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# safer VOLKSWAGEN motoring

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THE INDEPENDENT VW/AUDI FAMILY MAGAZINE



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**T**op selling motor caravan during the first half of 1983 was the VW-based *Kamper* by **Autohomes** (formerly CI Autohomes) of Poole. With the new water-cooled engines delivering power to keep up with the competition, the *Kamper* has been leading Volkswagen's drive to recoup a large share of the motor caravan market, where ten years ago their Transporter provided the foundation for as many as 70% of the motor caravans sold in Britain.

Brief test drives in a number of Transporter-based motor caravans with the new, water-cooled engines had quickly convinced me that VW had got it right by retaining the third generation model of the ubiquitous VW commercial, introduced in 1979, but giving it more power.

For comfort, ride and handling the Transporter was already well ahead of its long-in-the-tooth rivals from Bedford and Ford, although in those departments the new Renault Traffic and Talbot Express vans run it close. What the VW lacked was power, and to a woeful degree in the 1600 model.

The new engines, flat-fours with water jackets, looked set to rectify the one shortcoming of the Transporter, so it was with considerable expectations that I set out on my first prolonged test of one of the new models — a *Kamper* Mk 2 fitted with the 78bhp engine and standard 4-speed gearbox.

I always found it surprising that a marriage was not arranged earlier between the VW, for long the most popular motor caravan base, and the old CI company, one of the top manufacturers of both motor and trailer caravans.

CI waited until the almost-completely-new Transporter appeared, with the benefits of larger internal dimensions and less engine intrusion. The *Kamper* made its debut at the 1980 Caravan Show, achieved instant popularity, and then appeared in improved Mk 2 form at the end of last year to benefit from the new VW engines.

To put the road qualities of the VW to the test before assessing the *Kamper* as a living unit, I took a circuitous route from Autohomes' Poole factory to my chosen camp site on the fringe of the New Forest. Fast dual carriageway on the A35 west of Poole, and then the flat road following the Stour to Blandford, showed just what a relaxed cruiser the new water-cooler Transporter is.

At speeds up to 70 mph the engine is scarcely audible, and the twin-carburettor version of the 1.9 litre flat-four obviously has plenty in hand for speeds well above the legal limit (with the optional, 5-speed gearbox the 4th-to-5th change-up point is marked at 75 mph!).

Subdued tyre noise at lower speeds is superseded by a whistle from the *Kamper's* overcab roof rack at higher speeds, and by more air-generated sound if the VW's fresh air ventilation system (effective enough on a hot day) is turned on. Although the *Kamper* is an exceptionally quiet vehicle, yet at times I had to strain an ear to be sure that the engine was still turning.

Wary of the habits of leaden-footed commercial drivers, Volkswagen still fit the Transporter with a governing device to limit maximum engine revs, but it no longer provides those heart-stopping moments when overtaking which were familiar to drivers of earlier models.

In the 78 bhp, 4-speed version of the water-cooled model the 2nd-to-3rd change-up point is marked at 40 mph, and 65 is the speed for selecting top. The speeds feel right for the power and torque characteristics of the motor and I soon found there was no temptation to try to exceed them (although there is a small margin beyond the limits marked on the speedometer before power loss becomes apparent). I rated the acceleration exceptional by motor caravan standards, bettering the manufacturers' quoted 0-50 mph figure of 15.7 secs, by just over a second.

A willing engine, coupled with a feeling of surefootedness from the coil-spring independent suspension, encouraged brisker progress with the *Kamper* Mk 2 than with earlier VW motor caravans, and I was more often the overtaker than the overtaken. The latest Volkswagens should do as much to extinguish the 'snail' image of the motor caravan as the early ones, with puny 1200 engines, did to establish it!

From Blandford I turned northwards for Shaftesbury and, searching for sterner country to test the *Kamper*, took to the byways through Cranborne Chase and on to the Downs of the Dorset/Wiltshire border. It's hard to find hills of both

*The Kamper carries its name boldly. Note height of elevating roof; one side can be left open to turn the 'van into a mobile grandstand.*



**Kamper leads VW comeback**

length and severity in the South, but here the land rises to just over 900 ft and one can find gradients of more than 1-in-10.

The 78 bhp VW proved itself a more nimble climber than the former top-of-the-range, 2-litre air-cooled model, and on zigzag climbs where there was a need to swap between 3rd and 2nd the gearchange was positive and pleasant to use, if still a little stiff at 4000 miles.

Top on the Transporter remains an overdrive ratio (0.85:1 on the 4-speed model) so early downchanges are called for and the 4-speed box is fairly widely spaced. It's not unusual to find a hill which allows near maximum revs in one gear but which cannot be climbed comfortably in the next ratio.



*Kitchen unit is opposite side door. Single seat swivels. Note free-standing table.*

The buyer spending upwards of £9,000 for a new VW motor caravan would be wise, in my opinion, to find not only the extra £233 for the higher powered engine (and after driving the 78 'horse version there's



*The comfortable cab of the new Transporter.*



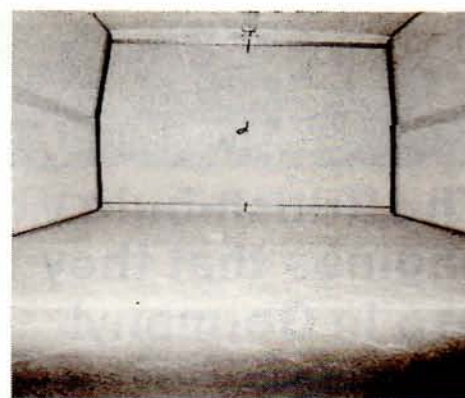
## Kamper Continued



View from rear shows neat cabinetwork with rounded corners. Stool is provided to reach roof.



Bed measures 6' 1" x 4' and cushion-to-cushion joins are undetectable.



Upper bed is 6' x 4' with exceptional 29" headroom.

no way one could be content with the 60 bhp Transporter!) but also £200 for the 5-speed gearbox. It should provide almost exactly the right ratio for every occasion, with advantages in performance, particularly at the top end and on hills, and in overall economy (although Volkswagen's own steady-speed figures show only a marginal improvement).

Whether on the narrow byways of Cranborne Chase or the varied roads of the New Forest, straight and fast or narrow and twisting, the VW was in its element. At just half an inch over 6 ft the re-modelled Transporter is wider than its predecessors, but it's still a go-anywhere vehicle.

A remarkably tight turning circle — just under 30 ft between kerbs — helps when there's not much room, and the rack-and-pinion steering is superbly precise. Handling gives not the slightest cause for criticism by commercial van standards, and bears comparison with that of many saloon cars. Helped by the good visibility which the high driving position brings, I found the Transporter opening long gaps over most following vehicles through roundabouts and bends.

Radial tyres, standard for some time now on all Transporter models, assist roadholding, and the almost equal weight distribution between front and rear axles has not been upset by the small weight penalty added by water-cooling — just some 65 lb.

Braking is up to the high standards set elsewhere, the servo-assisted disc/drum combination, with pressure limiter to adjust rear braking effort to load, being exceptionally progressive. Vans, needing to cope with a near doubling of weight when fully laden, sometimes produce rather harsh braking from low speeds when lightly laden (as in motor caravan form) but that is not a characteristic of the Transporter.

In its cab the new Transporter follows the pattern of comfort with simplicity established by earlier models. Seats adjust for reach and rake and are fitted with head restraints. Cloth-faced to be cool in

summer and warm in winter, they should suit most except the very long-legged, who may find the squabs a little short.

The slim, two-spoke wheel is comfortably set at about 45° and the controls come nicely to hand. The handbrake, against the driver's seat, needed little effort to hold on steep gradients. Column mounted stalks control indicators and dip/flash functions, and the electric washers and two-speed wipers.

Instruments, with switches adjacent, are housed in a binnacle arrangement atop the sloping fascia, and water-cooling has brought a temperature gauge to join the speedometer and fuel gauge. There's a flashing light, coming on with the ignition but going out in seconds if all is well, to guard the interests of the 'waterworks', and other warning lights for major functions. By comparison with its contemporaries, however, the VW is not well endowed with warning lamps.

I checked the heating system only long enough to prove that it could provide plentiful blasts of hot air in the right places, aided by a three-speed fan. Four slide levers control heat and air quantities and distribution, and require some practice before the right results can be obtained. There are separate controls for air volume and direction, on vents at the end of the fascia, and the usual air extraction slides in the cab doors. After not a little experimentation a satisfactory airflow was arranged to cool the cab on a hot day.

There's a good, big, lockable glove locker (where with the owner's handbook and service manual I found a well-produced guide by Autohomes to the caravan side of the Kamper) and the fascia looks handy for those maps and guidebooks to which one wants instant reference. Well, it looks handy, but everything was soon on the floor! A higher and squarer lip is needed there.

The failings of the new Transporter are few and trivial, and it's easy to see why the VW is still No.1 with motor caravanners. Now to see how the caravan side of the Kamper wins friends.

On the road one point had already become obvious — a total lack of rattles or chattering had been testimony to soundness of construction in the Autohomes conversion. Even off the road, when the Kamper was driven on a potholed track to see if the coil-spring suspension copes as well with the rough stuff as did the earlier torsion bar system (it does!), scarcely a noise could be heard from the well-fitting cabinetwork.

A good quality chipboard, surfaced with plastic laminate in a medium oak pattern, is the main constructional material in the Kamper. It looks well able to take the inevitable knocks, and edges are finished and protected by neat plastic inserts. Worktops, clad in a basket-weave effect Formica, are round edged and fitted with piano hinges with the corners of the cabinetwork rounded as a safety feature. Completing the smart and well-made units are strong hinges and recessed catches with a positive bolt action.

Arriving at Bashley Park near New Milton, a large well-equipped campsite handy for the New Forest or the sea, the first job was to put up the solid panel, insulated roof. The Autohomes elevating roof rises from a full-length fibreglass plinth, the front portion of which provides a roof rack. It adds considerably to vehicle height when down, making the Kamper Mk 2 7'6" high, but provides exceptional headroom when up.

Lifting the roof is easy. A single T-handle behind the cab roof releases the ingenious locking bar system, and two gas-filled struts on each side then assist in lifting the roofcap. Because of the height, a free-standing stool is provided so that those of normal stature can reach and unfold the side panels (one hinges down and one up) and secure them with the single catch.

Once up, the roof was firm and well sealed, and compared with the more usual fabric-sided roof it will provide good protection against both heat and cold. There's an opening rooflight with flyscreen, an acrylic window on each side and a

fluorescent light for the 'upper bedroom'.

Like many of its rivals, the Kamper Mk 2 provides a 6' x 4', firm-based upper bed. There's a fixed base to the rear of the centre roof bow, which VW decree must not be removed, and the bed is made up with two interconnecting sections which slide out from an overcab slot in the roof plinth. With the bed complete only an 11" gap remains at the forward end of the roofspace, so it's easiest to climb up and then pull out the forward sections to finish the bed assembly.

The generous headroom in the Kamper's roof, 29", makes this easy, and also allows the upper berth to be regarded as a separate, private compartment. The agile, at least, will find room to undress up there, while by day the upper bed with its firm, 3" thick cushions can double as a playroom.

Down below, the layout of the Kamper mainly follows the popular floorplan for the new VW. Cabinetwork extends the full length of the offside, the back seat joins with the engine deck area to make a bed, and there's a single seat beside the sliding side door. In detail, however, there are a number of thoughtful and practical features to set the conversion apart from its rivals.

The offside unit is wider at its forward end (to make space for items of 'galley' equipment) and narrower at the rear to leave room for a 4 ft wide bed. Worktops are neatly fitted on piano hinges. The wider section, double hinged so that when raised it folds to make a handy shelf, lifts to reveal a 2-burner-and-grill cooker and a 12" round sink set in an integral, stainless steel top. Below is the standard Electrolux 122 (gas and 12V) fridge and a spacious cupboard.

I found a foot switch, actuating the submersible pump in the 12 gal water tank which occupies the space beneath the rear seat; a sliding window providing ventilation in the cooking area and a fluorescent light overhead.

Three narrower worktop sections lift to reveal, from the front, a



# Kamper Continued



Kitchen arrangement with cooker, sink and separate drainer. Fridge is standard and sliding doors give easy access to upper cupboards.

drainer (with waste pipe connected to that from the sink), a cutlery tray and a sanitary unit beneath a mirrored lid. Access to storage space below these shallow units, and adjacent to the rear seat, has been well thought out. The top portion of the cabinetwork is provided with sliding doors giving access without hindrance to the two cupboards whether the rear seat, the bed or the table is in use.

The lower cupboard, beside and in front of the seat, has a conventional door (not obstructed when the bed is down) and accommodates the *Camping Gaz* 907 size bottle in the awkward, round-the-corner space beside the rear seat. The cupboard is sized to house a *Porta Potti* 230 model, offered as an option with the Kamper, in a handy, slide-out position behind the door.

Although the Kamper loses a traditional storage area in the VW (that beneath the rear seat) to the water tank, it is not short of storage space. Completing the offside unit is the 'jacket length' wardrobe in the rear corner, with width and depth of 24" and 11½" max respectively. Adjacent is the big well behind the rear seat, usually given over to bedding, while below this and the engine deck cushion I discovered a couple of shallow drawers, accessible through the tailgate or by lifting the cushion, which will be useful to keep clothing flat and warm.

There's the usual shallow, but quite capacious, locker filling the curve of the roofspace at the rear and Autohomes have thoughtfully added another slim, but useful, unit above window level on the offside. The plinth of the single seat beside the VW's side door, and the interior of the freestanding box-stool, both offer further stowage opportunities.

The rear seat of the Kamper is comfortably raked but best suited to tall occupants. Set with the squab overlapping the engine deck, so giving extra floor space, the front edge is 22" from the floor and squab length is 21½" — children and shorter



For travelling, rear seat takes two or three, while single seat is turned to face forwards. Note Zig unit over window, small locker and spotlight.

adults will find their feet dangling in mid-air!

To convert the seat to a bed, Autohomes have devised their own, simple-to-use system. The squab moves forward on a rock-and-roll linkage and is supported by a rail on the cabinetwork and by a fold-down leg. After releasing the two bolts which provide positive location, the seat back swings down to fill the gap over the water tank and the front edge of the engine deck. The firm cushions meet precisely, and the 6'1" x 4' bed was as comfortable as any I've slept on in my many years of motor caravanning, and better than one finds in most hotels!

The single seat beside the Volkswagen's sliding side door provides a fifth forward-facing seat for travelling (or a sixth when three slim ones share the back seat). The Kamper is as much at home as a multi-seat passenger vehicle as it is as a motor caravan.

Set on a sliding plinth, and able both to swivel and to recline, the single seat in the Kamper 2 offers several options — forward facing for travel, rear facing for lounging or dining, inward facing while the cook keeps an eye on the stove, or outward with the side door open, as a perch from which to watch the world go by.

With the back reclined and supported by the movable stool, a double seat is created at table, but, as in a number of other VW conversions, this arrangement still leaves two dining places with no back support. The double seat also restricts access to the fridge, however, so many users of the Kamper will choose other alternatives to provide four places at table. Three can share the back seat, or the stool alone provides an adequate perch.

A free-standing table is provided in the Kamper, an unusual feature in a British motor caravan and particularly in a panel van conversion. The table top is large, 37" x 20½", and there is the advantage that the

unit can be used outside the 'van, but on the whole I thought the disadvantages of the arrangement far outweighed the benefits. The folding, tubular leg system intruded too much into the space intended for diners' legs, and it also restricted the options for positioning the tabletop.

With the popular island-leg table mount the top can be swung to any angle, while the cranked-leg system, favoured in the German-built Continental, allows even greater flexibility. Motor caravanners with children, for whom the table is a play surface when on the move, will also be unhappy about leaving the Kamper's table up while travelling, for it is free to tip or slide. The table arrangement, in my opinion, is the one significant shortcoming in an otherwise excellent design from Autohomes.

On the road the new Volkswagens, now with a jacket of water to further reduce engine noise, are already exceptionally quiet vehicles. Extensive use of carpet in the Kamper Mk 2 further reduces noise level to a remarkably low level, and it's hard to find anything to criticise in the Autohomes trim (unless it's the untrimmed surround of the caravan area windows, a neglected point in too many VW conversions).

On the floor, and carried through into the cab, is an attractive rust-coloured carpet, which is also used to face all seat bases. An oatmeal-colour carpet material — a good, light contrast to the stronger shades of furniture and flooring — is used for side and roof trim, and I was pleased to note that the quarter panels at the rear and the inside of the wardrobe had not been overlooked.

The upholstery and curtains of the Kamper pick up the colour themes to complete a feeling of warmth and luxury. Seats are clad with a warm, velvet-like fabric, patterned in rust shades on oatmeal. The curtains are of a flecked rust-coloured material, good for light exclusion, and cut precisely rather than generously. When closed with the aid of *Velcro* fastener strips attached to the window surrounds they gave a sleek, fitted appearance, yet left no peepholes.

A couple of days with the Mk 2 Kamper left me in no doubt about the reasons for its popularity. The VW Transporter with its more powerful engines has got to be back at No.1 as a driver's vehicle — versatile as always, smooth riding, and

with economy as well as performance benefitting from the refined, water-cooled engines.

Consumption figures according to DIN Standard 70030 (half payload, three-quarters maximum speed, plus 10%) show 24.1 mpg for the 78 bhp/4-speed models, and my test with some brisk driving certainly equalled that. More typical touring use should make a figure well into the high twenties attainable, especially if the 5-speed gearbox is specified. VW credit the 5-speed with only an extra 0.6 mpg in the steady speed test, but in overall use I feel sure it's good for far more.

Autohomes' conversion fully complements the excellence of the VW. The layout is practical, makes good use of the limited space of the Transporter with storage readily accessible under all conditions of use, and everything is well put together. Materials and construction give a promise of durability to match the legendary lasting qualities of the base vehicle, and the whole is pleasing to the eye.

If the Kamper has achieved a top-selling position it must go without saying that it gets high marks from buyers for its decor; in all families (even VW-orientated ones!) the 'distaff side' brings at least as much influence to bear in purchase decisions as does the man of the house! If *she* falls for the colours and the design, *he* can forget his wish for twin overhead cams and suchlike mechanical niceties!

The Kamper, with the lower output, 60 bhp engine, costs from £9,566. Add the cost of the 78 bhp engine option and the 5-speed gearbox and you'll say goodbye to £10,000, while the options package fitted to the test vehicle — a *Propex* underfloor blown-air heater, secondary battery and *Zig* built-in charger/fuse unit with mains hook-up — will increase the bill by another £471.

If you're spending £10,000 on a motor caravan the heater package looks a good bet, for with the well insulated Kamper you can then enjoy virtually all-year-round touring. The total outlay looks large, but the Kamper Mk 2 brings not only everyday motoring with comfort, style and performance, but also years of holiday pleasure plus the freedom, if you wish, to wake up every weekend to a new scene.

If you're a nomad at heart, tot up the cost of hotel bills for two, or three, or four, before you judge the cost of the Kamper...

Water hoses seem a strange sight in a Transporter, but most engine items needing attention are easy to get at.

