



WEST COAST WONDER

Volkswagen California SE on SWB 2.5TD VW T5

One of the latest products from Volkswagen breaks the mould of retro-converted commercial vehicles with what could be the ultimate VW camper



Words & pictures by Dave Hurrell

The Volkswagen camper is an icon, not only in motorcaravan circles, but out there in the wider world too, so the introduction of a right-hand drive camper to the UK that's top-toe made by Volkswagen is an event in its own right. Of course, VW has the advantage of producing the best quality, best driving motorcaravan base currently on the road, so the addition of a living area that's also Volkswagen-built is sure to make this T5 even more of a head-turner.

Transverse bench seat and furniture arranged front to rear along one side - in this case the nearside - greets you as you enter the side sliding door. The furniture bank consists of a front-to-back layout of kitchen, wardrobe and shelved cupboard, with the space behind the bench seats providing a sizeable 'boot'. This layout is the most popular camper design ever and it originates from the days when Volkswagens had their engines in the rear. These days it remains popular, providing maximum versatility in a short wheelbase camper as the rear seat can be equipped with belts and quickly flattens to become a double bed. Upfront, seat swivels allow both cab seats to turn and help create a kind of 'camping three-piece suite'. The stand-out feature of the California's take on the classic VW camper layout is the superb quality of the living area - both from a design and construction point of view.

The curved furniture is part-made from a composite alloy material that includes a honeycomb core to make it light, strong and presumably, very durable. Covered with a light wood-effect decor surface, the furniture looks bright and modern, and a whole world away from basic boxy-looking cabinetwork. The rest of the rear is trimmed in automotive fashion - looking superb with not a square millimetre of badly glued-on carpet in sight.

BASE CAMPER

Smartly dressed in alloys, the California looks good enough to eat. The short wheelbase T5's natural good looks are aided by a low-lie alloy-topped rising roof that blends superbly with the body. Only the (optional) rollout awning spoils sartorial elegance but, of course, this feature will be very useful on sunny campsites with little shade. Engineering is up to Volkswagen's usual high standard and almost indistinguishable from its cars - if Bob the Builder owned one he might feel a desire to change his name to Robert le Maçon, such is its sophistication.

All doors are easy to operate with no slamming required - the remote centrally double-locking system even pulls the sliding side door and tailgate the last few millimetres to 'power-latch' them closed. The test 'van was also fitted with an (optional) electrically-operated side sliding door, which - while slightly comical - opened and closed at the touch of a third button on the ignition key remote or a control on the dash. This was particularly useful in the rain as a press of the remote can have the door open by the time you reach the 'van, allowing you to leap straight into the dry.

Driver and passenger benefit from comfortable-if-firm cloth-covered seats and air-conditioning as standard, while the test 'van offered half-leather upholstery and two-zone climate control (with separate controls for rear seat passengers). Standard-form cab kit is very good with front and side airbags for driver and passenger, ABS, heated seats, and alarm - in addition to the expected electric windows and mirrors. The biggest lump of additional kit in the test vehicle cab was VW's satnav CD/radio system offering all the benefits of A-to-B navigation with voice prompts and a large



California comes complete with outdoor/indoor table and two strong-and-stylish chairs

AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £34,000 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Volkswagen Transporter T5
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of transverse bench sofa with kitchen and storage furniture along the nearside
- **ECONOMY:** 35.5 mpg

◁ Swivel cab seats help create lots of space in the rear.







TOP LEFT: The classic VW layout of bench seat and side furniture in the California is only compromised by the UK offside sliding door. Superbly designed seatbelts adorn the automotive standard rear bench seat.

TOP RIGHT: Volkswagen's T5 cab is just about the best in the business. Inset: Satellite navigation was one of the many extras fitted to the test 'van.

ABOVE LEFT: The table takes seconds to erect and works very well.

ABOVE MIDDLE: The top-loading fridge uses no gas and offers good capacity for a small 'van.

ABOVE RIGHT: Easy to make, the downstairs double bed proved to be on the firm side.

RIGHT: A tambour-doored hatchway gives access to the roof bed. Agility is an advantage here!

colour LCD display. Additional route information is also shown on a red-lit information panel in the instrument binnacle that shows doors open when stationary and MPG, average speed, range in miles etc. A CD slot is also present but, as I discovered, is there for the inputting of software (mapping) and not to play music. A six-disk CD auto-changer mounted under the driver's seat takes care of your favourite music, and this, and the radio, are both controlled via the system's big, easy-to-read display.

As an everyday vehicle, the ability to accommodate rear passengers safely and in comfort is paramount and the California comes up trumps again. The rear bench seat is superbly engineered and equipped with integral seatbelts. Automotive standard headrests are included too and these fold neatly away to improve rearward visibility when no passengers are aboard.

The California comes the closest to any motorcaravan I've tested to being a true multi-purpose vehicle, and the fact that the rear seat is able to slide all the way fore and aft makes it even more versatile.

With rear seat passengers on board, the seat can be closer to the cab - great for keeping an eye on the kids. In addition, it can be slid right back, right forward, or even be removed completely to leave a huge space - California becomes capacious load-lugger in seconds.

ROAD TRIP

On-road conversion noise was conspicuous by its absence, mainly due to the positive latches on every single lid or door in the rear.

In spite of being right-hand drive, the California is Continentally handed. That is to say that its rear side door is on the UK offside. This is of little consequence when loading up on the driveway, using car parks, or when camping, but parked at the roadside is a different matter. If you have rear seat passengers on board, street parking means they'll have to alight into the road rather than onto the kerb.

The 'van came to me direct from Volkswagen UK, resplendent with almost every optional extra and accessory that could be hung upon it. However, its most interesting extras proved to be the range-topping 174 horsepower motor with





4Motion four-wheel drive system, making sure all that power was delivered to the tarmac in a sensible fashion. Massive grip, with no tendency for front wheels to scrabble on take-off, was the result, with the added ability to show disdain when dealing with mud, snow and slush.

A very snowy car park in Ambleside in the Lakes this spring saw two-wheel drive cars sliding about like puppies on laminate flooring, while we drove calmly away. The California might tread with the tenacity of a Land Rover but - thankfully - once on tarmac terra firma, it performs as good as it looks. The 174bhp direct-injection diesel is a stormer - real grin-inducing stuff, with 'neck-snapping' acceleration. The only downside of this most powerful of diesels is a loss of tractability at low revs: this motor needs its turbo spinning to release maximum energy and the result is a rather narrow power band and a complete inability to 'slog' like an old-fashioned derv drinker. The six-speed gearbox is a joy to use and cab ergonomics are spot on with an adjustable steering column. Only the T5's usual cab seat height adjustment has been sacrificed - here to allow the proper operation of the swivels. Whether revelling in the ability to explore narrow streets and lanes, or tooling down the autoroute at 120kph, the California is superb. Sixth gear allows relaxed high-speed cruising and the five other ratios are perfectly spaced.

THE CALIFORNIA LOUNGE AND DINER

Simply swivelling the cab seats opens up the main living area and provides a lounge for four with that three-piece suite set-up putting many a larger motorhome to shame. There's plenty of floor space too, enough, in fact, to stretch out and get really comfortable. The glass top of the adjacent kitchen unit provide a buffet area from which to serve drinks and nibbles to friends (and would probably make a good perch for a TV as it's at a good height for viewing).

Mealtimes are taken care of in typically efficient fashion by a table, which is permanently attached to a rail on the front edge of the kitchen unit. This hangs vertically and stows latched in place below the fridge. When needed it simply slides along and is hinged up to allow a drop-down leg to support it. This unit is a really good example of the California's design-led approach as there's no lugging of legs and table tops from lockers to provide an eating surface.

CALIFORNIAN CUISINE

The kitchen is first in line, directly to the rear of the passenger seat. Twin, hinged glass lids swing up to reveal a sink, hob and the interior of a top-loading fridge. The hob's two burners are the only source of cooking heat available as there's no grill or oven on offer, but, with one or two gadgets (stove-top toaster, griddle pan etc) it should be possible to produce satisfying meals. Either that or you can always use the lack as an excuse to eat out! The cooker may be modest but it forms one half of a combination with the sink that's neat, easy to keep clean, and solves the problem of draining - as water from wet dishes stacked on the hob runs straight into the sink.

The Waeco fridge runs on 12 volts only, thus saving gas - and has plenty of space for a few days worth of fresh food and drink. There's also a sliding basket in here to help separate contents and prevent the need to do too much 'digging' when you need to get at things. Food preparation is best done in advance of the cooking process as the hinged glass lids over cooker and fridge form the only formal work surface.

I LIKED

- Stylish good looks
- High standards of design and construction
- Safety conscious base vehicle
- Powerful engine
- Slick, six-speed gearbox
- Superb rear travel seats
- Excellent range of options
- Power-latch doors
- Super diesel-fired heating system
- Clever central control panel
- Versatile sliding rear seat system
- Excellent levels of storage
- Good roof bed
- Ever-ready dining table
- Neatly stowed outdoor table and chairs
- Inboard water tanks

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A softer downstairs bed
- An included toilet
- A more easy-to-use windscreen blackout system

I DISLIKED

- Side-sliding door on UK offside

WEST COAST WASHING

If a luxury bathroom in your motorhome is a priority then you'll find the California wanting, and indeed full-facility campsites will be the best choice for California accommodation. Much like those nineteenth-century terraces in old black-and-white documentaries, it's a cold water only sink and the kettle that'll have to meet your needs if you plan to wash aboard (although there's obviously no room for the tin bath in front of the fire!). In addition to this, and unlike many other campers, there's no mini Porta Potti toilet in a dedicated locker, so if night-time tinkle facilities are a priority then around fifty quid will see you the owner of a portable loo that can be carried in the rear and deployed at night.

CAMPER BEDS

This undeniably small motorcaravan still offers very convincing four-berth accommodation, thanks, in no small part, to its upstairs double bed. Once the roof is raised, access is via a sliding tambour-style hatch above the cab. Although a certain amount of agility is required to gain this berth, once you're upstairs you find a big (but narrowish) bed, with plenty of headroom and excellent ventilation - thanks to large, flyscreen-equipped zip-open panels on each side. There's a stalk reading lamp too, and a thin-but-comfortable mattress that should ensure a good night's rest. Three-season use is probably possible and, thanks to those vents, summer sleeping shouldn't see you too sweaty.

Downstairs, making the bed is simply a case of pulling the rear seat forward on its runners and flattening it after folding down the headrests. The resultant berth is flat and long but a tad narrow and a bit on the firm side (at the rear this firmness is thanks to the thin parcel shelf mattress section, and towards the front it's due to the cushions' need to do double duty as a passenger seat). That said, we slept well, although, on waking with aches in various places, I decided that a mattress overlay would

be on my list of accessories to purchase shortly after I'd bought my California.

Blackout is courtesy of some very neat blinds to side windows and tailgate, with clever spring-to-shape panels for the cab side windows supplied in a neat, zipped bag. The blackout panel for the windscreen, however, is less successful, being an unhappy marriage of tent-style glass fibre poles and cloth - which is tricky to assemble and less than effective once in place. I'd get some Silver Screens pronto.

STORAGE

Another reason for the classic Volkswagen layout's enduring popularity is the generous amount of storage space it offers in so small a motorcaravan. This is true of the California. The boot behind the rear seat is the space where once lurked the flat four motor that made Volkswagen famous. Now it provides a big area for the storage of bulky kit - indeed folding bikes, among other things, should slot in a treat. The parcel shelf above (which forms the aft end of the bed) offers

a great place to store bedding, and hinges up to improve access. Of course, once the tailgate is closed the boot area (and its contents) are concealed from prying eyes.

The parcel shelf can also be removed and, once this is achieved and the bench seat slid forward, it creates a generous and supremely useful load area that'll show no fear when faced with flat-pack furniture or the best your local garden centre can throw at it. Directly above this area is a transverse, drop-down, tray-style locker that's best used for clothes or other lightweight items as we found it needed a bit of a heave to close.

In the kitchen there's a couple of capacious, shelved cupboards with super-stylish sliding doors - one hiding a cutlery drawer. To the rear of these, the wardrobe features twin tambour-and-hinged doors (giving access to a space big enough to hang jackets and fleeces). Behind this, another corner cupboard provides shelves and the opportunity to store more folded clothing. This space is most easily got at through the tailgate during the day, but when the bed is deployed you can reach it easily, making it convenient to extract clean clothes from here in the morning.

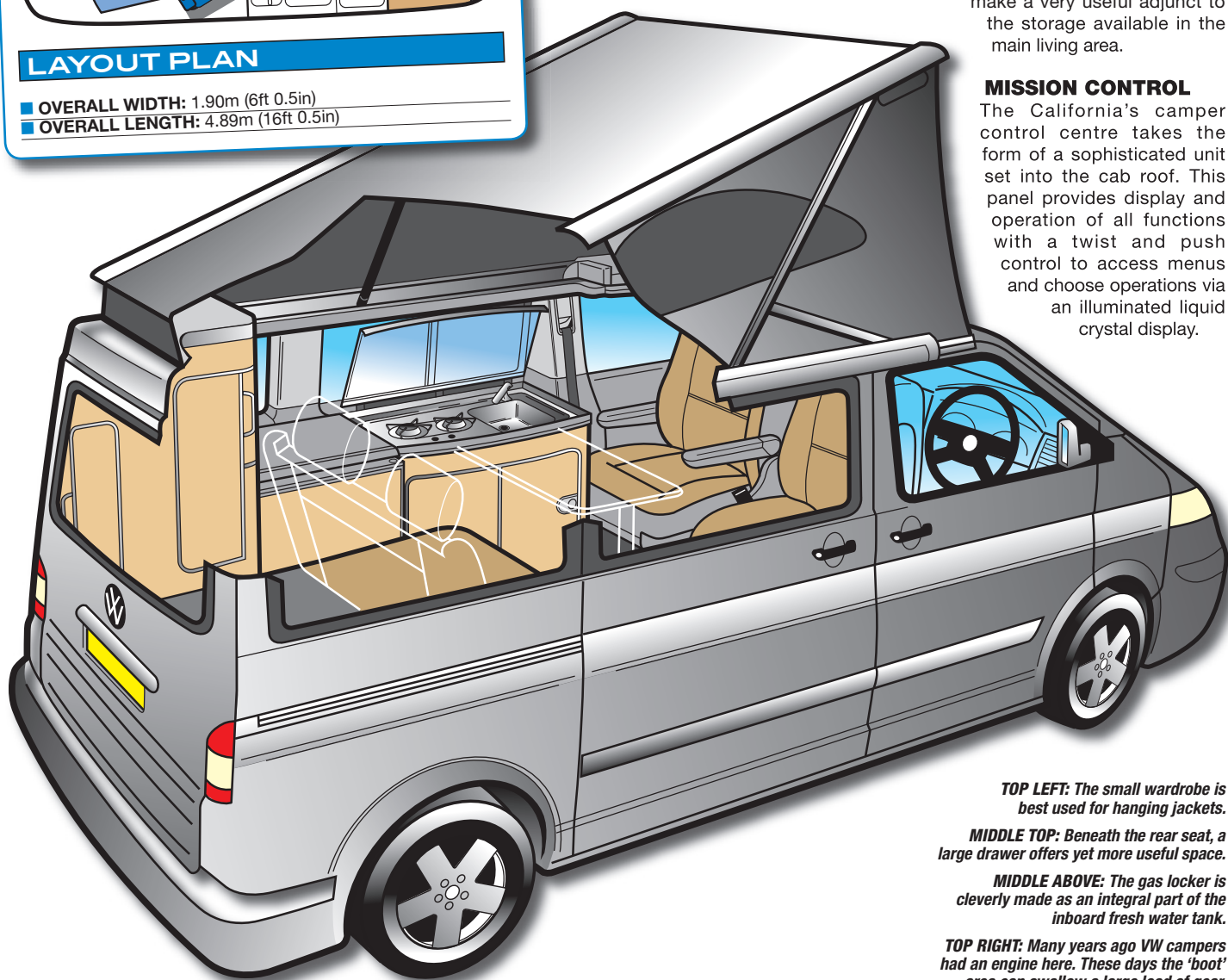
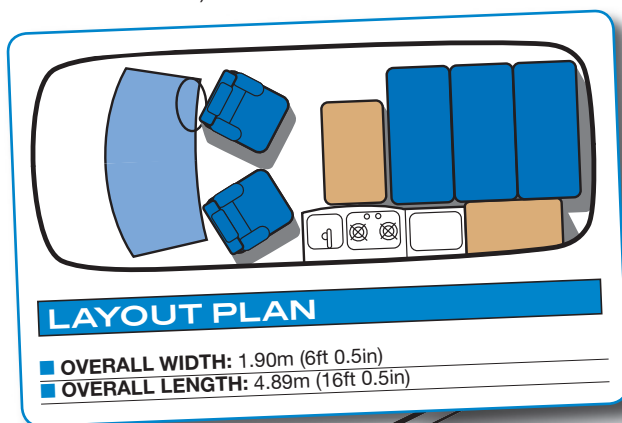
The rear bench seat hides a big slide-out drawer, where I'd store stuff such as shoes and books.



One of the big plus points of the T5's design from a motorcaravanning point of view is the presence of big two-shelf door pockets in the cab. These are easy to get at when pitched and make a very useful adjunct to the storage available in the main living area.

MISSION CONTROL

The California's camper control centre takes the form of a sophisticated unit set into the cab roof. This panel provides display and operation of all functions with a twist and push control to access menus and choose operations via an illuminated liquid crystal display.



TOP LEFT: The small wardrobe is best used for hanging jackets.

MIDDLE TOP: Beneath the rear seat, a large drawer offers yet more useful space.

MIDDLE ABOVE: The gas locker is cleverly made as an integral part of the inboard fresh water tank.

TOP RIGHT: Many years ago VW campers had an engine here. These days the 'boot' area can swallow a large load of gear.



The first job once pitched is to turn on the panel, twist the knob to select the pop-up roof menu, select the correct option and simply push the control again to raise the roof. The power-assisted fabric-sided pop-top rises thanks to an electro-hydraulic system that works with the ignition on and hums away to fully erect the roof in seconds. Once this is done the roof bed base can be pushed up out of harm's way on its gas struts to leave good standing headroom above the main living area. Aside from the almost zero effort required to get the roof up, there are also no fiddly catches or straps to release - just push the button and hold until full extension is reached. Lowering the top is simply a matter of selecting the correct menu option and pushing the button again, although a two-tone siren with visual reminder alarm to make sure you have everything correct for landing (a window open to relieve internal pressure, the roof bed down, no kids left upstairs etc) is a tad disconcerting 'till you get used to it.

The cleverest part of the roof's mechanism is also one of its simplest, as plastic strips are sewn in to sides and end of the fabric to ensure that material folds in as the top descends - there should be no snagged canvas here. Three-season camping will be the preferred option with the top popped as thin fabric and generous permanent ventilation means overall insulation values will be low. That said, we spent time camping in a chilly spring Lake District and managed to stay warm, even with the roof up. However, winter camping would see me sacrifice headroom for warmth.

The other big feature of the California's kit list is the heating system. Diesel-fired (from the vehicle's tank), temperature-controlled, and programmable from the panel, it helps make this 'van usable all year round. During our tenure the heating system worked superbly well. The inclusion of inboard fresh and waste water tanks also means that even in cold weather plumbing should remain perfectly usable too. The gas locker is notable for its design rather than capacity as it holds just one 2.7kg Campingaz cylinder. The locker is in the form of a plastic 'bin' (into which the cylinder is slid) moulded as part of the fresh water tank in the base of the rear nearside cupboards; it has a neat screw-in lid.

Bringing a grin to my gnarled old features (all good motorcaravans do this at least once during a test) was the matching outdoor table and two chairs that come as standard. The chairs stow neatly in a zipped compartment in the tailgate, the table equally neatly inside the side

sliding door. The table can also be used inside, when a larger eating surface is needed.

CONCLUSION

Is this the ultimate T5 camper? I think it comes whisker close.

VW has created the most integrated motorcaravan I've ever tested - and made it a genuine MPV.

The superb driving, safety conscious T5,

complete with its excellent travel seats in the rear, makes the California a viable everyday vehicle and family car. Indeed, only the UK offside location of the side sliding door threatens its title.

As a weekend 'van it's just great, and you'll probably enjoy the drive to and from your destination as much as you will the camping. Add a drive-away awning, and longer (fair weather) holidays could become perfectly possible.

This 'van ain't cheap (especially the extras-laden test version), but it is superbly designed and constructed.

The California is, I hope, the beginning of a new success story for an enduring motorcaravanning icon. □



Slide the bench seat right forward and camper becomes load lugger.

MMM LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

Rising roof camper

PRICE

- From: £34,000 OTR.
- As tested: £43,019 OTR

BASICS

- Vehicle: Volkswagen Transporter T5
- Berths: 4
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (including driver)
- Warranty: 3 years base vehicle and conversion, 12 years body perforation

CONSTRUCTION

Short wheelbase steel-bodied window van with rear-hinged fabric-sided rising roof, top-hinged tailgate, sliding caravan entrance on the UK offside

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- Length: 4.89m (16ft 0.5in)*
- Width: 1.90m (6ft 3in)*
- Height: 1.99m (6ft 6.5in)*
- Wheelbase: 3.00m (9ft 10in)*
- Rear overhang: 996mm (3ft 3in)*
- Max authorised weight: 3000kg*
- Payload: 438kg* (including allowances for driver and full fuel tank)

INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of transverse bench sofa with kitchen and storage furniture along the nearside

- Insulation: Roof 10mm, floor n/a, walls n/a
- Interior height: Roof raised 2.13m (7ft 0in), roof lowered 1.23m (4ft 0.5in)

THE VEHICLE

- Engine: 2.5-litre turbo-diesel producing 128kW (174bhp) @ 3500rpm
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, four-wheel drive
- Fuel consumption: 35.5mpg overall
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round
- Suspension: All-round independent
- Features: ABS, remote-operated central locking, alarm system, electric (folding) mirrors and windows, auto open/close sliding side door, traction control, differential



lock, driver/passenger/side airbags, heated cab seats, 17-inch alloy wheels, climate control with front/rear zones, CD/radio/satellite navigation system with six-disk auto-changer, headlamp height adjustment, lockable glove compartment, driver and passenger twin door bins, height-adjustable top seatbelt mounts, reversing sensors

LOUNGING & DINING

Swivelling cab seats and forward-facing bench settee in the classic VW layout provide comfortable lounging for four. Rail-mounted, sliding, fold-up table attached to kitchen unit serves lounge seating. Dining for four with alternative (supplied) table in place

KITCHEN

Side kitchen unit with twin, hinged glass lids over sink, hob and fridge, two sliding door shelved cupboards

- Sink: Stainless steel sink as part of combination with hob, folding cold water mixer tap
- Cooker: Cramer two-burner hob as above with push-button ignition
- Fridge: Waeco top-loading 12V compressor type. Capacity 42 litres

WASHROOM

No washroom or toilet

BEDS

Downstairs double (rear settee)

- Length: 2.00m (6ft 6.5in)
- Width: 1.14m (3ft 9in)

Upstairs double (pull-down roof bed)

- Length: 2.00m (6ft 6.5in)
- Width: 1.20m (3ft 11in)
- Headroom: 870mm (max)

STORAGE

Large drawer beneath settee; small wardrobe with hinged/tambour doors, side-to-side

hanging rail and internal mirror; rear corner shelved cupboard; rear 'boot' area with hinge-up parcel shelf; drop-down transverse locker above

LIFE SUPPORT

- Fresh water: Inboard. Capacity 30 litres (6.6 gallons)
- Waste water: Inboard. Capacity 30 litres (6.6 gallons)
- Water heater: None fitted
- Space heater: Diesel-fired, thermostatic blown-air with manual/auto operation
- Leisure battery: 2 x 72 amp hr
- Gas: Capacity 1 x 2.7kg cylinder
- Lighting: Two filament lamps above side sliding door, two filament lamps and one fluorescent light above kitchen, adjustable stalk light in rising roof
- Sockets: 230V - one (at end of kitchen unit), 12V - three (at end of kitchen unit, next to rear seat, and in cab)
- Control panel: Mounted above cab, liquid crystal display, monitors/operates all caravan functions
- Blinds/curtains: Pull-down blinds to rear side windows, pull-up to tailgate. Spring-to-shape cab side window pads, sectional pole-supported curtain to windscreen
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle:

- Base vehicle: Upgrade to 174bhp with 4Motion all-wheel drive (£3900), metallic paint (£511), 17-inch alloy wheels (£440), CD changer (£270), mud flaps (£94), parking sensors (from £193), satellite navigation (£1703), climate control air-conditioning (£575)
 - Conversion: Roll-out awning (£329), electrically-operated side sliding door (£317), Alcantara/leather upholstery (£687)
- Other options:
- Base vehicle: Upgrade to 174bhp engine (£1600), upgrade to 174bhp engine with Tiptronic auto trans (£3100), cruise control (£170), towbar (£417), rain sensor and auto-dimming rear-view mirror (£88), headlamp washers (£141), charcoal filter for ventilation system (£17)
 - Conversion: Additional single passenger seat for rear (£287)

E&OE

WE STAYED AT

The Camping and Caravanning Club site, Crow Park Road, Keswick, Cumbria CA12 5EP (telephone: 01768 772392; web site: www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Volkswagen UK, Yeomans Drive, Blakelands, Milton Keynes MK14 5AN (telephone: 0800 717131; web site: www.volkswagen-vans.co.uk/california). More information can also be obtained from Bilbo's, Concept Multi-Car, Deepcar, Murvi and Torbay. See MMM Directory Motorcaravans for contact details.

