



Words and pictures by Mark Brownrigg

AT A GLANCE

- PRICE FROM: £35,950 OTR
- BERTHS: 4
- ECONOMY: 40mpg

- 1 The grey interior is both classic and minimalist
- 2 The rear bench offers belted seating for two
- 3 Comfy cab and frugal, nippy motor are great qualities



CARRY ON CAMPING

Jerba Tiree on 2.0-litre VW T5

Our Scottish correspondent re-learns the basics, living in a rising roof camper from north of the border

Jerba Campervans was set up by Simon Poole, almost in protest at what he saw as poor design and build quality in the various campers he'd used. His partner, tired of listening to his complaints, said: "Why don't you build your own?" So he did.

However, before he turned experimentation into a formal business, he decided to pick the brains of a real expert. Chancing his arm, Simon contacted long-time expert and industry celebrity, Richard Holdsworth, and asked if he could meet him and talk through what he must do if he was to make a success of the venture.

"Richard was absolutely brilliant," Simon says. "We got on really well. He took me through all the pitfalls and convinced me that

top quality was the only route to follow." The Jerba Tiree was Simon's first model (out of a current range of four), and the present version is the result of a constant process of evolution. And testing: here is a converter who takes to the road on holiday to check out any changes in design. "We're always tweaking and improving," says Simon.

The Tiree is a rising roof conversion of the short wheelbase VW T5 Transporter window van, and is targeted at a specialist niche market: "80 per cent of our customers are ex-tent campers," explains Simon. These tend to be younger professional people, active in cycling, walking and all sorts of outdoor activities. They want a 'van they can use as a car during the week, then take off in it over a weekend, or longer holiday for leisure activities. They abhor the thought of a

coachbuilt sitting idle in the driveway and disdain what they see as fripperies, such as lounges, washrooms and fixed beds. "They are really still campers at heart, and want to stay as close to 'roughing-it' as possible."

Many of Simon's customers are therefore campervan newbies. He always recommends that they use Jerba's try-before-you-buy scheme, where they can rent a Tiree (or any Jerba model) for a week, to check that it is exactly what they are looking for. "If they come back and place an order," says Simon, "we give them back their rental as part-payment for the purchase price. If they decide it's not for them, at least they've had a week's holiday."

The Tiree represents a completely different culture - a return to basics, almost - from conventional motorhomes. For those of you who

like lounging, washroom, oven and microwave, slide-away flat-screen TV and island bed, this 'van won't tick many boxes. "In our experience, there's not much cross-over between the groups," says Simon. "But we do get a few customers who, in downsizing, want to get back to the type of 'van they started out in."

Over five years, the Tiree has been consistently successful - to the point where there is a five-month waiting time for delivery. "We lose orders, because we can't supply quickly enough," Simon shrugs.

Reviewing a model through a week's live-in test is as harsh an examination as they come. Flaws, which escape a single inspection, can become maddening over a period of use.



Equally, initial doubts can be dispelled, as temporary ownership lets the tester appreciate the good qualities on offer.

So how did the Tiree perform?

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Externally, the Tiree doesn't look a campervan - maybe a people carrier. Its lines, and lack of graphics, simply flag up its base vehicle, the VW window van. Don't bother waving to motorhomers as you pass - they won't realise you're one of them.

The first impression, when you push your head and shoulders into the low interior space, is that this is very much an austere and even minimalist model. Grey bench seat and two swivelling cab seats, in hard-wearing, but understated fabric, grey decor for roof and walls. A small grey kitchen unit holding a two-burner hob, stainless steel sink, plus a variety of shallow drawers and floor (or underseat) cupboards. Neat, dark blue (cream-lined) curtains are gathered sternly back.

Everything changes when you raise the roof. This simple operation transforms both the exterior look and the interior space. You find yourself looking at a tough little cookie of a camper - oozing VW class and confidence - that turns heads on any campsite, or slips solo into a forest track to wild-camp for the night.

On the inside, there is room to stand and

move about. With the passenger seat turned to face the (high-ish) rear bench, the curtains drawn, the LED reading lights on and the blown-air heater purring, you could face down an Arctic blizzard.

Likewise, when you raise the tailgate, not only does this provide an instant awning under which to sit and sip your brew, but you also reveal a cavernous storage area, which holds bedding and leisure gear. This little 'van has heaps of rugged home-base appeal for active walkers/cyclists/windsurfers/hang-gliders, who will spend lots of time outside - coming back to close the sliding door only when they are shattered after a day's sport.

MOTIVE POWER

The test 'van had the 2.0-litre turbo-diesel, which delivers 102bhp. On motorways, it effortlessly maintained 60 or 70mph - uphill and into headwinds. On busy and twisty non-motorway trunk roads, the lively German horses will zoom you out and past any lumbering lorry, quickly and safely.

For the test, the Tiree was taken into the merciless West Highland road network, where midges come even denser than falling rain. Over a week's driving, there was no hill that left the 'van struggling - not even on rough single-track roads, where the ride was still smooth and easy.

The Tiree handles like a dream - steering

is light, the fascia-mounted gear lever almost car-like. Brakes (discs all round) will throw you through the windscreen if you're too heavy-footed. The centrally-mounted commercial-sized handbrake was the only issue, from a week's hard labour. This didn't only wait to trip the unwary watching their headroom, it had a nasty habit of feeling released, when it wasn't. A problem defused both by the normal warning light and a carillon of musical chimes, until you released the handbrake fully.

The sweetest news about this engine is that it is even more frugal with diesel than my wife is with my pocket money. In a week where the 'van seldom saw 5th gear, and the diesel-powered space heater was on most evenings (indeed, throughout one night), the 'van returned 40mpg over 386 miles. On a motorway, cruising at 65mph, you could expect up to 44mpg.

LIVING AND DINING

The traditional panel van format of two cab seats, rotating to face two bench seat places, across a large space in the middle, isn't really meant to be lived in from dawn to dusk. It is a place to which you retreat after a hard day's activities.

Seating is firm, with the captain's seats easily winning the support-and-comfort stakes. The bench seat at the back has to double-up as a bed, which carries two downsides for the vertically challenged. First, the seat bases are pretty high relative to the floor, so little legs may dangle without reaching a solid surface. Second, as one-third of a six-foot bed, the seat base is about two feet wide, so some people's spines will also struggle to reach the support of the - fairly vertical - seatback comfortably.

It follows, in a 'van which is only six feet wide, and has a kitchen unit running down its offside, that finding feet-up lounging space becomes a major challenge - surmountable if you jam a pillow into the corner of seat and kitchen cupboard, and sit diagonally. A second person can claim the cab passenger seat, drop its back to a comfortable angle, and stick their feet out.

Two can co-habit in comfort - but the test 'van had seatbelts and beds for four. This leaves a stark choice: four either sit primly at night, or take turns to go out for a last walk.

Once everyone sorts themselves out, there is an excellent flexible LED reading light above each seat and, in the test 'van, two good quality rear speakers plus a very acceptable radio/CD player. There's no place for a TV, but if you are



real campers, would you really expect one?

The lounge is at its cosiest at night, with curtains drawn (studded into place, for the windscreen). Given discrete lighting, a decent CD playing and the blown-air heating burbling round your ankles, this is a decent home-from-home.

The charm of smaller 'vans is how the designer can transform a single space into one which has many uses. Bring out the concealed tables and the lounge becomes a dining room. The sturdier of the two, was clipped onto the kitchen unit behind the driver's seat. With one folding leg and two strong plastic hooks, it hangs onto a chrome rail running along the sink unit.

The second is a rotating table, which fits snugly into a bracket just inside the sliding door. This can be rotated to serve as either an indoor table for the cab seats, or an external one for picnics. In the test 'van, it showed an unwillingness to remain completely flat and, after writing off a couple of bowls of soup, was abandoned for the rest of the test. However, it remained perfectly flat for picnic usage so, given the 'van's high quality build, the fault probably was tester incompetence rather than poor engineering.

A week's use failed to solve a riddle discovered on the first night: if both tables are erected, they take up almost all of the floor space - so how does the cook serve up and get back to a seat to scoff his/her share?

Equally, the tight dimensions make for smallish table-tops, and it is far from easy to arrange two place settings on each. The diner furthest from the tables' anchorage points will need very long arms, or to be on a diet.

Is this a major, or minor problem? The latter: think basics, and the clientele's preference for 'roughing-it'.

Two of you can manage easily. If there are more than two, pray for good weather and have a great time eating and drinking outdoors.

BATHROOM SUITE

There is no washroom. We are in 'Porta Potti' country, meaning that curtains must be drawn even in daylight, and for any mid-night tinkle, an aptitude for limbo dancing helps enormously. My wife has a profound belief that this system is one step too far in togetherness.

Therefore the solution is to carry the portable loo under the rear seat for emergencies, but either use the site facilities or, if you are on the road, think 'al fresco.' For the latter, remember your camping training: always check the wind direction first!

For ablutions inside the 'van, you have the kitchen sink. However, there's a shallow, but very hard and sharp, bank of three overhead lockers only 18 inches above both this and the hob. Bend over to wash your face, or brush your teeth and there is a loud bang and a large number of

'stars'. You quickly learn to spit toothpaste from one metre, thus avoiding more of the same.

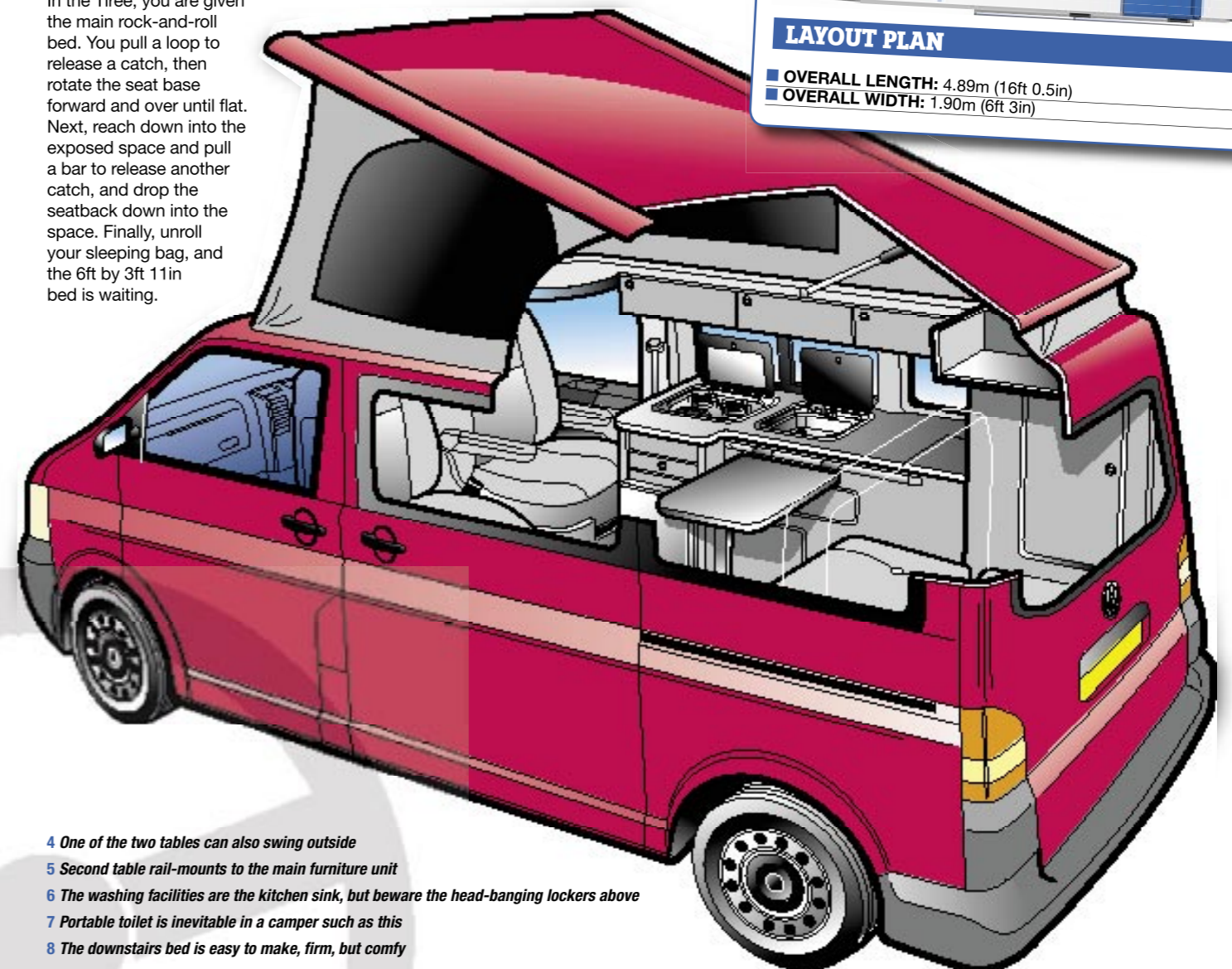
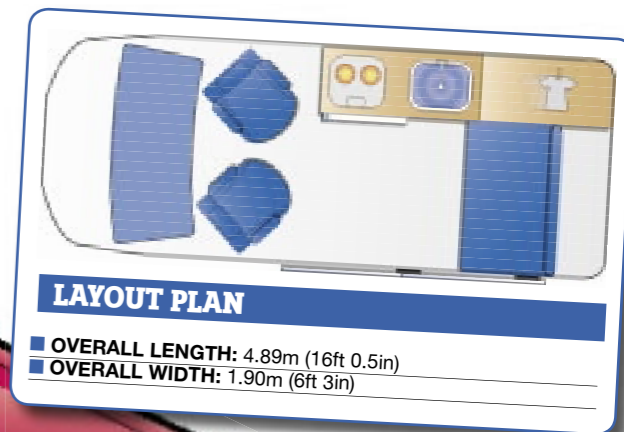
Once more, you're camping! Use the site facilities or, if wild camping, remind yourself of the joys of brushing teeth, washing faces or bathing in a nearby brook.

DESIGNER BEDROOMS

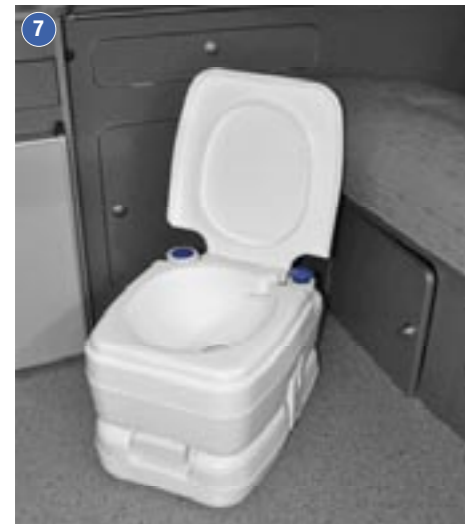
In the Tíree, you are given the main rock-and-roll bed. You pull a loop to release a catch, then rotate the seat base forward and over until flat. Next, reach down into the exposed space and pull a bar to release another catch, and drop the seatback down into the space. Finally, unroll your sleeping bag, and the 6ft by 3ft 11in bed is waiting.

At the first few wriggles it seems firm, but while pondering this you quickly fall asleep, so it can't be too uncomfortable.

The test 'van offered the optional extra of a roof bed. This fits under the rising roof and drops down to



- 4 One of the two tables can also swing outside
- 5 Second table rail-mounts to the main furniture unit
- 6 The washing facilities are the kitchen sink, but beware the head-banging lockers above
- 7 Portable toilet is inevitable in a camper such as this
- 8 The downstairs bed is easy to make, firm, but comfy



make another 5ft 10in x 3ft 8in bed, designed primarily for kids, and with a rail and safety netting. Having to climb up via a cab seat base and backrest will only add to your fun. Its mattress is thin-ish - okay for young kids caught up in the adventure of a camping holiday, but less so for a heavier adult.

A whole family crammed into this small 'van? Why not? The old splitty VW caravanettes competed to see how many kids could be fitted across cab seats, or swung from hammocks in the roof. Now adults, these kids remember the experience as the best holidays of their lives.

The Tiree is the throwback to this culture. You are meant to have fun in your 'van, not just sit and watch television - you can do that at home.

THE COOKING EXPERIENCE

Forget cordon bleu. You have two burners, no oven, no grill and no microwave. But check out your mum's old recipe book and you'll be surprised at what you can cook with such primitive equipment. Or for the culinary challenged, like this tester, re-experience living out of a can. There are some very interesting meals contained in cans. Some of them are even edible.

The fridge is a 51-litre, 12V compressor-type, and it seems small on the outside. However, it reaches well back inside and holds a lot more than you might think - there's even a small freezer compartment, to make ice cubes if nothing else. Its noise, however, might disturb light sleepers.

Don't try to wash your dishes at the kitchen sink - or if you do, be careful, those overhead lockers will eat you alive. The sink drains directly (no waste tank, although you can have

one as an optional extra), and a small plastic pail catches the grey water happily.

STORAGE SPACE

Every square inch of each nook and cranny is designed to hold something.

The three offside overhead lockers are limited, but hold their share of smalls. Above the rear seatback, there is a useful long locker, which holds the windscreen curtains, a couple of pairs of jeans and a folded jacket.

Beneath the sink, a deep cupboard swallows dishes, pots and washbowl. Beneath the rear bench seat, there are two very deep cupboards - one holds the portable loo, the other holds all manner of bulkier things. Abandon the toilet and you liberate a second large-and-useful cupboard.

In the boot, there's a good side locker, which holds mains hook-up cable, fresh water hose (you take on fresh water by clipping the hose to a concealed over-bumper inset at the rear) and has space for wedges, or boots.

The more you search, the more usable space you find. The best cupboard of all is a huge larder under a hatch in the surface beside the sink; this seems as though it could hold provision an army.

BITS AND BOBS

The fresh water tank holds 38 litres and the menu on the control panel can be set to let you see how much is left. The 125 amp hr leisure battery is cunningly set in a steel cage, and hung beneath the floor. This frees up internal space, and it drops easily to check the levels at



9 Basic kitchen offers just a hob - the fridge is roomier than it looks

10 In-kitchen larder is a very useful stowage space

11 Control panel, power sockets and heater control are located at the aft end of the kitchen unit

12 The tailgate lifts to reveal a massive storage area

13 Overhead locker at the rear is good for clothes, speakers are a worthwhile option

14 The side locker, aft is a good place for lead and hose

15 Hook-up and fresh water inlets are hidden inside a rear light nacelle



a service. If you plan to go wild camping, you'd be advised to take the option of a second leisure battery - that 12V-powered fridge eats juice.

The mains hook-up socket is revealed when you pull away the offside corner panel, below the rear light, but take care to properly push this closed: the rising roof sheds water backwards - to run down the side of the van, straight into the clip-on female socket, if you leave a gap. Guess who didn't close it right!

There is no water heater (an option is available), while the Webasto blown-air space heater (if a little noisy) soon creates a homely fug on a wet night, or keeps temperature comfortable during a cold one. The heater runs on diesel from the vehicle's tank, so saves gas supplies.

With single-glazing throughout, and over a prolonged cold and wet period, heavy condensation built up. This is unavoidable, and isn't helped when you bring in sodden outdoor gear. Over the test week, damp shirts, socks, and food became a standard feature.

However, if you are camping, or outdoors, in our UK climate - especially in the Scottish Highlands - you can expect to get a little damp around the edges. If you can't take that, any camper will tell you to book a hotel.

Of course, camping in warmer climes, where the weather's dry and warm, will be completely different experience, while adding a drive-away awning might make the Tiree suitable for longer holidays too.

CONCLUSION

For its target clientele, this sturdy little workhorse of a camper does exactly what it says on the tin, and that's why it continues to

I LIKED

- Drivability of the T5 base
- Being able to use and park it like a car
- Frugal, but nippy, 102bhp engine
- Simple-to-use, roomy fridge
- Big larder locker under the work surface
- Easy-to-make main bed
- Good quality radio/CD system

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A quieter heater
- Double-glazing in living area

I DISLIKED

- The low lockers over the sink and hob
- Small roof bed - I would hate to sleep in it

be successful. It will take its active camper/owners anywhere, to work or play - delivering them safely and cheaply to wherever they want to go. It'll then wait for them to come home to base at night, tired but happy. All the time keeping them in touch with their camping side - at one with nature.

However, unless you are - or were - a dedicated tent camper, your initial reaction will be one of culture shock. Too small, too austere, where's the loo?

If you are brave and take this little camper out for walkies, it could win you over - taking you back to your youth, where one spoon fitted all, from eating cereals, to digging worms, and spreading butter.

In the context of current prices, £35,950 represents decent value for money. This little 'van is a cracker, the high build quality of the conversion living up to the reputation set by the almost indestructible VW van it inhabits. ■



On Test Jerba Campervans Tiree

LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

Rising roof van conversion

PRICE

- **From:** £35,950 OTR
- **As tested:** £38,383 OTR

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** VW T5 Transporter window van
- **Berths:** 4
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (incl. driver)
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle, 2 years conversion

CONSTRUCTION

All-steel body with GRP, fabric-sided rising roof. Caravan entrance - side sliding door - on UK nearside

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 4.89m (16ft 0.5in)*
- **Width:** 1.90m (6ft 3in)*
- **Height:** 2.18m (7ft 2in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 3.00m (9ft 10in)*
- **Rear overhang:** 990mm (3ft 3in)*
- **Gross vehicle weight:** 3,200kg
- **Payload:** 798kg (after allowances for weight of driver, fuel, fresh water, gas)
- **Insulation:** Sides - British sheep's wool. Floor - Thinsulate
- **Interior height:** 1.39m (4ft 7in) roof down; 2.25m (7ft 4.5in) max, roof up

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 2.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 102bhp
- **Transmission:** Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 40mpg
- **Brakes:** Discs all round with ABS
- **Suspension:** Independent all round on coil springs

- **Features:** Driver and passenger airbags, remote central locking, electric windows and mirrors radio/CD player, door bins, twin armrests, lockable glove compartment, heater equipped with dust and pollen filter

LOUNGING AND DINING

Swivelling cab seats and rear bench seat provides seating for four. Dining for four at two tables - one rail-mounted, one single-leg-mounted

KITCHEN

Offside kitchen unit contains two drawers; one shelved floor cupboard; one larder cupboard underneath work surface

- **Sink:** Rectangular stainless steel bowl with hinged glass lid, folding mixer tap. No drainer
- **Cooker:** Stainless steel, two-burner hob with push-button ignition
- **Fridge:** Vitfrigo 12V compressor-type, with freezer compartment. Capacity 51 litres

WASHROOM

None fitted. Portable toilet stows in locker beneath rear bench seat, emerges to be used in main living area

BEDS

Lounge double

- **Length:** 1.87m (6ft 1.5in)
- **Width:** 1.21m (3ft 11.5in)

Roof double

- **Length:** 1.79 m (5ft 10.5in)
- **Width:** 1.13m (3ft 8.5in)
- **Headroom:** 870mm (2ft 10in) max, 150mm (6in) min

STORAGE

Three small overhead lockers above sink, one long overhead locker above rear seat, two drawers and one (shelved) cupboard in kitchen unit, large larder beneath kitchen work surface,

JERBA CAMPERVANS TIREE

two large cupboards (unshelved) beneath rear seat, large shelved boot area with locker (shelved) on offside

LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Underslung, capacity 38 litres (8.4 gallons)
- **Waste water:** No tank fitted
- **Water heater:** None fitted
- **Space heater:** Webasto Airtop 2000S, diesel-fired with blown-air
- **Leisure battery:** 120 amp hr
- **Gas:** Capacity 2 x 3.9kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Four multi-LED stalk-lamps, twin-tube fluorescent above sink, multi-LED strip above boot
- **Sockets:** 230V: 2 (to aft end of kitchen unit). 12V: 1 (to aft end of kitchen unit)
- **Control panel:** Sargent digital LCD control panel displays battery voltage, fresh water tank level, alarm, clock, controls 12V supply, fresh water pump
- **Blinds/curtains:** Curtains, with blackout linings, at all windows, midge-proof netting to rising roof
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- **Fitted to test vehicle:** Four-bike rack (£419), rear speakers (£105), portable toilet (£60), space heater (£1,175), additional gas cylinder (£60), roof bed and safety net (£614)
- **Other options available:** Alloy wheels (£665), removable front seat covers (£112) roof rack (£495), Isofix child seat locking system for both rear seats (£128), safe (£185), drive-away awning (£327), awning rail (£245), diesel-fired space/water heater (£2,550), external shower - fitted in conjunction with space/water heater (£250), rear tailgate-mounted shower curtain (£170), waste water tank (£250), 68W solar panel (£1,015), hob/grill upgrade (£225)

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

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WE STAYED AT

- **Yellowcraig Caravan Club site,** Dirleton, EH39 5DS Tel: 01620-850217
Web: www.caravanclub.co.uk
- **Blair Drummond Caravan Club site,** Cuthil Brae, Blair Drummond, Stirling FK9 4UP Tel: 01786-841208,
Web: www.caravanclub.co.uk
- **Oban Camping and Caravanning Club site,** Barcaldine, by Connel, Argyll PA37 1SG Tel: 01631-720348, Web: www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

