



# CARVING OUT A NICHE

Martyn Bell reveals how he created a campervan from a two-year-old Fiat Ducato, a variety of woods and his skills as a cabinetmaker



**M**y journey started on a holiday in Portugal. My wife and I were at Bordeira beach and caught sight of a couple of motorhomes wild camping at the beachside. By the end of the holiday I decided I had to have a motorhome.

Being a cabinetmaker by trade, the most obvious choice was to build my own, with a focus on wood. It then occurred to me that perhaps this was something I could offer as a part of my cabinetmaking business. Once I'd made that decision, there was no time to waste in researching and planning.

After a false start searching for a good base vehicle on ebay – which took us on an interesting trip down the country from West Yorkshire to Birmingham to view a white Mercedes Sprinter. Despite its young age, the Sprinter was already showing signs of rust and had numerous scrapes and scratches.

We found success on our next trip to Birmingham's Harrisons Commercials. Our perfect base van was tucked around the back being cleaned and had not yet made it onto the forecourt. A long wheelbase Fiat Ducato, two years old with low mileage and priced at £10,000.

## THE PLAN

The first task was to plan the design. I was keen to keep it functional and stylish, and let the beauty of the wood be the main feature of the conversion.

Deciding on the interior layout was simple. We are foodies at heart so a large, functional kitchen area was the most important aspect in the plan. The second big requirement was to fit as large a bed as possible into the space that was available.

The third key aspect was to incorporate a small garage area at the back to keep the outdoor gear separate. Once these decisions had been made the rest of the design just slotted into place.

I am regularly commissioned to create one-off pieces of furniture, solid wood doors and windows within my business. A great deal of planning goes into building bespoke pieces when thinking of the space available, which joints to use, how to go about building it and so on. So, it was a natural step for me to plan and think of building the fitted furniture for the interior.

I also like quality. The yacht building industry, with its use of wood, has been a major

source of inspiration to me in this build. Bespoke wooden furniture not only stands the test of time but can be purpose built to fit into any small space and be practical for the specific needs of a motorhome interior.

My aim has been to create a bespoke 'van by using a mixture of woods tailored in their use to the specific needs of the build. I used a mixture of woods such as ash, solid and veneered oak, merranti and iroko.

Wherever possible I've used reclaimed wood. In particular, merranti from a previous job was used to create drawer boxes and to build the bed. Merranti is a very lightweight timber, so it's a perfect solution for motorhome use.

The main challenge has been to ensure that this solid build quality has been achieved within the payload weight parameters. I was initially quite nervous about the payload, but on final weighing, it came in at under 3,000kg and gives a respectable 500kg payload.

## INITIAL STAGES

In starting the build, I tackled the windows first. Initially, I was nervous about cutting through the van for the first window, but it slotted in

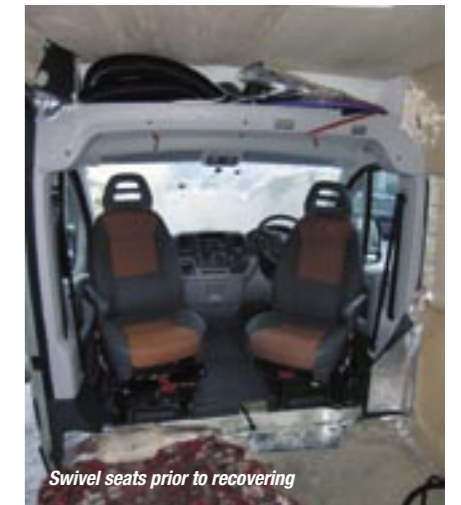
## THE BUILD



Before the work started



Windows fitted



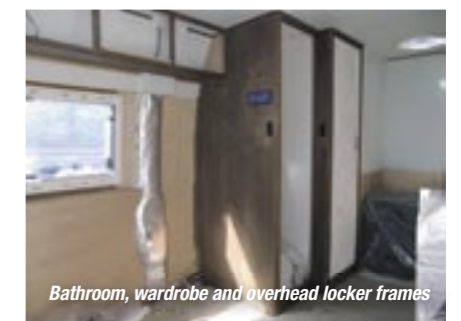
Swivel seats prior to recovering



Once the windows were in, we made a start on the insulation



Boarding out the wardrobe frame



Bathroom, wardrobe and overhead locker frames

without a hitch. The remaining windows and rooflights were fairly straightforward.

Insulating came next. I was keen to double insulate, which forms a vapour barrier. Although this added extra time to the build, it has proven well worth the time invested. The 'van is cool in summer and keeps warm in winter.

The electrics appeared initially daunting. However, a book on boat electrics helped a great deal. I used a CBE control panel and nearly 1,000 metres of wiring – which gives an indication of the complexity.

For the materials I took a trip to O'Leary's shop in Woodmansey for the hob, grill, sink and taps, toilet, gas blown heater and hot water. The remaining materials for the build were ordered from various companies via the internet.

## IT'S ALL IN THE CHOICE OF WOOD

For ease of starting the internal build, the bathroom (as an enclosed room) came first, along with the wardrobe, which sits alongside. I decided to use ash for the construction of the dividing walls based on its strength and flexibility. Historically, this wood has been used

extensively in the construction of old motor vehicles, most notably the Green Goddess fire engines. Ash has a high tensile strength before it snaps, which is why it is used for sporting equipment such as cricket bats.

In the bathroom I was aiming for high-class so hand-built the wooden sink in iroko. Frequently seen in yacht building, iroko is a particularly oily timber, which has anti-bacterial properties making it ideal for use as a sink. Together with an oiled finish it lends itself perfectly to being used in a bathroom. I also designed and built a bespoke light fitting for the bathroom, also made out of iroko.

The bed construction is integrated tongue and groove slats. It simply pulls out to extend to make the base of the bed. It stretches almost the width of the 'van, with a standing area at the side, and creates a bed which is nearly a king size.

The kitchen has been designed and built with the grain of the wood in mind. The worktops are built using oak for the sheer beauty of its graining. Due to the weight of this particular wood, thin veneered sections have been used to create the worktops, whilst still

maintaining a solid feel. I built them with rounded corners as a design feature that runs throughout the interior scheme.

The kitchen cupboard doors are inset and not 'face fixed' for a traditional fit, together with mitred beading. This is a labour intensive process as there needs to be an equal and exact gap all the way around. The cupboard doors have a spray painted finish and stainless steel handles fit flush to maximise space and to maintain a contemporary feel.

Deep drawer boxes give fantastic storage, with traditional dovetail joints and incredibly easy access to storage. Full extension ball bearing drawer runners have a spring to pull them in to ensure they are securely closed whilst on the move, removing the need for any other catches.

I built a veneered oak coffee table and a larger dining table, both with rounded corners to reflect the kitchen work surfaces. The coffee table is neatly stored in the bulkhead and is for use alongside the rotating cab seats; the dining table, for use whilst sitting on the main seat, is stored in the wardrobe. Both utilise the same leg for setting up; also stored in the wardrobe.



The small rear storage area



The bathroom basin is made from wood



You can just imagine our view with the door open



Wardrobe drawer boxes are simple



Julie contributed the compass artwork



The shower tray



The crockery cupboard



The small coffee table complements the...



...larger dining table with legs

## EVERY DETAIL COUNTS

The 'garage' at the rear of the 'van takes only 15cm of space and takes two folding chairs, outdoor table, silver screen, boots and rucksacks. It provides easy access to the Gaslow refillable LPG canister and cassette toilet. It has also provided much needed storage for damp coats and muddy gaters on occasion – all nicely separate from the inside of the 'van. It has shaved 15cm off the room inside, but has been well worth the loss of space in the 'van itself.

I aimed to make the build as environmentally-friendly as possible. My research suggested a solar panel would be a good idea to power the fridge, lessening the drain on the batteries – perfect for wild camping. I also incorporated the new SOG system for the toilet, which removes the need for a chemical toilet. This has been a wise investment.

With the plumbing, I used domestic-sized fittings in both the bathroom and kitchen to give good water flow and drainage.

Environmentally-friendly LED lighting is used throughout.

For the upholstery, the foam for the seats was ordered cut to size from an online company. For comfort we opted for six-inch thick foam. The fabric came from ebay, an end-of-line Linwood upholstery fabric.

Upholstery is the one thing I could not do myself but fortunately my wife, Julie, is handy with a sewing machine and rose to the challenge. The results are fantastic and we made a significant saving by upholstering ourselves.

Julie is an artist, so her creative touch has also been added to the 'van with compass-themed artwork on the interior door.

## UNIQUE INVESTMENT

The project to build a van conversion has been a hugely enjoyable one. I've learnt a great deal along the way but essentially it's been all about utilising existing cabinet-making skills and applying them to a new environment, with different constraints to ones I have been previously used to.

My work has always been about creating bespoke pieces. Bringing my experience of

cabinet making and joinery together with the knowledge of the issues around building a motorhome is now a fresh arm to my business.

In total, this project cost £18,000 (£10,000 for the base vehicle and £8,000 for fixtures and fittings). Labour, of course, is not included. ■

## CONTACTS

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■ **More images** can be seen at:  
[www.finewooddesigns.co.uk](http://www.finewooddesigns.co.uk)