

M-WAY JOB BONANZA

By CLINTON MANNING, Business Editor

THOUSANDS of jobs are to be created by a new chain of up to 20 motorway service stations.

Bosses behind joint venture Extra aim to challenge Granada and Welcome Break's stranglehold.

The partners are investing £60million in the first three Extra sites due to open later this year at J17 of the A1M near Peterborough, J10 of the A1M at Baldock, Herts, and close to the junction of the A14/M11 near Cambridge.

Services will include a McDonald's and a budget hotel. Another 17 sites are planned.

Extra chief Stephen Spouse said: "Our aim is to give road users more choice and better services at competitive prices."

Watchdogs investigating motorway stop-offs are believed to have found that the big two charge twice as much as independent cafes.

Granada said criticism ignored the huge costs of providing 24-hour services.

Dustman crushed

A DUSTMAN who died after falling into the crusher of his refuse truck had been in the job for just 10 days.

Safety experts were yesterday checking if Christopher Gallagher, 36, had been trying to retrieve an item from the crusher bin when he was killed.

He was collecting waste at RAF Benson in Oxfordshire. Service doctors who rushed to the scene could not revive him.

JACK RUS-SELL

THE home of Rev Jack Russell where he developed his terrier breed in the 19th century is for sale in South Molton, Devon.

EXCLUSIVE

By ROB MCGIBBON

IT IS the must-have gadget of the summer. Robbie Williams has one and Kylie Minogue is a whiz on hers.

Even Hollywood legend Kirk Douglas has been spotted whipping along Sunset Boulevard on his.

Students use them instead of the bus. City gents cut through the morning crush on theirs and top designer Alastair McQueen raced down the catwalk on one.

Everyone is scooter loopy.

To be more accurate, they are wild about Micro Skate Scooters, a super-slick, pearl polished aluminium version of the 1970s children's toy.

The £100 Micro glides on 100mm nylon wheels controlled by a rear mudguard that doubles as a brake. The telescopic steering column slides down, the handlebars slip away and the 6lb machine fits neatly into a shoulder bag.

The Micro may be small, but it is big business.

It was launched in the UK last October and now 5,000 a week are vanishing from the shelves, a figure which is expected to double this summer and climb even further closer to Christmas.

In Japan, sales have hit 75,000 per week and Micros are selling out across Europe. America is so hooked on what they call "side-walk surfing" that retail giant Wal-Mart has ordered three million. Staff are using them to whiz round its huge new store in Bristol.

The Micro's Swiss-born inventor Wim Ouboter is now a millionaire. Two new Micro designs will be launched this summer and giants such as Volkswagen are wooing Wim with a huge takeover offer.

"There were many times over the past few years when I nearly gave up, but I had to stick with it," says Wim, 40. "I knew that people would want my scooter." The seeds of the Micro were sown when he was a child.

His sister Corinna was born with one leg shorter than the other and was unable to ride a bike, so Wim and his two sisters took to the fat-wheeled scooters of those days.

IN 1994, 24 years later, the former banker was juggling several businesses - but dreamed of being an inventor.

Living alone in an apartment in Zurich he was frustrated by the distance to his nearest takeaway - too close to drive, too far to walk.

"I had wanted to create something and was always coming up with various ideas," says Wim, now married with two children. "I wanted something that would get me to the local takeaway and remembered how much fun my family had on scooters."

"I also wanted something portable that people could use for a short distance. I did some designs and made the first prototype over two weekends."

"I bought the materials - some in-line skates and some steel - and started making a scooter." It was the first Micro.

"It was a bit difficult to ride and it did not fold up very well, so I started making a second," says Wim. "This was made of aluminium and

It's

HOW WIM



COOL CAT: McQueen



WHIZ: At Bristol Wal-Mart

RIDE TO FORTUNE

Wim Ouboter risked everything to develop his scooter which is now selling millions around the world, and here he is on his latest three-wheel stunt model

was much better. I used it around my neighbourhood and in the city on my way to work. Everyone thought I was crazy and laughed at me. Even some of my closest friends laughed.

"I was very upset and put the scooter back in the basement for nearly two years. I gave up, although I kept thinking about it."

"But when I got married the

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Scooterman

SKATED WITH RUIN TO BUILD HIS TWO-WHEEL VISION



HOT ROD: Sex And The City's Sarah Jessica Parker



TRACK STAR: Kirk Douglas



PRIME MOVER: Canada's PM



POCKET ROCKET: Kylie Minogue on hers



TIDY: The fold-up Micro

the first 20,000 Micros went on sale in Japan — and within weeks, they sold out.

Australia was next and then last year Wim linked up with Seth Bishop and Nick Joslin, two British entrepreneurs who had already launched the Citybug, a 15mph collapsible mini moped.

When they saw a Micro they loved it and snapped up the UK distribution contract.

For the past six months, Wim's life has been in a spin. He has become a celebrity in Switzerland where he is seen as a transport visionary.

He won a leading design prize in Germany and is often asked to lecture young designers and engineers who are bringing their ideas to him, not the established companies.

Suddenly, all the doors are open.

He has linked up with the Swiss National railway to offer season ticket holders discounted Micros and this summer Berlin will begin the first pilot scheme of Micro stations, where travellers can rent a Micro to avoid buses or taxis.

There are plans to introduce them in airports to hasten a last minute dash to the departure gate.

In July and August a new Micro will have a flexy deck and air tyres for comfort while another will have a suspension fork.

The latest prototype includes a tiny electric powered engine and will hit the high streets early next year.

BUT success has come with a price. The market is being flooded by cheap copies — some from companies which originally turned down his idea.

Wim is trying to avoid spending his time fighting patent infringement lawsuits because he only wants to design new products.

The company is still run by five staff from a two bedroom apartment in Zurich, and Wim is exhausted. He is working 16-hour days and has little time for his children.

"This is the most exciting time of my life, but also the worst," he says.

"There is too much work to enjoy life. There is a war of the scooters being fought and I am not sure at I can win it.

"Within the past six months, there have been around 50 different companies making scooters. Some are direct copies of the Micro.

"I could spend the next 10 years fighting lawsuits, but I have decided not to do that. I want to stay positive and work on new ideas.

"Although it is tough, it is very rewarding and I feel proud that I have got this far.

"I could stop now because I am happy that I made my original idea work.

"I saw it through — and got to the finish."

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children from my neighbourhood saw the scooter and asked my wife, Janine, if they could have a ride. Soon all the kids wanted to try.

"My wife told me she had 16 kids waiting for their turn on the scooter. She said that if children think something is good, they stick with it. She inspired me to stick with the Micro."

Over the next two years, Wim fine-tuned the Micro into the sleek design that is now its trademark. He

also designed a sport version, called the Kickboard, which has two wheels at the front and is built for stunts and speed.

Wim thought he had finally cracked it when Mercedes and watch-makers Swatch teamed up to make the tiny Smart car and agreed, as a sales gimmick, to give give his scooters away with each new car.

But when they refused to bankroll the project Wim ploughed £100,000 of

his own money into the idea in the belief he was safe with the Smart deal. He found a manufacturer in Taiwan — but no sooner had the production line started, than the Smart deal fell through.

Wim was left high and dry with a shipment of Micros on their way.

"Suddenly, I had no idea how I was going to market it," says Wim.

"I took the scooter to trade fairs and showed it to big companies, but

they all said it wouldn't sell. People thought I was a bit of a joke. I thought I was going to lose all the money I had put into the project."

Thankfully, his manufacturer in Taiwan believed in the Micro and delayed the payments he owed them.

"We decided to go it alone and get it into the shops ourselves without the backing of an established company," says Wim. And 18 months ago