



50 NOT OUT

Andrew Robson reports after 50 000 miles with his 1987 Autohomes VW Kamper

Our love affair with the Autohomes VW Kamper marque began back in 1983, when we purchased our first model (in two-tone cream and yellow) which, due to its colour and speed, was named The Flying Banana. Having towed a caravan around most of Europe with it, we decided it was time to trade it in for one of the new water-cooled models.

So, in the spring of 1987, we made the first of several visits to the friendly people at Capital Motorcaravans in Glenrothes. We examined the wide range of vehicles on display but each time we kept coming back to the Kamper. The conversion had been improved in a number of areas and . . . the dashboard sported an analogue clock! Decisions had to be made.

Basically, we were looking for a motorcaravan which could take five persons in forward facing seats, be no larger than a 'normal' van in width or height, have an 'upstairs' with reasonable headroom and be capable of towing a caravan. The Autohomes Kamper fitted our requirements exactly.

A deal was struck and we purchased our current Kamper in the ubiquitous white colour. The colour scheme did not lend itself to a nickname this time. Undeterred, we have now driven over 50 000 miles in the vehicle, an ideal time to give a retrospective assessment.

The vehicle

Our only major bills have been for partial replacement of the exhaust system (which VW-owning readers will know is expensive) after around 44 000 miles, and replacing all the tyres, between 30 000 and 40 000 miles.

Fuel consumption, on unleaded petrol, varies between 19mpg for town work and 27mpg for touring abroad solo. When towing, the average is around 21mpg. The 1.9-litre petrol engine is a powerful beast and she can silently and effortlessly cruise along the motorway between 60 and 70mph, keeping up with the best of them! Hills pose no problems, even with the caravan in tow.

Unlike our previous Kamper, which had no baffle to protect the factory-fitted roof rack at the front, there is no moaning noise from the wind. In addition, there is no back seat chatter from any of the interior fitments. Indeed, it is so quiet that rear seat passengers do not have to communicate with the front seat passengers with the aid of a megaphone. Wind on exposed motorways can be a problem where the vehicle can switch into 'automatic lane-changing mode'. Reducing the speed and learning to look out for potential trouble spots such as bridges, gaps in cuttings etc helps keep problems to a minimum.

The long-legged gearchange can take a bit of getting used to after driving a car, but, once mastered, it slides effortlessly into gear

each time. Ours is a four-speed box – a fifth cruising gear would have been useful. Reversing is relatively easy – the big mirrors are a great help. You only need to watch your distance at the back when reversing into a parking space.

The view from all the seats is superb with good all-round vision, ideal for looking at the things car passengers are unable to see. Manoeuvring is not a problem, though power steering would be helpful when trying to squeeze into that tight parking bay. Cab controls are all easy to hand, with the indicator stalk on the left hand side of the steering wheel and the windscreen wipers on the right. There are dashboard switches for lights, rear fog light and hazard warning lights. For reasons unbeknown to us, there is no intermittent wipe facility. The rather weak-sounding horn is in the middle of the steering wheel.

If you are a car driver and enjoy fiddling with dashboard controls, then you will find the VW a great disappointment. No basic necessities such as heated rear window or rear wash/wipe. No luxuries such as heated wing mirrors and seats. However, in 1987 VW did make a concession to the 'spartan rule' and installed dashboard clocks. It wasn't until a few years later that VW emerged from the primitive age when vehicles came complete with the now standard basic necessities. (I realise that all

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of these things could have been retrofitted, but they should have been there in the first place, especially on a vehicle produced in the mid-eighties.)

Heating is probably our biggest complaint with the vehicle, and will be well known to other owners – the inability to get warm air at your feet with cool fresh air at your head. Full marks to VW for such an excellent heater, but boy, it does get stuffy very quickly.

The spare wheel can be found under the front of the vehicle. It is not easy to reach. For access you have either to lie or kneel on the ground, reach under the front of the vehicle, release a catch and slowly lower the pan in which the spare wheel lies. Lifting it back requires the strength of Samson. Moral: avoid flat tyres when in your best clothes. We carry an old cagoul and waterproof trousers just in case.

Being a 1987 VW, the engine is at the back. For checking oil you pull the lever behind the registration plate and gain access that way. For more involved surgery, the rear cushions have to be removed and the drawer unit unbolted and slid out. This takes just a few minutes. Once removed, you lift up the large access panel and hey presto there's the engine. (When we take the vehicle to be serviced, we leave the cushions and drawers behind to permit easier access for the mechanic.)

The conversion

One of the main selling points for us was the potential for seating five persons in forward facing seats, in relative comfort. The layout is traditional VW style with the kitchen and cupboards down the right hand side. A bench seat capable of seating two, three at a squeeze, is towards the rear, behind which is a largish parcel 'shelf' over the engine suitable for dumping your weekly shopping, or storing the bedding while on holiday.

There is a single seat by the infamous side door, the 'silent' door that wakes up the campsite at night! The single seat can be swivelled round and, as it is on rails, it can be slid forwards and backwards – a



1987 VW cab: long-legged gearchange and not much in the way of luxury, but we have had 50 000 miles of reliable motoring.

very useful feature. The rake can also be adjusted, and this seat does not block access to cupboards or fridge. We have had lap restraints fitted to the rear bench seat, but unfortunately there are no suitable anchorage points to fit one on the single seat. The front cab seats do not swivel.

Rear passengers have a superb all-round view of the surrounding countryside, there being no blank walls to look at. The bench seat cushion is very deep and the backrest is gently raked, ensuring a very comfortable journey. Unfortunately, on occasions we have found that passengers on the rear seat can sometimes feel queasy when the Kamper negotiates twisting, turning roads.

Insulation is good. The vehicle body sides are insulated up to window height, and the whole vehicle is carpeted throughout. The areas round the windows are left as painted metal.

The kitchen area

The kitchen area, along the offside of the vehicle, has the usual 2-burner hob with grill, Electrolux fridge, enamel sink and a small drainer. A small fluorescent tube lights the area. With the roof up, there is headroom

of 7ft 7in (2.31m) in the kitchen area. In a vehicle of this size, there is no space for a proper work surface. We use the top of the unit to the right of the sink, or the table before the diners sit down. The table itself is an island leg type and the table top can be swivelled round to ease access. Measuring 31 x 20in, up to four can sit comfortably round it (three on the bench seat and one on the single reversible seat). Another two can sit in the cab seats, though these do not swivel nor do they have a table – emergency use only!

When on site, we store the table behind the single seat, which is swivelled round with its back to the passenger cab seat. The table neatly slots in between the two seats, and is kept in position by string looped over the back of the single seat. When the single seat is swivelled round to the forward travelling position, we simply keep the table behind the rear bench seat.

Sleeping arrangements

At the end of a busy day, sleeping arrangements are simplicity itself. The rear bench seat works on a rock and roll mechanism. Firstly, pull the bench seat out, and drop the



One of our reasons for choosing the Kamper: the extra single seat, here facing forwards for travelling.



Kitchen showing cooker, fridge, storage and sink. Foot switch for water pump is on floor to left of open cupboard door.



Furniture run to rear of kitchen provides worktop area and extra storage. Note single seat, now swivelled for dining.



Bedtime downstairs: free access to kitchen remains. Reading light, upper right, is handily placed.



Upstairs, spacious sleeping accommodation – or an ideal den for youngsters, but it can be chilly.

spring support leg (clipped underneath the seat) down on the floor. Then pull the lever on the bench seat backrest until it unclips, pull the backrest upwards slightly at the bottom and press down into position. A large double bed ready in seconds! The cushions are thick and very comfortable, ensuring a good night's rest. With the bed out, there is still access to all cupboards, refrigerator and the cooker, essential for that early morning cuppa. To regain travelling mode, just reverse the process.

A small problem does occur in hot weather though. As you sleep over the engine, the heat from it seeps up through the cushions and adds to your discomfort on a hot sticky night. To try to rectify this, we open up the back door a couple of hours or so before bedtime and lift the cushions up to let the air circulate. This strange nightly ritual often puzzles our fellow campers. Now you know – the secret is out! Unfortunately, this underbed heating does not seem to work on a cool autumnal night!

Apart from the underbed heating, it can be rather stuffy in the back. We prefer to sleep with our heads at the tailgate end, where there is unfortunately no ventilation, the nearest opening window being halfway

up the 'van. Sleeping the other way round just does not feel right! With the shape of the VW, the sliding window, when open, easily lets in rain – beware leaving it open during thundery weather!

The curtains are probably the poorest aspect of the conversion. They are ideal for ensuring an early start as they let the daylight in, both in thinness of the material and in the fact that they fail to overlap and consequently leave gaps. I don't fancy the idea of someone watching our nocturnal activities, but we have never got round to making our own! The Velcro strips which hold the curtains in place at night have had to be renewed on a frequent basis.

Once in bed, making sure you do not touch the curtains in the process, you will see the thoughtfully positioned reading light, at the back beside the rear roof cupboard. When you have finished planning the next day's activities, all you need do is stick your hand up to switch off the light. Very convenient. As there are no flyscreens for the windows, the reading light, which has a swivelling head, becomes an ideal search-light for killing mossies!

Upstairs accommodation comes courtesy of the elevating roof. The release catch is

inside, so you do not have to venture out when you want to lift up the roof. To operate the roof, pull out the catch (on the left by the sliding door) until it clicks. This releases the locking mechanism that keeps the roof down when travelling. Using the stool Autohomes thoughtfully provided, push the roof up. This requires a little effort until the gas-filled struts take over. With the roof up, stay on the stool and release the top sides first, then push up the lower sides and when they meet, keep in position by pulling down the locking lever. Ensure the two halves are firmly locked into position or the bottom half could fall down on your head. Pull out the two linked support boards from the slot over the cab and you now have a bedroom area 6ft long and 29in high. Two additional cushions, which we store in the gap between the 'van roof and the elevating roof, cover the support boards. It goes without saying that you have to be fairly agile to squeeze through the 11in gap. If this proves impossible, one of the linked support boards can be pushed back into the slot, thereby widening the gap substantially. No ladder is provided, so it is a case of standing on the stool, putting your foot on the back of the driver's seat and heaving yourself up. Daunting for the average adult but fun for a youngster.

In fact, the area makes an ideal den for youngsters, who can sit up there and play with their games or read without feeling cramped. The upstairs area is also strong enough to take the weight of an adult. Such is the spaciousness that no-one should experience feelings of claustrophobia. Daylight comes from two non-opening side acrylic windows, complete with curtains. Ventilation comes from the opening skylight, complete with flyscreen. A bedtime reading light is also provided. During the daytime, in hot weather it is possible to leave the top half of the section open to release a current of welcome fresh air to help keep your 'van cool. This does not affect the stability of the roof.

During the summer of 1993, there were a number of letters from readers warning of the roof suddenly rising up when travelling. Despite owning two Kampers, this frightening experience has only happened once to us and it was probably our fault for not checking that the roof was firmly locked when in the down position. This is something we always check now, before moving off – by pushing up inside, and going outside to the rear and trying to push up the roof from there. If it rises slightly, then the roof has not locked properly.



The handy, free-standing stool, and the side storage unit opened to reveal more cupboard space.



ELCB and refrigerator socket. Storage below for two Camping Gaz bottles, or Porta Potti + one bottle.



Wardrobe can be accessed through door (easier with bench seat lowered to bed position), or via tailgate.



Rear view showing 'parcel shelf', with drawers below. Cushion and drawer unit can be removed for access to engine.

In fact, with our current vehicle the opposite happens. Sometimes the roof fails to rise after pulling the release catch, especially on cold wet nights. This is solved by someone going outside, standing on the back bumper and giving the back of the roof a hefty shove. This normally does the trick. Although the roof is rigid, double skinned and insulated, draughts do tend to come in at the corners and can make sleeping up top a rather chilly experience on a cold windy autumn night.

Storage

In a vehicle of this size, the converters have made use of every possibility for storage. Looking first at the kitchen unit, there is a large cupboard under the cooker, for storing pots, pans, tins, and other bulky items. A cutlery drawer nestles between the cooker and the sink. Further along, storage is provided by two sliding door cupboards next to the bench seats. These are topped by a vanity unit and a deeper cupboard, containing a wire basket. There is still more space beneath this basket, ideal for storing small presents or little-used items. Just in front of the bench seat, on the floor, is a ventilated cupboard which holds the two Camping Gaz 907 bottles.

Unfortunately, the cold air which comes in through the refrigerator vents has to escape somewhere and it comes out through the doors of the sliding cupboard. This may be fine for the rear seat passenger in the summertime, but in cooler weather a blanket has to lie over the sliding doors. Do not be tempted to block off the cold air at source. We put these 'draughts' to good use in summertime, when returning from abroad, to store our bars of 'lilac chocolate' – as long as you are on the move each day the bars do not melt in the heat.

There are two small roof-height cupboards, one at the side and one at the back for small items, along with a small cubbyhole for odds and ends. A wardrobe is located behind the rear bench seat. If the

wardrobe door is blocked, you can gain access by opening the vehicle's back door. While we have the back door open, under the cushions (which make up the 'shelf' over the engine) are two handy drawers. As this area gets hot from the engine, we tend to use it for storing clothes.

Additional storage is possible under the single seat and also in the box stool, which has a hinged top. We use the stool to store maps and guidebooks, but avoid filling it with heavy items as we need to be able to move it around the vehicle.

Other facilities

There are no toilet facilities in the conversion, although there is space in the gas bottle cupboard for a small Porta-Potti. Our supply of cold water (there is no water heater fitted) comes from a large tank underneath the bench seat. The water pump is strategically placed on the floor by the front cupboard door, handy for the kitchen and for the dog to stand on. It is not the first time we have been stopped by anxious motorists pointing out that petrol is leaking from the vehicle when in fact it is water draining from the sink!

There is a gauge above the rear bench seat, which should tell when the tank needs to be filled, but we have found this never really works properly. In theory, you should fill the tank, via the filler cap (mid-way up the outside of the van). We did this once or twice, using plastic piping and some bits from a home brewing kit. What a guddle – and having to stand outside in all weathers too! We now fill the tank by pulling forward the bottom part of the rear bench seat and unscrewing the pump plug. It is then a relatively simple job to replenish supplies. We use the tank water for washing hands, preferring to use a water bottle for our fresh drinking supplies. This bottle is stored in the wardrobe. There is no onboard waste water tank – a pail or waste water bottle needs to be carried.

A mains hook-up is standard on the



Raising the roof: half-way stage. Gas struts can be clearly seen but side panels are not yet in place.



The finished article. Note too the front roof rack, complete with baffle which prevents wind noise.

Kamper conversion, the electrics being situated in the sliding door cupboard adjacent to the fridge. Two 13 amp sockets are supplied – one beside the electrics, for the fridge, and the other handily placed above and to the right of the kitchen unit. A 12 volt socket is positioned here as well. The electrical system is rather basic. What it does not do is charge your battery, nor power your interior lights. It can only be used for the fridge, television or heater.

A heater is necessary as no blown air system is fitted. We use a fan heater which we find excellent though rather noisy. If no electrics are available, then no heat. Sites with electrical hook-ups are essential in the cooler months of spring and autumn. (A blown air heating system, second battery and control panel incorporating a battery charger were available as optional extras.)

Summary

This has been a 'warts 'n all' assessment, but despite its minor niggles (we doubt if the perfect conversion really exists) we are very pleased with our Kamper. In total we have probably had over 120 000 miles of pleasure from our two. As this Kamper is no longer made, at the time of writing we are anxiously waiting to see if any of the major converters are planning to introduce a similar conversion. Sadly, it seems to be a case of 'don't hold your breath'!

In comparison to the current conversions, our seven-year-old Kamper does look a shade basic, but for someone with a young family, for first-time motorcaravanners or for someone looking for a reliable second-hand motorcaravan, we would have no hesitation in recommending the Autohomes VW Kamper as a worthwhile purchase. Like ourselves, we hope your Kamper will give you miles of happy holidays and outings.

[The original Autohomes company, based in Poole, Dorset, went into receivership in 1992. Later that same year, Eddis acquired the business assets of the company, retaining the name 'Autohomes'.]

Footnote: Andrew might have been tempted by the subject of our main road test this month, had he not, since writing this report, already changed to an Auto-Sleeper Topaz. Ed.

Brief specification

Base vehicle: 1987 VW Transporter panel van
Conversion: Kamper by Autohomes
Mechanical spec: 1.9-litre watercooled 78bhp petrol engine. Rear wheel drive.
Transmission: 4 speed box
Fuel tank capacity: 13 gallons (60 litres)
Average fuel consumption: Town – 19mpg, touring – 27mpg.
Overall length: 15ft (4.57m)
Overall width: 6ft 1in (1.85m)
Overall height: 7ft 6 1/4in (2.29m), roof down
Interior height: 7ft 5in (2.26m), roof up
Refrigerator: Electrolux RM212
Water: Built-in 12-gallon water tank
Lighting: One fluorescent light over kitchen area, one reading light over rear bench seat. Front and side door courtesy lights.
Gas equipment: Ventilated locker, able to take 2 x Camping Gaz 907 bottles
Cooking: Two-burner hob with grill
Table: Length 31in (785mm), width 20in (510mm)
Wardrobe: Height 33in (840mm), width 24in (610mm)
Beds downstairs: Length 6ft 1in (1.85m), width 4ft (1.22m)
Upstairs: Length 6ft (1.83m), width 4ft (1.22m), headroom (735mm)
Price when new: From about £13 000. □