

SUNRISE

over the mountains



AT A GLANCE

The Devon Sunrise's key selling point has to be the Toyota Hiace Powervan on which it is based. Two versions are available, both with elevating roofs. This is the type of camper to consider if you need it also to act as a car. Price as tested: £22,053 on-the-road

PLUS POINTS:

A camper with car-like qualities, simple but effective conversion, Toyota "approved"

WHICH TEST

Devon have matched the superb driving characteristics of the latest Toyota Hiace base vehicle to a tried and trusted conversion in their latest Sunrise. **JOHN PAGE** reports on an elevating roof camper which really could do duty as the family car.

What a revelation — the ride, the performance of the base vehicle; and the down to earth simplicity of the conversion. Here is an elevating roof camper small enough to park in a car slot with room to spare — and to slide under just about all the regular height barriers. Incredibly, with the roof retracted, the overall height is 2m (6ft 6½in), a mere 1¾ inches higher than a fixed roof Toyota Hiace van.

The Toyota base vehicle is space-age pretty and technically the equal of anything produced in Europe. The three-year or 60,000 mile warranty suggests that Toyota is happy about its durability.

The fern green metallic paintwork of this demonstrator is a change from white, white, white which, coupled to some swish wheel trims, takes the Sunrise right away from the commercial vehicle look. All credit to Devon Motor Caravans for recognising the potential of the latest Hiace Powervan, and obtaining the full backing and support of Toyota GB Ltd.

There are two alternative layout plans for Sunrise: number one with four forward-facing seats and a larger kitchen; or number two, this traditional "Volkswagen" arrangement of rear settee, offside furniture unit with lots of floor area to relax in or transport anything from a bureau to a baby carriage. Although both are

basically two-berth, a bunk in the roof is an option, and a young family could always cope by adding an annexe tent for the children to sleep in. That way all the benefits of a compact vehicle around town are retained.

To the obvious advantages of low height, better fuel consumption and sleeker looks of an elevating roof, add greater headroom, plus increased light and coolness in the summer. Yes, it does miss out on the roof locker storage a high-top could provide.

THE CAB

Modern this definitely is. But conventional, too: right in front of the driver is the speedometer; left of this but close together, the fuel and temperature gauges can be scanned at the same time. You couldn't possibly be confused about the rear fog light switch as it is the only one on the front panel.

The heated rear window button is over near the radio, while the hazard button is unmistakable, sitting on top of the centre console between two dashboard air vents. The miserable hooter squeaks when the steering boss is leaned on; lights, washers, wipers and headlight dipping are all by stalks on the column.

A massive diameter steel gearstick sticks straight up from the floor yet falls nicely to hand, and has a "boot" large enough to remind you not to trip over it. I didn't like the throttle pedal position because it was difficult to relax my right foot unless I jammed my shoe up against the bulge of the front wheel housing, and even that wasn't really satisfactory.

I liked the unusual shaped door mirrors for a good field of view, but in diabolical conditions of thin mud, salt etc on the M11 at night, both mirrors dirtied over repeatedly, the only cure for which was to drive with the window down. It must have had something to do with the airstream between the door and the mirror — needing, I suspect, a fairing to close the gap.

Exiting and entry was unobstructed, and I appreciated central door locking as a standard feature. Cab curtains close to seat belt anchorages have always been a safety no-no, and I also question the possible hazard of a metal rail for them screwed to the cab roof.

Listening to the Sony cassette radio was a pleasure at any speed. The detachable fascia ought to deter the villains, but I'm told it's no more effective than other security measures. The deep, capacious and unobtrusive locker beneath the centre console was useful — it was big enough for cameras, binoculars and documents. A second locker opened from the top of the dash' in front of the passenger seat. And a final plus for the tall windscreen wipers which coped with everything a dirty January night on the motorway threw at them.

ON THE ROAD

The great surprise to me when I read the technical details of the Hiace is that Toyota doesn't bang the drum about what it has to offer in terms of ride and performance. The Toyota brochure has the typical hype but no colourful diagrams of the little wonder of an engine, nothing showing some of the best suspension around, and not the glimmer of a performance statistic.

So here are my thoughts on its capabilities. Returning a mean average of 30mpg across a widely differing series of driving conditions included prolonged driving in the 70s, low gear work around the byways, and a fair mileage in town doing the chores and family bussing.

With the exception of the recently tried Fiat Scudo-based Ci Itaca, the Sunrise was the nearest to a car feel I've tried to date; it's highly manoeuvrable in town, turning even tighter than a short-wheelbase VW T4 by no less than 2ft 3in. In fact, a van specialist's view of the Toyota versus its obvious rivals is: "It's equal to, if not better than the VW, which has always been superb to drive . . . and it absolutely murders the Mercedes Vito for noise and vibration."

On a private airfield, the Sunrise exceeded 90mph without seeming to work especially hard, but it was the cruising speed range of 65-70mph on the motorway which really impressed — the noise level was low enough to listen to a Perry Como tape in comfort. The diesel "knock" was practically non-existent; all this and plenty of firm feel from the power steering.

The 2,446cc square dimension diesel motor ►



A really neat motor installation with good access for routine servicing.



Ultra simplicity of operation from Toyota. Only three dash buttons are impossible to confuse by virtue of totally different positioning. Note the superb locker low down in the centre console. Fuel and temperature gauges can be scanned together.



Unobstructed floor space and the comfort of a well-upholstered double seat are characteristics of the Sunrise's traditional layout.

Two of the toughened glass windows slide open for ventilation and their integral flyscreens are built-in. January was not the ideal time to test a camper with a canvas-sided roof and single-glazed windows, but I've no doubt that with an optional blown air heater aboard it would have been capable of raising the temperature to a comfortable level in short order.

► is far from new, as it successfully powered the older Compact van for a number of years. It has been refined though from time to time, is now nicely accessible under the bonnet, leaving room for a pair of 65ah vehicle batteries. The conversion auxiliary battery is some distance away, at the rear of the wardrobe.

Front suspension is by double wishbones and a torsion bar for each wheel, damped by twin tube shocks. It's a system of exceptional wheel stability, closely akin to racing car practice where directional accuracy is crucial. The rear wheels are sprung by semi-trailing arms and coil springs, a technical geometry which achieves a flowing wheel movement over the bumps.

A good analogy of how a trailing link works is to run the index finger of your right hand over the palm of the left hand, keeping the finger at right angles to the palm. The finger's path will feel bumpy. Now bring the finger down to, say, 30 degrees off the angle of the palm and it will trail.

Apart from the good suspension design, this Toyota also performed well and quietly — a result of its slippery shape without projections, and low overall height. Another by-product of the curved shape was jet washing the grime off in a quicker time than any other motorcaravan.

Apart from not being able to adjust the seat back as upright as I like, it gave good support for the thighs with about the right degree of resilience; it also had a usable headrest angle — even if the vinyl is cold against the head — and, with a little modification the door pull could have doubled as an armrest.

As you will have gathered, driving Sunrise was enjoyable, safe and quiet. A final thought — if the 78bhp diesel performs like this, what on earth would the 114bhp of petrol motor option go like?

THE CONVERSION

By concentrating on the essentials of good living space, comfortable seating and ample headroom, Devon has built a true multi-purpose camper ideal for everyday use as a big

estate car, but ready for holiday travel as soon as the fridge is stocked and the sleeping bags stowed away.

The logical space to stow bulky items was beneath the bench seat, which lifts from the front. It was weighty but the complete framework was well finished and varnished — a pleasant change from the usual bare wood of seat bases. Also, the attention to keeping the cushions firmly in place was neatly dealt with by properly placed Velcro strips for base and backrest upholstery. The same applied to the extra cushions needed for the bed.

Basic construction details are: GRP roof on a steel body, to both of which Devon apply a pale grey, soft texture fabric to offer contrast to a darker grey carpet. A lively mid-brown oak finish for the woodwork and the turquoise velour upholstery fabric added colour to this rather plain decor scheme.

LIVING QUARTERS

This layout, the all-time most popular for smaller campers, has no equal in terms of elbow room to relax in; nor do the typical smaller single seats of a front lounge camper (part of the alternative layout) give the shaped ease of this 4ft wide, high-backed sofa. To be more sociable, and closer to whoever might be sprawled in the reversed cab seat, I slid it forward a bit; another benefit was being able to recline the back to a point where it looked and felt like a real settee.

A couple of small single-tube fluorescent lights in the roof and a little square tungsten fitting above the galley were adequate, whereas a full blown mains connection set-up with ►



General view to the rear highlighting the lively grained oak furniture finish. Note the varnished wood base of the bench seat.

CONCLUSIONS

► The on-the-road price for the diesel-powered Sunrise is £22,053, but surely the temptation will be to go for the more powerful petrol version which costs over £1,000 less. It is only sold direct by the makers and can be ordered in white, red, blue, aqua or, surely best of all, the Fern green metallic of our test machine.

Mechanically, I found the Toyota driving experience vastly enjoyable — it was also brisk and quiet, the only slight glitch being the throttle pedal position. Toyota's three-year or 60,000-mile warranty has to be worth money and consideration.

Competing designs are: from Auto-Sleepers, the Trooper with a considerably higher level of equipment and safety-tested lap and diagonal seat belts for two passengers; or the similar Cockburn Holdsworth Villa Low Line. Both cost around £2,000 more than Sunrise. Then there are Bilbo's Weekender, Breakaway or Celeste, also on VW and sold direct, at about £1,500 more. The Reimo range must also come under consideration, while a possible "outsider" would be the Wheelhome Millennium based on the Peugeot 806 MPV. The comparison with VW-based models in each case assumes the 2.4-litre diesel option like the Sunrise, although again you'll pay less if you opt for two-litre petrol power.

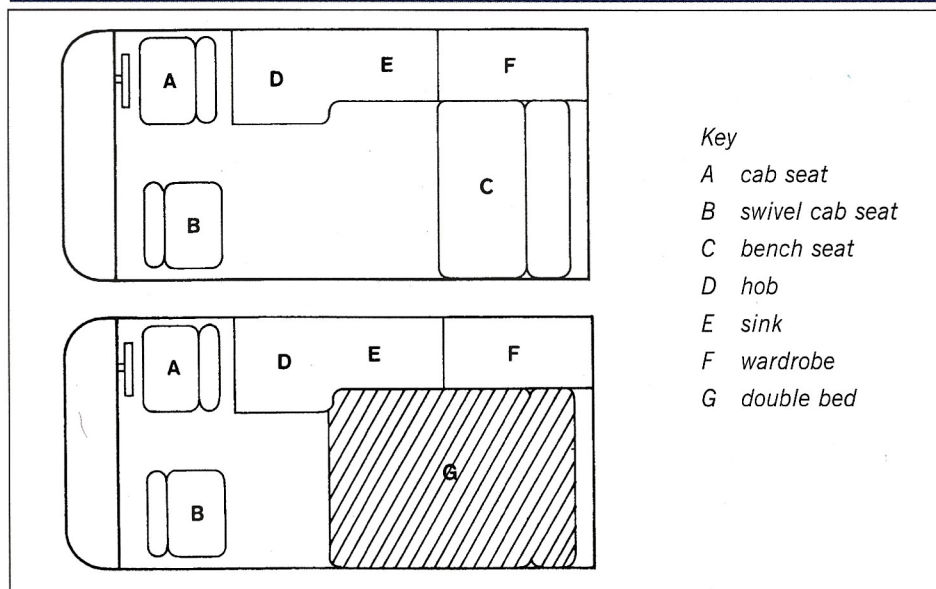
Bilbo's can match Devon's bed widths, the Auto-Sleeper and Cockburn Holdsworth don't. I liked the Sunrise's ease of operation, would have ordered the blown air heater for myself, and omitted the toilet in favour of better underseat storage. It looks fabulous and, who knows, maybe that colour might just inspire other makers to ponder on whether white is right for all seasons.

Vehicle kindly supplied for testing by: Devon Motor Caravans Ltd, Mainsforth Road, Ferryhill, Co Durham DL17 9DE, tel: 01740 655700.

STAR RATING

Performance	★★★★★
<i>Smooth, quiet and lively</i>	
Roadholding	★★★★
<i>Stable, predictable and highly manoeuvrable</i>	
Lounging	★★★
<i>Spaciously inviting</i>	
Dining	★★★
<i>Small but adequate table</i>	
Sleeping	★★★★
<i>A better camper bed</i>	
Bathroom	n/a
Kitchen	★★★
<i>Basic but with the essentials</i>	
Back seat travel	★★
<i>Lap belts only</i>	
Aesthetics	★★★
<i>An exterior shape to drool over</i>	
Innovation	★★
<i>Traditional interior in a pretty shell</i>	
Key: five stars maximum.	

SPECIFICATION



BASE VEHICLE

Make: Toyota
Model: Hiace Powervan
Type: Panel van
Power unit: 2,446cc, four-cylinder, indirect injection diesel
Dimensions: Bore 92mm stroke 92mm
Driven wheels: Rear
Power output: 78bhp @ 4,100rpm
Torque: 120lb.ft @ 2,200rpm
Gearbox: Five-speed all synchromesh
Steering: Power-assisted rack and pinion
Suspension: Front double wishbones and torsion bar plus anti-roll bar; rear independent semi-trailing arms with coil springs
Braking system: Servo-assisted front discs, rear drums with tandem master cylinder
Tyres: Semperit 195/70R 15C
Fuel capacity: 75 litres (16.5 gallons)
Turning circle: 11.0m (36ft 1in)

PERFORMANCE DATA

Fuel consumption: 30mpg*
Comfortable cruising speed: 65-70mph*
Maximum speed attained: 91mph*
Acceleration times: 0-60mph: 21 seconds 40-60mph: 10 seconds*

TEST DATA

Test dates: January 16-22, 1997
Total mileage: 412
Weather conditions: Mostly dank, cold with light winds

CONVERSION

Make: Devon
Model: Sunrise II
Type: Elevating roof
Maximum gross weight: 2,800kg
Kerbside weight: 1,882kg
Payload: 918kg
Roof rack capacity: N/a

Basic construction: Steel-bodied van with GRP elevating roof
Fresh water capacity: 27 litres (6 gallons)
Waste water capacity: None
Gas storage capacity: Two x 6lb Camping Gaz cylinders
Water heating: N/a
Space heating: N/a
Refrigerator: Electrolux 60-litre (2cu.ft) capacity with auto ignition for gas/12V/240V
Cooking facilities: Two-burner hob and grill
Toilet: Space for portable toilet in underseat area
Electrical equipment: Mains input to Zig unit, charger, auxiliary battery, fridge and 13amp socket
Lighting: Two x 12V single-tube fluorescents. Single tungsten fitting
Standard equipment also includes: Sony radio/cassette, central locking, tinted glass
Windows: Glass, single-glazed
Upholstery: Turquoise abstract velour
Other options fitted: Portable flushing toilet
Other options available: Annexe tent, blown air heater
Price of vehicle tested: £22,053 on-the-road
Prices start at: £20,831 on-the-road for petrol version

MEASUREMENTS

Overall length: 4.71m (15ft 6in)
Overall width: 1.80m (5ft 11in)
Overall height: 2.00m (6ft 6 1/2in)
Maximum internal height: 1.95m (6ft 5in)
Minimum internal height: 1.85m (6ft 1in)
Internal width: 1.62m (5ft 4in)
Bed sizes: 1.90m x 1.21m (6ft 3in x 4ft 0in)
Headroom in overcab bed: N/a
Worktop height: .82m (2ft 8in)
Washroom: N/a
Table: .62m x .48m (2ft 0 1/2in x 1ft 7in)
*Which Motorcaravan figures



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