

# Sleeping the Stagecoach way

When it comes to 'thinking outside the box' in the bus and coach industry a few names stand out, among them Brian King, Roger French and Giles Fearnley, but the one that comes most readily to mind is that of Sir Brian Souter the charismatic head of Stagecoach Group.

He was the man that came up with the idea of megabus.com – need I say more?

Now he's come up with another idea – sleeper coaches. At first you might think just another Souter gimmick, but I don't think so. Like most of Brian's ideas, however whacky they might seem at first glance, there is always a degree of realism there.

Stagecoach's Glasgow – London service is already one of its most popular routes and the overnight service is particularly popular. Brian felt that whilst the standard service using the 15m Plaxton Volvos suited most people, there had to be a portion of that market that given a good opportunity to make that journey and get a proper



Branding identifying the vehicle as operating the sleeper service.

night's rest whilst doing it, would take that option. So he decided to put it to the test.

Currently at Plaxton's workshops in Anston they are converting three Jonckheere bodied Volvo B10M-55s from the Stagecoach fleet into sleeper coaches. Two of the vehicles have Jonckheere Modulo bodies and the third is a Jonckheere



Passengers have free access to tea, coffee and cold drinks. In front are examples of the fleece blanket, welcome pack and megabus.com water that all customers receive.



One of the Jonckheere bodied Volvo B10m articulated coaches which have been converted into sleeper coaches.

Mistral. All have been modified to meet the London LEZ requirements.

The vehicles previously served on the megabus.com operation when it first began but more recently they have been used on the Ardrossan-Glasgow express service.

At first it might seem strange to use what are essentially relatively old vehicles on this service (the Mistral dates from 1996 and the Modulos

from 1999) but Stagecoach are not noted for doing things without a great deal of thought. There are sound reasons for using older vehicles for the experiment. First of all they represent a relatively inexpensive way of testing the theory as the conversions have cost far less than buying new. Perhaps of greater significance is the fact that the vehicles pre-date the DDA regulations on wheelchair access on express services so these vehicles do not have to comply with that.

Of course that may only be a temporary reprieve because if the service proves a success Stagecoach will look to increase its fleet of sleeper coaches. Now there aren't exactly a lot of articulated coaches in this country, (though Stagecoach does have others with Jonckheere or Plaxton bodies) so, unless some sort of dispensation from the legislation on wheelchair accessibility can be engineered, they will have to find a way around the problem on any new vehicles they buy.

## The conversion

What Plaxton have done is to take the existing fully seated vehicles and remove most of the seating from the front section and part of the seating in

the trailer section. In fact there are now only 24 seats in vehicles that originally had 72. They have also removed the parcel racks in the areas where the seats have been removed. In place of the seats they have constructed three-tier bunk areas. In the front section there are three sets on each side of the gangway giving a total of 18 and in the rear there is a single set either side of the aisle giving an additional six berths for a total of 24 berths.

Each bunk has a mattress, duvet and pillow. Additionally there is an LED reading light, power socket, USB socket, call button and a fresh air vent. When the call button is pressed red LED lights outside the berth alert the crew and identify which berth needs assistance.

The windows in these sections have obviously been blanked out but upper berths do have a small window with a draw curtain and the whole



Seating for 24 passengers is retained in both the front and rear sections. Customers are assigned a seat and a bunk. Note the toilet compartment with its hot drinks dispenser and fridge.

berth is fitted with two piece, full draw curtains to maintain privacy.

In addition each passenger receives a fleece type blanket as commonly issued on overnight air flights, a welcome pack consisting of luggage label, eye shade, toothpaste and brush and a bottle of megabus.com water. The duvet cover and pillow slip are also identified with the megabus.com logo. I suggested to Bryony

Chamberlain, Stagecoach West Scotland MD, who is responsible for the service, that I foresaw many a student dig being equipped with megabus.com bedding. She said that they had factored in a high rate of 'loss' but considered that was a small price for the marketing gain.

In addition all passengers have free access to tea and coffee or cold drinks including Brian Souter's favourite Irn Bru and biscuits.

In the conversion Plaxton have built in a storage unit for these comestibles in the front section and an additional drinks store alongside the staircase in the trailer section.

The existing toilet, located alongside the staircase in the trailer section, is retained as is the toilet top hot drinks dispenser and fridge.

The normal seating, as on all megabus.com vehicles, is equipped with power sockets and free Wi-Fi. Passengers are allocated a seat and a bunk



Bunks ready to receive customers with branded duvet, pillow, blanket and welcome pack.

service each way, each night with the third vehicle kept in reserve. The vehicles will be double manned and will run non-stop from Glasgow to London with only a quick pull in at Charnock

Richard services on the M6 to change-over drivers. The journey time will be around eight hours so as to give a sensible arrival time at the destination.

Once at the destination the vehicles will go either to Blochain or West Ham for servicing. Stagecoach are using a contractor to remove the used bedding and make up the bunks with new linen ready for the next journey. The bedding is actually laundered by HM Prison Kilmarnock.

Kenny Monaghan, Depot Manager at Blochain, told me that Brian Souter has been very closely involved in the development of the vehicles including testing out the bunks and making minor changes.

### Trials

So will it work? As you would expect, Stagecoach have carried out some trials and initial indications are that Brian Souter is on to another winner. At the moment Blochain only has one vehicle. This was deliberate so that any modifications needed could be fed into the other two vehicles before delivery from Anston. Following the early trials Plaxton have increased slightly the noise insulation in the lower bunk areas and are modifying the Eberspacher hot/cold air flow system to achieve a better air circulation.

During the trials Stagecoach have been offering passengers booked on their existing overnight service the option of upgrading to the sleeper coach for a supplement of £7.

There has been no shortage of takers.

What has been the reaction? It has proved to be universally popular. In the passenger surveys they received overwhelming praise and support for the service. People have found the bunks to be very comfortable and had no difficulty sleeping. In fact one of the biggest problems the crews have faced is getting people to wake up at the destination. On one occasion the driver thought he'd checked all the bunks but found he had a piece of luggage left. Another inspection of the vehicle revealed a passenger still fast asleep in the bunk!

The service is due to go live on 12

September. It will operate seven days a week leaving Glasgow at 23.15 and with a scheduled arrival in London at 07.20 the next day. The northbound journey will leave London at 23.59 with arrival in Glasgow scheduled for 8.05. Fares range between £1 and £20.



Even the bedding carries megabus.com branding.

### Future

Bryony Chamberlain told me that they had been surprised at how well the concept had been received and they are already looking at ways of extending the idea. She told me that future



Brian Souter has taken a keen interest in the development of the vehicles and tried out the bunks himself.

so they are free to use either whenever they like during the journey.

A full CCTV system has been installed on each coach and Plaxton have also fitted an engine bay fire suppression system and smoke alarms.

Plaxton's Dave Hutton, who is in charge of the project at Anston, told me that they have worked very closely with the VOSA certifying officer involving him throughout the development so as to achieve first time certification and not have to go back and make modifications which would delay the project.

### Operation

The vehicles will be based at the depot at Blochain in Glasgow. Initially there will be one



In the front section there are 18 bunks in tiers of three.



Upper bunks have a small window with full draw curtain.

vehicles may differ from the initial ones because they already foresee a need for increased bunk space. This may point to the use of double deckers. They had considered using deckers originally but did not have spare availability of vehicles to convert. Going double deck would also overcome the wheelchair accessibility question.



Cab of the vehicle showing the CCTV screen.

Time will tell whether this is another Souter winner, but I think Stagecoach Sleepers will become a familiar sight on our motorways in the future.

By Rob Orchard