

FRIENDS REUNITED

1

Bilbo's Nexa 4Motion on 2.5-litre Volkswagen T5

The Bromleys meet an old flame when they test a range-topping, British four-wheel drive camper



With the roof raised there's standing room even for the tallest

AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £33,585 OTR (two-wheel drive model)
- **BERTHS:** 2
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of two rear travel seats, nearside kitchen, offside wardrobe and fridge, Porta Potti toilet in dedicated cupboard
- **ECONOMY:** 35mpg



Words & pictures by Andrew Bromley



Motorcaravanning is all about compromise. Should you buy a large 'van - spacious and luxurious - a *motor home*, in fact? Not much fun on narrow lanes, nor easy to park in crowded town streets, but

safely on site you can relax in roomy, home-from-home surroundings to enjoy your holiday.

Alternatively, do you buy a smaller vehicle, for use as a 'van about town, and for exploring deep Devon lanes, whilst accepting the inevitable shortage of space and home comforts? There's no right answer, of course. Indeed, requirements may change as years pass: the 'van ideal for snatched weekends in the Highlands may be unsuitable for long-range luxury touring in retirement.

Thus it was for us. We've owned a variety of 'vans, but small changes in circumstance and outlook enabled us to justify frequent changes. A few years ago we owned, and greatly enjoyed, a rising roof Volkswagen camper - a Bilbo's Nexa, followed by another, high roof version. They were small, nimble beasts, fun to drive and very well made. Eventually, we moved on, searching for a

slightly larger 'van with a washroom, but always wondered if we'd made the right decision. So, you can imagine how excited we were to have the chance to test a top-of-the-range version of the Nexa, with the most potent engine and four-wheel drive too.

Bilbo's has converted Volkswagen Transporters since 1977, and as a Volkswagen approved converter (a hard-won accolade shared with few others) the company can obtain special, high-specification vehicles for conversion. Bilbo's offers a range of long and short wheelbase models, in high top or rising roof versions.

Nexa has an unusual layout for a VW. Unlike the 'classic' camper arrangement (with side kitchen unit, and rock and roll seat/bed), a central aisle is provided. Swivelling cab seats form part of twin single beds, as do two forward-facing rear travel seats, either side of the aisle. To the rear, on the offside, are wardrobe and fridge, with kitchen on the nearside. The rising roof is side hinged on the offside, and, gives good internal height when raised.

The VW Transporter T5 is a beautiful creation, especially in short wheelbase guise and as here, in Pine Green metallic paint with tinted privacy glass. The discreet, body-coloured rising roof



adds a sense of purpose. Our own Nexas had the base-level 1.9-litre 104 horsepower engine, but turned in good performances and excellent economy. By contrast, this demonstrator had all the bells and whistles - full-time four-wheel drive (only available from Bilbo's on short-wheelbase Transporters, with the 2.5-litre, 5-cylinder 174bhp engine), plus air-conditioning, cruise control... the lot. I couldn't wait to get my hands on it!

IN THE COCKPIT

Actually, Rona drove it first. She started purring as soon as she settled herself behind the wheel. As far as she's concerned, the T5 isn't car-like to drive - it approaches a perfection that mere cars can only dream of. Her suspect back is better *after* a long drive in the Transporter than before, so it was difficult to wrest possession of the steering wheel from her!

Once ensconced, the initial impression is of quality, and how neatly everything falls to hand. A small (fully rake and reach-adjustable) steering wheel, coupled with a firm, well-shaped seat and tactile dash-mounted gearstick, all provide a well-nigh perfect driving position. If nitpicking, I'd like slightly bigger door mirrors with separate wide-angle sections. I'm not enamoured of red-on-blue dials either, but that's the lot so far as cockpit grumbles go.

The 174-horse engine with six-speed gearbox has lots of oomph, as you'd expect. It's a noisy unit and peaky, with less instant acceleration in first and second gears than I'd hoped for. However, once in third, via the gloriously sweet gearchange, it took off and through the higher gears, roared away. Driving in a more normal fashion, Rona found nothing to complain about. If buying, I suspect I'd go for the cheaper, (and, by all accounts delightful)

1 Off-roading in deepest Surrey

2 Two RIB belted travel seats form half of the four-seat lounge/diner

3 Beautifully-made cockpit with superb ergonomics

4 Kitchen, storage and services live in the rear

On Test Bilbo's Nexa 4Motion on 2.5-litre Volkswagen T5

130 horsepower engine. That would mean doing without the 4Motion badge, of course.

Volkswagen's four-wheel drive is a sophisticated system, whereby the vehicle's computer decides for itself how much power each wheel requires, and in normal driving I couldn't tell any difference from ordinary front-wheel drive. Given a 4x4 to test, naturally we had to do some off-roading - the evaluation would be incomplete without! The Vee-Dub has no low-range box, no creeper first gear, and no raised suspension, so clearly it isn't a Land Rover competitor. However, it acquitted itself well, driving nonchalantly over a bumpy field of lavender and powering up and down steep, rough, grassy slopes without objection. You might argue such test driving wasn't entirely relevant to most motorhomers' daily requirements, but it satisfied me that the 'van should cope equally well with a wet, greasy CL field, especially as it has traction control with a rear dif lock available for really tricky situations.

On-road, it handled beautifully (with supple, controlled suspension) and was narrow enough to slip down tiny Surrey lanes heavily populated with 'death wish' BMWs. As you might imagine, my fuel consumption was heavy, but non-test driving should return much better than my 31.5mpg overall. Rona, tootling along on cloud nine, achieved 40.5mpg on one outing, so I'd generally expect 35mpg, perhaps a bit less for the high top version.

LIVING AND LOUNGING

So, having established that the Transporter is heavenly to drive, what's it like to live in? Surely, at under five metres long (and slim with it) it must be too cramped for big people.

You enter through the sliding side door, crouching in just 1.5 metres (4ft 11in) headroom with the 'lid' down. Reach up, release two easily accessible catches, (one at each end of the roof), push the carpeted ceiling, and the roof rises majestically on gas



struts. The 'van interior suddenly floods with light from two clear, flexible, plastic panels in the nearside roof fabric, and you have 2.16 metres (7ft 1in) of headroom, throughout the entire length of the roof cut-out. This illustrates the benefit of side-hinged elevating roofs over those hinged at front or rear.

In each 'gable end' there's a zipped, mesh ventilation panel, while the elevating roof extends beyond the cut out at the front, affording an invaluable storage shelf when parked. There's also a narrow shelf on the other three edges - all covered with grey plastic moulding. A rim accepts an optional roof bed (made from 25mm, lightweight Vohringer board) that's ideal for children, who would love the adventure. It's heavy-duty

enough for an adult, but a bit narrow for two.

To lower the roof, grab the handle and pull downwards. There are tabs to pull in the side fabric whilst doing this. Once down, secure the clips and pull the straps tight. Voilà - you've returned to the Hobbit hole!

To form the lounge, swivel the front seats - always problematical in VW campers, with their narrow cabins. The passenger seat turns easily, but the driver's requires the steering wheel to be raised and pushed in - and, with 'van in gear, the handbrake must be released. Adjust the seatback to vertical or beyond and with some pushing, shoving, cursing and jiggery-pokery with the armrests, the seat will turn. It's easier if you open the driver's door, but not if there's Highland rain or midges to contend with!

You end up with those well-shaped cab seats facing two travel seats across a flat floor. All are covered (as standard) by a hard wearing, but rather drab, grey material, but our 'van had a much nicer dark green pattern (Spruce) as an optional extra. At the factory, we also saw a different colour-way named Shadow - in beige and dark grey - which we would probably choose.

The floor is plywood-clad, covered with a hard, durable finish in a blue speckle colour - only the cab is carpeted, so provide your own mats. The furniture is pale blue-grey (15mm lightweight Vohringer board), beautifully constructed, with flush, curved edging, and cushioned corner strips. Surfaces are a darker blue-grey.

In our Nexas, the walls were finished in carpet, but now more practical (wipe-able) plastic mouldings are fitted. The windows were single-glazed, VW factory units with (optional) privacy glass - not as dark inside as it appears from outside. Lined grey curtains are fitted to all windows and roll-up 'blinds' used to cover the plastic windows in the roof. With curtains shut, the overall effect is austere - rather airliner-like.

In better weather, with the sliding-door opening wide, the lounge is a pleasant place to entertain. Unlike many 'vans, Nexa has two travel seats worthy of the name. These French RIB pews are extremely robust and attached to metal frames, with removable headrests and three-point belts. The seatbacks are also adjustable for rake. I can achieve a very comfortable position. A word of warning though,



6

CAMPING CUISINE

This camper has the facilities to provide a hearty meal for outdoor types at the end of the day. A small Smev combi oven/grill has electronic ignition and a rather sharp-edged grill pan, which we never used in our 'vans and left untried on this test! The combined Smev hob and sink has three manual-ignition burners under a single glass cover, leaving a reasonably sized work surface toward the rear of the galley. We had reservations about this set-up.

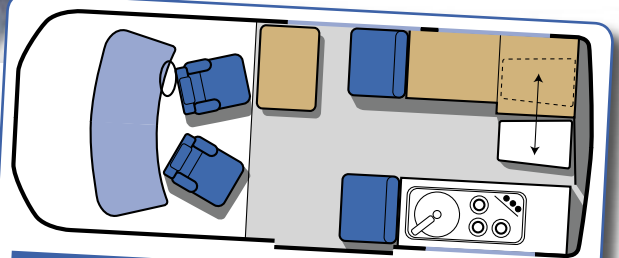
Two mains sockets are situated together, just under the worktop behind the nearside travel seat - a sensible position. However, plug in a kettle with a standard length flex, and it won't reach the far side of the hob - it must stand on the glass lid, rendering hob and sink unusable. Moreover, the remaining work-surface is largely under the 'van roof, aft of the cut out, so isn't easy to use. Our Nexas had separate hob and



smaller folk may find these seats too deep and too high, for long-term comfort, especially when travelling. Check it out: if they suit you, they're great.

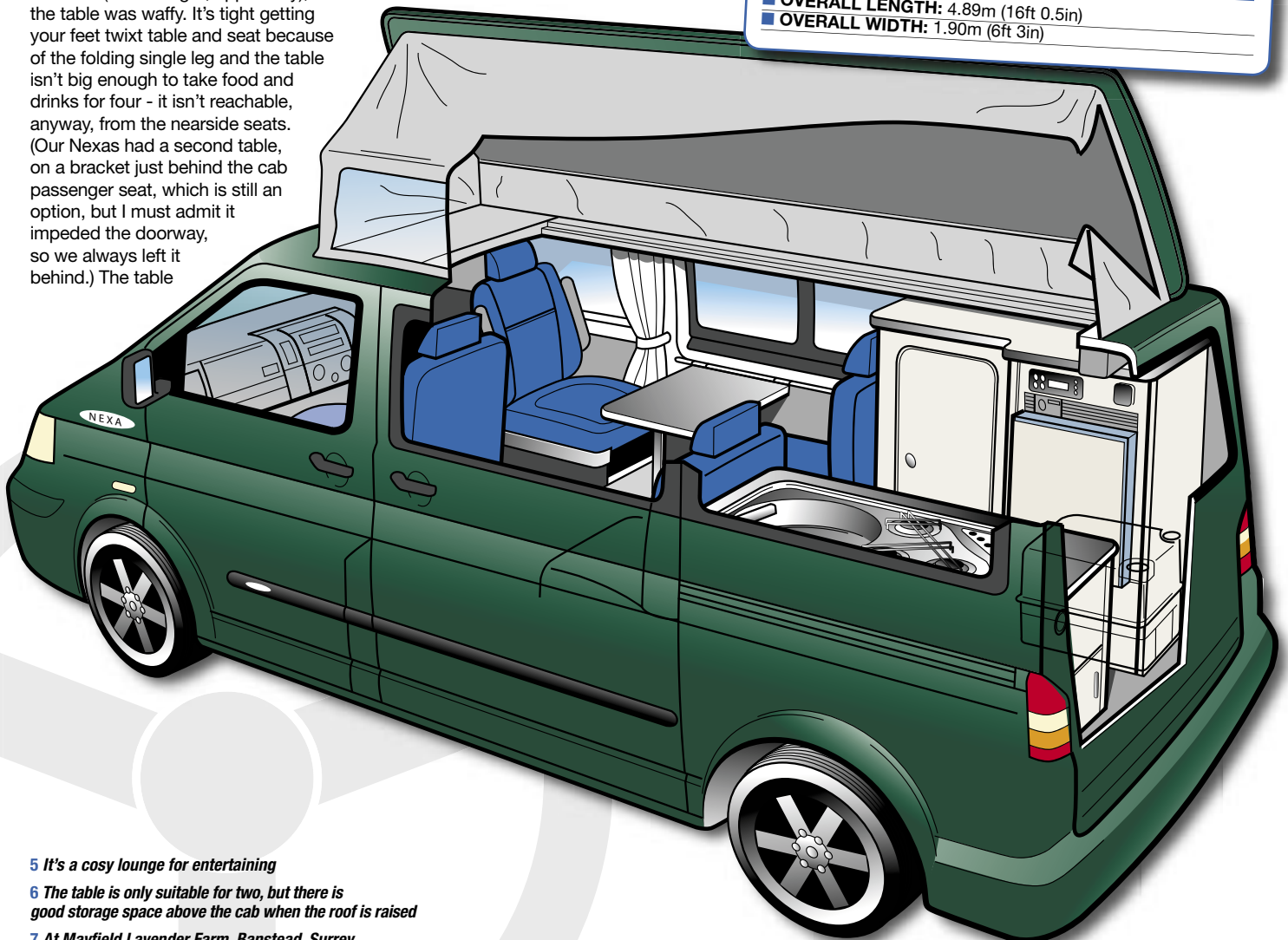
The table clips to a long rail under the offside window. In our Nexas, this rail had a central support bracket, but this was missing in the test 'van (an oversight, apparently), so the table was waffy. It's tight getting your feet twixt table and seat because of the folding single leg and the table isn't big enough to take food and drinks for four - it isn't reachable, anyway, from the nearside seats. (Our Nexas had a second table, on a bracket just behind the cab passenger seat, which is still an option, but I must admit it impeded the doorway, so we always left it behind.) The table

stores behind the wardrobe in the rear, but it sticks out into the aisle and obstructs the opening of the toilet cupboard somewhat. We kept ours behind the nearside rear seat where it formed a convenient splashback for the kitchen unit.



LAYOUT PLAN

- OVERALL LENGTH: 4.89m (16ft 0.5in)
- OVERALL WIDTH: 1.90m (6ft 3in)



5 It's a cosy lounge for entertaining

6 The table is only suitable for two, but there is good storage space above the cab when the roof is raised

7 At Mayfield Lavender Farm, Banstead, Surrey

On Test Bilbo's Nexa 4Motion on 2.5-litre Volkswagen T5



sink, so the lid on one could be used as a work-surface, serving the other. Also, there was room for the kettle *behind* the sink. Unsurprisingly, we prefer the previous arrangement, which is still available as an option.

The kitchen unit contains an excellent-sized cutlery drawer, a deep pan/crockery drawer, and a big floor-level cupboard, as well as the fresh-water tank and gas locker (both accessed from the rear end wall). Between the unit and the window is a long shelf, useful for storing washing-up liquid, toothbrushes and suchlike.

At a sensible height, opposite the kitchen, is the 50-litre, Waeco compressor fridge. Although it makes similar sounds to a domestic fridge, these become unnoticeable 'white noise,' even at night. We like compressor fridges - no irritating switching between power sources and fewer holes cut in 'van sides.

THE SMALLEST ROOM

Washroom - what's that? In a 'van this size, something's gotta give. You use the kitchen

sink for ablutions - nothing wrong with that - and a Porta-Potti 465 toilet is supplied, housed in a cupboard below the fridge. The biggest of the range, it has electric flushing and integral water supply. To use, simply open the cupboard door (easy, especially if the table has been re-sited) and slide the loo into the aisle. To preserve modesty, a curtain may be hung across the aisle, and the window curtains deployed. We think this loo is far more practical than any fixed cassette toilet, whether swivel or bench-type. Removal for cleaning is simple, and if using the 'van as your car, just take it out altogether.

BED TIME

Sleeping arrangements in a small 'van can be a real problem for the tall, but the Nexa is acceptable. Two single beds are formed by hinging the RIB seat squab over and forwards, to the horizontal; the seatback then folds forward and down to fill the gap left by the seat squab. The resultant bed is level,

except at the foot (formed by the swivelled cab seat's squab). Sizes are 1.88 metres (6ft 2in) in length for the nearside bed, 1.83 metres (6ft 0in) for the offside. Both are 600mm (1ft 11.5in) wide - a little narrower at the foot. Mine (the nearside bed) fitted me like a coffin! They're a little hard, but we remembered this of old, so brought our Thermarest mattresses and enjoyed comfortable sleeping. When compressed and folded, the (semi-self-inflating) Thermarests stored neatly behind the rear seatbacks. One night, I obtained extra bed-length by half-swivelling my cab seat, but the seat's sides proved intrusive.

Bilbo's offers an optional new double bed arrangement, whereby the offside seat moves into the centre of the 'van, closing the aisle, and the resultant gap on the offside is filled by cushions which, during the day, form an offside sofa backrest. Sounded good to us, but unfortunately, there wasn't one available for inspection during our visit.

Sleeping in a rising roof 'van is a novel



experience! It's like being in a tent - all the outdoor noises flood in, and if you're close to an airport, or a pub at closing time, you'll know it! Also, any heat inside the 'van quickly dissipates. In humid, rainy or cold weather, you'll likely suffer from condensation, which is maybe why plastic trim is fitted around the roof, so it can easily be wiped dry in the morning. Anything stored up there overnight in such weather will need to be protected from damp. One night (despite stern warnings in Bilbo's excellent manual) we slept with the roof down. Even with a sliding window open just above my head, I found it much quieter and warmer.

STORAGE

Storage in a small camper can be challenging, but Bilbo's has cleverly made maximum use of space. There is sufficient room under either rear seat to store sleeping bags and pillows, leaving the other free for shoes, boots, cameras and other vital stuff. Each seat also has a small map pocket in its base side, and there are plenty of cubbies in the cab too. The storage unit to the offside rear of the 'van includes a deceptively large wardrobe, which is shelved and railed. This space also houses the box containing electrical circuit breakers, battery charger, and systems control unit. While parked, this storage unit's top provides a useful surface, with a 12V socket next to the fridge.

In our rising roof Nexa, we could use the ledge around the roof cut out for standing cups, bottles and similar items, as it was carpeted and - effectively - non-slip. Now, the plastic

moulding that replaces the carpet is slightly curved and slippery, so care is needed.

If you like the Nexa's layout and execution, but need more storage, Bilbo's also builds LWB Nexas. The high top version provides another answer, with high-level cupboards, and storage shelves along the sides. It's also warmer and quieter!



WE LIKED

- All round superb base vehicle
- RIB rear belted travel seats
- Superbly crafted furniture
- Practical layout
- Top-spec Porta Potti 465 toilet

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Softer beds
- The double bed option
- Firmer support rail for table (or free-standing option)
- Shadow upholstery option and less sombre curtain fabric
- Previous model's separate hob and sink arrangement

WE DISLIKED

- Water filler location
- Steamy - single-glazed - windows!

8 *Open the tailgate for access to the gas locker, table, and water filler. The loo slides out ready for action*

9 *Bedtime. Our Thermarests smoothed the dip at the beds' foot and improved comfort*

10 *The compact kitchen. Plastic ledge above is useful, but these days, curved and rather slippery*

11 *Useful drawers & cupboards are capacious & well-made*

12 *The 50-litre compressor fridge is in a handy location*

13 *Well-designed wardrobe carries much more than you'd imagine*

14 *In driving mode the Nexa is a small, nimble beast*



On Test Bilbo's Nexa 4Motion on 2.5-litre Volkswagen T5

EQUIPMENT

Bilbo's equips its campers well, though many of the facilities fitted here were optional extras, which raised the total price. The Webasto diesel-powered heater, under the driver's seat, is one such. Though it has but one vent, it's extremely efficient. There's no water heater, but without a shower, there's no need for one; simply use the kettle.

The 36-litre fresh water tank fitted in the kitchen unit is filled via a horizontal filler beneath the work surface at the rear of the 'van. A small length of hose is supplied for filling, which pre-supposes that your rufy-tuftu, wild-camping, macho man (the typical Bilbo's customer, like us!) has immediate access to a tap. It isn't possible to fill the tank from a water carrier. In *our* Nexas, Bilbo's modified the system, placing the filler in the work surface top and that worked just dandy.

Because the fridge is an electric compressor-driven type (relying on 12V power), Bilbo's fit a hefty 135 amp hr leisure battery, accessed via the loo cupboard. A Sargent digital power-management panel is situated above the fridge, with myriad functions

and buttons, including outside and inside temperature readings and an alarm clock.

A 3.9kg propane gas cylinder will fit in the locker at the rear of the kitchen unit (accessed from the open tailgate), but it's set up for two Campingaz 907 (2.72kg) butane cylinders. Clearly, Bilbo's expects the 'van to be used for three-season camping, when propane (with its lower freezing point) is unnecessary. The walls of the 'van are well-insulated, with 15mm closed cell Miothene throughout, but heat loss once the roof is raised is bound to be high. Again, the high top version is better in this regard.

Lighting is adequate rather than bright, with two halogen reading-lights on flexible stalks attached to the B-pillars behind the cab, (LEDs would use far less power) and fluorescent strip-lights above the offside lounge window and over the sink.

CONCLUSION

For us, this test was a lovely trip down memory lane, and I had to lever Rona out of the 'van at the end of our time with the Nexa. For a couple's sole vehicle, with a realistic capability for comfy camping holidays in reasonable weather, it's excellent: we remember a wonderful fortnight in Germany in 2004, when our Nexa acquitted itself superbly. When the weather turns foul, condensation and heat loss can make daily life more difficult; that's why we ended up preferring the high top version.

Against that, many will find the ability to park the rising roof model under cover

15 The water filler proved less than perfect

16 Completely at home in Ashdown Forest



irresistible. Don't expect to pass under two-metre height barriers, though - it's slightly too tall unless you specify a lowered suspension base vehicle.

All motorcaravanning is a compromise, and no design ever satisfies everyone. But we do think most people will love the VW Transporter, whether or not they can afford, or justify, this top-of-the-range version. And if the Nexa's layout suits, then we're pretty sure the high quality of Bilbo's construction and finish will greatly impress. ■

VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Bilbo's, Eastbourne Road,
South Godstone, Surrey RH9 8JQ
(tel: 01342 892499;
web site: www.bilbos.com)

WE STAYED AT

Alderstead Heath Caravan Club Site,
Dean Lane, Merstham, Redhill,
Surrey RH1 3AH (tel: 01737 644629;
web site: www.caravanclub.co.uk)



LIVE-IN TEST DATA

TYPE

Rising roof window van conversion

PRICE

- **From:** £33,585 OTR (two-wheel drive model)
- **As tested:** £45,030 OTR

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Volkswagen T5 short wheelbase window van
- **Berths:** 2
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4
- **Warranty:** 2 years conversion, 3 years base vehicle

CONSTRUCTION

All steel bodied panel van with factory-fitted single-glazed windows and GRP rising roof. Side sliding door on UK nearside, tailgate at rear

DIMENSIONS

(*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 4.89m (16ft .5in)*
- **Width:** 1.90m (6ft 3in)*
- **Height:** 2.02m (6ft 7.5in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 3.00m (9ft 10in)
- **Rear Overhang:** 996mm (3ft 3in)*
- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3000kg
- **Payload:** 606kg (After allowance for weight of driver, full fuel tank, 90 per cent fresh water, two gas cylinders)

INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of two rear travel seats, nearside kitchen, offside wardrobe and fridge, Porta Potti toilet in dedicated cupboard

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 2.5-litre turbo-diesel producing 95kW (174bhp) @3500rpm
- **Transmission:** Six-speed manual gearbox, all-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 31.5mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all round with ABS
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent on McPherson struts. Rear: Independent on mini-block springs.
- **Features:** Electrically-operated and heated mirrors, electric windows, colour-coded bumpers and mirrors, adjustable steering column, driver and passenger airbags, door bins, lockable glove compartment, radio/CD player



LOUNGING AND DINING

Swivelling cab seats and two rear travel seats give comfortable seating for four. Offside wall-mounted table offers dining for two

KITCHEN

Nearside unit includes long shelf by window, pan/crockery drawer, cutlery drawer and large floor cupboard

- **Sink:** As part of Smev combination sink/hob: circular stainless steel with metal swivelling tap, hinged glass lid
- **Cooker:** As part of Smev combination sink/hob: three-burner hob with hinged glass lid, no ignition. Separate Smev grill unit, with glass door, interior illumination, push-button ignition
- **Fridge:** Waeco 12V compressor type. Capacity 50 litres

WASHROOM

None fitted, but Porta Potti 465 electric-flush freestanding toilet with own water supply emerges from dedicated locker for use in rear aisle. Modesty curtain

BEDS

Lounge singles
Nearside

- **Length:** 1.88m (6ft 2in)
 - **Width:** 610mm (2ft 0in) max, 500mm (1ft 7.5in) min
- Offside
- **Length:** 1.83m (6ft 0in)
 - **Width:** 610mm (2ft 0in) max, 500mm (1ft 7.5in) min

STORAGE

Shelved and railed wardrobe; under-seat storage in each rear seat base; cutlery drawer, pan/crockery drawer and large cupboard in kitchen unit on nearside

LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Inboard, 36 litres (8 gal)
- **Waste water:** Underslung, 35 litres (7.6 gal)
- **Water heater:** None fitted
- **Space heating:** Webasto Airtop 2000S

BILBO'S NEXA 4MOTION

with blown-air, diesel-only operation

- **Leisure Battery:** 135 amp hr
- **Gas capacity:** 2 x Campingaz 907 2.72kg cylinders or 1 x 3.9kg Propane/4.5kg Butane cylinder
- **Lighting:** 2 flexible halogen reading lights over cab seats, fluorescent light above offside window and sink
- **Sockets:** 230V: 2 (on forward end of kitchen unit). 12V: 1 (above fridge)
- **Control Panel:** Mounted above fridge, displays for Voltages, fresh water and waste water levels, battery on/off, wake-up alarm/timer, interior/exterior temperatures, battery condition
- **Blinds/curtains:** No blinds/flyscreens fitted, curtains to all windows
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 Compliant:** Yes

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base vehicle:** 174bhp engine and six-speed gearbox (£3330), 4Motion four-wheel drive system (£2950), cab air-conditioning (£680), cruise control (£185), trip computer (£120), metallic paint (£880), upholstery upgrade (£595), front fog lights (£155), 16-inch alloy wheels (£400), mud flaps (£105), privacy glass (£250), rear parking sensors (£215), removable towbar (£520)
 - **Conversion:** Webasto diesel-fired, blown-air space heater (£895), awning rail (£165)
- Other options available
- **Base vehicle:** Electronic Stability Program (ESP) (£340), high top surcharge (£650), long wheelbase surcharge (£1950)
 - **Conversion:** Double bed upgrade (£395), swivel-mount table beside sliding door (£125), outside table rail (£45)

E&OE



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