

Silver cloud



Combining MPV practicality with motorcaravan versatility sounds like the perfect recipe for a part-time motorhome. Peter Rosenthal checks out Carlight's Cirrus 466EK

WHICH motorcaravan test

MODEL:	Carlight Cirrus 466EK
STARTING PRICE:	£27,985 exworks
BASE VEHICLE:	Mercedes Vito 108CDI
AS TESTED:	£32,075 on-the-road
WARRANTY:	2 year base vehicle (including breakdown cover and one year free servicing). Conversion one year warranty.

...at a glance

If you had to sum up the firm Carlight in a single word, that word would be craftsmanship. Based in Sleaford, Lincolnshire, the firm have been manufacturing caravans since the Thirties and it is clear that they have a real passion for the vehicles they produce.

Last year marked their first major venture into the motorcaravan market with the company offering two elevating roof models, the Cirrus CK and the EK, both based on the Mercedes Vito. The CK has a rear-hinged roof and a kitchen area to the driver's side, while the EK uses a front-hinged roof and has an

'U-shaped kitchen area built into the rear.

As Carlight build to order, they can tailor their conversions to your exact requirements. Want different colour laminate trim, or genuine oak veneer? No problem. How about adding a grill, or moving the sink? Again, not a problem.

It's likely that no two Cirrus EKs will leave the factory in the same spec. For this reason, reviewing their demonstration vehicle is a little like viewing someone's personal motorcaravan. Another important factor to bear in mind is that this is a prototype with certain areas still under development.



LIKE THE STYLE!

Walking up to the gleaming Carlight, the first impression is what a stylish looking vehicle it is. The slimline design of the Reimo elevating roof blends flawlessly with the steel bodywork, and the gleaming silver paintwork (a £1,168 option) really makes this conversion look like a classy piece of kit.

Thanks to, the coveted three-pointed star badge and the whole image that the Mercedes brand exudes, it must also be one of the most desirable vehicles to have parked on your driveway. For campsite cred, the Cirrus scores top marks.

BEHIND THE WHEEL

Being identical in size to 'an MPV, the first pleasant surprise about the Cirrus is how easy it is to get into; there's only a small step up to the cab, but you still get a decent elevated view of the road. Once sat behind the rather funky dashboard, it all looks very car-like. Being over six-foot, I found the dash a little too close to my knees, but overall the driving position is good.

The only other odd thing about the ergonomics is how far away the heater controls are (they are biased towards LHD). And they are a pretty poor design, using rotary wheels, rotating knobs and push buttons to control the

temperature and air-flow. Messy for a Mercedes.

Setting off in the vehicle, the most noticeable aspect is how firm and Germanic all the controls feel. The clutch is relatively heavy, as is the accelerator, and the gearbox also needs a manly shove to swap cogs. Strangely, though, the brakes feel a little spongy and uninspiring - surprisingly, ABS isn't fitted as standard (a £775 option that includes traction control). I also would have liked electric windows and mirrors to be fitted as standard - I object to manual winders when paying nearly £30,000.



Vito cab has that all-important three-pointed star badge, but no electric windows



Both front seats swivel to face the rear double seat, which is a little too high for comfort



EK means 'end kitchen' and there's not a lot of room for the chef back here



Downstairs double bed is rather fiddly, so we slept in the roof bed instead

Everything did feel very solid, though, as if it had been engineered to last 200 years or so. As the vehicle had only covered around 1,500 miles, it's possible that the controls will loosen up as it piles on the miles.

Despite this low mileage, the 82bhp engine (the least powerful unit of the Vito range) had plenty of pulling power and, although no ball of fire, it's perfectly adequate for the job. The engine's turbocharger is rather too audible, though, making enthusiastic whistling noises when the accelerator is floored. Some drivers would find this tiresome after a while, but the boy-racer in me quite liked it!

Probably the best bit about the vehicle is the handling. Although slightly on the firm side, the Vito is a great handling vehicle. There's minimal body roll and round the bends it's almost like being in a car, and a sporty one at that. This excellent roadholding isn't at the expense of ride comfort, and the Vito soaks up the bumps very well.

The only negative that's worth noting is that the steering feels slightly dead and gives little feedback. To my mind this is actually a benefit in a motorcaravan as it effectively means that no harshness (such as vibrations or torque steer) get transmitted through to the rim. More sporting motorcaravanners may disagree.

The Vito's compact size also makes it an easy vehicle to live with and, unlike many motorcaravans, it is easy to parallel park. Unusually, it is far easier to judge where the rear of the vehicle is than the front end - the bonnet slopes away steeply and you can't see where it ends..

At a mere 1.98m (6ft 6in) in height the Cirrus will also slip under most car park height restrictions and, if you are lucky, you may even be able to squeeze it into your garage at home. It is certainly no more difficult to live with than an MPV and is definitely practical enough to use as an everyday vehicle.

LOUNGING AROUND

Access to the rear of the Cirrus is either via the cab (both front seats swivel around) or the twin sliding doors. These are an excellent idea and have several benefits. Firstly, you can always unload passengers at the kerbside, and secondly, it's great for loading. Thanks also to the remote central locking, doing the weekly shopping has never been easier.

Once opened, the doors reveal a huge expanse of wipe-clean flooring and a bench.



Porta-Potti pulls out into the kitchen area for use

seat with two three-point lap belts but, oddly, no headrests. Behind this is a wardrobe unit and an 'L'-shaped kitchen area housing a stainless steel twin-burner hob and a matching sink.

The only fabric to be found in the vehicle is on the sliding doors. These doors also house vital camping equipment; the passenger side one housing the centre table, and the driver's side holding bottles of gin and whisky. This spirits holder is something of a Carlight tradition and is fitted to every model because the wife of the company's founder, Anne Earl, was particularly partial to a drop of Gordon's. And I thought they just wanted a good review.

This particular vehicle had a rather contemporary overall look, with the seats being trimmed in two-tone grey Connolly leather, the floor in dark grey laminate and the furniture in a light-speckled grey finish.

I wasn't very keen on it (it looked a little stark and functional to my eyes), but it is worth pointing out that the customer can specify almost any finish they would like (including Carlight's gorgeous, genuine, oak veneer) at no extra cost.

This is, however, a supremely practical interior and very easy to keep clean; we went to a car boot sale in a very muddy field and got the interior thoroughly caked in mud. After a quick brush and wipe down with a bucket and sponge, it was soon looking like new again. The leather trim is also highly practical if you are an outdoor type, as stains or marks won't penetrate the material and can be easily wiped off.

With the cab seats swivelled around, there's plenty of space to chill out. The most comfortable seats are definitely the cab seats, as the centre bench is a little too high for comfort - I found my head brushed the underside of the (optional) bed with the roof down. There is lots of legroom, though, and an added bonus is a neat Hella reading lamp conveniently located in the side of the wardrobe (this lamp works independently of the leisure battery and can be used on the move, too).

With the roof down, access to the kitchen area is also a little cramped. Once you are



A Carlight tradition - provision for the evening tipple

installed, though, everything is to hand,

including a decent-sized auto-igniting hob and a well-proportioned sink with cold water tap. Although there appears to be plenty of workspace, thanks to the L-shaped worktop, in practice the rear of the centre seat makes it awkward to use.

To the left of the hob is a small wardrobe and there are three cupboard doors built into the L-shaped kitchen unit. The first door houses a neat sliding cup rack/cutlery tray, with bowls and plates being stored beneath. To the right is a narrower door which provides access to the gas bottle for the inside of the vehicle. The actual gas taps for the hob and heating are located in the next cupboard along. At the edge of the cabinet is a useful slide-out waste bin.

The fridge is sited poorly, though, and the only way to see what's in it is to grovel about on all fours. Ideally the fridge could be moved out into the central floor area, which would also make it more accessible for grabbing cold drinks during the daytime. Again, in fairness to Carlight it must be noted that this is a prototype model.

PITCHING UP

Once on site, with the elevating roof raised by releasing two straps and shoving the whole assembly skywards, the interior headroom improves greatly and the whole vehicle feels much more spacious. The only downside is that storage space is at a real premium. There's only one wardrobe and we soon filled it with clothes, camera gear, and pots and pans.

Although billed as four-berth, and having travel seats for four, you would struggle to fit in all the sleeping equipment, let alone clothes and food. The cushions for the lower bed are stored in a locker beneath the centre seat, and this further reduces the available storage room. Equally, while the roof bed will hold a sleeping bag, it won't hold pillows and the only place for these during the daytime is on the kitchen floor.

The centre bed itself is a prototype unit and is a bit of a chore to erect, especially if you want to use it as a double. We chose to sleep on the roof bed as a result and found it to be comfortable once we had got up there. As there



Crockery is provided as standard in its own neat rack

are no footholds in the wardrobe (yet - Carlight may alter this), access to the roof bed involves standing on the kitchen worktop and contorting your body upwards - tricky if you're not very flexible. It could also do with some form of lighting up there - again, this is being considered by the firm.

Another item needing a little more development was the front curtain, which was essentially just a sheet of fabric that you draped over the backs of the cab seats and behind the sunvisors. Again, Carlight tell me that this is to be modified for production versions.

One aspect about the vehicle that was excellent was the electrical system. Rather than have one of those daft control panels with more switches than Mission Control at Houston, the Cirrus has a simple auto-switching system. Plug in the supplied 25-metre mains lead and it runs off mains. Take it out and it runs off the leisure battery. Simple and effective.

Other good points were the downstairs lighting, which uses nine halogen downlighters to illuminate the interior, and the excellent warm air heating system. This Truma unit kept the living area pleasantly warm and, as the controls are accessible from the upper bed, you can switch it on to warm the interior before you get up. Another neat touch is that there is an extra vent to warm the locker under the centre seat to take the chill off any stored bedding.

After a comfortable, but noisy (see travel panel) overnight stay in the Cirrus, the next day dawned bright and fine. Time to try out the outdoor furniture that is supplied with the EK, then. This equipment is housed in the rear of the motorhome, behind the kitchen area and accessed via the tailgate.

The rear section also houses a small portable waste water tank (which must be fitted under a drain by the passenger sill to collect the waste water) and two gas bottles. To the right of these is an aluminium folding table (behind which is the mains cable) and a storage unit holding two fold-up chairs. The table and chairs are a brilliant design and took just seconds to put up. After coaxing my girlfriend out of bed with coffee and cereal, we enjoyed a very pleasant breakfast out in the sun.

Water heating	X	
Space heating	✓	2.4kW Truma heater
Fridge	✓	230V / 12V compressor type
Hob	✓	two-burner stainless auto ignition
Oven	X	optional extra
Toilet	X	
Mains hook-up	✓	25m cable supplied
Auxiliary battery	✓	90 Ah
Mains sockets	✓	One on side of kitchen cabinet
Swivel cab seats	✓	Driver and passenger side
Roof vents	✓	Flaps in canvas roof
rear seat belts	✓	Two three-point belts

Conversion Options: connolly leather upholstery (£1.301), roof bed (£392), towbar and electrics (£264), extra 230v sockets (£51 each).



Base Vehicle

Make & model: Mercedes Vito 108CDI

Engine: 2.2-litre turbo-diesel producing 82bhp

Options: Metallic paint (£1,168), alloy wheels and low profile tyres (£705), remote control central locking (£435), 102bhp 110CDI diesel engine (£1,057), 122bhp 112CDI diesel engine (£2,702), 130bhp 113CDI petrol engine (£176), ABS brakes and traction control (£775), air-conditioning (£917), rear air suspension (£1,175), cruise control (£341), electrically heated and operated door mirrors (£196), electric mirrors and windows (£505)

Fuel consumption: 31.Ompg

Capacities

Berths: 4

Travel seats: 4

Maximum gross vehicle weight: 2,700 kg

Payload: 540 kg

Fresh water: 50 litres

Waste water: 6 litres

Gas: 2 x 2.72kg Campingaz

Fridge: 40 litres

Dimensions

Roof double: 1.90m x 1.40m (6ft 3in x 4ft 7in)

Lower double: 1.90m x 1.25m (6ft 3in x 4ft 1.5in)

Overall height (roof down): 1.98m (6ft 6in)

Overall length: 4.66m (15ft 3in) Overall width: Overall width 1.88m (6ft 2in)

