

# Set in stone

**Bill Savidan** checks out a recently emerged Kiwi brand of motorhome and finds it's not so new to the market after all.

**K**iwi Autohomes, run by father and son team Paul and Keran Miller, has been a round for 22 years and is best known for renting motorhomes to travellers wanting to tour New Zealand. Because they focus on travellers from overseas, they have tended to fly 'under the radar' in the local market.

During these years of hiring out motorhomes, they have learnt a thing or two about what works and what fails in a motorhome. "Breakages and equipment failures cost money – lots of it, and they erode the good name of our business as well, so we do everything we can to avoid them," says Keran.

Recently, Kiwi Autohomes has developed a new coach built body for motorhomes for use in its rental fleet as well as for sale to the public. It incorporates many features designed to overcome the shortcomings of previous models. The design of the new model, the Sapphire IV, has been initiated by Keran and refined by Chris Cunard, proprietor of Auckland Coach and Motorhomes Ltd, which is building it.

At the recent Covi Motorhome and Caravan Show in Auckland, the new Sapphire IV attracted a lot of attention from prospective buyers as well as sellers of competitive products interested to look

at the 'new entrant' Kiwi-designed and -built motorhome at the show. That same vehicle is reviewed here.

The Sapphire IV is presented on an LDV V80 cab chassis. The four-berth motorhome bears the signature of its rental heritage with a popular interior layout of a U-shaped lounge at the back that can be made up into two single beds or an enormous 2200-by-1900mm double bed; long kitchen bench opposite the entry door; bathroom/toilet stall to the left of the entry; and a large 1400-by-2200mm bed over the cab.

On entering, the first impression is lots of room. It is a combination of factors.





A great sense of spaciousness



**Specification**

- External: H 2.9m, L 6.5m, W 2.25m
- Internal: H 2.17m, W 2.2m
- Tare wt. 2900kgs, GWW 3500kgs  
Payload 600kgs



Plenty of kitchen workspace

The 1900mm-long side settees; the large windows; and the generous (2200mm) interior width all contribute to the feeling of spaciousness. But it is the interior height that seals the deal. The Sapphire IV carries the roofline from the high point above the bed over the cab, right through to the rear of the body providing a whopping 2170mm of internal height.

This height causes a dilemma when fitting overhead lockers because making use of the extra available height means the shelves are too far above the floor for shorter folk to see what is on them. So a simple solution – a footstool – is provided to alleviate the problem.

Starfish Interiors was given the task of coordinating the interior and has done an impeccable job. The attention to detail is

outstanding with two-tone covers over high density bedding foam, decorative window curtains and quality fitted carpets. Customers can select from a comprehensive range of fabrics and cabinetry surface colours. The review vehicle interior was a restful autumn palette of chocolates, cream and copper with contrasting black benches.

They don't use MDF board in their cabinetry. It is one of the lessons learnt when hiring. All cabinets are constructed from lightweight marine grade plywood surfaced with high-grade scratch resistant melamine. All edges are sealed and any floor contacts are also silicone sealed. It's a belt and braces approach that gives the manufacturers peace of mind that they are not creating problems for the future. It is an attitude that prevails in all aspects of the Sapphire IV's construction.



The Sapphire IV's lounge is built to lounge in. Stretch out, put your feet up, lie down to watch TV or read a book, its no problem, even if there are two or three of you. Pop the dining table on its twin pedestals and you could host a party of six, possibly more at a squeeze if that's what you wanted. Later, conversion to a

large bed is just a matter of pulling out the bed base slats and putting two backrest cushions over them. Job done.

As with all stock items, there can be things you would like altered, changes made to the way the cabinetry is utilised for example or upgrading the under bench 'fridge to a full-height 'fridge/freezer. Short of a major layout alteration, the builders will do their best to accommodate you. Personally, I would get them to change the location of the TV, bringing it lower and closer to the lounge area from its current position beside the entry footwell.

Kitchen bench space is always at a premium in an RV and the Sapphire IVs bench at 2100-by-640mm excels in this department with clear workspace both sides of the centrally mounted sink and stovetop. The whole kitchen has a clean uncluttered look with five drawers, a pull-out pantry and a tall cupboard below bench height plus three large lockers above. The hob has three LPG and one electric hob with a separate grill and oven

below. Below the bench, a Waeco 108-litre 12/240-volt compressor 'fridge is fitted as standard but you can elect to have a similar-sized or a full-height three-way 'fridge fitted if you prefer. A rangehood is fitted to whisk away cooking smells along with a microwave for rapid cooking. It is an easily worked kitchen with ample storage capacity for all your supermarket shopping.

Access to the bed over the cab is not the full width of the van so you have to climb a ladder and crawl in through the 1100mm-wide entry rather than arriving courtesy of a neatly executed 'forsbury flop'. The narrower-than-usual entrance does make the bed space more private and it has an opening window each side as well as a roof hatch so the space is well lighted and ventilated. There was a bulkhead light for after dark in the vehicle reviewed but subsequent production will have separate reading lights for both occupants. The interior surface of the luton is part of Starfish Interior's decor package, again with a variety of colour and fabric options available.

The bathroom is at the opposite end of the luxury spectrum from the kitchen. While the kitchen was spacious and well equipped, the bathroom is small and

spartan. "It's all you need," says Keran. "You go in, do what you have to do and then leave." So inside the neatly moulded fibreglass stall, you have a combined light/extractor fan in the ceiling; a Thetford swivel seat toilet; a corner handbasin with a corner shelf above for soap, shampoo and conditioner; a flexible hose shower hand piece with a wall rail to mount it on, and a drain hole in the shower tray to let the water out. Close the door screen on the way out, thank you very much.

Everything I have seen, read and been told about this motorhome leads me to believe it is a robust product. The exterior is all fibreglass. From the next production model onwards, all the fibreglass moulding, including the roof and wall panels, will be made at the Reflex plant, on Dyers Rd in Christchurch. The walls, roof and floor are all vacuum bonded with polystyrene insulation infill panels. The walls and roof have aluminium frames and embedded aluminium attachment plates for fixing equipment like externally mounted awnings and their external and internal sheathing is fibreglass sheet. The floor has a steel frame and marine grade plywood sheathing with a vinyl overlay on the interior surface and a protective external fibreglass sheath below. As mentioned above, the builders are from Auckland Coach and Motorhomes, which has a growing reputation for having quality builders, renovators and repairers who are currently employed by leading RV retailers and manufacturers in New Zealand for after-sales work.

### WHY AN LDV?

The LDV V80 is equipped with an advanced 2.5-litre 136hp/100kw turbo diesel engine designed by Italian diesel engine specialist VM Motori and comes complete with cruise control, cab air conditioning, electric heated mirrors, an MP3 radio/CD with Aux input and LED daytime running lights. Standard safety equipment includes dual airbags, four-wheel disc brakes with ABS (anti-lock braking system), EBD (electronic brake force distribution), BAS (brake assist system) and ESC (electronic stability control). The engine employs a common rail fuel injection system for improved combustion efficiency, as well as low fuel consumption (8.9 litres/100kms). Like all new LDV V80 vans, the Sapphire IV comes with a three-year/100,000km\* new vehicle warranty and roadside assistance. (\*whichever occurs first)

So now you have the inside story on the Kiwi Autohomes Sapphire IV motorhome. As reviewed and built to the standard specification on an LDV V80 five speed manual, it retails for \$136,995 or on its ATM (automated manual transmission) six-speed gearbox for \$138,495 inc GST and on-road costs. The Sapphire IV can be built on other brands of cab/chassis including Ford Transit, VW Crafter and Mercedes-Benz. ■

**For more information,  
phone 0800 288646**



- Quality of the build
- Large rear lounge
- The flexible approach of the builders reflects client preferences



- I'd prefer a more spacious bathroom
- I'd also re-site the TV, lower and closer

