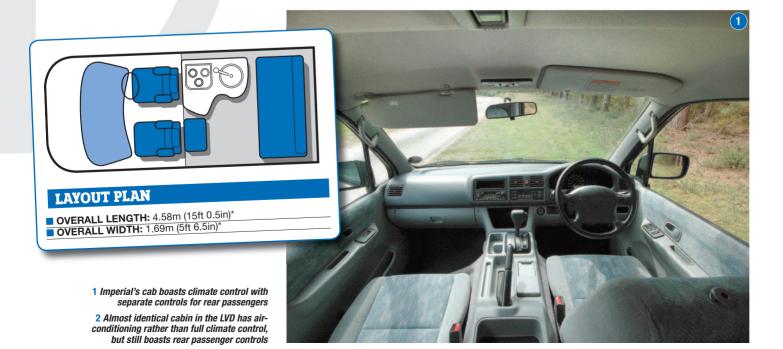
IMPERIAL CAR COMPANY





Camper conversions on the quirky Mazda Bongo are increasingly popular and can offer great value. Two of the more interesting designs available attempt to drum up support

Words by Di Johnson, pictures by Pete Johnson







t's intriguing to think that British buyers are benefiting from a quirky law enacted all the way across the world in Japan. You may have noticed the 'Bongo effect.' New Bongos are not available in Britain, but suddenly

there are more and more of these idiosyncratic vehicles appearing on our streets. It's the rearview mirror on a stalk, fixed above the back window, which catches my eye.

Strict controls by the Japanese government favour new rather than old vehicles, thus artificially depressing the price of the used, high spec, Mazda Bongo MPVs. Another Japanese governmental policy helps preserve these vehicles in tip-top condition (they don't use salt on their roads, relying instead on winter tyres).

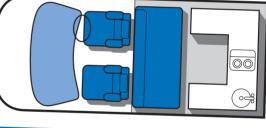
When bought new in Japan, the dealer gives a three-year 'stay'. When this comes to an end the buyer has to pay 50 per cent of the vehicle's worth to extend the 'stay'. These factors result in bargain basement used prices on very well preserved Bongos.

Let's not waste all these used eight-seater Mazda Bongo Friendees at bargain prices, thought the converters. So they shipped them over to good old Blighty and added some facilities, thus pleasing a whole host of folk who want a small, affordable camper. The name was supposed to be 'Friendly', but the Japanese can't do 'L's, so it's lumbered with Friendee.

What would two different converters make of the same base vehicle? Imperial Car Company at Poole, and Lifestyle Vehicle Developments (LVD), of Southampton/Isle of Wight, both make

use of the Mazda Bongo Friendee for their conversions. You might come across one with a Ford (Freda) badge on the front, but it's exactly the same vehicle.

Two of the Bongo's most endearing, and luxurious,



LAYOUT PLAN

OVERALL LENGTH: 4.58m (15ft 0.5in)* OVERALL WIDTH: 1.69m (5ft 6.5in)*



On Test Imperial Car Company Lulworth & LVD Bongo RK



3 Three can sit across the forward-facing rear bench seat in the Imperial, with a perch on the loo locker next to the stylish kitchen unit

4 Imperial offers a forward-facing rear seat with three-point belts

5 Utilising the padded top of the toilet locker, four might dine at the Imperial's table

I LIKED

- Stylish centre kitchen
- Full-width double bed
 Flactrically apprended bit
- Electrically-operated blinds
 Electrically-operated windows and
- mirrors
- Three-point seat belts for four
- Cool LED lighting
- I WOULD HAVE LIKED
- Space heating
- Mattress for upper bed
- Waste tank
- A little more driver's seat travel
- I DISLIKED

No access to toilet when beds made up

features are the electrically operated roof and the sliding door anti-slam device. Gently nudge the door shut and an electric device completes the operation for you. Vehicles are imported complete with an upper bed under the rising roof, great for children. Two berths on the ground floor utilise the seating. Threepoint seatbelts or lap-straps are provided for all the seats, depending on the conversion.

Facilities are basic; you get a freshwater tank, but no waste tank. A fridge is supplied in both 'vans but obviously storage space is strictly limited by the length of the 'van. It's a supermarket and driveway-friendly, 4.58m (15ft 0.5in) long.

MOTIVE POWER

Most Bongos are kitted out with the powerful 2.5-litre turbo-diesel engine, aligned to a silkysmooth four-speed automatic transmission, feeding 128bhp to the back wheels. I'm reluctantly beginning to see some of the advantages in having the gears selected for you, particularly in boring urban traffic.

Both 'vans have a handy button on the drive selector which allows you to change down a gear when necessary. This can be handy on busy roundabouts: such refinement.

Lifestyle Vehicle Developments (LVD) however, presented the popular 'Full-time' four-wheel-drive version of the Bongo, for testing. The MPVs all have a set back engine arrangement, so there's no room for the cab seats to swivel. Coil springs all round take care of the suspension, and disc brakes on all four wheels bestow a light and responsive braking ability.

ROAD MANNERS

When you hit the blacktop, it has to be admitted that driving these small Bongos is a joy, especially after the bigger and less manoeuvrable 'vans we're all used to. Light power steering, and an ability to turn around in the tightest of spots, make this just like driving a car.

We all use the 'car-like' epithet when we compare driver fun and comfort, but the Bongo's short footprint, large engine and snappy turning circle, beats the usual winner, the Volkswagen campervan, by a mile.

Though Bongos first came out in 1995, they were designed for the very competitive Japanese market and have lots of accessories such as electric windows, mirror adjustment, central locking and air-conditioning. Both

6

'vans had separate air-con controls front and back: Imperial's version even had the more sophisticated climate control.

The ride in the LVD conversion seemed a bit harsher. This may be due to the four-wheel drive set-up, and the firmer ride has to be balanced by the advantages on offer when enjoying a typical British summer in a muddy field.

For me, the driving position was perfect in both conversions, but my husband Pete would have preferred an extra inch or so of seat travel and rake in the Imperial. The forward kitchen location constrained this adjustment. Pete found there was more room for his legs in the LVD version, though the lever for adjustment was difficult to shift.

The dashboard of the Bongo is more '95 than '07, but all you need is there with plenty of nooks and crannies for essentials. The big centre console has small flat places to place mugs.

Four, three-point seatbelts and a lap-strap are fitted in the Imperial's conversion; its rear passengers face the front. The LVD has only two lap-straps for the rear passengers and they must face rearward.

Other than some rattling from empty lockers in the Imperial, occupants will find both 'vans remarkably quiet, apart from all the warning beeps that occur when reversing, raising the roof or leaving the front doors open.

By reputation the Bongo has never been as fuel-efficient as you'd hope for a vehicle of its size. The four-wheel drive version is in the region of three mpg thirstier.

LOUNGE AND DINE

First things first. When you've parked up at your favourite picnic spot the primary thing to deal with is headroom. That's to say, it's time to raise the roof. Now, with some campers, vou'll have had to do press-ups for a week or two to improve your muscle tone before tackling the job. Not so with the Bongo, it has the Auto Free Top.

The Free bit means free from muscle strain. Make sure the handbrake is applied and ignition is turned on. Depress a button, and wait in the comfort of the front seat while a whirring noise signifies that you're not having to do any work.

In the time it takes to send hubby off to fill the kettle, it's up. Now you can move to the rear lounge. Well, you can't exactly say lounge - let's be honest, 'sit' is a more accurate description.

In the Imperial there is a full width, forwardfacing rear seat, which can be easily rolled backwards or forwards to whichever position



LVD BONGO RK



- 6 In LVD the rear seat faces backwards towards the kitchen and offers only lap seatbelts
- 7 LVD's rear end features an L-shaped kitchen
- 8 It's a case of three-in-row dining in the LVD

On Test Imperial Car Company Lulworth & LVD Bongo RK

suits you best. The front seats can form part of the seating plan, if you have youngsters along for the trip. But, as mentioned before, they can't be swivelled. There's an additional cushioned perch beside the kitchen unit too.

The floor in the lounge/diner area has easyclean textured vinvl in a granite effect colour. A central strip light and two, battery-saving, LED spotlights make for a well-lit lounge at night, and there are two more LED spots over the kitchen unit.

An additional LED spot, on a bendy stalk, on the passenger's side, can be used as a map reading lamp: useful, and the kids'll love it. Electric blinds can be lowered over the smoked glass side-hinged windows.

During the day, natural light also comes from a big rooflight in the pop-up roof. The rear part of both side windows is covered by wall-hung storage bins: this reduces the view for the rear passengers but improves storage provision.

The rear seat in the Imperial has been rebuilt by the converter to make its contours as flat as possible as it forms part of the bed. However, it's still comfortable and supportive as a bench for three.





9 Imperial's stylish kitchen layout boasts lots of headroom to please the cook

10 A commendably long and flat bed in the Imperial will please the lofty camper

11 There was no mattress in the upper story of the Imperial

At the end of the kitchen unit is a GRP bin designed to accommodate a Porta Potti. It has a cushioned top that forms part of the bed assembly. This bin would also make a perch for one, when dining from the pedestal table, which is stored underneath the lifting roof.

In the LVD the rear seat faces to the stern and can also be moved back and forth. Bound edge removable carpets, in grey/green and blue, make it warm for winter. In summer, and when the beach is beckoning, I'd store 'em safely away from all the sandy mucky stuff.

A centre strip light and a single spot over the kitchen in the LVD are all the lighting that's available. The original seats are used in this conversion, but their curvy contours are ingeniously dealt with; more of which later.

No water or space heating was provided in either camper, though they can be fitted as extras. A substantial and heavy square of GRP, stored under the seat, makes up a central pedestal table for LVD diners.

There's a cupboard provided for a cassette toilet on the nearside of the kitchen. If it were my 'van I'd make the toilet double as a cook and washer-upper's seat. Maybe even a child's dining perch. In a small conversion you've got to make use of every available solution.

COOK'S QUARTERS

Here's where the two converters have very different approaches. In the Imperial there is a curvaceous L-shaped kitchen behind the driver's seat. where there's maximum headroom.

A three-burner Smev hob, with spark ignition is directly behind the driver and alongside it is a round, stainless steel bowl with substantial domestic-quality monobloc mixer tap. Supporting them is a stylish, moulded funnel-shaped GRP base with cupboard beneath.

Angled from the glass-lidded stainless unit is a further worktop over a Waeco CoolMatic 50-litre compressor fridge. From the side of this unit slides an extra piece of valuable worktop.

The LVD has a different perspective. A U-shaped, one-piece moulded GRP kitchen and wardrobe is fitted across the back of the vehicle, with a two-burner Smev hob fixed sideways in the middle. There's a good reason for the sideways fixing, as it means that you can cook from inside or out. Under the hob is a

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

PRICE

- From: £9000 to £20,000 (depending on choice of base vehicle and style of conversion)
- As tested: £12,995 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)

Berths: 4

- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including) driver)
- Warranty: Three months base vehicle, one ear conversior
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No Construction: Steel-bodied MPV with
- fabric-sided rising roof
- Length: 4.58m (15ft 0.5in)
- Width: 1.69m (5ft 6.5in)*
- **Height:** 2.09m (6ft 10in)* roof closed
- Wheelbase: 2.92m (9ft 7in)*
- Rear overhang: 950mm (3ft 1.5in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 2360kg* Payload: NA

THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 2.5-litre intercooled turbo-diesel producing 128bhp
- Transmission: Four-speed automatic gearbox, rear-wheel drive
- Brakes: Discs all round
- Suspension: Coil springs front and rear
- **Features:** Power steering, electric powered rising roof, inner roof panel can be used as upper bed or pushed up to give full standing headroom, anti-slam power-latching side door, front and rear climate control, electric windows, electric mirrors, central locking, electric side window blinds

INSIDE

- Layout: Forward corner kitchen, rear
- forward-facing bench seat, pedestal table
- Insulation: None added to base vehicle Interior height: 1.30m (4ft 3in) roof closed

KITCHEN

- Sink: Stainless steel Smev combination unit set into a shaped worktop, with circular bowl under hinged glass lid, chromed swivel tap
- Cooker: Smey three-burner gas hob, spark ignition, under hinged glass lid

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Fridge: Waeco CoolMatic 12V compressor type. Capacity 50 litres

WASHROOM

- (No separate washroom fitted)
- Toilet: Locker containing Porta Potti portable toilet
- Basin: None fitted Shower: None fitted

- BEDS
- In-roof double
- Length: 1.83m (6ft 0in) Width: 1.07m (3ft 6in)
- Headroom: 1.10m (3ft 7in) max
- Lounae double
- Length: 2.20m (7ft 2.5in) max
- Width: 1.20m (3ft 11in) max
- Headroom: 900mm (2ft 11.5in) when roof bed is deployed

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water: Inboard, 20 litres (4.4 gallons)
- Waste water: None fitted
- Water heater: None fitted
- Space heater: None fitted
- Leisure battery: 110 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity two 907 Campingaz, (2.7kg) cylinders
- Lighting: Two LED cluster spots over kitchen, two LED cluster spots over bench seat, one strip light in lower roof, one tungsten lamp in upper roof
- Sockets: 230V: Two. 12V: Two

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Fitted to test vehicle
- Base: None
- Conversion: None
- Other options Base: None
- Conversion: Five different layouts are available. All conversions are built to order on customer's choice of base vehicle. Diesel space and water heating, Porta Potti, bike rack, etc are all available

E&OE

Waeco CoolMatic 50-litre compressor fridge.

The LVD model we tested had a three piece awning that hangs from the raised tailgate; each panel can be fitted individually, zipped together and press-clipped to the side of the 'van. It's an adaptable system as you can use only one or two panels for shade or protection from the wind.

When cooking inside, the seat can be rolled closer to facilitate keeping an eve on the hob, though I found it a bit of a stretch. The GRP-moulded sink is in the nearside corner, with a tap fitted with an extension hose. This enables mucky bikes, sandy dogs and children to be rinsed off.

Two flip-up tables lift from the outside and are supported using extendable legs against the vehicle to level them up. Even when on a slope, front to back, they can still be levelled. A small extractor was inserted into the nearside rear window to waft cooking smells away.

BATHING SPACE

Yes, well... The kitchen sink can double as a basin but, in reality, most owners will use the campsite's facilities. However, the Imperial has the advantage of standing headroom in front of the sink, due to it's amidships positioning.

As tested, neither Bongo had the luxury of hot water, but you do have gas burners and it's a simple matter to heat a kettle of water and have a wash.

Most people don't want to troop across damp grass to the campsite toilet in the middle of the night. With this in mind, both conversions have dedicated storage for a Porta Potti. However, we discovered that the Imperial's configuration would present something of a physical (or anatomical) challenge, as the toilet box becomes part of the bed. Of course, many Bongos will be used as primary transport by their owners and, with a footprint akin to a Ford Mondeo estate, this is a sensible idea. However and as always, compromises have to be made to allow this amazing versatility.

BED TIME

We've already established that the Auto Free Top makes lifting the roof easy and fun to do. But once up, you find there's also a hinged 'floor' which lifts up and down on gas struts.

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

PRICE

- From: £9995 OTR
- As tested: £10,445 OTR
- BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)

Berths: 4

- Three-point belted seats: 2 (includ. driver), 2 lap belts for rearward-facing passenger seats Warranty: 12 months on base vehicle and
- conversion Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: Steel-bodied MPV with fabric-sided rising roof
- Length: 4.58m (15ft 0.5in)*
- Width: 1.69m (5ft 6.5in)*
- Height: 2.09m (6ft 10in)* roof closed
- Wheelbase: 2.92m (9ft 7in)*
- Rear overhang: 950mm (3ft 1.5in)
- Maximum authorised weight: 2300kg*
- Pavload: NA

THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 2.5-litre intercooled turbo-diesel producing 128bhp
- Transmission: Four-speed automatic gearbox, full-time four-wheel drive
- Brakes: Discs all round
- Suspension: Coil springs front and rear **Features:** Power steering, electric-powered
- rising roof, inner roof panel can be used as upper bed or pushed up to give full standing headroom, anti-slam power-latching side door, front and rear air-conditioning, electric windows, electric mirrors, central locking, side window blinds

INSIDE

- Layout: Rear-end U-shaped kitchen and wardrobe, rearward-facing bench seat, pedestal table
- Insulation: None added to base vehicle
- Interior height: 1.30m (4ft 3in) roof closed

KITCHEN

- Sink: GRP circular bowl moulded as part of L-shaped worktop, white plastic mixer tap
- Cooker: Smev two-burner gas hob, manual ianition
- Fridge: Waeco CoolMatic 12V compressor type. Capacity 50 litres

LVD BONGO RK

WASHROOM

- (No separate washroom fitted)
- Toilet: Locker containing Porta Potti portable toilet Basin: None fitted
- Shower: Pull-out kitchen mixer tap doubles as shower head

BEDS

- In-roof double
- Length: 1.83m (6ft 0in)
- Width: 1.07m (3ft 6in) Headroom: 1.10m (3ft 7in) max
- Lounge: two singles
- Length: 2.0m (6ft 6.5in)
- **Width:** 600mm (1ft 11.5in) max
- Headroom: 900mm (2ft 11.5in) when roof bed is deployed

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water: Underslung, 20 litres (4.4 gallons)
- Waste water: None fitted
- Water heater: None fitted
- Space heater: None fitted
- Leisure battery: 85 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity two 907 Campingaz, (2.7kg) cylinders
- Lighting: One halogen spot over kitchen, one strip light in lower roof, one tungsten lamp in upper roof
- Sockets: 230V: Two. 12V: None

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Fitted to test vehicle
- Base: None Conversion: Tailgate awning (£450)
- Other options:
- Base: None
- Conversion: Diesel-fired space and water heating (£1195), diesel-fired blown-air space heating (£695), towbar (£185)

E&OE

This gives you your 'second storey.' The floor has a trapdoor conveniently in the middle of the 'van and you can leave the floor down, should you prefer, but maximum headroom is obtained with it raised.

Let's start bed making in the Imperial with the ground floor. Slide the rear seat forward and use the lever to lower the backrest. At the top of the backrest is an infill cushion, permanently attached, which fills the small gap between the tailgate and bed: good attention to detail.

A metal tube fits into the table socket in the floor and atop this is fixed a flat panel. Now place a shaped cushion on top of that and you've bridged the gap to the cushioned toilet box, which is the same height, and forms part of the bed. You now have a double bed. The rear seat has been reupholstered, so it's commendably flat. The mid kitchen intrudes into the space of the offside sleeper but, since the bed is a wide one, there's room to sleep obliquely across the 'van. Needless to say, only taller folk than I would need this extra length. The offside position has room for a Dutchman, such is the length offered there.







- 12 LVD has opted for an adaptable rear kitchen, which can also be used from the outside
- 13 A clever contoured mattress topper smoothes out any problem seat bumps
- 14 A lightweight mattress softens the floor upstairs in the LVD and the awning panels were stored here too

On Test Imperial Car Company Lulworth & LVD Bongo RK

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15



15 There's a large cupboard under the sink in the Imperial
16 Imperial has made use of every opportunity for storage, in this case at the expense of two rear windows
17 A separate GRP bin has been created by Imperial for the toilet



Climbing into the attic is easy. There's lots of room up there but no mattress was supplied. Mesh ventilation aplenty will stop the occupants overheating, and dropdown waterproof panels will protect them against the weather.

In the roof is a big rooflight equipped with a sliding cover to ensure the kids don't wake at 5am, and a light is provided for comic reading. Though the roof bed will mostly be used by youngsters, it is supposed to be able to carry an 18-stone body.

There's plenty of room up there as the dimensions are 6ft 0in x 3ft 6in (1.83m x 1.07m). I know a chap who insists that he always sleeps upstairs in his Bongo. He says it's very convenient as he can leave his bed made up permanently as there's room under the lowered roof for the bedding. Wow! A fixed bed in a 15ft 3in 'van? Well, sort of.

Now for the LVD: slide the rearward-facing bench seat to the rear and flatten the back. The kitchen is across the rear so there's no conflict with the bed space. Also flatten the two front seats, having pushed them forward on their extended runners. This allows them to close the gap with the rear seat giving two, rather undulating, single beds.

Now for some clever sideways thinking: LVD has made two contoured 'mattresstoppers' that smooth out all those uncomfortable bumps. They're stored between the front and back seats.

Though it sounds fiddly and complicated, in practice it works well. The prototype mattress-topper was covered in a waterproof material. Easy to keep clean, but I'd prefer a breathable material.

In the LVD loft a thin mattress makes it feel more a bedroom than the Imperial. The mattress has a cutaway, hinged section where the hatch swings up. A light is fitted and a little circular hole in the floor, with a hinged lid, puzzled me. I supposed it's for passing up bottles of water. This unusual feature was present in both conversions.

STORE ROOM

For their size these little 'vans include surprising amounts of storage space. The Imperial particularly has squeezed storage bins into every nook and cranny.

Both rear windows have been sacrificed to provide space for four drop-down lockers and an inset, open-fronted pocket will take a twolitre lemonade bottle. There's a big cupboard under the sink unit and, on the nearside, a very slim storage unit which might take a couple of road atlases.

Two lift-up doors give access into the space under the bench seat. Opening the tailgate reveals four top-lidded storage lockers, one of which can hold two 2.7kg Campingaz cylinders. Lastly, in the side of the inset step, covered by a plastic lid, is storage for the jack and some tools: this was present in both vehicles.

The LVD conversion, with its rear kitchen, allows room for a very useful large (for a small 'van) wardrobe on the offside, with a curved door. To the rear, behind the wardrobe and accessed from both the inside and out, are two small hinged doors with storage inside. On the nearside of the kitchen's U-shape is a cupboard for a Porta Potti.

Lifting the tailgate gives access to several cupboards behind sliding doors (this might not be so useful in the rain). In the right-hand cupboard is stored the Campingaz cylinder

with space for a second and easily accessed from the rear of the 'van.

In both 'vans the space between the lifting roof and the floor of the upper level shouldn't be forgotten. Stashing the bedding up there solves one of the most difficult storage problems in a camper.

LIFE SUPPORT

Both 'vans have a 20-litre freshwater tank, but neither has provision for waste water. The Imperial has the tank situated beneath the hob, whereas in the LVD the tank is underslung.

Neither conversion has space or water heating. The Imperial has a 110 amp hr leisure battery and the LVD had a smaller 85 amp hr. Both are fitted conveniently under the bonnet and should be of adequate capacity.

The control panel in the Imperial has its own dedicated locker on the offside while the LVD chooses to place it on the front nearside of the U-shaped kitchen unit.

Neither of the converters was able to give us meaningful values for the payload. However, there's no waste water tank and not a whole lot of storage space, so it's difficult to see how you'd overload it (even so, it's always a good idea to weigh your loaded 'van at a public weighbridge. Penalties for overloading can be steep. Ed).

With fabric walls in the pop-top and no heating, three-season use is the most likely scenario, but I'm sure there are legions of hardy folk out there who take their Bongos to Scotland in midwinter. I, however, would not be one of them.

CONCLUSION

The Imperial is the more expensive vehicle at almost £13,000, but it's younger (1997) and has covered less miles (41,000). A stylish central kitchen means that the owner can take advantage of the headroom in this part of the 'van and the double bed will suit those, like me, who prefer this arrangement.

If you are likely to be doing a bit of mudlarking the 4WD of the LVD will be invaluable and I liked its colour, dark smoky green with a metallic finish. The adaptable awning, hung from the tailgate, gives the LVD an added dimension and its kitchen can be used from inside and out.

Lastly, the £9995 cost of the LVD won't break the bank, but its year (1995) and mileage (64,000) have to be weighed up. A difficult decision for someone, but they'll have loads of fun whichever they choose.

VEHICLES LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

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LVD BONGO RK





18 Beside the LVD kitchen worktop are two handy grocery-stashing cupboards

19 The LVD's kitchen tap has an extending hose which allows you to hose yourself down while standing outside (if you don't mind cold water)

20 LVD has managed to fit a wardrobe in its conversion: incredible in a 'van this size

