

LIVING WITH A...

... 2007 Devon Sundowner

Carol Kubicki finally realises the dream and reports on her experiences living (for the weekend and for long-term camping) with a VW high top



AT A GLANCE

- PRICE FROM: £26,000
- BERTHS: 2
- BASE VEHICLE: VW T5
- LAYOUT: Front lounge end kitchen high top
- ECONOMY: 32mpg



When I was 13 years old my parents borrowed a friend's Commer motorhome and we spent a sunny week touring Scotland. Camping one night near Ayr, we met a couple in a similar 'van

who were full-timing and I listened enthralled as they told tales of learning foreign languages and moving, as the fancy took them, to sunnier countries for the winter. I was inspired.

However, it took over 30 years for me to save up sufficient spare cash and become the owner of a camper van with my partner, Anthony.

We dipped our toes gently into the world of motorhoming with our first 'van, a standard VW T4 conversion with a rock 'n' roll bed. We loved holidaying in this 'van and it provided us with lots of useful experience, but we didn't

feel it had enough space for full-timing.

After 12 months of camper ownership and an exhausting day spent looking in different 'vans at the York show in 2006 we were much clearer about what we wanted and the spreadsheet listing our choices had many refinements. At the top of our list were three essentials: we wanted four belted seats (as we don't have a car), a Volkswagen base vehicle and a high top.

In addition, we liked the idea of an onboard toilet and wanted a space heater. Whichever way we added it up, the Devon Sundowner ticked all our boxes. The chances of finding one secondhand seemed to be similar to winning the lottery and so we both took a deep breath (this was more money that we had paid for our house) and ordered our very own from the factory in Ferryhill.

Six months later, we excitedly drove our

blue bus out of the factory gates in Ferryhill. Our first trip was a four-week tour through Germany to Poland; many kilometres of cobbles and bumpy roads gave the 'van a good run in and showed up every rattle and squeak in the conversion.

We quickly got the hang of packing in a way to minimise any noises and settled into life with a new 'van. Over four years we have spent 468 nights in the van and covered 41,000 miles; a good chunk of these nights were during our later-in-life gap year in 2009-2010, when we opted out and took the 'van around southern Europe for 12 months.

ON THE ROAD

The driving experience of the VW has been discussed many times in this magazine, so needless to say we find it very comfortable for

On Test 2007 Devon Sundowner

long trips, knowing that the power of the 2.5TDI is there when we need it. With large amounts of glass, the cab can get very warm on sunny days and we are very pleased we splashed out on cab air-conditioning.

The cab has useful spaces for storing maps and guides. Also, we made a box for extra books to fit in the spacious passenger footwell. The electric cable and the grip mats are kept there too.

THE ACCOMMODATION

Inside, the conversion has two front-facing passenger seats, both with seat belts. These convert into two comfortable single beds, using the swivelled cab seats and extended drawers from under the rear seats. Add the extra cushion and you have a bed in minutes. Two single beds mean we don't disturb each other when we get up and, despite being made up of four cushions, the beds are bliss to sleep on.

The two drawers underneath the passenger seats provide useful storage for shoes, bicycle panniers and a rucksack. These drawers can



I LIKE

- Having room for two passengers
- Good design, clever use of space and build quality
- Having a large side door and back doors
- LED lights over the cab seats
- The hidden toilet

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A free-standing table so that we didn't have to carry an additional table for outdoor eating
- A roof light so we could lie in bed and stargaze
- A small onboard water tank for winter use

I DISLIKE

- Not being able to spend all our time in the 'van
- Items falling on my head when I open the overhead lockers

be very fiddly to close if you don't line everything up just right, particularly when you have spare novels tucked in the unused spaces at the back of them; we have noticed that Devon has now changed the design of this underseat storage.

For dining, there is a table that attaches to the wall between the offside rear seat and the driver's seat, creating a roomy side dinette for two. We have also entertained visitors and this works best with the nearside bed made up for an additional two or even three people to sit on.

There isn't the space for overhead lockers here, but Devon fits a narrow lipped shelf, which we use for books and games that we want to hand.

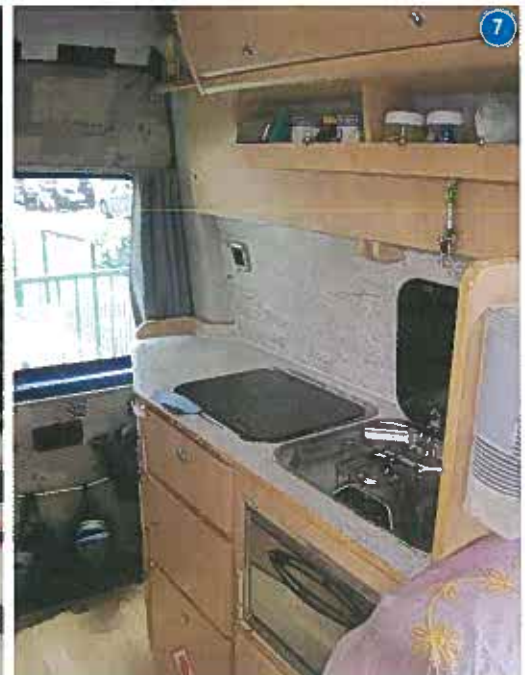
The cooking area can be found on the nearside, behind the two seats. There's an oven, two-burner hob, sink and a small work surface, with six cupboards of various sizes

underneath, including the gas cupboard. Above there are two overhead lockers and some open shelving, which is excellent for tea, coffee and spice jars. Opposite there is a fridge, more cupboards, a wardrobe and the clever toilet compartment.

We are happiest when it is sunny and warm and we can eat outside; we carry an additional table that squeezes between the toilet and the back door and two chairs that fit in the spacious overcab cupboard with the bedding.

After many disasters with various camping chairs, we now use two folding dining chairs. These are not the traditional campsite seating, but they have proved more robust than even expensive camping chairs.

On these warm days we leave the two single beds in place, protected by a throw. This gives us two very comfortable, feet-up lounging chairs. Both have an LED light above





in the cab roof and are perfect for reading, watching DVDs and relaxing.

Because the 'van has full-height double doors at the back, we can easily come and go when the bed is blocking the sliding door. We love the versatility of having both doors.

I adore cooking and the facilities to prepare good food are very important to me. Years of back-packing and making do with a meths stove, cooking and preparing everything sitting cross-legged on a Karrimat means that being able to stand up and cook on holiday is my idea of luxury.

In the Sundowner, with the back doors wide open, I can chop vegetables and throw together fantastic meals as I watch campsite life, wildlife and scenery. Nothing makes me happier.

The small gas oven/grill only gets used occasionally; the oven only gets warm enough to heat up garlic bread or roast vegetables

and the grill is a great disappointment, drying bread into submission rather than toasting it.

On a campsite with a hook-up we use a single electric ring and a kettle for cooking, saving on gas. The hotplate sits on the small work surface by the back door, freeing up the gas hob. With the hinged glass lid down this provides plenty of preparation space.

Most meals can be created with this combination and on the rare occasion I really need two rings or when we don't have a hook-up, I find the available work surface space somewhat cramped.

Devon fits a six-litre electric water heater as standard in the Sundowner, which required a hook-up. Although hot water in the 'van gave us the illusion we lived in an all mod-cons camper, after a few years we decided to remove the water heater and make do with a kettle to heat up water. This provided us with additional

cupboard space and enough room to store a toaster; we could enjoy decent toast at last!

The layout of the 'van means that, even if it is raining, Anthony and any visitors can be sat at the front, while I cook at the back and we don't all fall over each other, even in such a small space. How fantastic is that?

A compressor fridge is fitted as standard in the Sundowner. However, we prefer the flexibility of a traditional three-way fridge and had a 60-litre model fitted. This, and the cupboard under the sink, holds enough food for three or four days.

There is a reasonable size cutlery drawer and a cupboard big enough for plates and bowls underneath. We added shelves to the large cupboard under the oven to make better use of the space there, fitting in the electric hob, kettles (gas and electric), pans, teapot and tea towels.

We don't dress up much (or at all) on holiday and like many other motorhomers, we added shelves to the wardrobe. Along with the top half of the big cupboard above the fridge, this means we have more than enough space for our clothes and towels. The bottom half of this big cupboard is an Aladdin's cave of toiletries, medicines and useful bits and bobs, all easy to access.

Under the fridge is a small cupboard with a drop-down door. We use this for storing our stuff-for-a-day-out; the camera, binoculars, over-trousers, bike spares, first aid kit, picnic



1 Dining for two

2 The view from the back

3 A hidden toilet compartment!

4 The two single beds made up

5 Storage above the fridge, plus the wardrobe

6 Feet-up relaxing

7 The main cooking area is in the rear nearside

8 The fridge and cupboard

9 The gas hob can get a little crowded.

Note the knife rack we added

10 Cooking on the hotplate and watching campsite life



FACTS AND FIGURES

- **Conversion:** 2007 Devon Sundowner
- **Base vehicle:** Volkswagen T5
- **Power plant:** 2.5-litre TDi turbo-diesel producing 130bhp
- **Gross vehicle weight:** 3,000kg
- **Payload:** 640kg
- **Layout:** Swivelling cab seats and two rear seats form lounge and beds with kitchen and toilet with folding privacy door behind
- **Exterior measurements:** Length 5.3m (17ft 5in), width 1.9m (6ft 3in), height 2.6m (8ft 6in)
- **Berths:** 2 (4 belted seats)
- **Bed sizes:** Nearside 1.85m (6ft 1in) x 61cm (2ft), offside 1.80m (5ft 11in) x 61cm (2ft)
- **Length of ownership:** 4 years 4 months
- **Supplied by:** Devon Conversions
- **Mileage covered:** 41,000 miles
- **Fuel economy:** 32mpg
- **Accessories / options added:** Towbar for bicycle rack, pull-out Fiamma awning, air-con, passenger airbag
- **Base vehicle service:** £205
- **MOT:** £54.85
- **Habitation service:** £80
- **Insurance:** £500
- **Recalls:** None
- **Price new today:** £40,580
- **Cost of similar aged 'van today:** £26,000
- **What went wrong:** Conversion – upper side window stay broke, roof fabric came un-stuck due to faulty batch of adhesive and was repaired under warranty, tap broke after two years and water pump failed after three years. Base vehicle – gas exhaust sensor fault covered under warranty in Italy.
- **Further reading:** N/A
- **Contacts:** Devon Conversions
Mainsforth Road, Ferryhill, County Durham DL17 9DE Tel: 01740-655700
Web: www.devonconversions.co.uk

mat and much more are all in here so we can easily grab what we need for our days out walking or cycling.

This is not a 'van with space for a kayak (maybe on the roof) or golf clubs, but as cyclists and walkers we have plenty of space for the kit we need. The large double doors on the VW won't take a door-mounted bicycle rack; something we hadn't realised when we ordered the 'van. After a considerable amount of research we found the solution and had a towbar fitted. The towbar-mounted rack proved to be an excellent answer to the problem. It is easily fitted, we don't have to lift the bikes up high, the bikes feel secure and – once removed – the rack provides somewhere to store the bikes on site and we no longer have to hope our pitch has a convenient tree or wall.

The toilet is the really clever bit of the 'van; tucked away behind a bi-fold door at the rear offside. To access the toilet, unfold the door and slot it in to the opposite wall. This creates a private and roomy area that encloses the sink, so that even on *aires* or wild camping we can carry out our limited ablutions.

Devon fits a mirror on the wall above the toilet

and some hooks for towels. We removed the mirror and added a two-tier rack for toiletries.

Behind the toilet is the 'back cupboard'. This is similar to a loft in that it is where everything that doesn't have a home gets stored. It is not deep, but has a Tardis-like quality. We fit the jump leads, tow rope, walking poles, spare toilet rolls, rugs and many other things we've long forgotten about here and there's still room for a bottle or two of French wine when we've crossed the Channel.

During the summer months the house-rule is that we go camping in the motorhome at least every other weekend, as well as using it for longer trips. There seems little point in owning our dream camper and not using it as much as we can.

This, of course, means we have used the blue bus in all weathers and it continues to meet our needs. On inclement days, wet coats can be hung up over the toilet, wet shoes can be stored in the foot wells and the diesel heater has us warm and cosy very quickly. The pull-out awning is useful as a sun shade and, for those warm days with light showers, it still allows us to be in the great outdoors.

LONG-TIME LIVING

Having lived in our Sundowner for 12 months full-time and used it in various temperatures and conditions, on *aires* and *stellplatz*, as well as four-star campsites, we can happily say we made the right choice. The Sundowner is a no-frills, self-contained camper; built simply but to a high quality by a company that puts considerable thought into designing 'vans that are a pleasure to live in. ■



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