



VOLKSWAGEN DEVON CARAVETTE

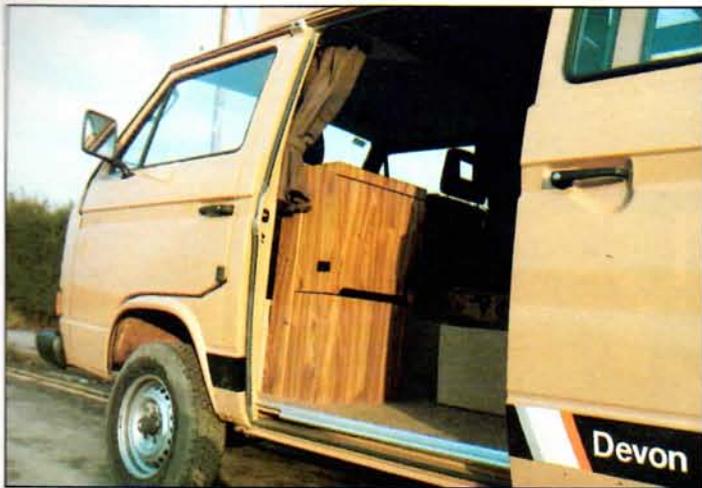
A VW CONVERSION THAT'S DIFFERENT FROM USUAL

Bill Taylor

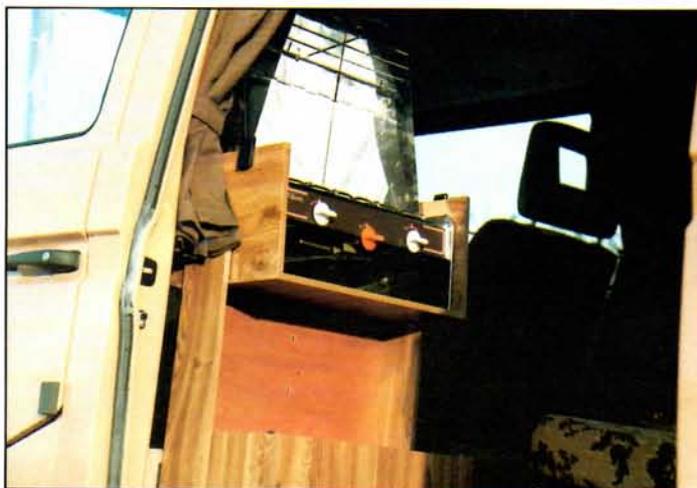
Very few converters have not, at some time, tried to make a motorcaravan based on the Volkswagen and a surprising number of them have continued to use this as a base vehicle. Devon Conversions have several models based on the current Volkswagen Transporter. The test model, a Caravette, was collected from the Hertfordshire Showground and went straight on test; therefore the start mileage was the delivery mileage to the Show.



VOLKSWAGEN/DEVON CARAVETTE



The "cooker box" closed.



The "cooker box" open. The close proximity of the curtains to the left-hand splash plate can be seen.



Electrolux 122E fridge beneath the sink unit.



The "box seat" facing forward in mini-bus style.



The "box seat" facing rearward ready for dining. The bar visible on the side panel is for mounting the table.

Caravan Interior

As I waited for the Show to close so that I could take the vehicle away, I had a good look around and I was impressed by some of the ingenious features incorporated in the design. With the sliding door fully open, I found getting in and out of the Caravette was quite easy — the step height is just 1ft 6in — but, even though the roof was erected, I found that freedom of movement was restricted to the centre portion of the living area. The problem was the 'upstairs' beds but I soon discovered that, by placing the front bed board on top of the rear one, more than ample headroom was available to make moving around easy. Using any motorcaravan requires a routine, when first parking and then when you are packing up ready for the road but, with an elevating roof vehicle, a routine is most essential. The 'upstairs' bedding I mentioned is an

excellent example; if the two halves are left on top of each other, and the roof is lowered, the roof hinges will be damaged.

The roof itself is fully insulated by double-skinned aluminium panels that are also lined with carpet to give a warm-touch feeling. The roof is completely rigid when erected and raising and lowering it is not difficult, as the action of raising or lowering the side panels automatically takes the roof panel with them. Ventilation in this area is well catered for with a leading-edge hinged roof vent complete with flyscreen, whilst in the sides are double-glazed windows that are hinged at the top to allow them to open. I feel it would be safer if these windows were of the sliding variety as, at present, if the windows are left open and the roof is lowered, then damage could be caused. If additional ventilation is needed then the seal of the side panels can be broken to provide a two-inch gap

VOLKSWAGEN/DEVON CARAVETTE



Two lockers, in roof, for odds and ends and crockery.



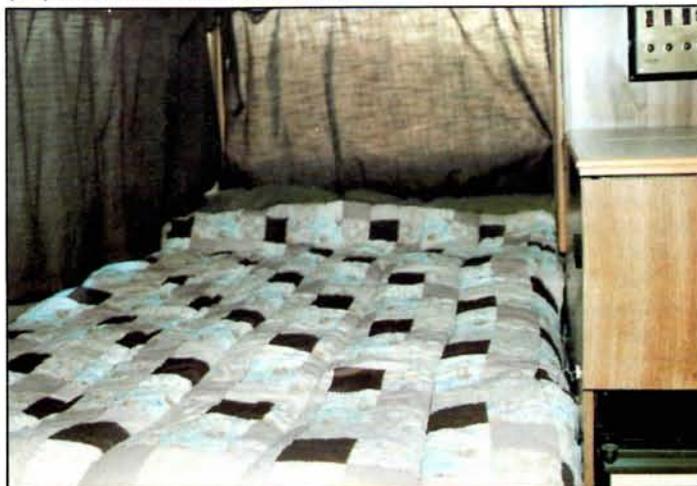
Wardrobe with the four table legs stowed for travelling. The "box" visible in the mirror is the rear of the switch-panel seen on the right.



The sink unit in its "extended" working position. Note the cutlery drawer (left) that slides beneath the drainer.



"Double bed" made-up



and ready to be occupied.



The rearmost "upstairs" bed awaits a sleeper.

along the top of the panels and, because of the roof overlap, rain will not enter. The 'upstairs' bedding can be arranged as a double (6ft 2in long) or two singles.

The main living area is compact and comfortable in addition to being versatile. Seating is provided for four persons with the rear seat being fitted just ahead of the engine compartment and the other seat behind the driver. Lifting the cushion of the rear seat reveals some stowage space; however, the main storage is provided by the deep, rectangular box base of the other seat and access is again by lifting the cushion. This seat is mounted on runners, which allows the seat to move fore and aft by 8in and, when in its rearmost position, the seat cushion and squab can be tipped completely to become a forward-facing seat. This ingenious move allows four persons to travel in the rear and all facing

forward, mini-bus style.

When both seats are facing each other, the table can be erected between them by screwing in a single leg at one end and sliding the other end of the table into a rail attached to the offside bodypanel. The table is large enough (35in x 21in) to accommodate four persons. Another good idea is the provision of another three legs so that, by screwing all four legs into the appropriate sockets, you have a free-standing table to take outside the vehicle.

The kitchen is fitted along the nearside of the vehicle on each side of the sliding door and, again, some ingenuity has been used to offer the best results. To the left of the sliding door is the cooker, which is neatly enclosed in a cabinet. To use the cooker, the passenger's seat in the cab must be moved forward as far as possible; then, after releasing the side-clips, the top part of the

VOLKSWAGEN/DEVON CARAVETTE



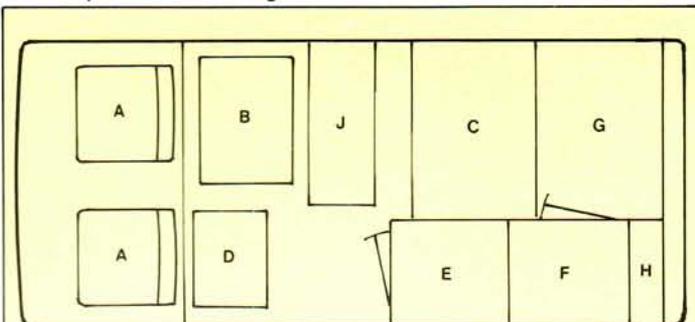
Tailgate open shows the water container along with the storage box on top of the engine compartment. The curtain covers the water container.



Engine cover removed shows a well laid out compartment where most items are easy to reach.



The carpeted lid of the rear storage box is partly removed to show the table top in one of its storage locations.



- | | |
|---|---|
| A. Cab seats. | F. Wardrobe. |
| B. Box seat that can be adjusted to face forward. | G. Engine compartment cover with storage box on top also forms part of double bed with C above. |
| C. Rear seat that forms part of the double bed. | H. Storage compartment for fresh water tank. |
| D. Cooker unit. | J. Table. |
| E. Sink/drainage unit with Electrolux 122E fridge below. (To indicate position, door is shown partly open.) | |

cabinet is swung forward into the space behind the passenger's seat, where it locks into its operational position. Erecting the cooker for use is easy by raising the back and side splash-plates and locking them into position by using the plate-warming rack. In the lower portion of the cabinet is the gas cylinder for the cooker (with space for a spare) and, with the main tap turned on, the cooker is ready for use. There is no working surface around the cooker; therefore the table or sink work-top would need to be used. I was not too happy about the closeness of the curtains to the cooker when it's in use, as they are actually in contact with the left-hand splash plate.

The second part of the kitchen is to the right of the sliding door as you enter the 'van, with an Electrolux 122E refrigerator and the sink unit on top of it. The fridge is operated by gas or from the vehicle's battery — the gas cylinder for the fridge is stored in the space below the rear seat. Washing-up reveals another stroke of genius with the sink/drainage unit sliding forward nearly 15 inches so that the working area is clear of obstruction. With the sink in this position, the cutlery drawer, which is hidden beneath the drainer, is accessible, as it opens into the space left by moving the unit forward. An electric pump supplies the sink with the cold water and this is operated by a push-button on the front of the cabinet.

Moving rearwards from the kitchen is the wardrobe, which is surprisingly roomy and gives a hanging height of 3ft 2½in from the rail to the floor. The door opens wide towards the tailgate to give good access and there is a small mirror fitted to the inside of the door. On the panel that separates the wardrobe from the sink unit is the Devon switch panel, which has illuminated switches for the fridge, water pump and a 12 volt DC socket. In this position, the switches are visible to the driver in the interior mirror so they can be checked even when on the move. Incidentally, the fridge 12 volt circuit will only operate when the ignition is switched on.

Behind the wardrobe, and accessible when the rear tailgate is

raised, is the fresh water tank. Housed in its own compartment is the special Devon plastic tank that has handles to allow it to be carried or pushed on the wheels set in the base. The translucent tank is graduated in one gallon steps up to six gallons; however, if filled to the top, the tank will hold nearly seven gallons. The submersible electric pump is fitted into the top of the tank to seal it and the whole compartment is screened from outside view by a curtain.

Over the engine compartment is a full width plastic box for additional stowage and, on top of its lid, is a 5in thick cushion upholstered to match the living area seats. This forms one third of the main double bed. To provide the other two thirds of the bed, the front edge of the rearmost seat is lifted and pulled towards you and the seat automatically flattens to give a 6ft x 3ft 7in bed. The same easy method, in reverse, will restore the seat. Above the engine compartment is a full width roof locker with a drop-lid and, over the sink, just ahead of the wardrobe, is another, but smaller, roof locker with a drop-lid.

Beige coloured carpet is used to line the walls of the living quarters and brown carpet is fitted on the floor. Fluorescent light units are fitted above the sliding doorway and on the cant rail opposite the door, whilst another unit is fitted on the roof for use by the occupants of the 'upstairs' beds. All windows in the bodysell are of safety glass and are not double-glazed.

Living in the Caravette

Preparing a meal was not quite as difficult as first appearance suggested but it means utilizing the table and the divided work-top over the sink unit. With a meal finished, it was found the sliding door had to be opened to release one of the catches to allow the sink unit to be moved forward. Then, when washing up, it was discovered that due to the lack of a means of locking it in position, the whole sink unit could start to slide back to its 'stowed' position. ▶

VOLKSWAGEN/DEVON CARAVETTE

As indicated earlier, preparing the double bed was 'child's play' and it proved to be a very comfortable bed indeed. The 'upstairs' bed was not too difficult to get into — using the sink unit as a step — but it was not used on the test. Experience tended to suggest this bedding was really for the younger generation.

The front, box seat does not become part of a bed and this is useful, as it can be used by the person who makes the morning cuppa which, incidentally, can be prepared without causing disturbance to those still in bed.

In dining mode, the Caravette gives ample room and good comfort and, during the test, we were able to use the free-standing table outdoors on several occasions.

Base Vehicle

The Volkswagen Transporter used for the test Caravette was fitted with the 1913cc, four cylinder, horizontally-opposed engine, which had a compression ratio of 8.6:1 and delivered 78bhp at 4600rpm. The rear-mounted engine drives the rear wheels through a five-speed gearbox and a differential with a final drive ratio of 4.86:1.

Independent suspension is used throughout with Macpherson struts at the front and semi-trailing arms with coil springs fitted at the rear. Telescopic shock absorbers are fitted at the front and rear.

The braking system employs a vacuum servo to assist the dual circuit hydraulic system that has discs on the front wheels and drums on the rear. The handbrake operates the rear drums through a mechanical linkage.

With a 13¼ gallon fuel tank located beneath the cab floor, to the rear of the spare wheel cradle, the Caravette should be able to cruise for about 300 miles on a single tankful of two-star fuel.

Gaining access to the engine compartment is a little laborious, inasmuch as it requires the removal of the mattress cushion and stowage box from the top of the engine cover along with the disconnection of the submersible pump and the removal of the water tank. After that the catches can be released and the cover removed to reveal a neat, well-filled compartment. Most items needing regular attention are convenient to reach; however, the air cleaner has to be removed to reach one of the spark plugs. There is no need to go through this procedure to check the oil level or replenish it, as the dipstick and oil filler are accessible by pulling down the hinged rear numberplate; it would have been helpful if the spring could have been 'locked open' during this task.

The unitary constructed steel bodyshell that is the base for this conversion is well finished and feels solid. Its components are well-ried and functioned perfectly throughout the test.

Driving the Caravette

The driving position is well laid out with all the controls in convenient positions. Seating was comfortable for long journeys and the low level of both wind and mechanical noise contributed towards the lack of fatigue experienced on a long run.

Handling was excellent insofar as the rack and pinion steering gave a good feel of the road and excellent precision with 4 turns of the wheel between the locks. Whilst the firm suspension offered a good quality of riding comfort and roadholding with little roll on fast cornering, I was a little surprised at the Caravette's susceptibility to crosswinds.

Volkswagen have chosen an odd layout for the 'gate' on the gear change for their five-speed gearbox. Unlike most five-speed boxes, where the gear lever movement is spring-loaded towards the centre of the gate (usually opposite 3rd and 4th), VW have spring-loaded the entry into reverse and first in much the same way as for the crawler gears on HGVs. Although I have driven numerous vehicles with five-speed gearboxes, I must admit this particular

example is certainly not my favourite. Having said that, the gearshift was both smooth and positive despite the length of the linkage.

Light and positive pedal pressures on the footbrake returned 74 per cent efficiency (seems about standard for motorcaravans) whilst the handbrake returned 34 per cent efficiency.

The Caravette felt well balanced under all conditions met during the test and, with the stowage space being fairly well distributed throughout the vehicle, I would not expect the 49/51 weight distribution at kerb weight to be altered too much when fully laden.

Conclusions

Some may feel that at £11 769 the Caravette is expensive; however, one must remember the price of the base vehicle is quite high and accounts for the bulk of the price. The Caravette is a well thought out conversion which, as a four berth motorcaravan, is best suited to family use with two adults and two children. It is a vehicle that can be used as the family car when not required for recreational purposes, and the ability to 'change-over' the front 'box-seat' gives a six-seater vehicle. One minor point worth mentioning is the number of holes in the bodyshell (these belong to the original van body) that are accessible and should have grommets fitted in them to prevent damage to little fingers.

Specification

Engine: Four cylinder, horizontally-opposed, 1913cc, OHV.

Compression ratio, 8.6:1 delivering 78bhp (DIN) at 4600rpm.

Mounted at rear, driving rear wheels.

Transmission: five-speed with synchromesh on all forward gears. Single dry plate clutch, hydraulically-operated. Final drive ratio of 4.86:1.

Suspension: Front: Independent, coil springs, wishbones and shock absorbers. Anti-roll bar. Rear: Independent, semi-trailing arms, coil springs and shock absorbers. Double-jointed drive shafts.

Brakes: Dual circuit, hydraulic with vacuum-servo assistance.

Discs at front and drums at rear.

Steering: Rack and pinion.

Tyres: 185R-14

Battery: 12 volt, 50 amp/hr

Measurements: Wheelbase, 8ft 0¼in (2.45m); Length, 14ft 10in (4.57m); Width, 6ft 0½in (1.83m); Height, 7ft 2½in (2.2m); Interior width, 5ft 2in (1.58m); Interior height, 5ft 3¼in (1.6m) (roof down), 7ft 0½in (2.13m) (roof elevated); Length behind cab, 8ft 5¼in (2.59m); Main bed, 6ft x 3ft 7in (1.83m x 1.1m); Roof beds, 3ft 9in x 3ft 1in (1.14m x 0.93m) each; Wardrobe height, 3ft 4in (1.01m), width, 2ft 1in (0.62m), depth, 1ft 4¾in (0.43m); Dimensions of area within elevated roof, Length, 8ft 0in (2.44m); Width, 3ft 11in (1.2m); Depth, 2ft 0in (0.61m); Table, 2ft 11in x 1ft 9in (0.9m x 0.53m); Driver's maximum leg length, 3ft 3½in (1.01m); Turning circle, 35ft 4in (10.77m); Kerb weight, 3770 lbs (1.71 tonnes); Front axle, 1830 lbs (0.83 tonnes); Rear axle, 1940 lbs (0.88 tonnes).

Performance: Maximum speed in gears: 4th, 78 mph; 5th, 80 mph. Acceleration through the gears: 0—60 mph in 22.0 secs. Braking efficiency: Footbrake at 30 mph, 74 per cent. Handbrake at 20 mph, 32 per cent.

PRICE: £11 769-00

The test vehicle was supplied by: Devon Conversions (CP) Ltd, Vulcan Works, Water Lane, Exeter, Devon. EX2 8BY.

Editor's note: It should perhaps be pointed out that many MMM readers, on the advice of Consultant Dave Farmer, run their Volkswagens on 3 or 4 star petrol. □

HEATER BOOSTERS For VOLKSWAGEN

1600 CARAVETTE - 1965-1979

BEETLE - 1965 onwards

£7 per pr. + £1 P&P JUST CLIP ON

WILFRED MAYER, 54 LYNNWOOD ROAD
MANCHESTER M19 1RJ Tel 061-432 4481

OVERDRIVE

There is an overdrive for your van. Any make and model, fitting service now available. New workshops one mile from M25 (Junc. 28). Access and Visa.

Phone Ron on Hornchurch 54162 or
Ingrebourne 71210

R & D MOTORHOMES

"Cutty Sark" Renault Conversions

Stockist of D.I.Y. Equipment

Acrylic Double Glazed Windows

Combined Blinds - Insect Screens for Windows

Furniture Fittings & Trims

Tanks, Pumps, Cookers etc.

SAE for details to:

29 Low Road, Drayton, Norwich
0603-860276