its Bessacarr tourers some years ago. The low-profile Startrail is runner-up, propelled by a

similar 130bhp engine, though here Peugeot-badged, and priced at a similar £43k. Layout is classic fixed bed (6ft 2in) with washroom to the offside forming a shower cubicle between the basin and the rear loo. Kitchen is well fitted, including microwave oven, but while the front lounge could make a 3ft 9in bed, there are just two travel seats.

The winning Auto-Sleeper Sigma EL is a low-profile classic, enhanced by the optional Peugeot 3-litre 160 version of the Sevel diesel motor. Layout is rear lounge that easily converts to a big double bed, while the small kitchen worktop is supplemented by a big 18in-square extension and a coffee table, and you get a swing-wall shower cubicle. Price is again £43k, proving this is a hotly-contested piece of the market. (See Nov '07 issue for a full test.)



Auto-Sleeper Sigma EL

Dometic's 88-litre fridge. A swinging washbasin makes full use of the shower space and the waste tap recessed into the skirt is neat. However, there was no provision to carry four people safely, despite four potential bed spaces and the washroom door lock needed adjustment to keep it closed.

Victory in this class goes to Swift Group's Bessacarr E789, the tandem-axle monster which, despite its title, is 8.67m (28ft 5in) long with

a 5-tonne MTPLM and 4165kg MIRO. This is a real long-haul tourer with garage under a transverse rear double bed, an excellent kitchen including microwave oven and ample cool food storage in sliding wire baskets plus a Thetford tower fridge-freezer. Four seats match four beds plus you get two sunroofs and an awning in the deal. Power is by Fiat's 3-litre 160 engine. Really hard to fault.

ON THE ROAD

Swift Group finally takes a Design and Drive 2008 class win, and the Bessacarr E789 certainly deserves it. Some of the distinctly iffy cab trim was hard to miss – or forgive, given the asking price – and it's about time Swift Group did something about its motor caravans' high levels of conversion noise, but the tag-axle chassis allied to the 3.0-litre Fiat engine added up to a performance, ride and handling package that comfortably bettered even the second placed Mercedes Sprinter-based Marquis County Berkshire in the final standings. The optional reversing camera would be money well spent, however.

The remarkable-value Berkshire surprised a lot of us, being at once sufficiently brisk (I noted its performance down as being 'more a build-up of momentum') and refined to justify the legendary three-pointed star on its grille, while a single word – 'Strewth!' – summed up the third-placed 160bhp Autocruise Oakmont's performance in my notes.

Other notable class entries included the undeniably classy, but almost comically underpowered Auto-Trail Arapaho (which sported a 2.3-litre Multijet engine, enormous body and tag-axle chassis notwithstanding) and the Knaus Sun TI 700MG, whose rattly conversion, despite looking and feeling superb both inside and out, is really starting to look its age.

CLASS 5
COACHBUILTS
OVER £45,000

- 1st Bessacarr E789
2nd Marquis County Berkshire
3rd Autocruise Oakmont

Class five's entries doubled to 10 this year, with just the Hymer-owned TEC submitting two models, which almost tied for fifth place. Again, very few marks separated any of these vehicles in our assessment, which speaks highly of the efforts both local converters and importers are making to meet customers' needs.

Following last year's class win with the Gleneagle, Autocruise scored a creditable third place this time with its almost brand-new Oakmont. This sports the latest motor caravan fashion, the island bed, but it only managed to stretch to 6ft length, which cost it some points. The cook has a full-size dual-fuel cooker and a microwave to play with plus a big 104-litre Dometic fridge, but only 10 x 20in of worktop, and the exposed drainer looks a bit out of place. However, Alde wet central heating will appeal to year-round users.

Well clear in second place comes the Mercedes-powered Marquis County Berkshire, quite a big beastie at 7.3m

Bessacarr E789
exterior and interior

(24ft) long and 3880kg MTPLM, with a rear lounge layout and a commensurate 150bhp motor. The kitchen area is superb with a massive 4ft 4in of worktop once the slide-out island unit is opened, dual-fuel cooker and microwave, partnered by

ON THE ROAD

A class of just two entries, but what a fascinating pair they were. I wasn't expecting a great deal from the Hymer, having tested a disappointingly noisy and rattly early model six months previously, but this one was a gem, being at once firmly planted on the road, near-silent over all but the very worst potholes on the test-route and blessed with a level of performance that belies its size.

The TEC I-Tec 680G, then, had quite a fight on its hands, and one that it just couldn't quite win, thanks in no small part to its higher asking price. That said, it's an extremely handsome motor caravan – possibly the best looking in the entire competition – performs strongly and has particularly good door mirrors and supportive cab seats.

In the end, though, details like a distractingly wobbly overcab bed, and sun visors that are impossible to reach without unfastening your seatbelt and standing up, counted against it.



Hymer B508 CL

CLASS 6
A-CLASS UP TO £60,000

- 1st Hymer B508 CL
2nd TEC I-Tec 680G

The British A-Class appearing to have disappeared from the market, this class has become a Continental preserve once again, comprising a Hymer Classic B508 and a left-hand-drive TEC.

The TEC hardly stood a chance to my mind, although not that many marks separated the two. Why? The TEC was to Continental specification, so made no concessions to the British market with just a three-burner hob that even lacked an igniter and there was only a small triangle of worktop available.

Good points were fixed rear 6ft 4in twin beds to partner the pull-down cab double, or you could quickly convert these to a second king-size double. If Anglicised it could do much better.

The winning Hymer B508 CL was built on the 3-litre Fiat and, as usual, impressed with its quality and detailing, such as the ease with which the cab bed could be operated and the proper stowage for its ladder in the edge of the bed. A SMEV mini oven/grill had been added for the UK market, and it was just a very nice compact tourer for two or three, with seating for four. The £58k price of the demonstrator included £7.5k-worth of extras.



Hymer B508 CL

**CLASS 7
A-CLASS OVER £60,000**

1st Concorde Charisma 890M

2nd Niesmann and Bischoff
Arto 74 LE GB

This is the class for fantasy and outrage with no upper limit, but the two entries here had a huge price difference, the Arto being £26k over the £60k threshold, then the late entry Concorde A-Liner at virtually double, with the extras alone costing as much as the winner of Class 3! As with so many A-Class models, both had only one door and that on the UK offside. The makers seem to presume people spending this much won't be doing much cooking as the galleys were poorer than most UK models' by far. The Arto has only three gas burners and a warming oven atop



the Dometic tower fridge-freezer, with precious little worktop. There's plenty of cool food storage and the soft-close drawers are clearly meant to impress, while the clever washroom design incorporates a round shower cubicle. You get a nice lounge at both ends in subtly-classy hessian-look cloth with faux leather borders.

The winning Concorde Charisma was on a mere 6.7-tonne Iveco chassis with a 3-litre 177bhp engine, so more mature drivers could handle it on a normal car licence. Amazingly though, its 9m length only provided three forward-facing seats when it has four beds. Again, only a three-burner hob, but there's also a Sharp combi microwave/grill and a coffee maker, plus you have an on-board generator to power it all. Storage is largely in convenient drawers, while the washing facilities get separate spaces for toileting and showering. Finished more to yacht than caravan standards, with a Tecma ceramic toilet and hydraulic steadies, it could hardly fail to rack up more points than the Arto, which it did in some style.



Concorde Charisma 890M and (below) interior

ON THE ROAD

The big, imposing Concorde Charisma 890M was the one motor caravan we were all itching to drive, even if its sheer size was rather daunting, given the narrow nature of some of the test-route's roads.

The bad news – wallet-busting price aside – concerns the driving position. Being based on a 6700kg Iveco Daily chassis means that the steering wheel is almost completely flat, leaving the driver feeling rather crouched over it. Gearshifts from the automatic transmission proved rather ponderous, too, although one guest passenger – one B Williams esq – was heard to opine that they felt and sounded like nicely executed manual gearshifts from where he was sitting.

The good news is that, initially daunting aquarium-sized windscreen aside, the Charisma is astonishingly easy to drive, with good all-round visibility (a lack of a reversing camera was one surprising omission, however) and sufficient get-up-and-go from its 3.0-litre engine to more than keep up with motorway traffic.

By comparison, the Niesmann + Bischoff Arto 74 LE GB, despite sporting a beautifully damped ride, brisk (if rather scrabbly) performance, excellent cab ergonomics and a general lack of intrusive noise, was hampered by awful brakes that almost completely lacked feel, and gearing that felt surprisingly – and restrictively – short.

Thanks to Tarmac, who lent us a weighbridge during the testing for this competition.

Fascinating facts about Design & Drive 2008...



200 10-litre jerry cans made up the water ballast



1512 miles covered on the driving aspect

70 – the number of different judging criteria for each motor caravan

£2.5million – the value of the motor caravans entered

56 entries – the biggest yet

10 judges – six design and four driving

9th Design & Drive competition



13.67 tonnes of ballast was moved during the competition

560 judges' sheets marked