



HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

Carlight Cirrus CK on Mercedes Vito 108D

Jonathon Lloyd evaluates the prototype of a compact camper from a company better known for luxury touring caravans

Carlight - don't they make posh caravans for posh folk? I must have been asked that question at least a dozen times during my 'ownership' of the Cirrus. The answer by the way is 'no'. The company makes hand-built caravans for discerning purchasers, regardless of class, colour, or creed. Apparently they will even make them for journalists! Carlight are renowned for the quality of their woodwork, and for the durability of the product.

Carlight describe themselves (on the cover of one of their brochures) as 'The makers of the most prestigious caravans in the world'. Does the same level of desirability apply to their latest motorcaravan? In short, is it as good as the hype suggests?

A new concept

Previously, the overwhelming majority of Carlight motorcaravans were large luxurious jobs, satisfying those purchasers seeking out more of a rolling gin palace than a compact camper.

Lately, however, Carlight have recognised that there are purchasers who wish for this level of craftsmanship in a compact dual-purpose vehicle. The Cirrus is aimed squarely at those who place a high priority on mobility. If there is a road, the Vito is trim enough to fit down it. It is also hoped that Cirrus will appeal as a 'tug' for touring caravans. Especially, I would have thought, those looking for a replacement for their gas-guzzling four-wheel drive (oh so

'nineties) pretend Jeeps.

The Cirrus can be used for days out or weekends away, as well as normal solo and towing duties. Anything a car can do, a motorcaravan like the Cirrus can do better. A Carlight motorcaravan towing a Carlight caravan would be a serious piece of one-upmanship. Almost as good as L-plates on a Rolls Royce!

Although quite a few readers will use their Cirrus as a tug, I will be assessing it purely as a solo motorcaravan, for reasons that will become crystal clear later.

Readers should be aware that the demo vehicle tested was a prototype and that, as such, suffered from some glitches that should be overcome on production examples.

Viticulture

The Spanish-built Vito has all the right ingredients for successful conversion to a compact motorcaravan. Mercedes opted for a transverse mounted engine and front-wheel drive and this was one of their early efforts at 'paying homage to' (copying?) the Sevel's superb fascia gearchange. Mercedes got it right from day one, gear changing is easy and effortless, though perhaps a gnat's whisker notchier than the rival Fiat Scudo's shift. Particularly pleasing was the hemispherical lower moulding around the lever, instead of the more commonly used gaiter. The teardrop-shaped dashboard extension



on which the gear lever is mounted was found to be a bit intrusive.

The majority of Cirrus miles are going to be covered using it as a car, and as such it should excel. The one-piece tailgate with full-width rear window, demisting element, and wash/wipe, will significantly improve the driving experience in the winter months.

Entry-level power for the Cirrus is now a 2.2-litre turbocharged common rail diesel engine. There are another two, more powerful, intercooled turbodiesel engines and also a petrol alternative. Automatic transmission is listed as an option. The demovan had the (now deleted) naturally-aspirated derv drinker. Perhaps a little agricultural, it was nonetheless perfectly adequate. It proved very tractable in town, and not too noisy at 70mph. It managed to use less than 7.5 litres of fuel per 100km; that's nearly 38mpg in real money. This was pretty frugal, considering it included performance testing. (Handing a double whammy to both the cost-conscious and the environmentally aware.) Maintenance and fluid level checks looked pretty straight forward.

The rear seat could do with another locked position, slightly forward of the rearmost one, to allow optimum headroom for passengers. There were no rear headrests on this prototype, but they will be available as an (extra cost) option on production models. The rear seat has not been crash tested, though the mounting points for the rear three-point restraints have.

Of course, it doesn't make any difference to the way the Vito drives, but doesn't the aluminium-style stick-on dashboard trim look good? Far better than pretend wood - but if you simply must have some plastic walnut it's on the options list.

Strangely, the Vito had no method of preventing unwanted access to the fuel tank. Neither the cap nor the flap locked. However, on all new production models central locking is standard and this includes a locking fuel flap.

Exterior

Structurally, the base vehicle is a small steel-bodied panel van with a topped rear tailgate (hooray) and two sliding side doors. The Vito is pleasant looking, without being radical or challenging. It actually managed to look sleeker than it really is. I found that, by the end of the test, the shape had really grown on me. The rather pricey alloy wheels successfully added 'cosmopolitan' credibility - suggesting forward motion, even when there was none.

Black window frames merge well into the surrounding black panel, cleverly disguising the fact that the windows' shape doesn't mirror exactly the raised profiles. Extra cost colour-coded bumpers suggest an upmarket saloon car (the



charisma-free standard plain grey offerings are more a home on a bread van than on a leisure vehicle).

Carligh have chosen just the right level of graphics - hardly any. There's only a thin coach line and couple of tasteful 'Cirrus by Carligh legends - infinitely better than the vacuously stylised heavy-handed 'graffiti' favoured by some.

There are no ugly plastic fridge vents in the side for me to moan about. In fact, even for an expert picker of nits, there was little to criticise. The only reservations I had were over the chosen colour (please anything except white), and that the extra cut outs around the grille looked a bit of a disaster.

Interior layout

CK, you will be unsurprised to learn, means centre kitchen. The 'EK' of its sibling promises an end kitchen. The Cirrus CK follows the traditional Volkswagen camper layout of placing the kitchen, storage cupboards, and wardrobe in a continuous run along the offside wall, and making the real bench seat convert into a double bed. A seat swivel for the cab passenger seat adds to the lounge complement.

The downside of this layout is that the offside sliding door is now useless





as a means of entry or egress. However it does provide access to the fresh water filler, gas cylinder storage, and free-standing waste water tank. The EK model allows entry through both sliding doors.

Raising the roof

Not a comment on my behaviour on site, but a prosaic description of increasing the headroom. The roof cap is made from GRIP, and the sides from canvas. Both are bought in from the German firm, Reimo. The 'lid' is colour coordinated with the body colour, so to most casual observers the Cirrus roof looks no different to that on a standard Vito. Choosing a rear-hinged roof means that there's ample headroom in the kitchen and forward lounge.

There are two zipped mesh ventilators in the sides, a permanently open vent in the front, and a large picture window with zipped canvas cover also in the front. Assistance for both raising and lowering the roof is via gas struts. When lowered, the roof is held down by some fairly low-tech straps; a couple of over-centre clips would be more in keeping, but it has to be said that the straps are extremely efficient.

Carlight are not, at present, offering a high top as an option, though I guess they may be able to source one for you, if you are really determined.

Daytime

With the roof raised, and the cab passenger seat swivelled, the interior is transformed into an airy lounge. There is a remarkable amount of floor space, given the compact overall dimensions of the Vito. The chosen plain colours for the interior fabrics were well-judged and increased the feeling of spaciousness still further. Our Cirrus came complete with sumptuous Connolly hide seats. This option is well worth the £1301 charged. I felt positively pampered. However, the overall effect was negated somewhat by not including the extra rear bed cushions (behind rear seat) in the leather option, and by not having any

armrests on the cab seats. (Carlight say that cab seat armrests make swivelling the seats more awkward and, therefore, many customers prefer not to have them, while the 'boot area' cushions are not trimmed in leather to avoid scratching when loading goods in this area.)

Mercedes had provided a stereo radio/cassette player with all the bells and whistles. It was easy to adjust the volume on the move, and reproduction was clear for both speech and music. It was used a lot on site, running from the auxiliary battery, so the ignition could be switched off.

The 2.4kW Truma blown-air heater efficiently warmed the interior. It's a pretty reliable unit, and provides a lot of heat for not much gas. All visitors to the 'van concurred with my view that it was visually offensive to mount the heater control panel at 90 degrees to the perpendicular, though it didn't appear to interfere with its operation.

The standard floor covering is vinyl, though there is a brace of whippededge removable carpets available at extra cost. Ours had the shamelesslyluxurious Wilton option (instead of propylene or nowt) in the cab. The residential section of carpet was missing from the test vehicle.

The island leg table has tripod feet, so it can be sited exactly in the right place inside, or taken outside for eating alfresco and (if your luck is in) for a sundowner. A by-product of opting for the tripod fixing instead of the usual socket in the floor is that the 'van floor has no ugly fixings - to gather fluff, half-chewed mint imperials etc.

Bon appetit

The table was found to be capable of holding food in Falstaffian portions for the lone diner, just about adequate for two (providing socially challenged elbows-out types like me were not present), but hopeless for any more. So, just where do the occupants of the roof bed eat?



Food preparation was relaxed. Useful kitchen storage is both abundant and easily accessed. Standard equipment included upmarket lightweight melamine 'crockery', and unbreakable glasses. The stainless steel sink has no drainer. We didn't miss it, and would rather have the bigger sink (as fitted) and that tantalising suggestion of worktop to the right of it.

The 12V and 230V unswitched power outlets are adjacent to the worktop. Each is fitted with a sprung cover that should offer a degree of protection from sloppy washer-uppers.

My partner suggested that a hot water system should be an option, as

she felt that price would not be an issue for Carlight purchasers, but equipment levels might be. It's hard to disagree, and recently I've heard good reports about the Hot Shot boiler. It's 230V only, so it's easy to install, plus it is very compact. Something for the Sleaford team to think about, perhaps.

Compressor-operated fridges, such as the Coolmatic fitted here, have been very under-used in the motorcaravan market. 'Ours' went through its chilling repertoire with glacial efficiency and, as has been mentioned previously, doesn't need any exterior grilles. It's 'electrickery' only, 12V or





230V. Basically, it operates like a domestic fridge; the compressor only turns on when required, and you have to really listen to hear it, so no problems there. Current consumption is described as minimal, and anyway, a sensor will turn off the supply if the battery is getting low. A cold-accumulator provides an extra 8 hours plus of 'coolth' after the power supply is cut. We thought the 40-litre fridge capacity to be ample, though others are almost bound to disagree. Our verdict: a wise choice.

The stainless steel two-burner hob and grill worked a treat. It was a pity that the wrong grill pan was supplied. It was an inappropriate shape. I'm sure it was for a grill with the heating element running from front to back, not the rearward located side-to-side one, as fitted. Result - I couldn't do more than one slice of toast at a time. Cynics might suggest that the factory evaluation programme of this prototype 'van didn't include actually using the grill.

Night time

Forget worries about insufficient artificial illumination in the Cirrus. Halogen downlighters are standard, and you get eight of them. There is also a cab courtesy light and a load light for the rear 'boot'.

With this design of interior layout there is always a competitive tension between the depth of the kitchen/wardrobe run, and the width of the double bed. Make the kitchen too deep and the bed becomes too narrow, and viceversa. It's a tricky one to call, and we think Carlight have managed an excellent compromise (or, in the vernacular, it's bang on the money).

Bed making was simplicity itself. Slide the rear seat forward and lower the backrest to join up with the cushions behind. It's comfortable and, with a length of 1.96m (6ft 5in), there's plenty of room for the lofty amongst us.

The lined curtains are so full as to be verging on the decadent. Curtains cover all the caravan windows and insulated internal screens cover the three cab windows. These are genuine Silver Screens and they have dedicated storage in the 'boot'. They need to be retrieved via the tailgate before settling down for the evening. It might have been preferable to just use a single curtain for the tailgate, and 'park' it behind the wardrobe, thus ensuring an unrestricted view rearwards whilst reversing. It's an idea that Carlight say they will be adopting for future models.

There is no option for single beds in the CK, but Carlight are working on a third layout for the Cirrus, the WT (walk through). This will offer twin single beds with the kitchen and wardrobe at the rear.

Access to the fridge is possible with the CK's bed down, so the early morning cuppa can be taken with milk. The Porta Potti is not accessible with the bed down, though there is ample floor area remaining to stand it on.

Each occupant of the Cirrus has a reading light. The (optional) roof bed is a folding double which Carlight are recommending for children only. It felt very substantial to me.

Storage

Storage is definitely a strong suit for the Cirrus. It's varied, capacious, and clever. There isn't space to describe all of it, but here are a few tasters. Firstly, there's a clever sliding tray in the boot holding three removable plastic baskets. Then there is the ginormous, and easily accessed, space under the rear seat.

The gas storage compartment will swallow a couple of 4.5kg butane cylinders (many conversions of this size can only accept the much dearer and smaller, but internationally available, Campingaz cylinders). An access flap in the kitchen allows the cylinder valves to be turned on and off without having to go outside. Full marks there for safety and convenience.

Fresh water has its own (uninsulated) underfloor tank. There is a level gauge mounted in a smart wood bezel above the tank. Waste water is collected in a free-standing container (stored in the Porta Potti cupboard when not required). It's actually a car oil drain can, and very suitable it was too. Shame the plastic moulding was badly finished, leaving some very sharp edges - which, of course, I cut my hand on.

The picnic table rolls up (oh yes it does), pops in a bag, and stores in a bespoke compartment in the 'boot'. Picnic chairs are stored upright in the tall cupboard forward of the wardrobe.

The wardrobe can be accessed from inside or through the tailgate. In contrast to the furniture in the rest of the 'van, which has hardwood-framed doors, the rearward-facing wardrobe doors have plastic edging (as used in many other campers). Apparently this is because the hardwood edging cannot be made to follow the contours of the side. I'm not convinced that something more fitting (in both senses) cannot be done.

The table top, island leg, and tripod feet have safe and secure storage on the inside panel of the nearside sliding door. This has been really well executed.

Finally, the fuses have been stored behind a flap above the kitchen. They are clearly labelled and easily accessible - perfect.

Ready to roll

All motorcaravans are supplied with basic equipment, but Carlight have gone one stage further by including a picnic table and chairs, crockery, glasses, rechargeable torch, fire extinguisher, and a worthwhile first aid kit. Just add food and bedding, and enjoy.

Magnum 45 pedicure

I hadn't expected Carlight to shoot themselves in the foot, but sadly, in my opinion they managed it. Here are my reasons. Some have already judged them as petty.

At the official unveiling of the Cirrus I noticed that the woodwork on the prototype had several nasty saw cuts made in error on the inward-facing panel to the rear of the wardrobe door. Also, the rear of the kitchen base unit (on view when the offside sliding door is opened) had several exposed screw heads and raw edges. Considering a major attraction of owning a Carlight is reported to be their build quality, it's hard to rate the woodwork in these instances as anything better than mediocre.

At the launch I pointed out these errors, both to the manufacturing and the PR departments, saying that if these were not corrected by the time I tested this vehicle for MMM (some three months later) I would have to comment on them. I thought I was assured that these would be corrected. After the test, the Managing Director informed me that there was never any intention to correct the errors on the prototype, but production models will be built to a higher standard. The prototype has been displayed at major motorcaravan shows, where presumably they are trying to sell it on high build quality and finish!

Secondly, one of the declared target markets is that of touring caravan owners looking for a dual-purpose towing vehicle. Despite three requests for the vehicle to be delivered with a towbar, it arrived somewhat lacking in this department. Apparently, the naturally-aspirated engine of the demo' vehicle was the reason for this decision (though this wouldn't have affected stability tests etc). For a touring caravan manufacturer to deliver a test vehicle without a towbar seems a mite counterproductive. So, sorry, no assessment as a tug.

Finally, one half of the caravan carpet was missing, and the picnic tabletop was covered in candle wax. Neither serious, but they do leave a lingering feeling of disappointment.

In conclusion

Mercedes-Benz and Carlight are two manufacturers with enviable reputations for quality, so the combination should have been a good one, and overall it was. A thoughtful and clever interpretation of a traditional camper interior layout has created a motorcaravan that is easy to live with, and easy to live in. Although criticisms regarding build quality of this prototype have been

made, I am aware that Carlight's normal production standards are far better than in this example.

Congratulations to the designer(s) of the Cirrus. The design is so good that it is difficult to believe that this was Carlight's first effort at a compact camper. It has so much that is both practical and innovative. If we had been looking for such a vehicle, it would be on our shortlist, especially as automatic transmission is available. We loved it. Readers should be aware that some options are pricey, and it is easy to inflate the basic price, but hey, you only live once!

A copy of Jonathan's report was sent to Carlight prior to publication. Managing Director, Robert Hodgson, made the following comments regarding the 'Magnum 45 pedicure' section of the text:

'The wardrobe was re-made in situ so there were some extra cuts, and these were pointed out. The whole idea of building a prototype was so we could chop and change its layout and detail until we got it 'just right'. If Jonathan found something like this on a production model, we would expect to be criticised, but he inspected our work on customers' products in the factory and found it to be of the highest standard.

Minor revisions do occur in prototypes and this is all part and parcel of making sure the customers' products are 'spot on'. We altered this area because we didn't like the original design and had to accept, on this particular 'van, there would be signs of the alterations made, which obviously wouldn't be apparent in a customer's vehicle.'

Regarding the rear of the kitchen (visible when the side door is open) Carlight commented as follows:

'The screws are exposed so you can easily remove this panel to gain access to the rear of the fridge and sink (tap and waste) for servicing, and the raw edges are not raw but are carefully sanded. However, they are not polished and we accept this criticism and we will do so on production models.'

We would respectfully remind Robert Hodgson (and any other motorcaravan converter) that MMM can only comment on the vehicle tested - and not on the standard of workmanship of any other vehicle we may have seen at the factory. Our testers will remark upon failings in test vehicles, as this is part of their remit. They have my full backing so to do.

In my opinion, any vehicle which does not meet the manufacturer's own standards should not be displayed in public - let alone offered for evaluation. Ed

**I liked:**

Ability to go anywhere a car can go
 Excellent use of available space
 Airy interior
 Matching veneer across cabinets
 Choice of oak veneer or laminate finish to cabinetwork
 Numerous examples of ingenious storage
 Substantial cupboard locks and turn-buckle catches
 Compressor fridge
 Dedicated crockery and cutlery storage
 Price includes crockery, glasses, picnic table and chairs, rechargeable torch, fire extinguisher and first aid kit
 Connolly hide seats (optional)
 Room for 4.5kg cylinders
 Full curtains
 Free-standing table
 Plenty of interior lights
 Central locking
 Tailgate with full-width rear window
 Heated rear window and rear wash/wipe
 Tasteful aluminium-style dashboard trim

Stylish colour coordinated bumpers
 Alloy wheels
 Excellent fuel economy
 'Owning' a Carlight

I would have liked:

Hot water option
 Only one rear curtain 'parked' behind wardrobe (production models will be so equipped)
 The correct grill pan
 An owner's manual
 Locking fuel cap/flap (standard on production models)

I disliked:

Poor finish in some areas on this prototype (see text)
 The use of plastic trim on rear wardrobe doors
 Space heater control panel 90 degrees 'out' of true

