

TEST REPORT EXTRA



MULTI-PURPOSE MALIBU

carthago malibu 28 on short wheelbase 2.5TDI VW T4

Rising roof VW conversions are still very popular in Britain, so we sent Jonathan Lloyd to see whether this German import is to British tastes



Gorgeous Paprika Red coachwork looks even better with the newish Caravelle-style nose and coloured bumpers.

Whilst the coachbuilt market has been absolutely flooded with imports from the Continent, the compact camper sector has not been affected in the same way. (Reimos are actually built in the UK, while Westfalias are presently only available with left-hand drive.) Lowdham Leisureworld, of Gunthorpe near Nottingham, decided to import the carthago malibu range from Germany to complement their existing selection of European coachbuilts.

The malibu range consists of three layouts. The 28 (as tested here) is based on the short wheelbase Transporter panel van, and comes with a rear-hinged rising roof (28.1) or a high top (28.5). The malibu 31 and 32 are based on the long wheelbase T4 and both have rear kitchen layouts, the latter with a shower and toilet. Whilst the 31 comes with a rising roof (31.1), a slim high top (31.3), or a taller high top with roof bed (31.2), the 32 is only available with the high top options (overall height 2.32 metres or 2.50 metres).

Small is chic?

Not the vehicle, though it undoubtedly is both small and chic, but the letters at the beginning of the names (carthago and malibu). In the true fashion of witless progressives, somebody has persuaded

carthago malibu 28 on short wheelbase 2.5TDI VW T4

carthago not to use capital letters at the beginning of the range monikers, so I won't either. I was once described as a 'maniacally repressive traditionalist', so it will be no surprise to learn that I'm uncomfortable with this. And just what do you do when such a name is at the beginning of a sentence?

Hey good lookin'

Just look at how urbane our test vehicle looks. A colour co-ordinated roof is standard and any currently available Volkswagen Transporter colour can be specified. Super! Nobody's going to come up to this when you're parked in a lay-by and ask for a 99 ice cream!

Gorgeous Paprika Red coachwork looks even better with the newish Caravelle-style nose and coloured bumpers. Wheel covers that do a passable impression of alloys also give an up-market look, appearing far more in keeping with a leisure vehicle than many that are fitted to motorcaravans.

On this colour, black vents, flues and fillers blend in so much better than their visually offensive bright white relatives. The converters have also chosen to give the graphics department the heave-ho. No heavy-handed stripes and swirls here, instead just a plain silver-grey carthago logo on the cab doors, nearside rear door, and bonnet. Definitely a case of less is more!

It was a surprise to discover that the test carthago had 'barn doors' at the rear instead of the more usually specified one-piece top-hung tailgate. Future models for stock will be ordered with a tailgate, though doors remain an option.

Brit friendly?

Well, 'yes and no'. The malibu is available in right-hand drive, though the conversion remains 'handed' for mainland Europe. That is to say that the sliding side door remains on our offside (and rear passengers may alight into the middle of the road). The interior layout hasn't been changed from Continental spec, with some significant consequences for the right-hand driver, of which more later.

The malibu has the well-proven traditional Volkswagen layout of a run of furniture down one side, a two-person rock and roll rear seat, and swivel cab seats. This is the favoured layout of UK Vee-Dub purchasers.

Lowdham have ordered an upgraded specification for the UK. This includes wood-effect dashboard trim, wood-effect table and inserts, swan-neck lamp (snake-light), and



General view forward showing swivelled cab seats. Black rectangle on floor to the rear of driver's seat is the heater for rear passengers.

rear speakers for the stereo radio/cassette. Also standard is a 'comfort pack' of softer, more luxurious upholstery; matching fabric door panelling; front seats with lumbar support; cab carpet; living area carpet; illuminated make-up mirror; two-tone horn; and delayed cut-off for interior lighting. The removable bound-edge carpet, in addition to the wipe-clean vinyl floor covering, will be well received as one can choose the most suitable for the weather conditions.

The cab carpet, dashboard trim, and make-up mirror had not yet been fitted to the demo vehicle. The Continental-style mains outlet will be changed for a 13 amp three-pin switched socket. Lowdham are the official importers, and we are told that malibus are transported from Germany, not driven.

On site

Turn off the ignition, raise the GRP roof and you're ready for a cuppa, or perhaps something stronger.

The elevating roof mechanism is gas-assisted, but I did feel it needed a hefty shove to initiate the lifting operation. When in the lowered position it is secured for travel by some easy to operate over-centre clips. Once raised, the canvas-sided roof affords plenty of

standing room. Strangely, it doesn't have any windows, only mesh vents plus canvas covers in the sides. I would have preferred a plastic semi-circular window in the front to let in the light without any draught, especially as the sink and cooker covers completely block the nearside window when raised.

Décor

Hmmm, very well judged, I thought. The laminates used in the cabinetwork look fresh and modern, and should wipe clean with no problems. Hardwood edging and wood-style laminate for the cupboard front/table top add a splash of luxury without turning it into a 1930s Pullman railway carriage lookalike.

All the seats are trimmed in VW's grey Velours pattern with blue Antara piping and headrests. Velours has a light grey background with a darker grey dot matrix pattern - simple, elegant, and unfussy, without being at all utilitarian or austere. Other pattern options are Inka, Salerno, Aztec or Cadillac. Friends with campers similarly trimmed with these ranges of fabric report that they are very hard wearing.

Lounging

There is a surprising amount of room for lounging, especially with the rear seat pushed right back. Comfortable cab seats have adjustable armrests and swivel to join in the fun. Be careful when swivelling the driver's seat as it needs a fair bit of to-ing and fro-ing, and the handbrake needs to be released. Don't forget to place the vehicle in gear before attempting this, and reapply the handbrake afterwards!

The convertible rear seat is a very clever piece of design. It is said to be strain tested to European standards and runs along substantial tracks. Now here is the clever bit - the tracks are hidden, leaving a completely flat floor. One track is under the furniture run, the other in the upstand of the side door footwell. The seat converts easily to a large and comfortable bed, which was just as well as I needed a lie-down after I discovered that the test vehicle had been supplied without any fuses in the domestic electrical circuits.

After a while I found the fuses (they had been removed whilst the 'van was in the showroom), though it seemed very strange not to make sure everything worked before the test vehicle was released. Some time later, I got most of the electrical gear functioning, though there was a noticeable lack of water



Looking rearwards we see the kitchen and wardrobe on right. Through-view when driving was almost nil.

TEST REPORT EXTRA



Kitchen ready for action. Cabinetwork was silent when on the move. Above the fridge is a cutlery drawer with moulded insert. See heater outlet bottom right of kitchen cupboard.



Panel next to kitchen cupboard is home to (from top to bottom) - timer for heating, temperature control for heating, switch for extra cooling fan for fridge, and 230V outlet.



Seat tracking is cunningly hidden. Nearside is under cupboard run, and offside (pictured) is in the upstand of the entrance step well.



Non-functioning water pump meant I had to use my water porter. There was no draining surface, but I managed fine by using the space to the left of my washing-up bowl.

delivery to the sink. I spent a while on the problem and then gave up and used my standby water porter with tap. Pretty low tech, but 100 per cent reliable!

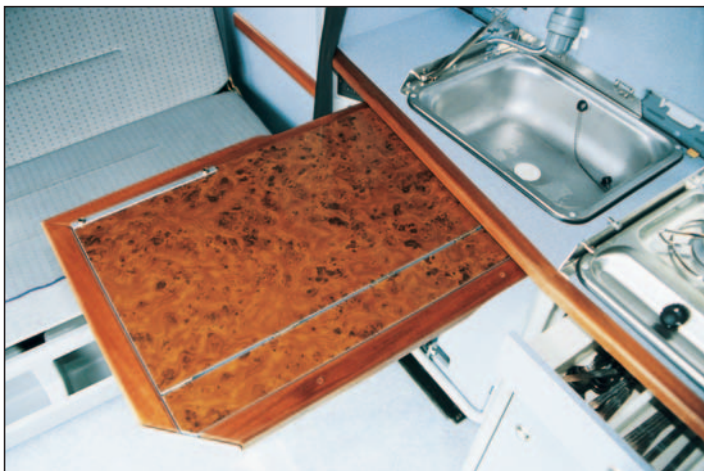
Truma provide a very efficient thermostatically-controlled 2.55kW blown-air heating system, only this time with a timer. There were no instructions or handbook for the conversion, and I'm pretty challenged cognitively, so it took a few minutes to get to grips with the controls. Not that they were particularly complex, just unfamiliar. It appears that it is a three-period, seven-day timer with

digital display. No need to worry about the distribution fan flattening the vehicle battery, as carthago install a gel leisure battery and 230V/12V charging system as standard.

The manufacturers have opted for a combination of top-hung and sliding windows in the conversion giving the opportunity for effective ventilation, both on the move and on site. The windows are double-glazed acrylic, unlike most Kombi-based rivals that have VW factory-fitted glass windows. The two fluorescent lights plus cab 'snake-light' provided ample illumination.

Catering and dining

With the water pump prematurely retired through ill health, I had to use the available worktop adjacent to the sink for the water porter, so was glad of the innovative cupboard door/expanding tabletop, on which to prepare and serve. To make this, the front panel of the kitchen cupboard door hinges up to form a stable table. (Access to the cupboard is still possible.) Still not enough worktop? The table can be extended further by pulling it away from the kitchen, and then



Kitchen cupboard door insert hinges up to form a stable table and then...



...opens out to double its surface area.

carthago malibu 28 on short wheelbase 2.5TDI VW T4

further still, by unfolding the hinged top. Even when fully extended, so that it could be reached by the cab seat occupants, the table remained firm. This was exceptionally well thought-out and executed.

A two-burner hob is standard, as is an Electrolux three-way electronic ignition fridge of 45-litre capacity. The pumped water supply to the sink, had it worked, would have been cold water only. Water is held in two 16-litre water porters that have secure storage in the boot. The advantages of this system over a tank are: the porters are easier to fill up, and to drain down; and because they are stored internally, they are less likely to freeze.

Beds

Two doubles are standard - a folding zed-bed arrangement in the roof, and a lower one from the converted settee. The upper bed looked good and solid and I thought that it might support the weight of a couple of adults. However, at just 1.78m (5ft 10in) long, presumably it's really only for junior motorcaravanners.

Having to go outside and open the nearside rear door in order to open or close the curtains was really annoying. Clearly no one has taken account of the intrusion of the (now compulsory) high-level third brake light.



Wardrobe was of a useful size and included three shelves.



Lower double bed is easily made by sliding the rear seat forward and then flattening it out to join the boot area cushion.

Storage

There is quite a bit of stowage space, and most of it is well thought out. Particularly worthy of mention are the lockable safe and

the large wardrobe with shelves.

On the downside, one of the catches on the gas cylinder locker door wouldn't operate at all, and there was no dedicated storage for a Porta Potti. It could be stored in the boot, but would be awkward to retrieve, especially at night.

The back seat and rear cushion can be removed to turn the malibu into a load lugger of really worthwhile volume. The load area then has two large access points, so loading and unloading should be easily accomplished.

According to the brochure, the MTPLM (gross vehicle weight in 'real money') should have been 2680kg, which would have allowed the malibu a stated healthy 610kg payload. However, the plate under the bonnet revealed our 'van to have a MTPLM of 2800kg, allowing, on paper, an even better 730kg payload. (If payload is critical, then figures should be confirmed with the importer.) Either way, a trip to the DIY superstore is unlikely to overload it, unless of course you fill it to the roof with paving slabs.

Construction and finish

The standard of construction of the cabinetwork looked high, and everything felt solid and robust. I've no evidence, but my guess is that it will last the lifetime of the vehicle without problem. It looked as though it had been built to last the course. Judging by the longevity of Volkswagen campers generally, that could be two or three decades, or more!



Gas locker will hold two 3.9kg butane cylinders or similar - more than most campers of this size.



Test 'van was equipped with Brandrup gutter awning rail.



I was surprised to discover that the malibu was equipped with barn-type rear doors, instead of the usual tailgate. Both doors had heated windows and wipers, but had neither washers nor a door check mechanism.



This is what the cab should have looked like. The wood trim hadn't been fitted to the test vehicle yet. See extra heater controls for rear heat exchanger (below radio).

Rear doors or tailgate?

Bit of a difference of opinion on this Chez Lloyd. I prefer to have a tailgate and thus the uninterrupted view rearwards when driving. Flora prefers barn doors, because she finds VW tailgates difficult to open and close. Kate would like to have barn doors, but asymmetrically divided like the ones on the VW Caddy, to gain the advantages of both. You can't have Kate's option, but the other two are both available. 'Yer pays yer money and makes yer choice!' All rear doors have heated rear window(s) and wiper(s), but only the tailgate has washers - don't ask me why.

Ridiculously, the barn doors have no method of securing them open, and are pretty heavy. You notice this when a gust of wind unexpectedly tries to slam them shut, with you bent over trying to retrieve something from the boot. Ouch!

Base vehicle

It's not perfect, but the T4 is still the best in its class. It just drives so much better than the

opposition. Early models did have a tendency towards front-end diving under heavy braking, but facelift models have vice-free roadholding.

Our test vehicle had the extra cost option of cab air-conditioning, and the standard rear heat exchanger with separate temperature control and fan distribution. These are both very desirable, but options on the test vehicle bumped the price up to nearly £35 000. (My guess is that the malibu won't be such a price-sensitive purchase as a budget coachbuilt.)

VW owners are usually enthusiasts and there is a large after-market for retrofit accessories, so you may wish to fit some of these items later. Residuals for VW campers (the price the dealer will pay you for it at trade-in time) are epic. Thus, although the VW is expensive to buy, it might well be better value in the long run than an initially cheaper alternative.

On the road

All carthago malibus arrive equipped with the 102bhp five-cylinder turbocharged and

intercooled diesel engine. In a flyweight slippery motorcaravan such as this, performance will always be sassy, and Autobahn cruising speeds indecently high. I didn't like it, I loved it. Even the revised position of the gear lever (only in 2.5TDI versions) didn't annoy me as much as previously. Perhaps the revision has itself been revised, or my left arm has grown. Appropriately weighted power steering is standard, and automatic transmission an extra-cost option.

All-round independent suspension endows the VW with a 'magic carpet' ride, soaking up road imperfections. The steering wheel is now smaller than previously, but there is still no tilt or reach adjustment. This would have been useful on the malibu as the seat swivel adds a few centimetres to the height of the seat squabs.

ABS brakes, EDL traction control and twin airbags are also present. Fortunately, I didn't need any of their services on this test.

Additional gizmos include electric front windows (nice to have but not essential) and electrically adjusted and heated mirrors (which make a positive contribution to safety). Finally, central locking and a VW immobiliser should make it less easy for the less than scrupulous.

A quality stereo radio/cassette provides entertainment on the move and on site. However, the key did have to be in the ignition to power it - annoying in a leisure vehicle.

I am not any kind of an engineer, but I did have serious doubts over the efficiency of the rear seat belts. The offside one jammed solid and refused to free itself throughout the week of the test. The nearside one has such a tortuous route through the adjacent wardrobe that it took an age to extend it, and then it wouldn't retract quickly enough, because it snagged - no good for restless children.

As a result, I didn't risk taking Kyle, our own junior motorcaravanner and muck-magnet for a ride. However, Kate (our adult daughter) sat in the back and pretended to be a passenger. She thought the seat to be comfortable, and felt that there would be a good view out for rear passengers.

The headrest section of the rear seat is designed to hinge backwards if the rear seat



I would have lined a plastic semi-circular window in the front of the roof canvas to let in light without any draught.

COMPETITION

'THE RECREATIONAL NOMAD'

We have six copies of David Berry's latest book to give away

David Berry has been a keen motorcaravanner for over a decade - and one whose other passion is writing. The result of this combination is a fistful of articles published in MMM and six books - three of which are motorcaravan-related. In 1995 there was *The Motorcaravan Handbook*, this was followed by *RV in UK* (a guide to the British use of an American motorhome). Now David has produced *The Recreational Nomad* (subtitled 'a motorcaravanning miscellany to inform, inspire and entertain'), which he describes as 'the motorcaravan book to end all motorcaravan books'.

The book is divided into four sections: *the basics* (essential advice for the newcomer and useful information for the more experienced);



Even when on his travels, David Berry just keeps on writing.

the ideas (around 150 suggestions to improve motorcaravanning enjoyment); *magazine articles* (the author's articles on a variety of motorcaravanning topics); and a *motorcaravan log* (extracts from the author's record of a decade of motorcaravanning enjoyment). David has chosen not to place the sections sequentially, but rather to lay them out (side by side) on A4 landscape pages. The aim is to make this a 'real browsers book'.

Our prizes

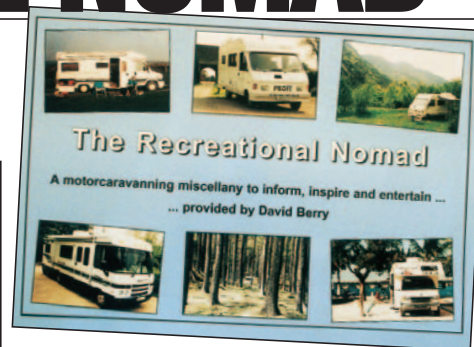
The Recreational Nomad (ISBN 0-952-7715-3-5, price £17.99) is an A4-sized paperback book with 300 pages and over 650 black and white photographs and drawings. We have six copies to be won in this month's competition.

Information

If you are not lucky enough to win a copy of David's book, it can be obtained from bookshops, or by sending a cheque for £17.99 (p&p free) to Keyham Books, Startley, Chippenham SN15 5HG (web site www.keyhambooks.co.uk).

How to enter

Answer the question printed below. Write this answer on the back of a postcard (or sealed envelope of a similar size), add your name and address (including postcode), and send to:



MMM NOMAD COMP
THE MALTINGS, MANOR LANE
BOURNE, Lincs PE10 9PH

to arrive by the closing date of 30th November 2001.

Question

How many motorcaravanning books has David Berry written?

Competition rules

1. Only one entry per household is permitted; multiple entries will be disqualified.
2. Employees and family members of any company associated with this competition are not eligible to enter.
3. The winners will be the senders of the first six correct entries drawn after the closing date.
4. The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.
5. The winners' names will be published in a future issue of MMM.
6. No alternative prize or cash in lieu will be offered.

carthago malibu 28 on short wheelbase 2.5TDI VW T4

is not occupied, to give a better view through for the driver. A faulty mechanism prevented it from doing so in the test vehicle. Combine this with the interference of the inner edges of the rear doors, and of the bottom of the across-the-back high-level cupboard, and there remained little through-view at all.

Furthermore, because the conversion is not handed for the UK, the nearside rear corner is home to the full-height cupboards, instead of the usual window. This is just where one wants to look when parallel parking. I am aware that any vehicle can be reversed using only the exterior mirrors (I have

to do this all the time when driving my own coachbuilt that is used as a daily car). However, owners of similar T4s (see MMM Motorcaravanners' Report March 2001) inform me that one of the principal reasons for buying a VW camper is the ease of parking and manoeuvrability. These factors have been compromised by not altering the conversion for the UK market.

Conclusion

VW street cred is awesome, even the 'obstructive adolescents' that live close by thought the malibu was 'croosh' (derived from

crucial, ie good)! An elevating roof camper also offers the owner so much, from family hack to load lugger, weekends and holidays away, as well as a support vehicle for hobbies, interests and pursuits. If you can't avoid it, you can even use it as a people carrier!

The malibu has some great ideas well executed, plus some ideas that need further development, especially the method of mounting those rear belts. The converters have endowed this camper with very solid-seeming cabinetwork, and appealing fabrics and finishes. It is a wonderfully civilised mode of travel. □

In brief

Base vehicle: VW T4 Transporter 2800kg SWB panel van (see text)

Engine type: Five-cylinder, 2.5-litre direct-injection turbocharged and intercooled diesel engine with exhaust gas catalytic converter

Output: 75kw (102bhp) @ 3500rpm

Gearbox and drive: Front-wheel drive, five-speed manual gearbox

Make and model: carthago malibu 28.1

Body type and construction: Steel panel van with rear-hinged full-length elevating roof with GRP colour co-ordinated cap, canvas sides
Conversion NCC approved: No

Electrical equipment: 230V hook-up, consumer unit with two MCBs and one RCD, leisure battery, 230V/12V charging, 12V circuit fuses

Lighting: Two fluorescent units, one snake-light

Cooking facilities: Cramer two-burner hob

Refrigerator: Electrolux 45-litre, electronic-ignition, 12V/230V/gas operation

Water heater: None fitted

Fresh water tank: None - instead two 16-litre water porters, with dedicated storage

Waste water tank: Underfloor, nearside, large aperture for cleaning

Space heating: Thermostatically-controlled Truma 2.55kW blown-air, with three-period seven-day timer control and digital readout

Rear restraints: Two three-point inertia reel seatbelts on crash-tested seat with high back and head restraints

Additional features: ABS, EDL, twin airbags, rear heat exchanger, electrically-adjustable and heated exterior mirrors, electric front windows, rear wipers, heated rear windows, central locking and immobiliser

Dimensions

Overall length: 4.79m (15ft 9in)

Overall width: 1.84m (6ft 0.5in) excluding mirrors

Overall height: 1.98m (6ft 6in)

Interior height: 2.44m (8ft 0in) maximum, 1.38m (4ft 6in) minimum

Bed dimensions: Lower bed 1.90m x 1.14m/1.11m (6ft 3in x 3ft 9in/3ft 8in), upper bed 1.78m x 1.13m (5ft 10in x 3ft 8.5in)

Max authorised weight: standard 2680kg, test vehicle 2800kg

Load capacity: standard 610kg, test vehicle 730kg

Price

Standard model: £ 31 935 on the road

As tested: £34 775 on the road

Optional extras

(starred items fitted to test vehicle)

Base vehicle options: Automatic transmission (£1574), Syncro four-wheel drive (£3983), stereo radio/cassette player and cab speakers (£370)*, cab air conditioning (£1100)*, cruise control (£185), metallic paint (£1175)*

Caravan options: Brandrup gutter awning channel (£195)*, three-bike rack (£265)

carthago malibu 28.1 kindly supplied for evaluation by:

Lowdham Leisureworld, Lowdham Road, Gunthorpe, Nottingham NG14 7ES.

Tel: 0115-966 3838. Fax: 0115-966 3124.