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THE INDEPENDENT VW/AUDI FAMILY MAGAZINE

TESTS

- 1·8 litre Golf GTi
- Westfalia caravan

www.WestfaliaT3.info - a useful website for owners and enthusiasts of VW Westfalia T25 / T3 / Vanagon Campervans

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A meeting with a friendly local for one of the last few Westfalia conversions based on the air-cooled Type 2 Volkswagen (current production has progressed to the newer water-cooled version). Whilst not particularly luxurious from the interior trim viewpoint, the latest Continental nevertheless impressed during *Safer Motoring's* road test with its overall value for money. **Full test report by Chris Burlace starts on Page 326.**

COVER PICTURE: A 'trundle' of Beetles (the nicest collective term we have heard), plus representatives of most other VW models, pictured in the attractive grounds of Bodiam Castle in East Sussex during this year's meeting of the VW Split Window Club and the VW Cabriolet Owners' Club. Some beautiful examples of early Beetles were on show at the event, which attracted hundreds of visitors on a fine, sunny day. Picture by Peter Noad; report and more pictures, Page 318/9.

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CHRIS BURLACE tests the last of the air-cooled Westfalias

Comeback for the Continental

Volkswagen's air-cooled van was by far the most successful light commercial the world has ever seen. In over 30 years something over 5½ million vehicles were sold. Its success as a load and passenger carrier was paralleled, in fact exceeded, by its popularity as a motor caravan base and it was 'number one' with constructors both in Britain and in Europe. It is surprising, therefore, that only one European-built VW motor caravan has ever won a share of the British market — the German-built Westfalia Continental.

The Continental was imported through 'official' VW channels for a few years until about 1974, and gained a small following over here despite being more highly priced than British conversions. It was a quality 'van, finished with Teutonic thoroughness, and had many ingenious features, but some considered the multi-functional complexities of its layout just too clever to be practical.

The price differential over the top home-produced VW conversions stretched eventually to more than 25%; the Westfalia was then imported only to special order and soon quietly faded from the British motor caravan scene.

Last year, however, the Westfalia made a comeback, not through 'official' channels but thanks to the enterprise of motor caravan specialists **Travelworld** of Wolverhampton.

Whereas the old Continental had been more expensive than its British rivals, it was a surprise to find the new models, offered only with the 2 litre engine, showing a price advantage relative to most of the home competition. When one considered the standard features of the most popular model — 2 litre engine package, swivel cab seats with table, fridge and mains electrical hook-up — they were unbeatable.

Westfalia layouts employ a modular furniture system which permits a considerable number of permutations of floorplans, although not all are possible on vehicles for the UK market fitted with the sliding door on the left-hand side.

Travelworld offer the Westfalia in fixed roof, two-berth form, or with a choice of elevating roof (either Westfalia's distinctive front-lifter or Travelworld's own full-length, side-lifting elevating roof) for a full four berths.

I took a four-berth model with Westfalia's elevating roof up the A5 to spend a weekend in the Welsh Border country and to see how this import compares with its British-converted competitors.

Unsurpassed

The VW Transporter may have been conceived primarily as a load-carrying commercial but it inflicts no hardships on driver or passengers. Ride comfort is unsurpassed by any of its rivals and is the equal of the standards set by many small or medium-sized saloons.

Progress is smooth and quiet all the way up to the legal limit, with the muted note of the rear-mounted engine blending with subdued tyre and wind noise to give a remarkably low overall noise level.

Neat and space-saving, the Inox *combination top provides a well proportioned sink and two burners but no grill.*

A great advantage for the VW, its compact dimensions make it ideal for exploring the quiet byways.

These last-of-a-generation air-cooled models set a new level of refinement in motor caravans, now challenged by Renault's *Trafic* van and the 'international' model built jointly by Peugeot/Citroen/Fiat and sold here as the Talbot *Express* and Fiat *Ducato*.

However, VW have stolen a march once again on their competitors with the new water-cooled generation — you'll be surprised at just how quiet the new models are, cutting the noise levels in the superseded air-cooled 'vans by yet a further 50%!

The refinement of the VW is complemented by Westfalia's caravan conversion, which produced not a chatter from its furniture, not even a rattle from its cooker, when on the road.

Furniture is built with an unusual material, a plywood/cork/plywood laminate which is both light and strong. It is surfaced with a tough plastic laminate, attractive in a forest green, easy to keep clean and able to withstand knocks. Doors and worktops are finished in a contrasting off-white laminate.

The units seem strong and precisely made, the neat fit, plastic edgings and springbolt type catches accounting for their quietness when on the move. Rounded corners to panels and flush-fitting pulls for the catches demonstrate that safety too has been a consideration in the design of the new *Continentals*.

Contrast

After the high standard of furniture construction in these German imports, I found the trim rather basic. Panels below waist-rail level were of white, plastic-surfaced millboard secured with self-tapping screws; there was nothing to disguise the raw panel edges. The same material was used as headlining in the caravan area.

The appearance was in sharp contrast to that of British conversions where the use of carpet and soft vinyl fabrics for trim has become the norm, to add warmth and luxury to interiors. Window surrounds in the test 'van had been left as painted metal, but I have been pleased to find in later models that neat, foam-backed vinyl has been used to clad window surrounds, leaving little of the original metalwork on view.

If the level of trim in the Westfalia is a little

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disappointing, the less obvious (but more important) feature of insulation has not been skimped. Taking out some screws for a peep behind the panelling I found plentiful fibreglass insulation between panels and the metal skin of the 'van. The floor throughout the living area and cab, and the cab seat bases, were carpeted.

An unusual feature in the test 'van was double glazed, acrylic windows throughout the caravan area, including the tailgate. Many owners would consider the extra £300 cost of these windows money well spent as a means of overcoming the bogey of condensation, particularly troublesome in a small 'van in early and late season. Double glazed units to fit the VW window apertures have long been available, and popular, on the Continent, but have only recently been introduced here by a new British convertor, Diamond RV.

With a couple of thousand miles already behind it, my test vehicle felt to be loosening up nicely, although probably not yet delivering its best performance. The gear change was positive, if still just a little stiff. Catching up the occasional slower vehicle in the light, evening traffic on Telford's road to Wales, I could drop into third for overtaking and found 60 mph came up easily.

Passing panting saloons with trailer 'vans in tow on the gradients, second gear proved good for a useful 40 mph. Nevertheless the later 2 litre VW engine, with the sophistication of its hydraulic tappets, electronic ignition and microprocessor-controlled idling, never seems to have achieved the same edge of sharpness as its simpler predecessor.

That, however, can be forgotten with the advent of the new 1.9 litre, 78 bhp water-cooled engine; it may mark the end of over 30 years of tradition but it will keep the VW up with the best. Try it in a motor caravan and you'll want nothing else — it delivers the same sort of performance as came previously only with the Bedford's beefy 2.3 litre motor, a favourite with motor caravanners, but with far less fuss.

Precision

The new Volkswagen has handling that more than matches its performance. The improvements introduced with the 'third generation' Transporter for the 1980 model year eliminated the oversteer characteristics which had so long been a feature of the marque.

Now, the all-independent, coil spring suspension, double wishbones at the front and semi-trailing arms at the rear, and almost 50:50 weight distribution between the axles, gives neutral handling.

Stepped-style roof is necessary to accommodate folding bed system. Note luggage tray over cab, and moulding in rooftop to accept optional rooflight.

The Transporter goes round corners like a well set-up saloon. The adoption of rack-and-pinion steering, too, has brought a new precision to driving the VW. The A5 across the Midlands gives little opportunity to appreciate the finer points of handling, except when negotiating the numerous roundabouts of Shrewsbury's ring road, and I had to wait until I reached the hilly by-roads of the Clun Forest and the Long Mynd to feel the Transporter at its best.

Still more noticeable are the improvements in roadholding in windy conditions, where the benefits of even weight distribution and precise steering make it easy to hold a steady course — something which with the old models demanded concentration, effort and anticipation.

But these improvements in the mechanical specification of the Transporter in the past few years can be enjoyed by all VW motor caravan buyers of a late model. What does the German-built Westfalia have to offer that distinguishes it from the marques which are familiar names in Britain? Naturally, given the constraints imposed by the VW with its intruding engine, many aspects of the layout are familiar, but there are a number of novel and worthwhile design points.

Swivel cab seats are a feature which has appeared in a good many British motor caravan conversions, allowing the otherwise wasted cab space to be integrated into the living area as a two-seater dinette. In the Westfalia, instead of the usual tabletop on a plug-in 'island leg', the 24" by 16" table fits to a cranked leg dropping into a socket at the corner of the base of the driving seat.

Thus supported, the table can easily be swung back, giving clear access to the cab seating. It can also be arranged as a worktop conveniently adjacent to the kitchen unit which is immediately behind the driving seat.

Neat

The kitchen unit is small, almost square-topped. Raising the one-piece worktop, I discovered a neat *Inox* stainless steel combination unit with two-burner cooker and a nicely dished, 12" x 12" x 5" deep sink. There is no grill, for the Germans are not wedded to their breakfast toast and rely far more on restaurant meals than the British motor caravanner.

Opening the large 'cupboard' below the cooker I found that it is, in fact, the fridge — a German-built Electrolux *Kreft* model, its insulated door liner attached to the inner face of the cabinetwork door. The three-way, (23V, 12V, 240V and gas) controls are also neatly hidden by the door. Storage space comprises two shelves and a couple of ice trays, and on the door a lower shelf with 13½" of headroom, enough for wine bottles, and an upper shelf sized for packs of butter. There is no freezer compartment.

A slim cupboard beside the fridge houses a plastic water container of perhaps three-gallons capacity, with a submersible electric pump supplying the fold-down faucet in the sink. The small water container, which is not too easy to remove and fill, contrasts with the larger fixed tanks common in UK conversions, and shows again the lower priority of the German camper for self-sufficiency. He can count on better camp site facilities to fulfil his needs!

Rear seating in the Continental is laid out in an 'L' shape. There is the usual rear bench and an additional side-facing seat beside the kitchen unit. Set into the angle of the 'L' is a second socket for one of Westfalia's clever, cranked table legs, providing a mounting for a 34" by 18" tabletop and dining places for three.

The pivoting table makes for easy access to the seating and it can be swung to a variety of positions, doubling as a worktop or just pushed aside over the rear bench seat to leave plenty of standing space around the kitchen unit.

Westfalia were originators of the lift-and-pull mechanism, used now by so many VW converters, which 'instantly' transforms a bench seat to a bed. In the Continental, therefore, the system works to perfection, and the seat flattens and teams up with the side facing seat and the cushion over the engine deck to provide a 74" x 46" sleeping surface. High density, 4" thick foam makes for a firm surface which I found to my liking.

The rear seat itself is also comfortable, whether on the road or for lounging on site. Some VW conversions suffer from a very short seat squab, while in others it is too long, but Westfalia have got it right at 18½" and have also imparted just the right rake to the back.

The rear seating arrangement in this particular Westfalia layout provides plenty of underseat storage. It is supplemented by an additional lift-top locker at the nearside end of the seat. In 'vans sold in the UK this locker is vented and houses the gas bottle, but still leaves plenty of space for oddments. The VW Westfalia is equipped with a rechargeable gas tank for the German market — a feature which has not gained popularity over here.

As usual in a VW motor caravan, the well behind the rear seat is a major contributor to storage space; it is a favourite place to keep bedding, which benefits from heat rising from

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The cab of the Continental becomes an integral part of the living area, thanks to swivel seats and a tabletop on a versatile cranked leg.

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Westfalia Continental

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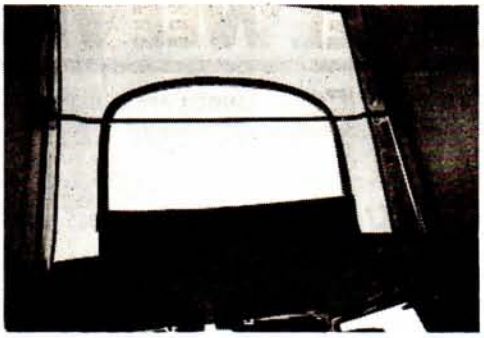


The big mesh ventilator in the roof skirt — fine on hot days but not so good in the rain. Note roof struts with transverse bar used for raising and lowering. (BELOW:) *The unique Westfalia roof marks out this conversion; inside it gives an air of spaciousness.*

the engine. In the Continental it also has to accommodate the two tables and their legs. Above, the curve of the roof over the rear well is filled by a capacious locker, 40" x 17" x 8", with access through a drop-down door.

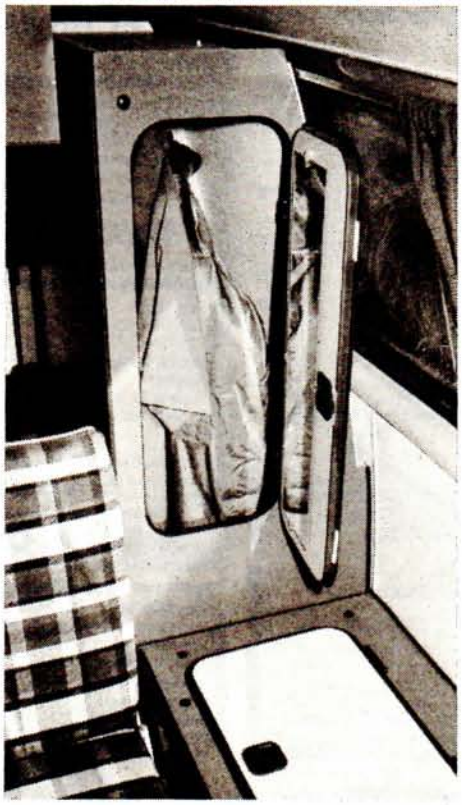
Wardrobe space in the conversion is provided by a large unit filling the nearside area over the engine deck. At its forward end is a conventional wardrobe space with hanging height of 37", a width of 21" and depth of 16". On the inside of the door I found a small but useful mirror. The rear portion of the unit provides a spacious, shelved cupboard, but if the rear well is packed high it will be necessary to move items in order to open the cupboard door.

Spacious

The 'downstairs' layout of this Westfalia is generally very practical with a good balance of the priorities — space for people, space for things, and space to move around. Up above, the unique Westfalia elevating roof is also spacious.

Lifting the roof was easy. After releasing a stout spring catch at the front, it needed just a moderate push on the transverse bar which connects the two V-fold struts. Assistance comes from clock-spring type assisters on the struts.

Lowering the roof took more effort than putting it up but you can hang as much weight on the bar as you wish. Tucking in neatly the rather voluminous quantity of heavy duty tent fabric that forms the roof skirt, is something of a chore, but against that must be weighed the advantage that this roof can be operated entirely from within the 'van — a feature much appreciated in bad weather.



Nearside unit provides a reasonable sized wardrobe with mirrored door and a spacious cupboard to the rear.

Being a factory-approved conversion, the Continental of course preserves the central roof bow, which is such an impediment to design in the new Transporter. Westfalia overcome the problem by providing a two-piece, folding upper berth, and that gives rise to another tell-tale feature of the Westfalia roofcap — the step at the rear accommodates the folded-away bed section.

The upper berth measures a generous 72" x 47" and the rearward sloping roof leaves plentiful headroom at the front and adequate space at the foot end of the bed. Hingeing the bed into place required quite a long stretch, awkward perhaps for those of short stature, while I found the base upholstered with only 2" thick foam, and of a seemingly softer grade than is used for the seat cushions. Children will be comfortable enough, but heavier adults, for whom there is space, might suffer with hip bones 'bottoming' through the mattress!

In hot weather, campers will be grateful for the massive mesh ventilator revealed by unzipping a panel on the front of the roof skirt. It will ensure good ventilation of the whole interior, although I had my doubts about its suitability in a more common climatic condition in these islands — driving rain! Best be sure and tuck the tail of the Westfalia into the wind.

A conventional rooflight is offered as an optional extra on the 'van, and the roofcap is moulded ready to accept it. With conventional window glass in the caravan area below, a sliding window is provided adjacent to the kitchen unit. The double glazed windows, however, are all fixed units, so it would be sensible to specify the optional rooflight with these windows.

Travelworld's version of the Westfalia has won high marks for the standard of its furniture, for its layout and for its level of equipment. At its test date price of £8,698 on a Kombi base vehicle with 2-litre engine, and with its level of equipment, the Westfalia Continental was significantly cheaper than its rivals. It lacks nothing in workmanship, and in the electrical and gas fitting departments sets standards that all might copy, but in some respects it is obvious where corners have been cut to keep down costs.

Trim is plain in the extreme and the upholstery is in the same idiom. The smooth, synthetic material, patterned in beige, brown, green and black, tones well enough with the interior, and it looks hard wearing. In comparison with the rich fabrics, ruched and roll-edged cushions in so many British conversions, however, the Westfalia has a down-market appearance. Curtains, rich brown and generously cut, are practical, but to save on installation costs they are merely sleeved on to an aluminium strip rail in the caravan area and press-studded in the cab.

The Westfalia's interior is attractive enough, the smart green cabinetwork a change from the interiors which we expect from British converters, but it fails to generate the cosiness which one finds in the VW models from all the big-name UK motor caravan constructors.

That particular attribute, however, is not demanded by all buyers and it could not be denied that the imported model from Travelworld represents very good value. They still have a few air-cooled models left, if you hurry, now at an on-the-road price of £9,000. Details and prices of the new water-cooled engined models are awaited.

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