

ORION'S BELTER

WildAx Constellation on 2.2-litre LWB Citroën Relay

Value and quality take starring roles in a shiny new high top from Yorkshire



In the depths of January 2006, and in a darkened corner of the north of England, a new breed of motorcaravan was born. WildAx was the Brainchild of Duncan Wildman and his technical director Chris Axon

- hence the name. The idea was to take new-ish low-mileage, secondhand Citroën Relay and Fiat Ducato (Sevel-built) panel vans, convert them to a good standard and sell them at an affordable price. So well was the venture received that the company now has a 4500 square-foot workshop and employs six craftsmen, turning out four conversions a month.

With the advent of the new bulbous-nosed X/250 Sevel-built vans, good secondhand examples of the previous model became more difficult to get, so the company now concentrates on converting brand-new vans with two layouts. Both Aurora and Constellation are built on the long-wheelbase Citroën Relay. As good-condition, secondhand X/250s become available, WildAx will be prepared to undertake commissions on these too.

On another dark north-of-England morning, we arrived to test the WildAx Constellation, which had just returned from the G-Mex Show in Manchester. It was explained that this example was very much a prototype

and various features would be modified in production. Also, the base vehicle was secondhand, having covered over 36,000 miles. Even so, and apart from a couple of stone chips, we would never have guessed. Painted standard panel van white (which seems quite unusual these days), the effect was softened by simple blue decals. What made this 'van unusual was the double-chevron logo on the nose. Few Citroën Relays are converted, but I don't know why they are shunned in favour of Peugeot boxer or Fiat Ducato - they are all the same basic van (almost identical siblings, built at the Sevel plant in Italy) and as we'll see, Citroën throws in some tempting goodies.



Words & pictures by
Andrew Bromley

ORBITER

Entry to the cockpit from the body of the 'van is easy, as there's no central handbrake cluttering space between the seats - it's sited to the right of the driver, while the (six-speed) gearlever is dash-mounted. Citroën fits a useful shelf above the windscreen, where unwary souls could bang their heads - no such problem for me though, and I'm tall. No passenger airbag on this 'van, (it's available as an option), however, there is a satnav fitted by Citroën, who supply three years TrafficMaster (traffic information system) support and three years anti-theft tracking free and as standard!

I found the cab seating comfortable and the driving position just grand. Radio controls are usefully sited on the steering wheel and the steering column is adjustable for reach and - minimally - for rake. The driver's seat had an armrest, but not the passenger's. However, Duncan Wildman explained that this 'van originally had the standard commercial double-passenger seat and this had been temporarily replaced by a driver's seat from another van, which currently, lacked a seatbelt. Rona, therefore, ensconced herself on the forward-facing rear travel seat. My 'back seat driver' found this pew too upright, but otherwise comfortable, and with good visibility. She didn't fancy trying the rearwards-facing travel seat though, fearing possible car ('van) sickness!

I enjoy driving these Sevel X/250s. This one had the 2.2-litre 120 horsepower engine, which pulled the big body smoothly and easily up the steep hills out of Keighley, while the 'elephant-ear' door-mirrors gave a clear view of the sides and rear. Although I think it's too long and wide to be a realistic sole vehicle, the LWB Sevel-built panel van is reasonably handy for its size, even in town. Suspension is harder than on our Transit-based camper, but

road holding and handling are excellent.

This test was not conducted in The Fens or on Cheshire's plain, so we had plenty of scope for reversing on inclines. Bearing in mind that some of these vans (the Sevel-built Citroën Relay/Fiat Ducato/Peugeot Boxer) suffer with a transmission problem that can cause juddering, how did it fare? Well, on a reasonably steep slope and given a hefty dose of revs, the Constellation reversed with mild vibration and protest. I've certainly driven a worse example, but I still feel reverse gear is simply too high. Having met an oncoming vehicle on a really steep and narrow hill, I would ask the opposing driver (nicely), if he'd reverse instead!

RELAXING SPACE

So, once parked up on the moors, it was time to inspect this 'van more closely. Entry through the wide-sliding side door is via an electrically operated Omnistep, but the two travel seats facing each other across the entrance limit access somewhat. Once inside, you're faced by a six-foot sofa, and we reckon five or six people could be accommodated in this lounge, particularly as all the seats are set commendably low: no dangling legs here. Stretching space for multiple legs, though, is cramped: you'd probably all end up playing 'footsie!' The rear-facing travel seat's back reclines, but the forward-facing pew is fixed and vertical. Production models will feature a removable lumbar support cushion to improve comfort.

The upholstery (including cushions) is in a pleasant beige with stripes, which contributes to a light, bright, welcoming interior. Plain fabric lines the walls and removable carpet covers a vinyl floor and extends into the cab.

Lighting throughout, is by LEDs. There are numerous ceiling lights, plus three reading lights in the lounge and a striplight over the



There's plenty of space in this front lounge-based conversion. Kitchen and washroom are sited in the rear

PLAN IT

The long-wheelbase high roof, Relay panel van measures in at a fraction under six metres (19ft 8in) in length. With a wide body (in panel van terms), it offers converters the scope to include many of the features expected in coachbuilds, without having to squeeze them into a 'dolls' house.

The Constellation has a forward lounge configuration - with a long settee on the offside and opposite, two belted travel seats facing each other either side of the sliding door. The kitchen runs along the offside rear, with the washroom and wardrobe opposite on the nearside. Neither cab seat swivels to face the living area.

On Test WildAx Constellation



1

- 1 There are two belted travel seats in the lounge and room for five to relax
- 2 Free-standing table is a snug fit
- 3 The optional TV pops up from behind the forward-facing rear seat
- 4 The lounge easily converts for versatile sleeping
- 5 The kitchen features a full cooker and plenty of worktop
- 6 No drainer for the sink, which offers a hook-on draining rack instead
- 7 The washroom is generously sized. Production models will get a tambour-type entrance door

sink cover. As part of the Lux Pack, a 40-piece crockery and cutlery set is included and there will (on production 'vans) be a cutlery drawer in the pullout larder unit. A Thetford three-way fridge (80 litres capacity on this example, but expanded to 100 litres with the Lux Pack) holds perishables. There are two further cupboards under the work surface and four high-level cupboards for non-perishable items. Currently, these have curved doors which are distinctly cranium-unfriendly; production 'vans will feature sliding tambour doors.

WASH IN SPACE

A panel van of this, generous, size gives space to install a washroom of sensible dimensions and Constellation doesn't disappoint. There is the ubiquitous Thetford swivel-bowl loo (cassette accessed from inside the rear nearside door) and above it, a drop-down washbasin. The combined tap/showerhead sits low on the sidewall of the washroom, but we would prefer it sited closer to the basin. There's no window, but a rooflight is fitted, plus LED lights, loo-roll holder and towel ring. In production, the door will be replaced by a tambour type, rendering the present shower curtain unnecessary. A sunken, mirror-faced, wall-cupboard is also proposed. WildAx makes all its own shower trays, and most washbasins.

SEEING STARS

Come bed time, making the main bed is simple. Twist a lever under the settee and the metal bed-frame pulls easily out into the aisle, the backrest drops flat (add one small infill cushion at the front) and that's it. The longitudinal double, six feet three inches long and three feet 10 inches wide, is pretty flat and comfortable. In addition, the rearward-facing travel seat slides out, meets the other



2



3

kitchen. Lighting will be upgraded further on production models, we were told. All along the offside and behind a pelmet, are WildAx-trademark, blue LED light strips which cast an ethereal glow. A Remis rooflight further brightens the interior. Other than in the cab, all windows are acrylic, including those in the rear doors. In this prototype, these lacked the Remis pleated blinds fitted to all the others, but that will be remedied in production.

Immediately behind the rear travel-seat is an anonymous-looking cupboard, reaching just above head height. Press the top shelf down and a (15-inch) TV/DVD player unit rises majestically on a strut – a real boy's toy! This television is part of the Lux Pack of options.

Assume you have five people in for a meal:

where will you feed them? When we arrived, the Constellation didn't yet boast a table, but a freshly made example was ready when we returned to base. Freestanding, it's stored in the wardrobe; erected, it fits - snugly - twixt travel seats and settee, making access and egress almost impossible. We think a smaller tripod-mounted table would suit better...

COOK IN SPACE

Constellation has a well-equipped kitchen, featuring a full-sized four-burner Spinflo cooker with oven and grill. There's also a deep sink and generous work surface, but no stainless-steel drainer (so useful as a 'messy' surface and for hot pans), instead, a nifty little wire basket drainer hangs from the Chinchilla glass

WE LIKED

- High standard of workmanship
- Tremendous value for money
- Well-equipped kitchen
- Easily made, huge bed
- Lots of storage space
- Standard spare wheel

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A stainless steel drainer
- A better-sited washroom tap
- A lower reverse gear

WE DISLIKED

- The (prototype) table and cupboard doors
- Lack of floor space in lounge

and reclines flat, to increase that double into a monster king-size bed – least-ways it should on production ‘vans. Remember that temporary replacement front passenger-seat? Well, its base prevented the travel seat back from flattening completely, so we had to pretend. Alternatively, the settee and the rear travel seats can be used as single beds. We understand that memory foam is offered as an option, for even greater comfort.

LIFE SUPPORT

I’ve mentioned the useful amount of kitchen storage, and this is mirrored elsewhere. Ahead of the washroom is a huge wardrobe, which also holds the table and awning winding-handle. I would request a shelf or two in here for folded clothes. Another commodious cupboard sits above the wardrobe and there are four high-level cupboards in the lounge (with curved doors, again to be replaced by tambours in production). There’s room under both travel seats (a pull-out shoe basket is proposed for the rear travel-seat in production ‘vans) and a considerable amount of usable area under the settee - the seat rising easily on a self-supporting frame. The shallow over-cab shelf contains silver blackout/insulating screens for the cab windows. Finally, there are two open cubbies alongside the high-level lounge cupboards, plus some useful shelving for hook-up leads etc, on the rearmost surfaces of the kitchen unit and washroom - accessible through the ‘van’s rear doors. This all adds up to a formidable array of storage facilities, but WildAx couldn’t be certain of the payload available to fill them until the ‘van is weighed in production trim. Payload is thought likely to be around 550kg, before taking



4

water and gas supplies into consideration. This could be increased if the option is taken to upgrade the standard 3300kg chassis to 3500kg MAW.

WildAx fits fresh and waste water tanks externally (each 100 litres capacity), but they can have insulation and heaters as an option. An unusual feature is a 20-litre underslung LPG tank, which will save considerably on gas costs,

compared with cylinder refills. A useful gauge on the dashboard indicates the gas level.

Blown-air space heating is provided by a gas-fired Truma E2400, hot water by a gas/mains electric-powered Truma Ultrastore boiler, which shares a niche under the settee with the 105 amp hr leisure battery.

AcoustiTherm sheet insulation is fitted in walls and ceiling – the equivalent, apparently,



5



6



7

On Test WildAx Constellation



Considerable amounts of storage space lurk under the sofa

of 118mm (4.5in) of loft insulation. We were also struck by the number of mains sockets: a double above the kitchen work surface, one at floor level by the wardrobe, one for the TV (plus an aerial socket) and another in the settee base. Citroën fits 12V sockets in the cab, and on the offside rear door pillar.

Many options are available, but we were impressed by the completeness of the standard specification. Particularly noteworthy is the three-year RAC warranty (part of the Lux Pack), which allows any necessary work to be done at workshops throughout the country: you're not required to return your Constellation to WildAx, which could be a problem if you lived at the other end of the country.

TEST EXTRA SPECIFICATION

- **Price from:** £30,995 OTR
- **Price as tested:** £33,270 OTR
- **Base Vehicle:** Citroën Relay long wheelbase high roof panel van, 2.2-litre turbo-diesel producing 120bhp, six-speed gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Warranty:** Base vehicle and conversion 3 years
- **Dimensions:** Length: 5.99m (19ft 8in); width: 2.05m (6ft 8.5in); height 2.60m (8ft 6.5in).
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3300kg
- **Payload:** 550kg (estimated)
- **Belted seats:** 4 (including driver)
- **Berths:** 2
- **Beds:** Double: 1.90m x 1.83m (6ft 3in x 6ft 0in); alternative singles: 1.90m x 650mm (6ft 3in x 2ft 1.5in) and 1.83m x 650mm (6ft 0in x 2ft 1.5in)
- **Other features:** Kitchen: Stainless steel sink with hinged glass lid, draining rack and mixer tap, Spinflo Caprice Mk III cooker with hinged glass lid, four-burner hob

(including one electric hotplate), grill and oven, all with electronic ignition, Thetford three-way fridge (capacity 80 litres). Washroom: Thetford C200 swivel-bowl electric-flush toilet, drop-down washbasin, shower mixer tap, single-outlet shower tray. Base vehicle: satnav with TrafficMaster software and tracking facility.

- **Heating:** Water: Truma Ultrastore boiler, gas-mains operation. Space: Truma E2400 with blown-air, gas-only operation
- **Water Tanks:** Fresh water: Underslung capacity 100 litres (22 gallons). Waste: Underslung, capacity 100 litres (22 gallons)
- **Optional Extras fitted to test vehicle:** Towbar with single electrics (£275), wind-out awning (£500), Lux Pack comprises TV/DVD player, PC200 electrical system upgrade, hook-up lead, 100-litre fridge upgrade, scatter cushions, three-year enhanced warranty with RAC-backed cover (£1500)

E&OE

STAR PERFORMER

The WildAx Constellation is a big high top with a largely traditional layout, thoughtfully converted to a high standard. Personally, we aren't sure if the extra rear-facing travel seat is worthwhile, given the loss of floor-space, but for some, the ability to carry four passengers could be vital.

The amazing feature of this 'van is the value for money. The basic price is only £30,995, which unusually, includes delivery to your door, road tax and number plates. The prototype was fitted with the desirable Lux Pack (normally priced at £1500), but if you visit WildAx at a show, it may be available as part of a special show deal. ■



VEHICLE LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

WildAx Motorhomes, Ascot Buildings, Starkie Street, Keighley, West Yorks BD21 1PH (tel: 01535 608555; web site: www.wildaxmotorhomes.com)