

WORTH WAITING FOR:

JOHN HUNT TESTS THE

CI VW KAMPER



Easy to drive, easy to park — that's the new Volks. CI's Kamper conversion has distinctive side flash, white, all-over GRP roof and dark plinth to rising section behind roof rack above cab.

From the outside, the raised roof is perhaps not the most elegant but that high rise gives big advantages inside. Top panels can be raised for increased ventilation on site. ▶

"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 Auto-homes 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, bearing in mind that every motorcaravan is, by definition, a compromise between a car for motoring and a home for living.

But, with the help of my wife, I've unearthed a few minor failings or, rather, points that we'd like to see given further consideration. You'll notice them among the paeons of praise.

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 two of just about the quietest motorcaravans we've ever tried (the other being the Auto-Sleeper conversion on the Volks) 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 other 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 50–55 mph. When loosened-up, we know the 2 litre will reach 80 mph indicated. Fuel consumption was around 24 mpg, 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 30 mph 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. ▶

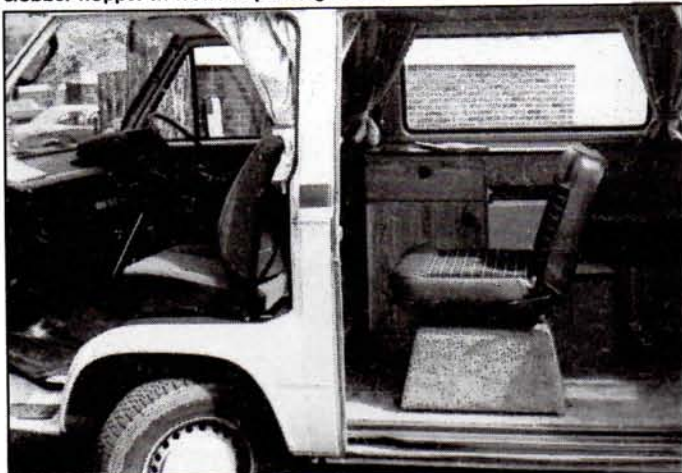
CI VW KAMPER



Cab is tidy and functional rather than luxurious. The wide, sloping fascia needs a fiddle rail if it's to be used to hold maps. There's a sizeable clobber hopper in front of passenger seat.



View from nearside, showing comfortable, velour-covered cab seats and CI's adaptable multi-position single seat, just inside sliding door.



View through side door with single seat facing rearwards. Bench seat ample for two, takes three if needed. Open cupboard beneath small seat takes Porta-Potti.



Kitchen unit, behind driver's seat. Opened top provides shelf for pans, splash guard protects front seat. Cooker and sink are integral, all stainless steel.

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 heads. 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.

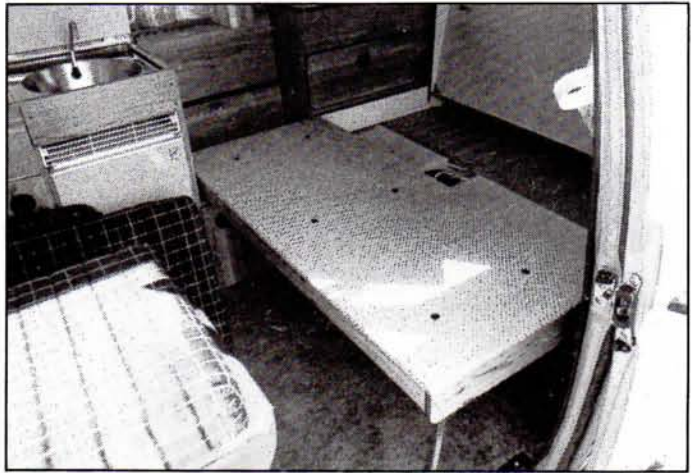
A couple have the choice of sleeping downstairs and preserving full headroom over the kitchen or sleeping upstairs and leaving the seats as seats downstairs.

Roof

It's fairly high, even when lowered. When you put it up, you



Dining room for five around the big, firm, free-standing table. Multi-position seat in foreground has been turned and backrest lowered to provide bench for two.



Downstairs bed making. Bench seat cushions are removed, seat base hinged forward, supported by side seat and one leg. Then backrest is dropped forward and cushions replaced.



To rear of kitchen — flat work surfaces. Backrest of side-facing seat has been raised to form flap. Deep locker has top-hinged lid, front flap door and removable shelf inside.



Here is the bed, ready for sleeping bags. There's a locker in the roof above. Wardrobe base (door opened here) projects over bed at rear, so maximum width is at front end.

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 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.

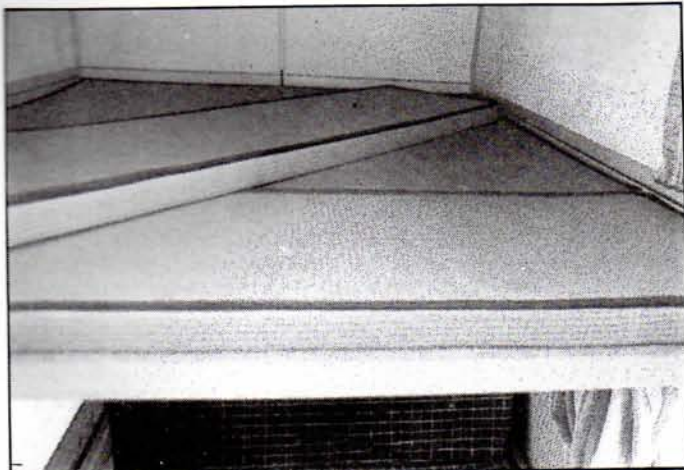
The battery is beneath the driver's seat, tools and 'nasties' beneath the passenger seat. The roof rack over the cab would take an annexe or a large suitcase. There are no cleats for strapping down small items, which could slip through the bars.

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

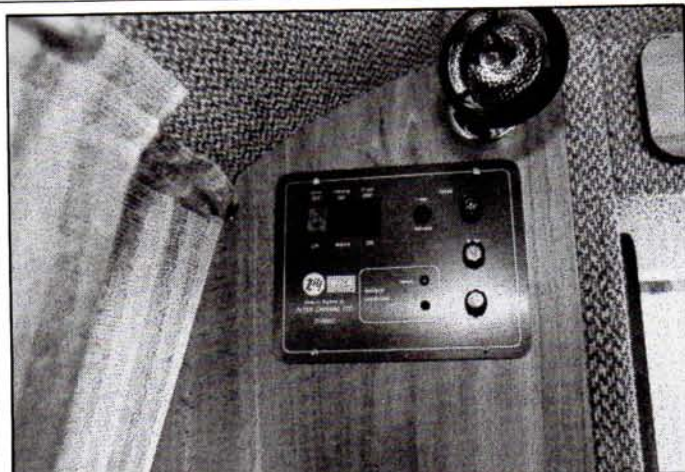
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Upstairs bed, seen from front end. First extension flap and cushion in place, second to follow. Headroom is excellent and solid walls all round give sense of security.



When full 6ft bed is in use, there's a gap of 11 inches — big enough for an adult to climb through, or front panel will slide away for wider access. Children could have 4ft or 5ft bed.



Zig unit has switches to isolate mains and 12 volt input, to select charging of second battery by car's generator or mains. Circuits are protected by cartridge fuses and there's a battery monitor.



Table, in stowed position, hides contents of boot inside tailgate. Beneath cushions are two commodious drawers. Access to wardrobe is via door or tailgate.

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.

Colour scheme

Exterior: Yellow with brown flash, brown plinth to white roof cap.

Interior: Fawn deep pile carpet throughout, with removable rubber mats in cab. Nigger-brown and white check velvet type upholstery. Cab seats covered in plain brown velour. Tweed brown/white/fawn striped curtains, lined and generously cut. Roof and walls lined brown-and-white flecked tweed material. Furniture constructed of pine-effect melamine on chipboard. Cupboard interiors in white melamine. Recessed dark brown handles. Bases of cupboards lined with vinyl or carpet.

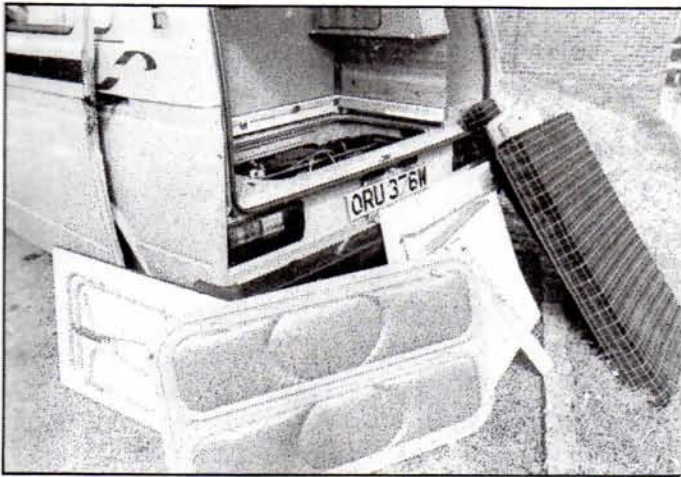
Equipment

Exterior: Tubular roof rack over cab. Mains input and water filler on righthand side.

Interior: Fire extinguisher. Insect screened roof vent. Electrolux 122 refrigerator, 2-way. Leisure Princess cooker with 2 burners and grill, integral with stainless steel sink and draining board. Water fed from 12 gallon (54.5L) tank beneath rear seat, via submersible electric pump and folding faucet, control by foot switch. Ventilated cupboard for two 907 Calor Gas bottles. Main gas tap and isolating taps for cooker, refrigerator and heater (where fitted). Cover to cooker and sink forms shelf when opened. Free standing table, doubles as luggage cover in rear compartment. Rear bench seat, 4ft wide. Small sideways facing seat over locker, 13in (330mm) high, 12in (305mm) wide, 19in (480mm) deep. Single, multi-position passenger seat with storage in base. Free-standing stool/storage box. Cupboard beneath cooker. Locker at offside rear, 25½in (655mm) x 10¼in (275mm) x 18in (455mm) deep, with removable shelf and top or side access. Locker beneath roof at rear. Two drawers above engine deck, each 21½in (545mm) x 22½in (570mm) x 2¼in (70mm) deep. Wardrobe 36in (915mm) hanging height, 26in (660mm) max width, 16in (405mm) max depth. Main bed 6ft 2in (1880mm) x 4ft 0in (1219mm). Upper bed 6ft 0in (1830mm) x 4ft 0in (1219mm). Four windows in saloon (one opening) and two fixed acrylic windows in roof.

Lights: 1 x 8-watt fluorescent in roof, 1 x 8-watt fluorescent and spotlight over kitchen, courtesy lamps in cab and inside side door.

Optional equipment includes Porta-Potti, Zig unit and blown air gas heater (£377-52).



Whilst oil level can be checked and topped up behind number plate, access to engine entails removal of table, cushions, drawers and cover.



Services on offside (left to right): fresh water filler, mains input, refrigerator vent, fuel filler (in wheel arch).

We liked:

Motoring in the VW
 Excellent front seats
 Smooth ride
 Good roadholding
 Forward-facing seats for 5
 Fuel economy at cruising speeds
 Instant starting
 Good insulation and soundproofing
 Absence of rattles
 'Boot' which hides shopping
 Roof rack
 Spare wheel stowage at front
 Big, counterbalanced tailgate
 Easy erection of roof
 Full opening of roof sidewalls
 Two good double beds
 Separate upper 'bedroom'
 Flyscreened roof vent
 Free-standing table
 Full curtains with press studs, front and nearside
 Deep locker for bottles

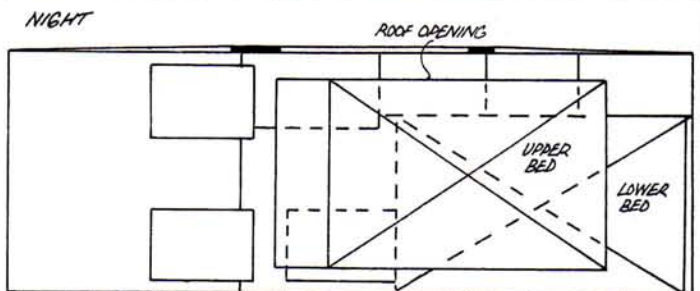
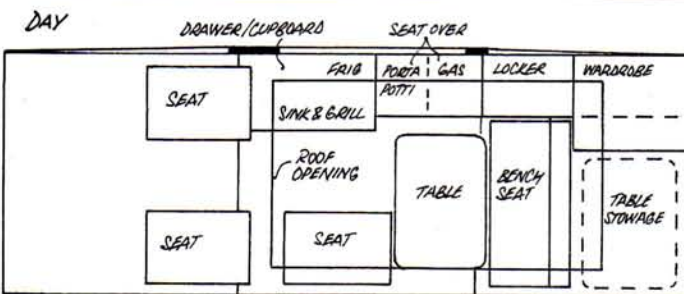
Big screw cap on water tank
 Quiet water pump
 Optional heater and Zig unit
 Instruction book for caravan
 General colour scheme, inside and outside

We would have liked

Cleats for strapping small items to roof-rack
 More rake on rear seat backrest
 Easy removal of single seat
 Seatbelts at rear
 Partial opening of roof sidewalls
 Handle to pull out bed base over cab
 Shallower wardrobe for wider bed at rear
 Slightly larger stool/box (to take loo)
 Press studs on offside curtains
 Rear curtains on rails rather than wires
 Underfloor water tank (to release more storage space inside)
 Waste water tank

We disliked

Noisy sliding door



Dimensions

Overall: Length 15ft 0in (4.57m); width 6ft 0½in (1.84m); height 7ft 5in (2.25m)
Interior: Length behind cab 9ft 2in (2795mm)
 Width at waist (max) 5ft 2½in (1590mm)
 Headroom over floor area 7ft 5in (2255mm)
 Headroom over upper bed 2ft 6in (760mm)
 Headroom over lower bed 3ft 0in (915mm) max, 1ft 11in (585mm) min
Fuel tank capacity 13 gallons (60L)
Turning circle 35ft 1½in (10.7m)
Fuel consumption (measured according to EEC recommendations): Urban 16.8 mpg (16.8L/100KM)
 steady 56 mph (90 kph) 25 mpg (11.3L/100 Km).
Price: £8395 as tested

Comments

There's not always time to invite manufacturers to comment on our reports. This time there was. Here's what CI have to say:

- 1) *Quietness is due to the glassfibre insulation fitted up to window level between skins of bodysides and side and rear doors. CI think they are alone in insulating not only the roof but the body of a VW.*
- 2) *Agreed - table too large. Size being reduced.*
- 3) *More press studs already being fitted to curtains.*
- 4) *Rear curtains will run on rails.*
- 5) *Size of stool/box could not be increased if it's still to fit in the most convenient place, between cab seats.*
- 6) *Water tank is above floor level to avoid freezing in winter. Unlikely that space could be found under floor of VW for large water and waste tanks.*

Vehicle supplied for test by the converters, CI Autohomes Ltd, 59 Old Wareham Road, Poole, Dorset