

TEST REPORT EXTRA



CALIFORNIA CRUISIN'

Westfalia California Freestyle on SWB Volkswagen T4 2.5TDI

Dave Hurrell tries the ultimate incarnation of the classic VW camper

Back in the sixties, people who owned motorcaravans were often referred to as 'having a Dormobile'. Although a brand name, it had become a word synonymous with motorcaravans and I still have a picture in my

mind's eye of the classic Bedford CA Romany, complete with sliding cab doors. These days things have changed, but say the word 'campervan' to your non-motorcaravanning friends and they'll probably say 'oh yeah, one

of those Volkswagen things'. In their mind's eye will probably be a T2 - you know, the one with a lawnmower engine in the back and next-to-no heater. (I've never been able to work out why a vehicle designed in a country that has very cold winters has such poor heating!)

Volkswagen realised (eventually) the drawbacks of the rear engine and air-cooling and launched the T4: it has a good heater and the engine in the front (driving the front wheels). One thing most T4 campers have inherited from their T2 predecessor, however, is the internal layout. Cabinets ranged down one side and a forward-facing bench seat were necessary in the old vee-dub with its space-eating engine hump in the rear. This layout proved so popular that it survives to this day and nowadays the lack of an engine in the back produces useful storage behind the rear seat.

Freestyle guru

Volkswagen products benefit from design-and-build qualities that are the envy of many an automotive manufacturer, and the T4 - in its current guise - is no exception. Supplied by Volkswagen in Kombi form with side windows already fitted, high levels of equipment, and Caravelle-style trim in the cab, the Freestyle oozes class. Add to this metallic paint, alloy wheels and colour-coded mirrors and bumpers, and you have a package that can hold its own with the latest



The roof pops up in a trice, although more care needs to be taken when putting it down.

WESTFALIA CALIFORNIA FREESTYLE ON SWB VOLKSWAGEN T4 2.5TDI



Design integration extends to the comprehensive caravan instruction manual: every bit as good as the one provided by Volkswagen.



Rising roof has flyscreened vents with zipped covers.

batch of MPVs on the school run, and still be hip enough to get twenty-something surfing-dudes drooling.

Beneath the short bonnet is a five-cylinder, turbocharged, intercooled, diesel engine and, even to the untrained eye, its looks are reassuring. The intercooler casing announces the fact that you are looking at a 'VW TDI - 2.5' engine and the whole feeling is of a vehicle that is - in mechanic-speak - 'well screwed together'.

A special relationship

Have a good look around, under, and in this 'van, and you quickly realise there is far more to the design than you would expect to find in a normal Volkswagen camper conversion. The transition between base vehicle and motorcaravan is more seamless than in any other I have tested, and the quality and attention to design detailing is remarkable. Things such as a centralised electronic control system, rear passenger heating, and harmonious design could have you thinking this 'van had not been converted at all - but had rolled, complete, off Volkswagen's own production line.

TDI motoring

In the cab you have all the modern motoring toys you could ever want, with only the slightly square styling of the dash reminding you that the T4 has been around for more than a decade. Facilities include electric windows and mirrors, twin airbags, ABS anti-lock brakes, air-conditioning and remote



On the road, rear passengers have their own heater controls.



'Toys' include electric windows and mirrors.

central locking. A radio/cassette with CD autochanger will help to ease boredom on those long motorway journeys.

The cab seats benefit from green and grey upholstery which, with its embroidered Freestyle logo, integrates stylishly with the rest of the interior. Meanwhile, in the back, the forward-facing bench seat has three-point belts and removable head restraints to provide safe travel for two. One of two floor-mounted outlets provides rear on-road heating, complete with dedicated temperature and fan control. Luxury indeed!

The potential drawback driving-wise is the fact that Westfalia only produce left-hand drive vehicles. However, you can soon get used to this new driving style (positioning on the road, overtaking, and changing gear with your right hand are the main considerations). I would recommend an extended test drive to see if piloting a left-hooker is for you. Of course, if you plan a lot of Continental touring, having the steering wheel on the other side gives you a distinct advantage.

With a car-style driving position and a high stance, the Freestyle compares well to an MPV. With the internal space of a large estate car, it should be high on the list of anyone looking for a 'van with sole vehicle potential.

The on-road experience can be summed up by saying that in no way do you feel you are driving a commercial vehicle. Car-like levels of comfort and noise (with not a peep from the caravan component) are enhanced by excellent brakes and handling. If I were nit-picking, I'd say that the power steering was, maybe, a bit light and the gearchange a bit rubbery - but that's about it.

The still-tight 102bhp 2.5TDI performed with gusto, making for effortless progress, if sounding slightly harsh when pushed hard. It growled at me as I accelerated to the legal limit with ease, and once there provided smooth cruising mile after mile.

Pop-top-tastic

Westfalia describe the rising roof as a pop-up top - and it pops up in a trice (thanks to a system that holds it down at the front with a bonnet-type latch). Rear hinged, with a GRP top and grey canvas sides, this pop-top is a low-line device, giving height-barrier-beating potential in many situations, thanks to an overall height that just beats the two-metre mark.

Once pitched, you operate a lever in the cab headlining to release the latch. Gentle pressure on a handle inside the front of the roof sees it rise easily on twin struts to provide impressive headroom throughout the standing area. Lowering was slightly more difficult, as it was necessary to check that the canvas sides were properly tucked in before pulling the roof down hard to engage in its



Cab has luxury car-like feel, though dash looks dated.



Rear bench makes a comfortable sofa for lounging, and has two three-point belts for travelling.



Typical VW 'camper' layout places all the furniture units in a bank down one side.



Being left-hand-drive, this 'van has the side sliding door on the UK offside.



Two-burner hob has no grill or spark ignition. Sink is cold water only but has nifty multi-use fitted washing-up bowl.

latch. The sides benefit from zipped mesh panels to aid ventilation, great on those hot summer nights.

Climb aboard

As with many Continental motorcaravans, the main entrance - in this case the side sliding door - is on the UK offside. When parked normally in Britain, rear-seat passengers will exit into the road rather than onto the kerb: not much of a problem when camping, but more of a consideration if you intend to regularly carry people in the back when using the Freestyle as an everyday vehicle.

Once aboard, there are few surprises layout-wise. The main cabinet run extends down the UK nearside and consists of kitchen facilities hiding under two hinged lids with a twin access wardrobe taking up the rear corner. The transverse bench seat slides on runners set into the floor, making it very versatile when living aboard (and giving potential extra load space behind when slid forward).

Loungeability

Lounging space for four is amply provided, by virtue of the fact that both cab seats swivel.

Good engineering has produced seat bases and mechanisms that are easier to use than many (they are an integral part of the seat, and not add-ons). The driver's chair is slightly more difficult to operate, owing to the proximity of steering wheel and kitchen cabinet. I found it necessary to open the cab door to get it to turn fully. Once swivelled, it is this driver's seat that suffers from being snug up against the kitchen. It was still comfortable, but its movement was more restricted than its partner on the passenger side.

The sliding bench seat begins to show its mettle here - slid back it provides maximum space, but it can be moved forward to create a more intimate feel or give better access to the table.

Camp kitchen

Strictly Continental and grill-less, the kitchen benefits from twin hinged worktops. One covers the manual ignition two-burner hob and sink (both stainless steel). To the left, the second is the cover and lid of the modestly sized, top-loading fridge. Beneath this unit there is a large two-door cupboard with two shelves and a sensibly sized cutlery drawer.

Cooking in here will have its limitations, but there is plenty of storage in that big cupboard - and one of those stovetop toasters should keep the marmalade-and-Marmite brigade happy. I loved the dedicated washing-up bowl fitted in the sink. It has a host of uses, many outside the 'van. When on site I would add a decent-sized tray to provide a draining surface while washing up.

The top-loading fridge is going to be a boon and a bane. Number one boon is the fact that it is a 12V compressor model. Combine this with the fact that there are no other gas-guzzling appliances in this 'van and



Cook's domain resides beneath twin hinged lids.

WESTFALIA CALIFORNIA FREESTYLE ON SWB VOLKSWAGEN T4 2.5TDI



Four diners could probably do coffee and sandwiches but this table is best for two.

it becomes clear that the single Campingaz cylinder supplied will last for yonks, as it only has to supply the cooker. The other boon is early morning access. Wake up, sit

up and you can fill the kettle, put it on, and reach into the fridge for the milk - no grovelling required. Remember to get the Cornflakes out the night before and it's brekky in bed too!

Bane time with the fridge comes when you're cooking and you need some chilled ingredients. Guess what? You've got a load of stuff on that worktop fridge lid! Oh well, they say there's no such thing as a perfect motorcaravan. Personally, I liked the top-loading cooler: things don't fall out when you open the door and there's no crash of spilt contents when you drive round the first roundabout and blame your partner for not shutting the door properly!

Perfect for fondue

As the dining table clips to a rail that runs along the front of the kitchen unit, you are never far from the cooker when eating - you could keep your fondue pot warm on the hob while you experience melted cheese heaven! Seriously, though, the table - which has safe storage under the bench seat - is really only big enough for two to dine, either side-by-side or opposite and offset to each other. On the plus side it is excellently engineered and its extending single leg locates in one of the runners in the floor, making it very stable and safe to use in a limited space.

The partnership of sliding table and bench seat gives many combinations when it comes to getting your ideal seat-to-table distance - there aren't many motorcaravans where you can 'pull up a chair'!



Comfortable low-level double bed is ultra-quick to make and nicely flat.

Upstairs downstairs

Sleeping accommodation in short wheelbase Volkswagens tends to follow a well-proven formula. The forward-facing rear seat folds flat to form a double bed, and some provision is made in the roof for two further berths (usually only suitable for children). Here, that formula prevails with an easy-to-flatten bench seat and bed boards in the roof.

The upstairs bed is easy to deploy, as the rearmost board is fixed and the front one is hinged and suspended from a strap in the roof when not in use. Simply unhook it from the strap and let it down to form a berth that benefits from excellent head-end headroom, owing to the shape of the rising roof. As with all these designs, it is really only suitable for occasional use by kids, as access is limited and there is no ladder. Most people will probably leave the front board at home and use the narrow space above the rear one to store the duvet.

The fold-flat rear seat seems well engineered and the downstairs double appears in a flash. Simply slide the seat forward and lift the squab until the seat back is horizontal. The squab then drops down to completely flatten the seat and - along with the permanent mattress section at the rear - forms a long, comfortable bed. It takes far longer to tell you how than it does to actually



Under the rear bed board is a useful boot - great for all the bulky outdoor stuff.



The underseat storage drawer - my home for kit such as hose, mains lead, wedges and tools.



The gas locker is accessible from the boot. It holds one Campingaz 907 bottle - but with only the hob to power this should last a while.

do it, and you'll be snoring while the guy in the coachbuilt on the next-door pitch is still trying to work out where all his infill cushions go!

The storage story

Storage follows a proven formula too, with space grouped into three main areas - the rear corner wardrobe, the boot area underneath the rear bed section, and beneath the rear bench seat. Coupled with the large kitchen cupboard and a shallow locker under the roof at the rear, storage is very good for such a small 'van. Westfalia have added to this by installing green and grey fabric pockets on various vertical surfaces throughout the interior, creating a kind of fisherman's gilet look. The pockets are very stylish and will be useful for all those bits and bobs that would otherwise be rolling around in one of the lockers.

The wardrobe has access points from front and rear and a small hanging rail, although depth is limited (owing to the presence of the fresh water tank in the bottom). The rear of this locker has a couple of T-shirt and shorts shelves as well. At the rear, under the bed section, is a useful boot. This is the natural home for chairs, barbecue and other bulky items. Under the bench seat is a capacious space that would be my home for kit such as hose, mains lead, wedges and tools. All these storage areas remain available while using the 'van.

The area on top of the rear bed section, behind the bench seat, offers more capacity, but bear in mind that you'll need somewhere else to put this stuff when you make up the bed. This is usually home to bedding or soft bags for additional clothing.



Centralised control panel allows timed control of the diesel-fired heater and regulation of the fridge temperature.



Freestyle package includes a fitted bike rack.

Service with style

A big contribution to the practicality of any motorcaravan is made by all those hidden things that have next-to-no showroom appeal but become the essentials of life once on the road. Westfalia have put a lot of thought into designing a practical camper, and one of the stars of the show is the centralised control panel. It is mounted in the cab roof and gives you all the usual information (such as tank levels and battery voltages). In addition to this it allows you to set the fridge temperature and provides a timed programming function for the other star of the show, the Eberspächer heating system.

Mounted under the bonnet and delivering warm air to one of two outlets in the rear floor, the Eberspächer will never have you wondering when the gas is going to run out, as it is powered by diesel from the vehicle's main fuel tank. Being able to return to the 'van after a long winter walk knowing you have set the heating to come on an hour before your ETA could see all those home DIY jobs you left for the non-motorcaravanning months under threat! In fact, winter trips with the Freestyle are a distinct possibility, as it benefits from inboard-mounted water and waste tanks, allowing you to populate frosty campsites, albeit with the canvas rising roof firmly closed (or you could order the high top version).

The sealed gas locker has capacity for only one Campingaz 907 cylinder, but as it only

supplies the hob, this should not be a problem. Mains hook-up feeds electric distribution and leisure battery charger in the normal way. The RCD safety circuit breaker, 12V fuses and the single Continental-style mains socket are neatly mounted on the wall to the right of the kitchen.

Lighting consists of two U-tube fluorescents in the main living area and a flexible stalk lamp in the roof that can be aimed down to provide task lighting while cooking. Curtains are hung in the caravan area and press-studded into the cab at night. Mesh ventilators in the roof provide fresh air during times when biting bugs are present. The excellent stereo system benefits from fitted rear speakers and works with the ignition off, so evening entertainment is assured.

West failure or victorious Volkswagen?

There's a pretty good choice of short wheelbase rising roof Volkswagen campers out there, most of them with this traditional layout. The Westfalia Freestyle stands apart from other makes - with design integration, quality, and attention to detail giving it a head-and-shoulders lead over much of the competition. Based on style alone it has the 'wow' factor that will make you want to drive and own one. When testing for MMM, the good 'vans have me sitting in the back smiling. In the Freestyle I was simply grinning my head off!

In brief

Base vehicle: Volkswagen T4 SWB Kombi
Engine type: 2.5-litre, five-cylinder, turbocharged, intercooled, diesel
Output: 75kW (102 bhp)
Gearbox and drive: Five-speed manual, front-wheel drive

Make and model: Westfalia California Freestyle
Body type and construction: Panel van conversion with glass fibre rising roof cap
Conversion NCC approved: No
Electrical equipment: Mains hook-up feeding RCD and miniature circuit breakers. Leisure battery charger, one Continental-type mains outlet and one 12V outlet
Lighting: Two U-tube fluorescents in living area, one halogen stalk-lamp in rising roof
Cooking facilities: Two-burner, manual ignition hob
Refrigerator: Top-access, 12V compressor fridge, 40 litres capacity
Water heater: Not fitted
Fresh water tank: Inboard mounted in base of

wardrobe. Capacity 50 litres (10.9 gallons)
Waste water tank: Inboard mounted in base of kitchen unit. Capacity 27 litres (5.9 gallons). Drain valve operated from within kitchen cupboard
Space heating: Eberspächer diesel-fired blown-air heater fitted with timer control
Gas locker capacity: One Campingaz 907 cylinder
Rear restraints: Two three-point belts fitted to forward-facing bench seat
Additional features: Electrically heated and adjustable mirrors, electric cab windows, ABS anti-lock brakes, power steering, twin airbags, engine immobiliser, cab air-conditioning, remote operated central locking, fog lights, cycle rack, removable carpets, colour-coded mirrors and bumpers, alloy wheels, detachable towbar

Dimensions

Overall length: 4.79m (15ft 9in)
Overall width: 1.84m (6ft 5in)
Overall height: 1.99m (6ft 6.5in) roof closed, 2.80m (9ft 3in) roof open
Interior height: 2.21m (7ft 3in) max, 1.35m (4ft 5in) min

Bed dimensions:

Roof bed 1.84m x 1.06m (6ft 0.5in in x 3ft 6in)
 Main double 1.94m x 1.06m (6ft 4in x 3ft 10in)
Max authorised weight: 2800kg
Load capacity: 660kg

Price

Standard model (as tested): £29 000 on the road

Optional extras

Base vehicle options: Cruise control, fresh air filter, GPS navigation system, removable front for radio, headlamp washers, mud flaps, wood-effect dash
Caravan options: Sunroof in rising roof, awning

Westfalia California Freestyle kindly supplied for evaluation by:

Deepcar Motorhomes International,
 Manchester Road, Deepcar,
 Sheffield S36 2RE (tel: 0114-288 2660;
 web site: www.dmiuk.com)