

# Vitesse

## FINESSE



Has Mercedes finally built a decent VW-alternative with its new Vito? Peter Rosenthal drives the very latest Devon Vitesse prototype to find out...

WORDS & PHOTOS PETER ROSENTHAL



Layout makes excellent use of twin doors and feels spacious

### DEVON VITESSE

#### PROS

- ✓ Smooth 7-speed automatic gearbox
- ✓ Practical layout works well
- ✓ Four safe seats and twin sliding doors
- ✓ Fridge accessible from both sides
- ✓ Easy to live with vehicle

#### CONS

- ✗ RWD only on more powerful engines
- ✗ Limited headroom with roof bed down



Vitesse offers lots of useful storage  
INSET: Stalk operates auto gearbox

### SPECIFICATION

#### Devon Vitesse prototype

**Base vehicle** Mercedes Vito 114CDI Long

**Drive** Rear-wheel drive

**Engine** 2.15-litre turbo-diesel (Euro 6)

**Power** 136bhp

**Economy** 33.8mpg

**Gearbox** 7-speed automatic

**Number of travel seats** 4

**Berths** 4

**Leisure battery capacity** 80Ah

**Payload** 680kg

**Length x with x height** 5.14m x 2.24m x 1.94m

**Standard equipment** Downstairs double bed 1.88m x 1.12m (6ft 2in x 3ft 8in), roof bed 1.91m x 1.10m (6ft 3in x 3ft 7in). Width to edge of canvas roof is 1.25m (4ft 1in). Fresh water tank 32 litres, waste water tank 11 litres, Smev combined two-burner hob and sink, two 240V sockets and two 12V sockets in habitation area. Vitrifrigo 38-litre compressor fridge with icebox. RIB twin-seater travel seat with two three-point seatbelts. SCA elevating roof bed with LED lighting around upper perimeter. Twin cab swivel seats.

**Optional equipment** TBC

**Warranty** 3 years for base vehicle (unlimited mileage), 1 year for habitation area

**Price from** £43,134 on-the-road

**Price of production vehicle** £52,536 (based on a 1.6-litre turbo-diesel FWD manual built on a crew van)

### CONTACT

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Until now, if you were in the market for a premium-quality German campervan, you had two choices. A new VW Transporter. Or a used one. Happily, there is now a third way, with the arrival of the new Mercedes Vito set to be a credible rival in the premium campervan market.

The key point to make here is with the height. A VW Transporter with a slimline elevating roof is under 2m tall and can slip under more height barriers than rivals from Ford and Renault. The Mercedes scores a direct blow to VW as it's only 1.94m tall with the elevating roof fitted (it's 1.91m tall with a steel roof).

The version that Devon is using for its Vitesse model is also based on the long-wheelbase version of the Vito, which at 5.14m long is midway between the short and long-wheelbase Transporter in terms of length. It's a pretty ideal length for a campervan.

### The moment of truth

To be blunt, the previous generation of Mercedes Vito has always been a bit of a duffer to drive. The brakes in particular were worryingly vague, while the fit and finish wasn't anything to write home about, either. So, in reality, the new model doesn't have to try that hard to be better than the old Vito.

**Compared to a SWB VW there's a lot more floor space...**

The swivel seat base does lift the driver's seat up by about an inch and a half but it still gave a good driving position with the Mercedes dash placing all the major controls pleasingly to hand.

While the Mercedes system of releasing the handbrake isn't very intuitive (it's a pull handle on the right-hand side of the dashboard) the optional automatic gearbox is brilliant because

it's actuated from a stalk by the steering wheel – a flick of your fingertips puts it in 'Drive' and you're away. For anyone with limited mobility it's a major plus over any automatics that need a gear lever to be manhandled. It also had 'flappy paddles' behind the steering wheel if you want to change up or down manually or hold it in a particular gear (and which you'll use once out of curiosity and then stick in automatic mode forever).

The kit of the test vehicle was generally excellent with a brilliant reversing camera fitted, together with air-conditioning, lots of radio controls and computer menus to scroll through via buttons on the steering wheel. Oddly, though, the wing mirrors were both manual!

On the road it bears no resemblance to the old Vito to drive. It feels much more surefooted and the handling and brakes are in another league. The automatic gearbox is an absolute delight and can't be faulted – it shifts gears imperceptibly,

holds it in place on hills and kicks-down immediately. Mercedes is synonymous with automatic gearboxes and this one is first-rate.

To be super picky the engine is a tad noisier than the Renault Trafic's and the electric steering is a bit on the light side, but this really is nit-picking. There's barely any wind noise, either, and overall it compares well with the VW Transporter T6.

### Easy lounging

There are two features that are unique to the Mercedes that give it a big advantage when you're pitching up. Firstly, the lack of a floor-mounted handbrake (Mercedes uses an unusual foot-pedal and pull-handle release on the dash) means that there's nothing for the driver's seat to get hung up on when swiveling the cabs seats around. Secondly, the test vehicle's optional automatic means there's no gear lever getting in the way of the seat's rotation.

Even the steering wheel didn't get in the way

of the driver's seat that much and both cab seats are a doddle to spin around. The extra length of the Mercedes is also useful here as the lounge seems amazingly long and spacious compared to a VW. The only downside is that with the roof bed down the headroom on the rear travel seats is limited. I'm 6ft 2in tall and long in the body and could only just fit into the rear travel seats. If you're around the 6ft tall mark – try it first. Children should have no issue with this.

One thing I did particularly like about the rear travel seats is that they've been trimmed in identical Mercedes fabric to match the front seats – a stylish touch that makes it look like a factory option.

### Kitchen simplicity

The layout that Devon has picked for the Vitesse really plays to the strength of the Vito's twin door layout and the forward-facing fridge

is a great idea. As well as keeping space to access the vehicle from both sides, you can also get to the fridge from both sides – ideal for grabbing a cold drink

while you're barbecuing. Even if the bed is erected, you can still get to the fridge.

The fridge itself is a modest Vitrifrigo C39 of 38-litre capacity with a small icebox – it's all you need in a campervan.

The familiar Smev 9222 combined sink and two-burner hob sits on top of the kitchen cabinets and takes up most of the worktop area, but does have a little room around it to balance your mug on. Food preparation is best done on the free-standing table (which lives in a locker under the travel seat) or by folding down one of the glass lids that cover the hob and sink sections.

The kitchen area also houses a cutlery drawer and a single large locker covered by a tambour door. Both areas are accessible with the bed



made up (so your other half has no excuse not to make you a brew in the morning!). The Sargent power supply unit and fusebox also live in this cupboard for easy access to blown fuses and the 240V circuit breakers.

## Popping up to sleep

In keeping with the premium feel of this campervan, Devon has elected to fit the SCA elevating roof which has the benefit of a plastic sprung base under a foam mattress for extra comfort (Reimo's version only has a foam mattress). With a double catch system and two meshed zip-out panels (and one clear plastic window), it's a well-engineered bit of kit. The roof bed is adult-sized, too, and has been treated to an LED lighting system around its upper edge.

The lower bed is the familiar RIB two-seater version and this works well with the seat base folding through 180 degrees and the backrest folding flat to form the bed base.

It's a tried and tested system and works well. The bed itself measures 6ft 2in x 3ft 8in wide, but there's room to overhang at the ends and a few more inches to the sides of the cabinets and body.

Even with the bed made up there's room to get changed at the foot end and the front-facing fridge is still accessible (as well as both sliding doors). There's plenty of room to store your bedding behind the travel seats when they're in the upright position, too. Compared to a SWB VW there's a lot more floor space...

## That sinking feeling...

Things didn't go quite so well upon attempting to leave the slippery campsite. Having sunk slightly into the soft grass, the poor Vito's rear wheels simply span on the Teflon-like grass. Even rocking the vehicle backwards and forwards didn't work that well (which is difficult with an automatic). There was no escaping it: I'd have to do the walk of shame back to the farm and seek help.

The farmer was very pleasant and nodded in agreement when I said it was probably stuck due to 'the combination of rear-wheel-drive

**The farmer was very pleasant and nodded in agreement when I said it was probably stuck due to 'the combination of rear-wheel drive and those large alloys'. Inside, I knew he was thinking 'idiot journalist'...**



Cab is more car-like than a VW



Make sure you fit mud and snow tyres!



Large bed is easy to set up

and those large alloys'. Inside, I knew he was thinking 'idiot journalist, can't drive...'

He went off to summon a young lad with a diesel forklift truck. Two minutes later the Vito had been unceremoniously hoiked out backwards onto firmer ground. The young lad grinned knowingly when I said that it was probably 'down to the rear-wheel-drive'...

It's worth making the point that the test vehicle is a prototype and that the crew-van based production versions will be front-wheel drive and fitted with a 140bhp 1.6-litre turbodiesel and a manual gearbox. These will be better suited to slippery campsites.

However, if you tick the more powerful engine or automatic gearbox options these are

only available with rear-wheel-drive. So you will need to make sure you have mud and snow tyres fitted if you regularly use grassed pitches.

## Storage

There's ample storage in the kitchen for most of your kit and together with the locker under the RIB seat and the tambour-doored rear wardrobe, there's a reasonable amount of space. As the rear section of the RIB seat can be positioned either vertically or horizontally, there are lots of options for stashing things in the rear and you'll use it just like that in an estate car. By keeping the interior cabinets to a series of large lockers, Devon has maximized the available storage space and made it flexible to use.



Fridge can be accessed without even setting foot inside the vehicle - great for cold beer!

## campervan VERDICT

The new Vito is a giant leap forward for Mercedes and the automatic seven-speed gearbox is the best in the business. Devon's conversion is a radical departure from its more traditional large van layouts, is well executed and suits the Vito perfectly. It's low roof height, twin doors and four safe seatbelts make the Vitesse ideal for daily use and it's a credible alternative to the default VW. At a starting price of just over £43,000 it's good value, too.