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LIVING WITH A ...2004 Hymer Exsis

The Hymer at Montreuil Bellay, Loire.

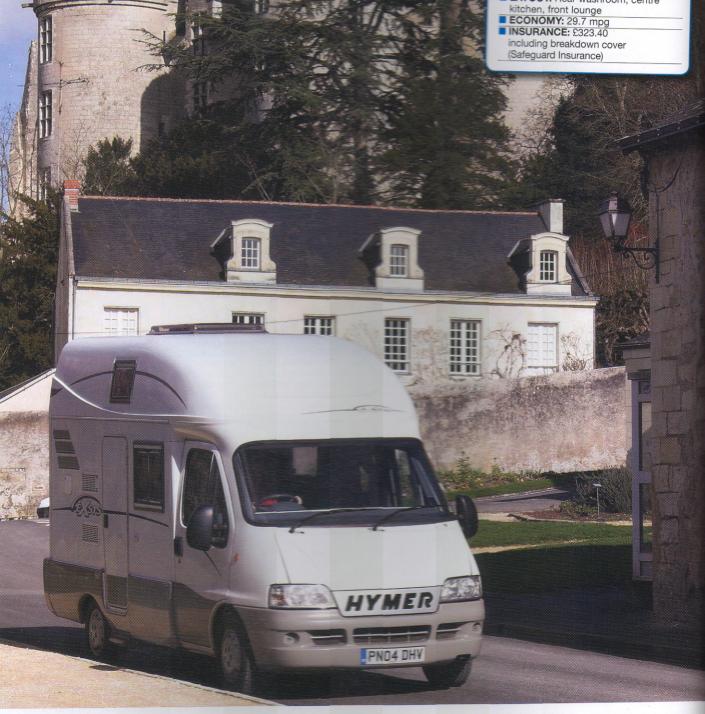
Travelling in style is what the Exsis is all about: stunning scenery near Mirapoix in the Pyrenees.



AT A GLANCE

- PRICE NEW TODAY: £34,995
- BERTHS: 3
- BASE VEHICLE: Fiat Ducato chassis cab with added GRP body

 LAYOUT: Rear washroom, centre



In our new series about the MMM team's own 'vans, Roger and Ann Mechan share their experiences







TOP: With the cab seats swivelled, there's plenty of room for feet-up relaxing.

MIDDLE: That looks good! Ann finds plenty of room for creativity in the Exsis' kitchen.

BOTTOM: With the drop-down bed deployed there's still enough headroom to use the lounge.

already had the front tyres of our Hymer Exsis on the ferry to Cherbourg en route to Roses in Spain when the call came through to ask if I could write a few words as to why we chose our motorhome, and had it measured up to our expectations? By the time the rear tyres were bumping along the car deck I knew where I would start, it had to be the size. Size does matter and when we looked to change our motorcaravan eighteen months ago the question was how small could we go and still have facilities that would rival those to be found in a coachbuilt, or even an A-class?

It may sound a blindingly obvious statement but when you decide to spend your hard-earned cash on a motorhome you need to be absolutely sure what use you are going to put it to. Some wish to arrive at a site and set up home without wanting to move anywhere other than the supermarket, others like to use their 'vans to invite in friends and develop a social life, but we like to be constantly on the move.

For us it is important to be able to get to the sort of places you would happily take a large car. Over the last year we have trundled along the narrow country lanes of Northumberland, driven up a spiral that passed for a road in the Tarn Gorges to reach the Cevennes Corniche, and rested in the centres of many out of the way French villages for lunch. In fact our mantra is: if a delivery wan can get there that's good enough for us. A philosophy that came into its own when on a visit to the Dali museum, at Figueras in Spain, we were sent on a diversion in the middle of the town that would have had us, and hundreds of irate Spaniards, stuck for weeks if we had been a few inches wider.

For many years we happily bombed along in a La Strada Regent and would probably have updated that for a similar model if it weren't for the fact we got lazy when it came to making the bed. At the end of the day all we wanted to do was crash out without the need to flick levers and arrange bedding.

Eventually it came down to a choice between the new La Strada Regent, with the drop-down overhead bed, and the Exsis, which offered the same. In the end, the unique way the interior space was offered by the Exsis swung the day.

SIX MONTHS ON THE ROAD

In the last year we have spent around six months on the road to somewhere - fortunately without any major problems, except for a crack in the rear bumper that appeared when I lost a fight with an oak tree on a campsite in the Dordogne. I feel at this stage I should be producing a litany of gripes about the failure of this or that, but in truth the only thing that has gone wrong is a sticky wardrobe door latch that received a sharp smack from me and has since thought better about misbehaving.

Mind you, I am to DIY what Gordon Ramsey is to delicate speech. The only use I can find for a screwdriver is to get the lid off a tin of paint in order that Ann can decorate the lounge, so I am grateful my motorhome has behaved itself. Yet reliability is only half the story. The other, and equally important, half is how the Exsis has measured up to our expectations in terms of living in it for long periods of time.

First let me tell you about the dirty stuff (no, not that, I mean electric leads, levelling blocks, buckets and the like). At the rear of the Exsis is a flap-up door giving access to a false floor that runs around 6 feet towards the front of the 'van. This is deep and wide enough to take a couple of plastic crates, two chairs, and a roll-up table.

The electric lead, bucket, and water hose share a compartment alongside this storage area, which is also occupied by 2 x 6kg propane gas cylinders. In the opposite corner are the hot water tank, and the valve to discharge grey waste.

It is irksome having to lift up the rear door every time you want to empty grey water. And more than once I've rested something on the sensitive hot water tank drain tap and emptied the system - to arrive in the middle of nowhere without fresh water.

EASY TO REACH CUPBOARDS

Our storage compartments for clothing and food look as if they have been designed by a man whose full-time job was working on aircraft interiors. For food there are two columns of cupboards on either side of the bathroom entrance. Not only does Ann fill them to overflowing before each trip but she can also see and reach into them, which is more than she can do in many other motorhomes.

At 75 litres capacity the fridge is a little on the small side, and while the eye-level oven above it is useful, an extra gas burner, in addition to the two on offer, would be welcome. Cupboards under the sink take the pots and pans, and a split sink cover doubles as work surface. To date we have no complaints about storage space.

Not being much of a cook I usually only stop at the kitchen to wash the dishes, but Ann tells me the facilities available more than fill her needs, and judging by what appears on the table at mealtimes I can't disagree. The swivel pedestal table that fits between the sofas has useful fold out flaps, and I have yet to trip over the badly thought out raised housing on the floor that takes the table leg. I understand new models have a sunken hole for the leg.

During the year our small lounge has been host to numerous guests, both home-grown and foreign, who have managed to squeeze on our two sofas, while I lounge in the swivel passenger seat. The driver's seat also swivels - so when it's only Ann and me we have a side

WE LIKED

- Spacious floor area in bathroom and kitchen
- Drop-down bed
- Large fresh and waste water tanks
- Modern interior design
- Wipe-clean upholstery and easyclean surfaces
- Drop-down aircraft style lockers
- Excellent storage
- The go-anywhere-in-comfort attitude the Exsis exudes

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Kitchen extractor fan
- Better mechanical assistance to push bed up into stored position
- Electric water heater
- Electric operation of large kitchen rooflight

WE DISLIKED

- Raised table support in lounge floor
- Need to raise back flap to drain waste water
- Driver's blind spot caused by wide window edges

each for lounging out on.

There were two facets, other than the 'van's size, that set the Exsis apart from the rest when we decided to buy. First there was the bathroom. This runs across the rear of the 'van and not only does it have the ubiquitous Thetford swivel toilet but also a neat washbasin that glides away into a recess when not in use. A large wardrobe is to be found in the washroom, and privacy to this ensemble is afforded by a concertina door.

Alongside the sink is a small amount of cupboard space, which I call hers and hers. I need little more than a razor, soap, and something to wave around under my arms to stay fresh. This can all be accommodated in a small wash bag and stored in the space alongside the toilet (along with the spare loo rolls, and packets of disinfectant wipes). In practice we prefer to use our own washroom facilities to those of any campsite.

The second facet is the Exsis fixed bed, the signature feature of the motorhome. When not in use it swings up out of the way (with the bedclothes in situ) giving acres of headroom, and when lowered for use still affords enough headroom to move around underneath, ensuring one of you can use the lounge while the other sleeps.

This bed will not be to everyone's taste. Getting in and out requires practice and some will find it a little claustrophobic, but it gives us the best night's sleep of any motorcaravan we have ever come across, and when we want to use it - all we do is turn a latch and down it drops.

Whenever we arrive at a campsite it's not long before someone wants to look inside the Exsis, and it's surprising the number who want to downsize their large motorhome while retaining many favourite features.

I advise those who will listen not to go for the model with the 2-litre engine. Ours has Fiat's 2.3-litre engine and cruises all day at 80mph, where allowed, taking most hills in its stride. Being so tall, and with a heavy bed in the roof, there is a tendency for the vehicle to wallow on roundabouts, but on the plus side it may also be the bed that makes the 'van far less susceptible to side winds than I thought it would be on first acquaintance.

Will we change our 'van in the future? Well, I am more elephant than elegant but I have managed to develop the knack of turning 180 degrees when climbing into or out of the confined bed space, thus ensuring I'm facing in the right direction for sleeping or climbing down the ladder. And, as long as we can continue to perform the 'Exsis swivel', Hymer's baby A-class hybrid will find a place on our driveway.



The baby Exsis with its big buddies at Itchy Feet, near Truro, in Cornwall.





FACTS AND FIGURES

- Conversion: 2004 Hymer Exsis
- Base vehicle: Medium wheelbase Fiat Ducato chassis cab with added GRP body
- Power plant: 2.3JTD (110bhp) with fivespeed manual gearbox
- Layout: Rear washroom/dressing room.
 Centre kitchen with offside gas hob and sink, nearside fridge, and eye-level gas oven/grill.
 Front lounge with two opposing longitudinal sofas that convert to a single bed. One dropdown double bed over lounge area.
- Exterior measurements: Length: 5.45m (17ft 10.5in), width: (2.06m (6ft 9in), height: 3.05m (10ft)
- Bed sizes: Upper bed 2.08m x 1.66m (6ft 10in x 5ft 5.5in). Lower bed 1.88m x 0.90m (6ft 2in x 3ft)
- Length of ownership: 18 months
- Supplied by: Brownhills
- Mileage covered in year: 8340
- Average fuel economy: 29.7 mpg on recent 2200 mile run to Roses in Spain, mixed driving, no motorways
- Accessories added: One extra 230V socket.
- Base vehicle service: Second year service

- (Alan Kerr, Paignton) £289
- MOT: Not yet required
- Recalls: Position of brake hoses checked at first service, new windscreen wiper kit for some models (not ours)
- Insurance: £323.40 including European breakdown cover and 12 months green card (Safeguard Insurance)
- Price new today: £34,995 for 2.0-litre version, add around £1000 for 2.3-litre
- Cost of similar age 'van today: £32,000 estimated, as none yet seen on secondhand market
- What went wrong: I reversed into a tree requiring new centre bumper section, cost £75 and self-fitted. Sticky wardrobe door requiring minor adjustment at no cost. Plastic strap securing toilet door needed reinforcing with duct tape, cost negligible
- Further reading: MMM test report 02/05, Which Motorcaravan test report 01/06
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