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Piaggio Porter

Go back 20 or so years and you could barely move for microvans. Bedford, Suzuki and Daihatsu were all promoting them energetically as the must-have response to the challenges that beset inner-city delivery work. Even long-serving *EastEnders* character Ian Beale had one.

How times change. Despite their budget prices and their standard sliding side doors, micro-commercials have become rarer than a smile from a Northern Rock director. Buyers seem to be moving upmarket, splashing more cash and opting for light vans such as Ford's Transit Connect instead.

They may also be expected to favour the Citroën Nemo/Peugeot Bipper/Flat Fiorino trio when the newcomers go on sale next year.

One manufacturer is still eagerly waving the microvan flag in Britain, however, and that's Piaggio with the Porter. As a consequence we're more than happy to hand the importer *What Van?*'s Microvan of the Year award once again, although it may be the last year

that we dish out this accolade given the lack of competition in the sector.

Made in Italy, Porter boasts a 3.0m³ cargo bay accessible from three sides; there's a hatch-type door at the back. A chassis cab is on offer too and can be specified with factory-fitted dropside or tipper bodywork.

The dropside comes with two different body sizes. The standard model has a cargo deck 1,330mm wide and 1,980mm long. Its bigger brother's deck dimensions are 1,400mm and 2,325mm respectively.

Looking across the line-up, top payload ranges from 560kg to 685kg and Porter has proved a useful platform for a wide variety of specialist bodywork.

No matter which model you pick, power comes courtesy of a 64hp 1.3-litre petrol engine married to a five-speed gearbox. At present the rear-wheel drive Porter cannot be ordered with a diesel, which some prospective purchasers may view as a disadvantage.

An electric Porter is available, however, with a range of around

85 miles between recharges and is not subject to the London congestion tax.

It's also worth noting that the pocket-sized load lugger can be ordered as a 4x4 with an electronic locking centre diff (see Road Test, page 46) and as a people-carrier.

Don't buy a Porter if you expect to be cosseted in the lap of luxury. The equipment provided is basic to say the least, and that's putting it politely.

Any concerns about the absence of air-conditioning or a multi-speaker CD player pale into insignificance, however, when you take the vehicle into a crowded town centre and realise how astonishingly manoeuvrable it is. While it won't quite turn on a 5p piece, it comes pretty close, and that's invaluable if you need to execute a swift U-turn to avoid a road blockage.

Parking in restricted spaces is a breeze, despite the lack of power steering, and the van's low overall height allows you to sneak into locations where overhead clearance is at a premium.

Porter is a forward-control vehicle; in



other words, the driver sits above the engine. Such an arrangement can involve a steep climb over the front offside wheelarch in a bigger vehicle, but hopping in and out of Porter's cab is a doddle.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises is how comfortable the driver's seat is. After a long hike from Peterborough to Slough and back the, admittedly vertically-challenged and well-padded, writer emerged from behind the wheel feeling fresh as the proverbial daisy.

He was almost as happy as he was when he visited the Piaggio stand at the British Commercial Vehicle Show earlier this year and saw the fact that Porter won 2006's *What Van?* top microvan accolade too being heavily promoted. It's great to be appreciated. ♦