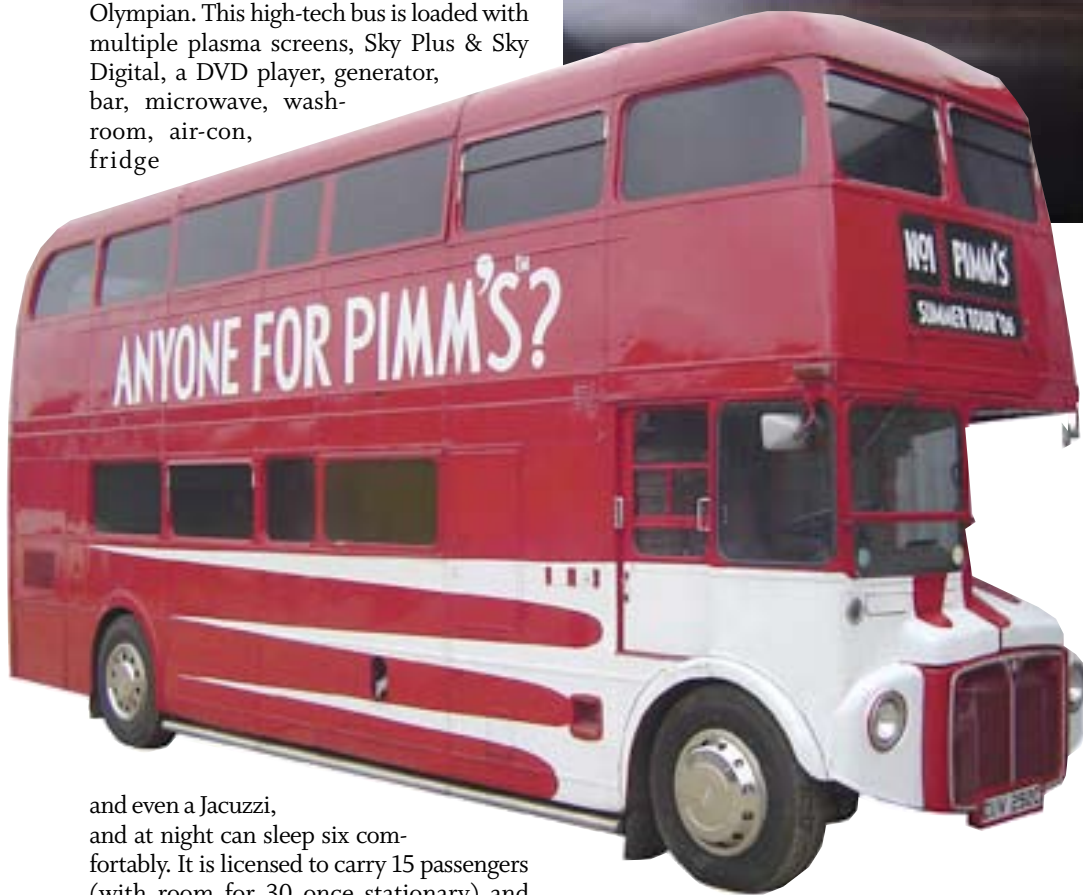


**There's a new way to maximise the benefits of your awaydays - on a bus. Cat Martin inspects these high-tech mobile venues.**

**T**eam-building, think-tank weekends, corporate celebrations – office awaydays are big business for hotels and conference centres. But to really get away from the distractions of daily life – or to get close to the excitement of a special event – mobile venues in the form of converted buses are providing a novel alternative. Fitted with generators, high-tech facilities and interiors smart enough to satisfy the coolest urbanites, they can provide a self-sufficient base virtually anywhere.

It's a relatively new concept, with several companies only in their first or second season. One of the newcomers is Brighton-based company Double Decadence, which operates from a converted 1982 Leyland Olympian. This high-tech bus is loaded with multiple plasma screens, Sky Plus & Sky Digital, a DVD player, generator, bar, microwave, wash-room, air-con, fridge



# GET ON BOARD

and even a Jacuzzi, and at night can sleep six comfortably. It is licensed to carry 15 passengers (with room for 30 once stationary) and comes complete with driver and satnav. "This bus is designed for entertainment," explains owner Alastair Redman, casting his eye over the huge, high-level double bed/chill-out area on the lower deck. Alongside are two single bunks, a seating area, fully equipped bar and monster-sized sound system. The open-topped wooden upper deck has alcove seating for about six and converts into a double bed at night. It's a great people-viewing platform and on a sunny day, complete with parasols, the atmosphere is rather like a high-level garden party.

This extraordinary luxury mobile venue has been used at many sporting occasions, including Epsom Ladies day, a wakeboarding event in Wales, music festivals and branded corporate celebrations. Lack of a roof makes Double Decadence a seasonal choice: "It's basically a summertime show-off bus: you've got everything on board – power, sound

system, ice machine," says Redman. Hire starts at around £150 an hour or £1,000 a day, on top of which the company can provide catering – anything from a barbecue to banqueting facilities, including waiting staff. Clients can travel on the bus or Double Decadence can arrange faster transportation by helicopter or limousine, in which case the company will spend a few hours setting up the bus prior to clients' arrival (for example, it takes a couple of hours to fill up the Jacuzzi).

Of course, not all corporate awaydays are linked to sporting events, and the big advantage of hiring a mobile venue is that a team can escape the office, and indeed urban life, completely. For team-building days, meetings or conferences, a fully equipped, web-linked bus can guarantee total privacy. (The only restrictions on roaming are country lanes



with overhanging trees which are not cut back for double-decker buses.) Adam Sullivan of The Bus Business elaborates: "One advertising agency, Claydon Heeley, was having an important strategy meeting and asked us to drive into a field in the middle of nowhere, fire up the generator and let them get on with it. If you want absolute privacy, that's the way to go."

Overhanging trees are less of a problem for the single-decker Neoplan Starliner offered by The Bus Business. Complete with leather seats and presentation area, the bus can be used for meetings during the day and converted into six singles and one double bed by night. With a WC and on-board hospitality ranging from drinks and canapés to a full three-course meal, this bus is proving a popular enclave at festivals – "for people who want Glastonbury without the mud. It's very plush" – and also makes the perfect corporate "reception" vehicle. "This summer we are meeting

**Top:** Bus Business's converted 11m Olympian for First Direct. **Above:** Pimm's Routemaster from Bus Business. **Right:** Double Decadence's lower deck bar, bed and entertainment lounge.

a group of about 40 delegates from ING Direct who are going to the British Grand Prix at Silverstone. There'll be a drinks reception on-board at the heliport and they'll be able to use the bus all day while watching the racing," says Sullivan. With luxury double-deckers for those who need a bigger venue and a wide range of optional extras, The Bus Business charges from £750 day, including a driver.

The needs of larger groups with fewer demands for luxury facilities are catered for by BusBeds. Co-owner Mark Sutton used to live on a bus, so knows first-hand what works and what doesn't. His four Leyland Titans each have a full-height, 11-berth, dormitory-style sleeping area (a combination of comfortable bunks and double beds) and a silver-sprayed exterior and interior. Each bus has all the basic equipment: mobile-phone charge points, tea, coffee, fridge, heating and lockable front door with bell (the WC and shower unit is separate).

Parked in a square formation with other units around a central Bedouin tent, the BusBed fleet creates an instant social space which has proved a great success at festivals, including last year's Bestival on the Isle of Wight. Emma Plews, marketing coordinator of advertising agency Glue London, explains: "We decided to take all Glue employees to Bestival and we wanted to do it in style, which BusBeds certainly allowed us to do. All the buses came equipped with fridges, fans and – most importantly – beds."

BusBeds are event venues rather than travelling hotels, so clients must organise



**Above: Bus Business's 11m Metrobus has been specially converted for presentations.**

their own transport. It's a seasonal business, but with outings booked to The Guardian Hay Festival in

May, The Cornbury Music Festival and Port Eliot LitFest in July, Sutton is busy for at least six months of the year. Cost depends on how much of an event the company is producing, but is usually in the region of £2,000 to £3,000 for three days.

With the demise of the Routemaster's operation in London, several companies now offer event day hire in these iconic buses. Routemaster Hire's bus has been renovated to match an original 1966 interior

with leather and moquette seating, yellow painted ceiling and Treadmaster flooring. With an on-board drinks service, it offers packages for up to 70 people, as co-owner Ross Osborne explains: "A recruitment consultancy hired our Routemaster for a team-bonding day. After a champagne reception we transported them to Daytona Karting where they all had a spin around the track. The winners continued to celebrate on the bus on the way home." Prices start at £575 for a day's hire (as transport to and from a venue in central London).

For an event lasting several days, Red Room Events offers a refitted No 73

Routemaster, The Red Room, which can be converted into luxurious accommodation. In addition to the multimedia fit-out (internet, audio, LCD, DVD, TV & live broadcasts), everything on the upper deck can be removed and substituted for whatever you want. "For instance, if you were going to Glastonbury we could take out all or part of the upstairs and install beds," says business manager Mike McSherry. Prices start at £1,750 for a day's hire within the M25 – which sounds steep for what was once a proletarian means of transport – but this bus's high-end fittings and facilities do set it apart from the crowd. A three-day package would cost about £3,000.

The Red Room is a consummate mile-eater, having recently returned from a three-day conference in the South of France for Pernod-Ricard. It also loves to party, and made a big impact at last year's launch of Virgin Media. "We took the bus to Virgin's HQ," says McSherry, "where there was a barbecue and the CEO served sausages and burgers to his staff." Caroline Lewis, internal communications manager at Virgin Mobile, says, "It was a huge feature. We had 75 on the bus and more outside, and everyone absolutely loved it. We are definitely going to use it again." ♦

#### **HOLD TIGHT**

**BusBeds**, 07966-375 287; [www.busbeds.com](http://www.busbeds.com), see also [www.boutiquecamping.net](http://www.boutiquecamping.net). **The Bus Business**, 0845-225 0320; [www.thebusbusiness.com](http://www.thebusbusiness.com). **Double Decadence**, 01273-389 791; [www.doubledecadence.com](http://www.doubledecadence.com). **Red Room Events**, 020-7193 0598; [www.redroomevents.co.uk](http://www.redroomevents.co.uk). **Routemaster Hire**, 07798-821 847; [www.routemasterhire.com](http://www.routemasterhire.com).

