



Worth waiting for

John Hunt

CI VW Kamper

"Not another Volkswagen!" Yes — and no apologies, for the new Transporter is becoming one of the most popular base vehicles with converters and customers.

That's hardly surprising — and easy to understand once you've driven one. It is, without doubt, the most car-like multi-purpose vehicle around and this latest conversion by CI Autohomes is one of the best.

Many manufacturers beat CI to the post with their versions of the new Volks. Wisely, I think, CI took their time, did some thorough research and development before the launch. And it shows. It is, in fact, difficult to fault their latest product.

On the road

The new Volks, as regular readers will be fully aware, is THE most pleasant and relaxing van on the road. It's completely unfussy, with no apparent vices, so easy to drive, so untiring to motor in hour after hour. This conversion by CI is one of just about the quietest motorcaravans we've ever tried, and I'm including the American giants.

We purred along, with only the slightest chatter from the grill pan, which needs the usual tea towel as a silencer. There

were no body rattles and the smooth 2 litre motor at the back was barely audible. Almost impossible to believe that it's cooled by old-fashioned air. There was a bit of wind noise at speed from, I'd think, the roof's plinth or the roof rack.

This Volks, with less than 1000 on the clock, was not the fastest we've tried. We didn't push it, out of consideration for its future owners, but found we could cruise happily at 50-55mph. When loosened-up, we know the 2 litre will reach 80mph indicated. Fuel consumption was around 24mpg, which included several short trips as well as some good runs.

Starting was always instantaneous, even after an all-night soaking during this glorious English "summer". The automatic rich mixture device allowed unhesitating entry into the traffic stream with a cold engine. As usual, with the so-quiet 2 litre VW, I sometimes forgot to change into top gear when leaving towns. (Urban areas and 30mph limits are best tackled in third, when there's much more flexibility available instantly to the driver).

We drove over familiar roads that are suffering from East Sussex County Council's policy of false economy (they'll have a terrific bill when eventually maintenance is resumed). The Volks

sailed over the corrugations that shake lesser breeds to the core. She cornered well, too. Directional stability was excellent, although the steering, through that big wheel, was light enough for effortless parking.

She was at her best on the open road, took long gentle climbs in her stride. It was only on steep, winding hills, such as abound in the Sussex-Kent coastal area, that we could have done with a bit more punch. Overtaking crawling commercials on the few stretches of straight was a hazardous occupation. First was too low, second gave a too-gentle surge forward for peace of mind. We found the velour-covered front seats gave good support and fitted our anatomies. The rear seat is a pleasant place to travel; although perhaps the backrest is a little too upright, there is lots of legroom and very good, all-round vision. The swivel seat can be pushed back on its runners and faced forward for a fifth passenger.

There are many improvements over the old Volks. The spare wheel, for instance, is easily accessible from its storage in a pan beneath the front floor. The pull-up handbrake is less of a stretch than the old umbrella handle. The rear engine deck has been lowered to give converters more



room and the window area has been increased. But, in some respects, motorcaravanners have been ignored. The side sliding door still awakens half the camp site when you try to close it quietly at night and the centre bow in the roof (which may not be removed) imposes severe restraints on interior layout.

The beds

So, we'll deal with beds first, and see how CI have got around the restricting roof bow. Quite ingeniously, in fact. The rear 4ft of the upper double bed is a permanent fixture. The front 2ft, in two sections, slides into a recess over the cab, pulls out like a drawer. CI suggest that you enter the upstairs bed thus: arrange sleeping bags on the fixed rear section. Pull out half of the front base, climb up, using the stool supplied. Pull the rest of the bed base into position and arrange cushions and sleeping bags on the front end. Fortunately, the high roof makes this operation a lot easier than it sounds. Once up there, you have a 6ft x 4ft bed with its own fluorescent light and room to sit up or crawl around. There's still a gap of 11 inches at the foot and I found that I could quite easily squeeze my bulk through.

The upper bedroom — for such it can be called, being almost isolated from what's going on downstairs — would be an ideal place for youngsters, who could go to sleep or play games, irrespective of what their parents might be up to below. And there's little chance of their falling out.

The main bed, downstairs, is more conventional, although CI have chosen to design their own seat-to-bed conversion

system rather than copy the rock-and-roll idea originated and copied by others. It works easily, although seat cushions must be removed to get the bed into position.

We Hunts, when in a Volks, like to sleep with our heads to the rear, finding it easier to shuffle in and out of bed this way. In the Kamper we couldn't, because part of the wardrobe projects over part of the end of the bed, leaving room for feet but not hands. We both agreed we'd have preferred a slimmer wardrobe and more bed room at the rear.

The downstairs bed was extremely comfortable, with mattress nearly 5 inches thick. (The upper mattress is 2 inches. It's not too hard because CI have chosen a foam that's fairly dense, and sharp bones don't "bottom" too painfully).

There's enough clear floorspace at the foot of the bed but I'd like to be able to remove the single swivel seat completely (and easily) for occasions when only two are camping.

A couple have the choice of sleeping downstairs and preserving full headroom over the kitchen or sleeping upstairs and leaving the seats as seats downstairs.

Roof

It's fairly high, even when lowered. When you put it up, you understand why, for it gives more headroom above the upper bed than any other all-solid, insulated rising roof.

To raise the roof, an internal catch is released and the cap pushed up — not hard work, for gas-filled struts assist. The operator then stands on the stool and closes the side flaps. The first time we

tried it, we'd left the instructions at home but experienced no difficulty.

We could detect no signs of rain seepage anywhere. CI seem to have got it right first time. It's a very good roof and there's no doubt that the double-walled and insulated cap and panels give a feeling of snugness and security. No flapping canvas here. In hot weather, the upper side panels can be opened fully for full ventilation. I'd like to see some provision for propping them slightly ajar, particularly as the two acrylic windows are fixed. There's a substantial, flyscreened roof ventilator which adds about three inches to overall height. Other ventilation is provided by a sliding window near the kitchen and, of course, the cab windows.

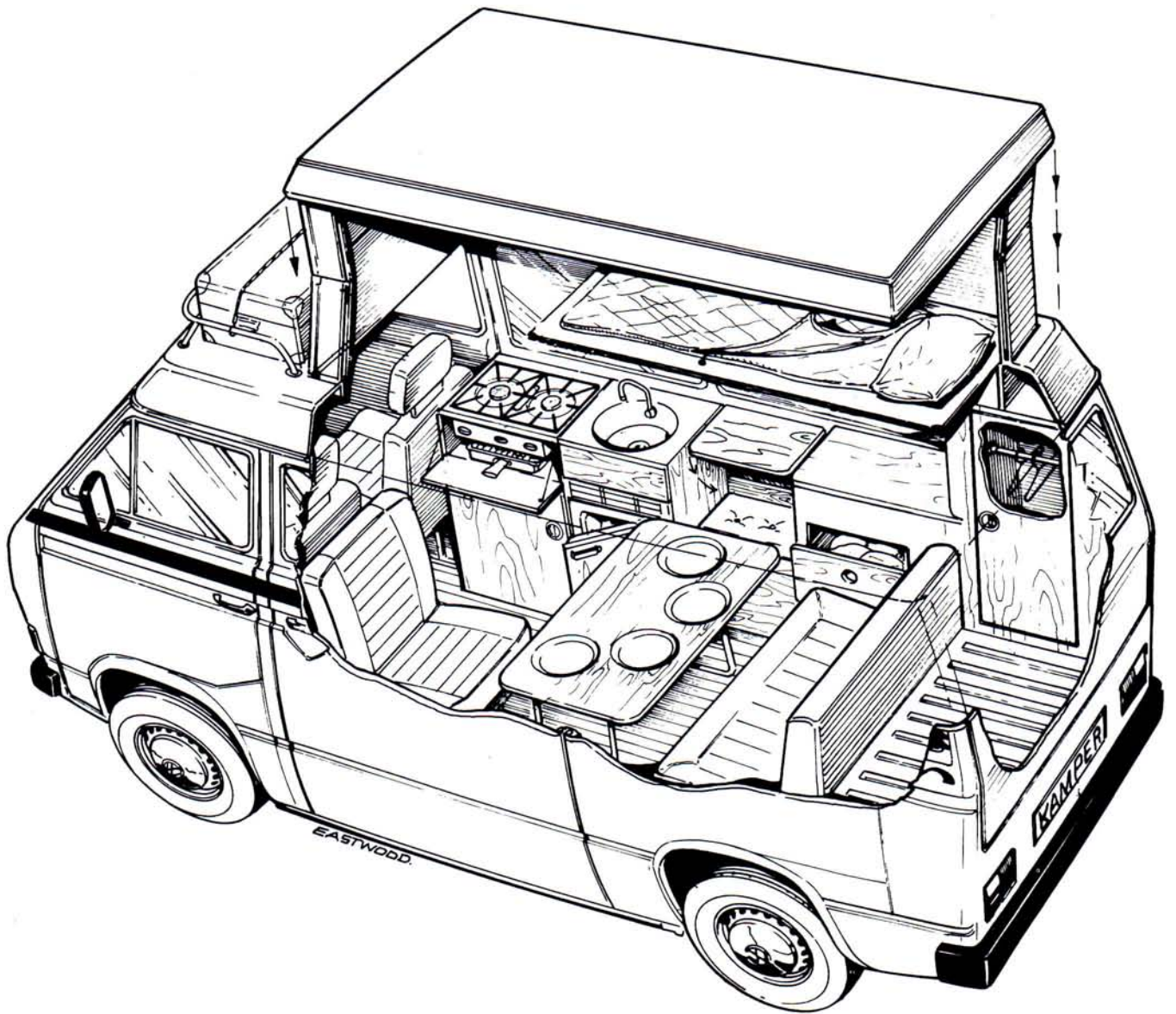
Cooking and eating

There's a reasonable amount of work space for the cook at and around the two-burner-and-grill cooker and integral stainless steel sink and drainer. The top of the storage unit next to the wardrobe provides a horizontal surface, as does the raised backrest of the small seat next to the kitchen. Then, there's the big, free-standing table. (We two found it over-large but no doubt a family of four or five would need it).

For dining, five can sit at the table: two on the big, forward-facing bench seat, one on the small seat, two on the swivel seat with backrest horizontal and supported by the stool. There's no backrest for the last two, though.

Storage space for kitchen equipment and food is generous. There's the

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cupboard under the cooker, the 'fridge' itself, the locker beneath the small seat (which will take a small chemical closet) and the deep locker, with top or front access and a removable shelf, next to the wardrobe. Other small items will go beneath the swivel seat and in the stool/step. There's a shallow overhead locker at the rear.

Bulky items like blankets and sleeping bags are harder to dispose of, for their traditional place in a VW (beneath the rear seat) is fully occupied by a large water tank. There's the "boot" over the engine deck (where the table is stored as a shelf to hide contents) but it's mostly occupied by cushions for the beds. On holiday, I suspect this would be crammed full and the table stowed elsewhere. (We discovered later that all upper bed cushions could be stored beneath the lowered roof).

Opening the tailgate gives access to the 'boot' and a couple of large drawers. It would be advisable to remove table, cushions and drawers before sending the Kamper for service. If you don't, the mechanic will have to do it to gain access to the engine, and his time is money and his hands are dirty! Fortunately, routine oil check and top-up are achieved

through the hole behind the number plate.

The battery is beneath the driver's seat, tools and "nasties" beneath the passenger seat. The roofrack over the cab would take an annexe or a large suitcase. There are no cleats for strapping down small items, which could slip through the bars.

Gas and electricity

A ventilated locker beneath the small seat takes two Camping Gaz 907 bottles. All gas services have separate, clearly labelled, isolating taps. The optional extra Zig unit gives full control over electrical systems and allows charging of the second battery (when fitted) by the mains.

The Kamper is a fairly complete motorcaravan in standard trim and there are not many optional extras offered. The most intriguing is an unique space heating system developed by CI Autohomes which takes up absolutely no room in the caravan, for it uses the VW heater ducts which serve the body as well as the cab. The gas heater and electric blower are situated out of the way behind the front grille. Ignition is completely automatic, just a matter of turning a tap and pressing a switch. Demand for this unit has outstripped supply and, unfortunately, the demonstrator had to go without.

But, unusually, this demonstrator was fully equipped for use, with a set of pots

and pans, crockery and cutlery, for the ladies and gentlemen of the press. That's not all: full documentation was aboard, not only the comprehensive instruction manuals supplied by VW, but also CI's own 16-page folder about the caravan. This, in our experience, is unique (it's not often we can use that word twice in one report). This is no mere rehash of a sales brochure, but a document which tells the owner how to operate and care for all aspects of his caravan. It's published in five languages: fortunately, we had the English version.

CI gain full marks here. It's a feature which should be considered when awards such as "Motorcaravan of the Year" are being made.

STOP PRESS

Two exciting new CI
Autohomes models
launched at the Caravan
Camping Holiday Show
11th-12th November
1982, Earls Court,
London.