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VW conversions face stiff competition

Report/pictures: Chris Burlace



VW Westfalia Continental from Travelworld

At the fifth National Motor Caravan Fair held at Brands Hatch Volkswagen, although no longer enjoying their predominance in the motor caravan world of ten years ago, were still the most numerous marque on the camping fields.

Split-screen models, now 15 or more years old, survive in plenty; some are immaculate, many sound, and a few much frayed at the edges. Most numerous were the next generation (the model was known as the 'Clipper' when it was launched but the name didn't stick) which once accounted for an astounding 70% of motor caravan sales; but it was encouraging too to see so many conversions based on the latest Transporter.

The new model, retaining many of the features which have endeared the marque to motor caravanners for over 25 years, yet with engineering changes which make it an 'all new' vehicle, has brought an upswing in Volkswagen's fortunes, increasing their share of the camper market to around 40%.

However, I found new rivals to the VW — vans able to challenge it both in the camping role and as all-rounders. Compactness, ease of driving, handling and ride comfort attract buyers to the new Transporter as much as do the various caravan interiors which are available. These new all-rounders, based on the Renault Trafic and the Japanese Colt L300, offer similar standards of handling and road comfort but rather more living space.

The Renault Trafic, with its steeply raked windscreen and obvious attention to aerodynamics, has acceptable if not elegant lines, far removed from the tin-shed-on-wheels styling which has characterised many French light vans of the past.

Like the VW, the Trafic offers three engine options, 1397cc and 1647cc petrol and 2068cc diesel, but it also comes with a choice of front- or rear-wheel drive!

In size it is comparable with the VW, 14'7" long, just over 6' wide, and 6'8" high. Despite front-wheel drive on the 1397cc T800 model,

which has so far been most used by constructors, the turning circle is a tight 34'9", and the rack-and-pinion steering is light even at low speeds.

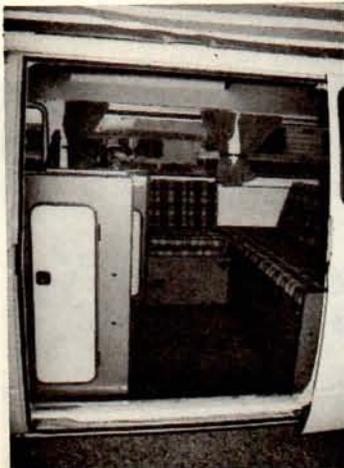
On the road I have found the Trafic excellent to drive. MacPherson strut front suspension, and a conventional rigid axle and leaf springs at the rear, give ride and handling which are beyond reproach.

The controls are well placed and easy to use and there is a comprehensive level of instrumentation for a van. Engine and road noise are low, but the performance of the smallest-engined version, with only 47.5 bhp, is best compared to that of the 1600cc Volkswagen. The 1647cc engine, delivering 64 bhp, or the diesel with 60 bhp, should prove more acceptable.

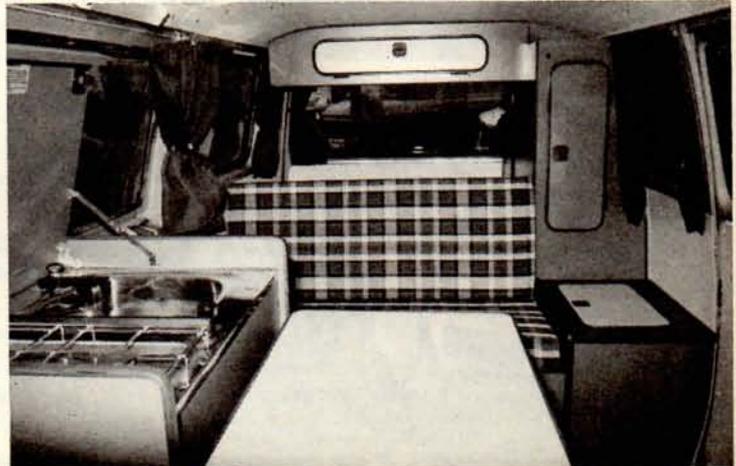
Auto-Sleeper and Holdsworth are the two Renault-approved converters of the Trafic. Predictably, Auto-Sleeper have produced an immaculate conversion using their famed light oak furniture, but it is conventional in layout. Forward dinette seating rearranges to form two comfortable forward-facing seats for travelling, while at night teaming with the reclining cab seats to make a pair of single beds.

At the rear a kitchen unit on the nearside is equipped with a two-burner cooker and practical sink/drain in stainless steel, while opposite stands the wardrobe and the Electrolux 122 refrigerator. The 'van is fitted with Auto-Sleeper's solid-sided elevating roof.

At a recommended price of



The German-built Westfalia Continental is back in Britain. Comprehensive spec, 2-litre engine, and ultra-competitive price. Here is seen one of six layouts available: neat furniture but rather plain upholstery and trim. On the right is the view to the rear in the Continental. The model offers plenty of storage space. Also in evidence is the well-proportioned and compact two-burner cooker and sink unit.





Cavalier Coachman

£8,481 (at the time of the Fair) this Renault SV50 Auto-Sleeper costs £182 more than Auto-Sleeper's SV20 model on the VW Transporter.

Richard Holdsworth, by contrast, has seized the opportunity to create an original layout on the new Renault. The Holdsworth Giant Riser concertina-sided elevating roof is fitted, giving standing room over virtually the full length of the interior. This enables the cab area to be integrated into the living space, and swivel cab seats are used, which face inwards to create a 2-seater dinette.

At night these seats recline and make single beds in conjunction with the caravan seats, as in the Auto-Sleeper. The caravan seats themselves, however, are more versatile than in the rival conversion. They can provide two forward facing units, dinette seating for four, or the nearside seat can be turned to face the rear. The seat units can also be removed completely for use outside or to increase load space in the 'van.

It is in the rear kitchen area, however, that the Renault Romance, as Richard has named his conversion, breaks completely new ground. On the offside an L-shaped unit contains the sink (set into the base of the 'L' and towards the centre of the 'van) and a two-burner cooker set against the side beneath an extractor hood.

Sink and cooker, by **Inox** of Italy, are in attractive, shaded vitreous enamel and there is a separate eye-level grill. The adjacent fridge is set high for ease of access and lighting, while the base of the unit provides good cupboard storage. On the nearside a narrow worktop covers further cupboards and, wasting no space, a couple of slim cupboards are fitted to the twin rear doors.

The kitchen layout alone will make the ladies love the Romance, but added appeal comes from the interior decor. There is Dralon upholstery, carpet trim, tile-patterned vinyl flooring in the kitchen and carpet at the front. Seat units are walnut veneered plywood, while at the rear the cream coloured Formica worktops



The Renault Romance from Richard Holdsworth. With compact dimensions (it's shorter than the VW) and with fuel consumption figures well into the thirties, it challenges the Volkswagen for the most popular motor caravan. Looking forwards in the Renault, Richard Holdsworth demonstrates his swivel cab seats and table which provide an additional 'room'. Other constructors' layouts on these vehicles finish behind the cab. On the right is shown the superb kitchen area which provides storage space and working surfaces belying the compact dimensions of the vehicle.

are complemented by orange Formica door facings and beechwood handles.

A practical touch is the use of roller blinds for windows in the kitchen area. This very well equipped Renault conversion at £8,491 was only just over £300 more than Holdsworth's popular Villa model on the VW.

The Renault Romance took first place in the panel van conversion category of the Motor Caravan of the Year competition, while its Auto-Sleeper rival was in third place in this contest which has become an established feature of the annual Brands Hatch Fair.

Splitting the Renaults was the tiny and ingenious Fiat Pandora conversion of the Fiat 900E Citivan by **CI Autohomes**. The main feature of the Pandora is the elevating roof, cleverly conceived with folding, insulated panels (no fabric) which hinge out to create an 'upstairs' compartment, adding 76% to the interior space of the 'van.

The big sideways extensions look somewhat ungainly but enable two or three six foot long berths to be provided in the roof. Below, the Pandora packs all the basic motor caravan facilities into its 12'2½" by 4'10½" road space, and offers

another (smaller) bed; with roof down the 'van is still half-an-inch short of 'garage height', at 6'6"

Surprisingly, there were no Volkswagens entered in the Motor Caravan of the Year contest, but there was plenty of VW choice for visitors to the Fair. The established 'big name' convertors — **Danbury, Devon, Holdsworth and Motor-homes International** — had their models on many stands.

Beside them stood the **CI Kamper** and the Auto-Sleeper SV20, relative newcomers perhaps, but excellent motor caravans which have immediately joined the front-runners. **Jem Motor Caravans** of

Walsall and **Davis & Stone** from Brighton had the most comprehensive VW selections, but there were surprises in store for VW fans from **Cavalier Coachman** and **Travelworld**.

Travelworld are enterprising motor caravan specialists from Wolverhampton. Initially importers of American **Travel Cruiser** motor-homes, they took a large financial stake in the manufacture of that marque in the USA and opened a motor caravan sales complex at their Midlands base.

The latest move from this bright young company is to commence once again the import of the German **Westfalia** VW 'vans. The **Continental** when last offered in Britain some eight years ago was far more expensive than models from UK convertors. Now, compared to British VW motor caravans of similar specification, it is as much as £1,000 cheaper!

The Westfalia conversion is still easily identified by its distinctive, front-lifting elevating roof. To accommodate the folding upper double bed, the roof moulding is stepped and the Westfalia therefore looks a little taller than its British rivals.



The richness of real wood veneers in a Holdsworth Villa VW.

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The most expensive Type 2 ever — Cavalier Coachman's Type 2 super luxury 'van at £11,300 even has TV as standard! Hightop incorporates the TV, plus extractor fan and 'weather centre' showing temperature, pressure and humidity. The luxurious interior has U-shaped seating which conceals a Porta Potti in a pull-out section by the door.



Fixed-roof models are also offered, and there is a wide choice of layouts. Travelworld also supply their 'Travel Cruiser Continental' with a conventional, full-length side-lifting roof.

Inside, the new Westfalia 'vans look far bigger than the old models. In part this is due to the extra size of the new VW Transporter, but much of the air of spaciousness comes from the colour scheme. Gone is the old dark furniture, and in its place units are finished in an attractive shade of green ('Forest Glen' is its official name) with a durable looking plastic surface.

The furniture is actually built from a patented plywood/cork laminate which is strong and light. The weight saving over a 'van which employs mainly chipboard must be considerable.

The Westfalia models on show at Brands Hatch seemed strong on storage space without being cramped for living room. Cab seats swivelled to provide a two-seater dinette, and the main table was carried on the versatile cranked leg, which Westfalia pioneered and which provides a permutation of positions.

I liked the neat combination two-burner cooker and well proportioned sink: no drainer and no grill (the Continentals do not insist on breakfast toast!) but the unit is eminently suitable for the small confines of the VW. Practicality seemed the keynote of the new Westfalias, but without the clash of facilities which appeared to be a failing of the previous models.

I was surprised by the specification offered at £8,698 — the 2-litre base vehicle with radial tyres, and caravan fittings including swivel cab seats, fridge, mains hook-up, sliding window, under-floor heater, interior pile carpet and roof rack. Double glazed (plastic) windows in the caravan area are an option.

Disappointing aspects of these German 'vans, however, were the standard of trim and the plain

upholstery. Trim panels were plastic-surfaced millboard secured by push-in plastic clips, and there was far too much untrimmed metal-work.

However, Bob Edwards, managing director of Travelworld, explained that the models at the Fair were prototypes built from delivery vans. Future imports will be built on the Kombi version with improved trim. They look set to provide fierce competition to established British convertors.

Cavalier Coachman produce conversions which are a blend of the practical motor caravan and the exotic custom van; pleasing to the eye both inside and out, yet not impractical to live in. They have been converting the Volkswagen LT for a few years but unveiled their first air-cooled VW model at the Fair.

VW fans had to take a second, and a third, look before comprehending the price tag — £11,300! For that, however, it is certainly something special.

As one would expect at the price, the Cavalier is based on the 2-litre version of the Transporter. A hightop is fitted and blends perfectly with the lines of the new VW; whereas so many hightops look very much an afterthought, this one, with the help of distinctive coachstripes, really enhances the lines of the vehicle.

Inside, I found the best trim job

ever on a VW, with scarcely a square inch of painted metal to be seen. A heavy, high quality hopsack-weave material is used, with features such as locker doors in the hightop picked out in pile fabric to match the cushions of the U-shaped rear seat unit. The cab and cab seats are trimmed to match the decor in the caravan area.

At such a high price the new Cavalier has to be something of a rich man's plaything, so it is naturally only a 2-berth. The sumptuous, U-shaped rear seat unit converts to a double bed virtually the full width of the 'van, with only a little space stolen by the slim wardrobe on the offside.

There's an island-leg mounted table, a storage cabinet adjacent to the side door, and a kitchen unit on the offside with neat, stainless steel rectangular sink and Electrolux 122 fridge. Cabinets and worktops are immaculately clad in Formica, and the floor is covered by luxurious, thick pile carpet.

Up aloft there are capacious lockers formed by the front and rear portions of the hightop, and further slim lockers along the offside of the roof. Missing is the infamous VW roof bow which could not be allowed to intrude into the headroom; Cavalier assured me that they had taken measures to replace the strength lost by cutting away that structural member.

Not a little of the cost of the Cavalier is accounted for by the 'extras' which on this luxury vehicle come as standard. There's a stereo radio/cassette player, a digital clock, a 'weather centre' with instruments showing temperature, pressure and humidity, and even a 6" Vega TV set built into the panel of the front roof locker! The roof light, with flyscreen, has an electric fan, while lighting is provided by numerous spotlights instead of the more usual fluorescent unit.

All this equipment makes heavy demands on electrical power, so the 'van has an auxiliary battery and a Zig charger and fuse unit. If you have the money this is a 'van to make you noticed; a 'van for comfortable touring; and not least, it is still a practical camping vehicle.

That these Cavalier conversions with their plush interiors can be used for serious touring was amply demonstrated by a Volkswagen LT28 conversion exhibited at the Fair. Built for a retired BP engineer who spent his working life in Saudi Arabia and is now a resident of Andorra, the vehicle was fitted with every convenience for life on the move.

In it the owner and his wife had covered 24,000 km in a year through Europe and North Africa,

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yet inside and out the 'van was as good as the day it left the works — a tribute both to the quality of the conversion and the meticulous care of its owner.

Interestingly, the base vehicle was powered by the 6-cylinder, 2.4 litre VW diesel, not yet offered on UK models, which develops the same 75 bhp as Volkswagen's 2-litre petrol engine. Careful records of a year's international motoring showed that the diesel LT had returned 29.5 mpg — economical travel when most of the fuel had been bought in countries where DERV is far cheaper than in Britain!

LT-based motor caravans are for the well-heeled, being way above the £12,000 barrier within which one can have a wide choice of coachbuilt 'vans. In the coachbuilt category of the Motor Caravan of the Year contest last year's winner, the Bedford Auto-Sleeper SV100, triumphed again. Its superior fibreglass body and quality interior just gave it a narrow margin over the Colt Pioneer (better on price alone) and the CI Autohomes Bedford Travelhome 'S' which was ahead on layout and equipment.

At around the £12,000 mark both these Bedford-based motor caravans seem far better, in value-for-money terms, than current expensive VW LT models; nevertheless there will still be plenty prepared to pay the premium for the merits of the Volkswagen.

The Pioneer, on the Mitsubishi Colt L300 which has gained rapid popularity in the UK since its introduction only a couple of years ago, carries a price tag of only £9,999. That's within £1,000 of some VW Transporter panel van conversions.

Having recently clocked up 750 miles in a Colt Pioneer in a couple of days, I consider it to be a very serious rival to the smaller



Bedford Coachbuilt Auto-Sleeper SV100.

Volkswagens. At 14'4" long it is shorter than the VW, and at 6'3" only a couple of inches wider. True, the Pioneer is 8'11" high but even the addition of an elevating roof to the VW makes it too tall to fit many garages.

On turning circle the Colt wins by about 5' at 29½ feet, while on performance its 1597cc overhead cam engine returns figures which the 1600 VW cannot match. It gets from rest to 50 mph in 16 seconds and is reputed to have a top speed of over 80 mph.

Despite the high caravan body the Pioneer Colt is fairly frugal — I got 26 mpg on motorways and 'A' roads cruising at 55 mph, not much different from what I would expect from the VW.

If the Pioneer is the equal of the Volkswagen motor caravans as a road vehicle both for touring and day-to-day use, it is certainly superior when it comes to camping. There's a rear dinette which converts to a 73" by 46" bed, and another double bed in the Luton above the cab.

Only one VW offers a toilet compartment — and that is tiny with just room for a chemical toilet. In the Pioneer the cubicle is 40" by 25", big enough for a folding basin and a shower. There's hot water too, from a Logic storage-type heater, an inboard fresh water tank and undervan waste tank, and a small catalytic space heater is also a standard item.

Kitchen equipment includes a 14" by 12" stainless steel sink, three-burner cooker, eye-level oven and an Electrolux 212 fridge. Other features include a mains electric hook-up, with earth leakage circuit breaker for safety, and glass

double glazing.

Living space, although small for a coachbuilt, is much bigger than in a VW panel van conversion, and the 'van provides a fully self-contained unit for summer or winter camping. It must tempt the family motor caravanner with the price of a new VW in his pocket to spend just a little more for far more amenity.

The VW flag was flying strongly, displayed by the old favourites and some interesting newcomers, but the Motor Caravan Fair revealed new challengers to the popularity of the 'Wolfsburg legend'.

I will be surprised if the new Renault Trafic does not attract more convertors, for it has similar merits as a road vehicle to the VW, but the advantage of plenty of flat floor space as a caravan. Will it last like a VW? That remains to be

seen, but it does not appear to be so robust.

The Colt in panel van form has been converted by a number of companies but suffers certain drawbacks. It has sliding doors on both sides, low internal height, and a low window line which constrains the height of furniture units. Current conversions look more likely to affect sales of the small Fiats (popular with the pensioner market) rather than the VW.

With a small coachbuilt body, however, the Colt looks a strong competitor with those who are prepared to pay for a 2-litre version of one of the top-of-the-range VW motor caravans.

Germany versus France versus Japan; to see how that three-sided battle is going, don't miss next year's Motor Caravan Fair . . . !



This spotless Cavalier Coachman VW LT had already covered 24,000km in its first year. Engine is VW 6-cylinder diesel.



Colt Pioneer — 'a very serious rival to the smaller Volkswagens'.