

Plaxton's new big cat

Aimed at the day hire and school market, Plaxton has already sold nearly 30 Leopards on both Euro 5 and Euro 6 chassis. One of the first delivered, supplied to Haddington, East Lothian-based Prentice Coaches, is taken for a routeone test drive by Tim Deakin

The Leopard is unashamedly an entry-level coach. Low in height – and weight – and high in capacity, at Euro 5 it can seat up to 59, with a 3+2 version in the offing for the future which will increase this figure to 70.

Although it's aimed squarely at the day hire, school and short-distance markets, and cannot accommodate a toilet, on Volvo's accomplished chassis the Leopard is more than able to cover long distances when required.

Such a scope of work is expected by Prentice Coaches, crowned Small Coach Operator of the Year at 2013's routeone Operator Excellence Awards. MD Ross Prentice kindly made his factory-fresh Leopard-bodied B9R available to test drive last week.



Build

Reflecting its market, the Leopard is lower than many other coaches. It is well put together, with luggage locker doors and other external access flaps shutting with a reassuringly solid clunk.

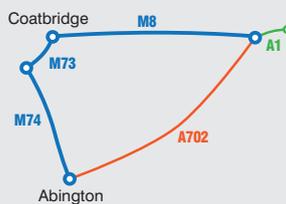
Its engine door is in two pieces: the upper, opened with a lockable handle, gives access to more commonly-used elements of the bay such as various filler caps. The lower portion is detachable.

Volvo's D9B, 9.36-litre engine is compact which means plenty of space beneath the bonnet. Nevertheless the 380bhp D9B is a proven performer, driving through the I-Shift 12-speed automated transmission.

Fillers for fuel and AdBlue (400 and 60 litre tanks respectively) are adjacent to the door. The Leopard's roof-mounted Thermo King climate control unit is also at the front. All are here for weight distribution, as are batteries below the cab.

Although entry-level the Leopard has a good road presence, and shares many components with other members of Plaxton's range

The test route



The roof is made of aluminium, as are the locker doors. Front and rear mouldings are GRP; main panels are a composite of both.

Passenger access

In line with its role, the Leopard is fitted with an in-swinging door, quicker in operation than a plug type. On the downside this has the effect of slightly reducing the

useable width of the opening – 710mm – but Plaxton Marketing Manager Andy Warrender says there is “consistent demand” for the in-swinging.

Three steps are in the entrance, with another between the platform and gangway. None is higher than 230mm. Gangway width is 360mm; the Leopard is 2,550mm wide, but only because of its flared wheel arches. The body itself is 2,500mm across, to allow it to be sold in Australia, and so the aisle feels a little narrow.

It is easy for passengers to find their seats, which are at the same height as the gangway, although the rear bench is accessed by one more, shallow step. Although the Leopard is a low-height coach it retains more than adequate headroom.

Emergency exits are in the standard locations. Two roof

▶ hatches are present, glazed and offering natural light. The rear window and two on each side can be broken, and the normal rear offside door is present.

This has a set of extendable steps which slide out from within the body when the door is opened. They lock in place and must be released before the door is shut, and have an abrasive top coating for good grip.

Passenger comfort

The Leopard on test has 59 Brusa Extend 300 seats, finished in blue moquette and with leather headrest inserts and piping. All have three-point belts, sturdy handholds and armrests. Recline is moderate, as is legroom. Optional are Politecnica seats, but they limit capacity to 57 on the B9R.

Above each pair are individual LED reading lights, a speaker and air vents. Heating is provided by the Thermo King climate control unit. For entertainment purposes a radio/CD player is present.

Internal panels are soft finished in a dark blue fabric. The aisle is carpeted with a hard-wearing material, while non-slip Altro flooring is below the seats.

On-board luggage racks are reasonably sized and shared with the Panther, as is most glazing. Curtains are the same colour as the seats' leather inserts, creating a good match. Visibility through the double-glazed windows is good.

Ride quality is excellent, as would be expected of a Volvo chassis. It transmitted few road shocks to the saloon; one particularly awful pothole on the M73 was hit at full

speed but little was felt, either on board or through the steering wheel.

Noise levels are muted. When cruising, the dominant source of at the front is air and tyre 'swoosh', but at the rear the engine note is detectable, particularly when the D9B is under full throttle. It is not overbearing, however.

Apart from individual reading LEDs, saloon illumination comes from two full-length strip lights, roof-mounted adjacent to the overhead racks. Underfloor luggage capacity is adequate for short duration trips and will meet the needs of school sports teams. Three manually-operated doors on each side provide access and a 'suitcase hook' is provided.

Driver comfort

Volvos have long been regarded as drivers' favourites and the B9R is no different. With no gearstick to negotiate cab access is good, although the stumpy I-Shift control is attached to the left of the Grammer seat. It may be better sited out of the way on the right, although it can fold down when required.

The seat itself is a standard fully-adjustable air-suspended type. A reasonable amount of storage space is provided between it and the side wall, including a large tray for atlases and such. The more technologically-minded will find a discrete cigarette lighter-style socket for a sat-nav.

The B9R's steering wheel is standard Volvo issue and adjustable for reach and rake via a third pedal where the clutch would otherwise be found. This requires a solid push

Inside:

1. Interior is smart, durable and high capacity
2. Emergency exit complete with slide-out steps
3. Courier seat complete with microphone and storage area
4. Cab is logically laid-out and comfortable



1



2



3



4

Close up:

1. Adequate luggage space and uncluttered bay are positives
2. Batteries easily accessed below cab
3. Spare wheel and screenwash easily reached
4. Radiator unit is compact

to activate. An electrically-operated sun blind is fitted.

Cab heating and air-conditioning are separate from the saloon's, and on a day which started and finished on the chilly side it soon brought the temperature up. A very powerful demister is present, something important in the Leopard's intended application; up to 70 passengers can produce a lot of condensation on a wet day.

Controls are logically sited. Buttons related to the chassis are generally to the driver's right with those for internal equipment on the left. 'Set once and forget' items are lower down.

All mirrors are electrically adjusted and heated, with two multi-purpose buttons controlling movement. The offside mirror combination in particular offers a good view when moving away or changing lanes.

An internal mirror is fitted above the screen, although it's not the easiest to see. Keeping it company is a digital clock and seatbelt reminder. The signalling window is electrically lowered.

Visibility forwards is good, although as is now often the case, the optional gullwing mirrors and A pillars combine to generate blind



spots. Care is needed at junctions as a pedestrian or cyclist could easily become 'lost', although most drivers will be aware of this issue and act accordingly.

Variable cruise control is a useful and a fuel saving feature, controlled by a stalk on the left of the steering wheel. As with another B9R test (route **one**, Test Drive, 8 August), the in-built retarder provides superb

auxiliary braking and has three settings.

Its strongest should perhaps be used with care on slippery roads, such is its stopping ability. It can be set to apply in its least severe setting when the brake pedal is depressed.

A reversing camera is present, feeding to a colour LCD monitor in the cab. This is not standard fit, instead having been specified by

Ross Prentice as part of a £2,000 options package.

Performance

Weighing in at a sliver below 12,000kg unladen, 380bhp is more than enough to guarantee sprightly performance. Even at its GVW of 18,000kg the B9R should have no difficulty keeping up with other traffic. ▶▶

Facts and figures

Fuel economy (miles per gallon)



Acceleration (seconds)



Noise (at 50mph/80kph)



Vehicle:	Plaxton Leopard-bodied Volvo B9R
Retail price:	£201,380
Length:	12.8m
Height:	3.44m
Width:	2.55m
Wheelbase:	6.85m
Engine:	9.36-litre 6-cylinder Volvo D9B Euro 5 using AdBlue
Power:	286kW (380bhp) @ 1,900rpm
Torque:	1,740Nm (1,283 lb ft) @ 1,200rpm
Gearbox:	Volvo AT2412C I-Shift 12-speed automatic with direct-drive top gear
Brakes:	Discs all round with electronic control
GVW:	18,000kg
UVW:	11,996kg
Tyres:	295/80 R22.5



is felt as the pedal is depressed. Smooth stops come easily. Manoeuvrability is good, but the 12.8m B9R has a comparatively long wheelbase, which the driver is constantly aware of. It pays to dominate the road when making tricky turns; steering lock is fine.

Verdict

Aimed squarely at the day hire, school and short distance market, the Leopard is almost like Ronseal: it does exactly what it says on the tin. It offers a cost-effective solution yet stands out from the crowd when liveried, as seen when carrying Prentice Coaches' scheme.

Its capacity is good, although on Volvo's Euro 6 B8R chassis the maximum will decrease by two to 57. This is due to an enlarged engine bay, which results in a relocated emergency door.

Internally it is well put together and refined, and the Leopard offers a reasonable amount of under-floor luggage capacity.

The B9R chassis' reliability and durability is established, and even though it had been in Ross Prentice's fleet for just a couple of weeks at the time of test he reports that it's lived up to all expectations. "For what we require the Leopard is perfect, and would be my first choice in this class of coach. Capacity is king; lots of schools want 57 or 59 seats." He has since ordered another.

Plaxton has a good number of B9R chassis in stock, for sale on a 'first come, first served' basis. It has so far sold the majority of Leopards on the Euro 6 B8R, which has a weight penalty in the region of 150kg. Lead time is currently around six months, with build slots available for spring 2014. **RE**

Straight forward panelling leaves plenty of room for livery application

▶ The test route took in a portion of fast motorway and dual-carriageway running but also included a 35-mile trip down the A702 from Edinburgh to Abington services. This features a degree of winding and undulating road which gave the coach a chance to show its capabilities. It didn't disappoint.

The B9R's I-Shift gearbox is a delight to use and features low-speed clutch control on a par with a skilled driver and manual transmission. It starts in 3rd gear and block shifts to 6th, continuing to do so up the 'box although most commonly each gear is used from 9th upwards.

In higher ratios it is not keen to let the engine lug down to the 1,000rpm lower end of the green band and changes down relatively soon, although when accelerating is reluctant to allow engine speed

to stray much the wrong side of 1,500rpm.

Ascending hills is no problem and the I-Shift even block changed when climbing steeply before joining the M74 to return north. Likewise, accelerating out of the several 30mph limits on the A702 and up to the relevant maximum of 50mph was made with no fuss and without impeding following traffic.

Top gear is not reached until in excess of 50mph and at the 62.5mph limited speed the engine is turning at 1,475rpm, which gives flexibility on motorway hills. Steering is very precise and the Leopard goes exactly where it is pointed, holding the road well as it does so, particularly when pushed hard through a corner. Roll is non-existent.

Brakes, aided by the retarder already mentioned, are reassuringly powerful and a good graduation



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