

TROOPER ON PARADE

Auto-Sleeper Trooper on SWB 1.9 TDI Volkswagen T5

Di Johnson looks at Auto-Sleepers' makeover of an established favourite



Fond memories of fun-filled weeks in France, in an Auto-Sleeper Trident, came flooding back as we drove off in Auto-Sleepers' new take on its tried and tested design - the Trooper. This 'van is first cousin to the Trident but differs in that it is equipped with a solid-sided rising roof (rather than a high top). Based on Volkswagen's new T5, which is the recent replacement for the massively popular T4, the Trooper has been transformed with modern colours, materials and fabrics.

We drove to Willersey, near Broadway in Worcestershire, to collect the 'van from Auto-Sleepers' factory. I expected the coldly efficient service of a large organisation. What I received was warm, friendly and helpful service from Charles Trevelyan and his staff. The place still has the feel of a family-run business. Charles said: "We try to take into account the opinions of women when designing our 'vans. This is where our Auto-Sleeper Owners' Club, with its 5000 membership, comes in handy for getting feedback."

As a female of the species it's good to hear my opinions are valued. A note of pride entered his voice when he explained about the new insulation (Thinsulate) that they are now using in their 'vans. "All part of the ongoing improvements that we



It's only when you lift the lid that the Trooper identifies itself as a motorcaravan.

make to our motorcaravans", was his comment.

A couple contemplating buying a large car might like to have a serious look at the Trooper as a possible alternative. Its footprint is the same as a family estate car but it carries a toilet, cooker, fridge and, most important of all, the rear seat converts into a double bed. The comfortable rear

bench seat carries two inertia-reel seat belts. A couple with young children would find that, with the help of the optional roof bed, ladder and safety net, they could pop the kids upstairs for the night.

Patently there is limited storage in something of this size. However, with rigorous care about



The T5 cab: Volkswagen is being very kind to drivers.

Extra space for the driver has been achieved by chamfering the cabinet behind the driver's seat. ▷



One of two levers that holds the roof down.



Popping the windowed sides into place is child's play.

what is really needed for holidays and weekends, two could holiday in comfort. This model can easily be used as everyday transport; the steering is positive and precise, it's easy to manoeuvre, and the gearbox is a delight. Some of my fellow lady drivers say that they are nervous of driving a motorcaravan. They would be pleasantly surprised if they got behind the wheel of the T5. I urge you to give one a test drive.

TROOPER TRANSFORMED?

Has Auto-Sleepers' design team improved upon this classic model? That's what I was impatient to find out. The company is on to a winner with the base vehicle. The T4 was car-like to drive, but the T5 takes this a step further. One difficulty that my husband Peter met with, in the old Trident, was that he found it uncomfortable to drive for any distance. This was because the cabinets behind the driver's seat were too close. He could not get his seat back far enough. Would they have tackled this limitation and the, now rather dated, look?

Hmm, yes. Very smart! Nothing 'white box' about this 'van. It looks more Notting Hill than Tooting. More city apartment than country cottage. It's been modernised without losing the Auto-Sleepers' character. The designers have made a good start by choosing an attractive colour for the exterior paintwork on the demonstration model. I'd call it metallic champagne (VW calls it 'wheat beige'). I thought it both attractive and practical. Pale silver and gold metallic paints are good tempered; they don't show the dirt. A smart set of wheels, literally,

and visible, but discreet, graphics make this 'van one that most would be proud of. The graphics give the Trooper the appearance of sporting a moustache. Quite fitting, given the name.

Two details that could be improved upon are the appearance, from the outside, of the silvered concertina blinds and the fridge ventilators. The cabinets are taller than the windows, with the result that the blinds cannot be lowered sufficiently to place them out of view. Perhaps they could be tidied up by blanking the glass to cabinet level, which is already the case on the rear window. I'm sure that the white plastic ventilator covers could be sprayed (with the right paint application technique) to closely match the body.

It's nice to see things like a heated rear window, rear wiper, colour-coded bumpers and door mirrors, all included as standard. Great! That's what I like, lots of bells and whistles. They even include armrests, electric windows, electrically adjustable heated mirrors and central locking. All of which certainly brings a smile to my face. Yes, I know that they can go wrong, but I'll worry about that when it happens. A nice little touch was the small Union Flag and 'Made in Great Britain' badge above the tailgate. Nothing too ostentatious, you understand?

THE COCKPIT

Volkswagen is being kind to drivers. I found driving the new T5 an enjoyable experience. Nope, that's an understatement, I loved it. When you look at what some folk pay for a four-wheel drive MPV it puzzles me. For the same money

they could own one of these. Mad!

VW has supplied the van with ABS (anti-lock braking system), EDL (electronic differential lock), and traction control (for improved road holding) - all very reassuring. And is it just a woman thing? Lots of different places for storing things in the cab is my ideal. Again, this vehicle is well equipped to please me. The list is a long one.

Let's start from the top. In the roof is a little open-fronted box. There's limited storage in the glove box, a cargo net is strung under the dash, an upper and lower storage area in the door and, attached to the outside edge of the seat plinths, is another deep-ish box. A pullout section in the dashboard contains two mug supports with a little box above, and the means to light a cigarette. On the top of the fairly flat dash is an inset, sectioned tray - useful for cards, coins, mobile phone and...lipstick. Whew!

The backs of the front seats are supplied with two generous deep pockets, which will accept even the largest road atlas. Sadly, none of the guys designing motorcaravans ever needs to apply their lipstick or straighten their hair. So, no vanity mirrors are provided on the sun visors. Mirrors are difficult items to retrofit; any suggestions as to how to attach one safely would be most welcome.

When it was my husband's turn to drive, he noticed a great improvement on the old design. The cooker cabinet has been re-jigged to take account of the taller driver, but there was still room to store the little table top behind the seat. The height-adjustable front seats (with lumbar support) and movable steering wheel result in



Interior décor is more city apartment than country cottage. Just like a family car the Trooper can carry two safely belted passengers in the back.

high comfort levels.

Electrically adjusting mirrors are particularly useful if you are changing drivers all the time. And, as a front seat passenger, it made a welcome change to be able to reach the floor.

MAKING CAMP

When you stop, it's time to raise the roof. Release the turnbuckles on the levers at the back and front. Pull the levers down and lift the roof. Push the sides into place, push up four bolts to anchor them, and that's it. Lowering involves reversing the procedure, but taking care to push the mattress sections above your head into the right place to seat the roof correctly. The front lever was more difficult than the back. Perhaps it is a question of adjustment. Strangely, I found this to be a much easier operation than my husband, something to do with my shorter height perhaps. I think we would leave the upper bed sections at home unless we were intending to sleep some children up there. The smoke alarm location was

not ideal but it could easily be repositioned, and still remain effective.

INSPECTING THE BILLET

Opening the big sliding door on the Trooper reveals a transformation in style. Instead of the nice old wooden doors (that stained when water droplets fell on them) and flowery upholstery, we now have a tasty blend of coffee, cream and chocolate with chromium and mahogany added to the mix.

The Belgian upholstery fabric on the seats, we both agreed, is a big improvement. Much brighter and more up-to-date. The cabinet door fronts are a pleasing matt coffee colour with chromium fittings (the brass finish on the old doorknobs used to wear off, which soon made them look scruffy). The speckled wheat-coloured carpet is removable. Nice one, Auto-Sleepers. In winter it's good to have carpet, but in summer I prefer to remove it.

In the Trooper the rear seat becomes a double

bed, with the facilities lying along the offside. On the top of the cupboards, and set in mahogany-styled worktop are, starting from behind the driver, a two-burner Smev hob and grill (both with piezo ignition) over a Dometic 60-litre fridge. The grill is embellished with a light. Cor! Next comes a good-sized stainless steel sink with mixer tap, then a stainless steel draining area (separately drained) with inset removable wooden chopping board. These all have heat-resistant glass tops.

It's here that I feel Auto-Sleepers has made a retrograde step. I know glass tops are fashionable, but a proper worktop surface is much nicer than glass to prepare food on and to keep clean. Beneath the sink is a clever pullout cutlery container with more storage beside it. This container pulls out on rails from the limited space under the sink. It produced most of the rattling we heard as we drove along (a tea towel solved the problem). Ordinary drawers can leave you struggling because you can't pull them far enough out to remove the cutlery easily. This



A smart two-burner Smev hob with grill under, both with piezo electronic ignition.



The Trooper boasts a 60-litre fridge and attractive removable wheat-coloured carpet.



A good-sized sink and separately drained area make this a practical kitchen for a small 'van.



How's this for 'going all modern'? Lovely white, platinum-rimmed crockery is supplied. The jug is not included.

device solves the problem.

Underneath is the storage cupboard for Auto-Sleepers' famous crockery. But what's this? Wow! The crockery complements the new styling. Very swish! Pure white china with platinum-coloured rims. Our rustic set, in the old Trident, was put away until such time as we sold the 'van. But this crockery is so stylish I would delight in using it and, maybe, even try to acquire an extra set to allow for breakages.

The method used to anchor the crockery (enough for four) in its plastic recesses is amusing to say the least. Little nylon straps have to be threaded through slots in the nethermost depths of the cupboard and then fed back on themselves, with the plates in situ, then secured with Velcro. Peter and I both struggled with this system. There must be a better way.

Under the draining area is the main cupboard. This used to be top-hinged, which Peter changed to a drop-down side in our Trident. I'm glad to see that this has now been adopted in the Trooper. However, I was surprised to see no shelves inside, though that could have its advantages for storing taller articles.

THE MESS

Auto-Sleepers provides two tables for this 'van. Really rather generous. It means that you can be adaptable in your eating arrangements. The large table mounts on a central pole, which fits into a socket in the floor. This will allow you to sit side by side on the rear seat to dine. With it swivelled slightly you can squeeze in past the set table to join your partner for a cosy meal. Or, more practically, you can put the other, smaller pedestal table (on a cranked arm) in front of the turned passenger seat, giving both diners more room.

The larger tabletop and both legs are kept in a large drawer that pulls forward from under the rear seat. This drawer is so useful that, in our Trident we found other places to store tabletops



The large table can be used for side-by-side dining. and legs and used the resulting space for clothes.

THE DORMITORY

At night it's the work of moments to make up the bed. Underneath the rear seat is a lever. Push this lever to one side and pull forwards. That's it, the bed awaits its bedding. Equally, it was just as easy to put away.

A problem we find with this layout is the lack of width across the bed. Our solution to this was to sleep head to toe. "Quiet, you lot at the back." No joking, it works. Peter has broad shoulders, but we find there's loads of room if we sleep this way. If

you want a small van conversion with a bed of greater width, your storage potential will be limited. You pays your money and takes your choice.

When the bed is stowed there is room for bedding behind the backrest of the rear seat. A shelf lies at the top of this space, held in place with Velcro, making it easy to remove if you need to pile things high. If you lift the tailgate you will find more space under the seat. We found the insulated screens for the front windscreen were stored there. Screens may be very efficient at keeping the cold at bay, but curtains take up less room in a small van.



The pull-out drawer under the bench seat is home to the large tabletop and its leg.



The optional roof bed is plenty big enough for a couple of children.

WHERE TO STOW YOUR KIT

If you want to take your best evening frock or jacket, modern fabrics being crease-proof, you can hang them in the small wardrobe. The big access door to the wardrobe is via the back, though there is a small, posh-looking, sliding door available to reach in for things from the interior. The silvered slatted door looks great. The tracking, however, which intrudes unnecessarily into the wardrobe, puzzles me. By its very nature this sort of door will follow any shaped tracking; therefore why cannot the track run along the side of the wardrobe and not intrude?

Below the wardrobe lies the gas locker, which the owner's manual says will accept 4.5kg plus 2.75kg butane gas cylinders. However, the vehicle we tested came with a 4.5kg butane and a 3.9kg propane cylinder. When we tried to remove one of the gas containers to look at the locker, we found that the tolerance for removing the cylinder was very tight. The door was so narrow that flakes of paint were coming off the cylinders (Auto-Sleepers says that this problem has now been addressed). My hands are not very big, but I found that reaching in to isolate the gas was tricky. However, there seemed to be plenty of room for some tools alongside the gas, and the lifting tailgate will keep your head dry whilst you are changing cylinders. An advantage not to be taken lightly in good old damp Britain.

ABLUTIONS

If taking a shower every day is a must for you, then you will have to stay on campsites, as the Trooper does not run to one of these. However, if wild camping on Scottish islands appeals then there is, after all, a kitchen sink in the Trooper, and you will certainly carry a kettle. The wipe-clean finish in the kitchen is a great improvement on the old timber doors, especially if you are going to use the kitchen as a bathroom. It is impossible to keep water splashes off the cabinets.

Getting onto baser things. We managed long holidays using the little, 'pull out from a cupboard' toilet. You get used to it. It hides in the lowest cupboard (next to the cupboard housing the gas isolation taps). If you are squeamish about such matters, ask your partner to go for a walk whilst you perform. I didn't even bother to pull the curtains when camping in remote areas, as no one could see what I was sitting on. If you see someone sitting in the middle of a Trident or Trooper, you might guess what they're up to! Somewhere to empty your toilet will have to be found after a short stay, as the waste capacity of the toilet is necessarily small.

HEATING THE TROOPS

Eberspächer's D2 Airtronic thermostatically controlled blown-air space heater is fitted, which is fuelled by diesel from the 'van's tank. This has the huge advantage of conserving gas, so you won't be changing cylinders so often. It is a little noisier than the equivalent gas heater and you do



The rear seat converts into a bed in one move.



The slatted silver door enables quick access to the wardrobe. Strangely, the track for the slatted wardrobe door intruded into the interior space, when it could easily have been channelled along the side.



The entrance to the gas locker was barely wide enough to get a cylinder out. Auto-Sleepers, I was told, has addressed this problem.

get a little burnt diesel smell if you are standing outside on start-up. These small inconveniences are worth putting up with for the benefits they bring. The unit is installed under the floor, thereby

saving space in the 'van. An abundance of 'built-in' ventilation in the Trooper roof will make the Eberspächer a necessity for cool evenings.

The Trooper has an external fresh water tank



Lift the tailgate to reveal a spacious boot, with the gas locker to the right.



The little toilet lies alongside the cupboard that carries the gas isolation valves.



◀ *The leisure battery can be found under the driver's seat.*

of 66-litre capacity, and a 37-litre external waste water tank. The control panel, situated over the sink, incorporates fresh water level and battery level indicators. The 68 amp hr leisure battery resides under the driver's seat.

Above the sink are situated the 230V and 12V sockets, and a TV aerial socket. I can hear all the health and safety bods chorusing their disapproval, but they will have to be reasonable and have faith in the safety trip device. It's a small 'van. All motorcaravan users must always be very

careful when using mains power within reach of water.

DOES THE TROOPER PASS MUSTER?

Has Auto-Sleepers made positive improvements on what was already a great little 'van'? You bet it has. The attractive exterior styling, updated décor, and all the new electronic bells and whistles, have made it an even more enjoyable motorcaravan. The limited storage will put some off, but with the lid down it's almost a car. Raise the roof, however, and you have a great little motorcaravan for those who travel light. □



IN BRIEF

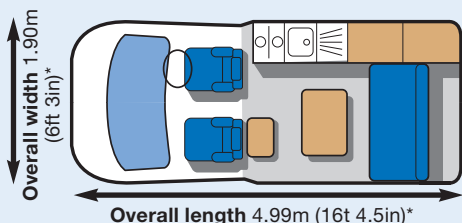
- **Base vehicle:** Volkswagen T5 Transporter SWB panel van
- **Engine type:** 1.9-litre TDI PD turbocharged and intercooled four-cylinder diesel, direct injection
- **Output:** 62.5kW (84bhp) @ 3500rpm
- **Gearbox and drive:** Five-speed manual gearbox. Fascia-mounted gear lever, front-wheel drive
- **Make and model:** Auto-Sleeper Trooper
- **Body type and construction:** Steel panel van with solid-sided rising roof
- **Conversion NCC badged as EN1646 compliant:** Yes
- **Electrical equipment:** 230V hook-up, Sargent PSU 2005 power unit with 12V charger, 68 amp hr leisure battery. One 230V socket, one 12V and TV aerial socket
- **Lighting:** Three individually-switched 12V fluorescent fittings, courtesy entrance step light
- **Cooking facilities:** Smev 8002 two-burner hob and grill with piezo ignition
- **Refrigerator:** Dometic RM4213S three-way, tilt-tolerant, with freezer compartment, capacity 60 litres
- **Water heater:** None fitted
- **Space heater:** Eberspächer Airtronic D2, diesel-fuelled
- **Fresh water tank:** 66 litres (14.5 gallons),

- underslung
- **Waste water tank:** 37 litres (8.1 gallons), underslung
- **Gas locker capacity:** Two 4.5kg /3.9kg cylinders (see text)
- **Rear restraints:** Two three-point inertia reel seat belts
- **Additional features:** Electrically-operated cab windows and door mirrors, central locking, fire extinguisher, smoke alarm, swivelling passenger seat, height-adjustable front seats with armrests, colour-coded bumpers and door mirrors

DIMENSIONS

(*data supplied by manufacturer)

- **Overall length:** 4.99m (16ft 4.5in)*
- **Overall width:** 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- **Overall height:** 2.07m (6ft 8in) roof lowered*
- **Interior height:** 1.97m (6ft 5.5in) roof raised
- **Bed dimensions:** Main bed 1.91m x 1.12m (6ft



- 3in x 3ft 8in), roof bed 1.56m x 1.19m (5ft 2in x 3ft 11in)*
- **Max authorised weight:** 3000kg*
- **Load capacity:** 671kg*

PRICE (all prices include VAT)

- **Standard model:** £31,387
- **As tested:** £31,979 (see options below)
- **Warranty:** Base vehicle 3 years/100,000 miles, conversion 2 years

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

(* fitted to test vehicle)

- **Base vehicle options:** 1.9TDI - 104bhp (£823), 2.5TDI - 130bhp (£1939), 2.5TDI - 174bhp (£3584). Alloy wheels (£458) *, pearlescent metallic paintwork (£171)
- **Caravan options:** Pull-out roof bed with access ladder and safety net (£134)*, upholstery change (£141)

Vehicle kindly supplied for evaluation by:

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