Autohomes Merlin

Plus points: Smooth drive, practical two-berth floor plan, generous payload

Minus points: Standard looks, ride not totally rattle-free, not really suitable for rear seat passengers

An overcab coachbuilt motorhome with the twin virtues of a quality base vehicle and a very competitive price was our instant assessment of the Merlin. Strictly a two-berth, the living quarters feature inward-facing settees right at the back of the 'van and washroom opposite kitchen in the centre.

The test vehicle came with Volkswagen's optional five-cylinder 2.4-litre diesel engine mated to a four-speed gearbox, which will give it novelty value as a secondhand buy, as not that many were subsequently produced in this format.

Volkswagen (and Ford) are among the few major base vehicle manufacturers who do offer automatic transmission as an extra; the standard power-assisted steering, too, is a boon for anyone who perhaps can't cope with the manual work.

We were impressed with what we referred to as the "quality feel" of the cab. "That we were still leaping enthusiastically into the cab at every opportunity even on the final day says much for the contribution from both VW and Autohomes to this neat package," we said in our report in June 1995. This latest version of the Merlin also conformed to the National Caravan Council habitation code for motorcaravans, while Autohomes are Volkswagen-recognised manufacturers.

Performance and economy felt better than our subsequent figures, but the engine was new and was expected to loosen. Even so, comfortable cruising was in the 50-60mph range and the overall economy worked out at 21mpg, but mid-20s would probably be more typical. We did praise the Merlin's excellent road manners at all speeds.

Merlin's outward appearance is plain, although the maroon graphics and trim help to differentiate it from the crowds.

On site, the rear lounge does allow a super view out on three sides, and the four seating cushions were fairly easy to convert to a double bed which, because of its location, means the kitchen and washroom facilities are easy to access at all times. There is also a double bed over the cab, although typically headroom is fairly restricted.

Among the standard equipment, removable cab carpet was noted as a practical feature, as was the single key operating all doors — eg toilet locker, gas locker, rear "boot" — except the cab.

We said the washroom had "all the right facilities" — Thetford Cassette toilet, shower and a fixed washbasin, with a sturdy GRP floor — although space to shower in was at a premium and the curtain tended to cling when wet.

Similarly, the kitchen was well-equipped but would have benefited from the provision of more work surface and maybe a larger fridge.

The kitchen also missed an oven as standard, and the absence of rear protection was another sign of cost paring. Positive locking for some of the interior cupboards/drawers would have been appreciated. ●

Nick Harding

The Which verdict:
"A nice, compact coachbuilt at a nice, compact price."

Spec check Spec check Spec check

Make: Autohomes
Model: Merlin
Type: Overcab coachbuilt
Payload: 700kg*

Base vehicle
Make: Volkswagen Transporter
Type: Chassis cab
Power unit: 2,370cc, five-cylinder diesel producing 78bhp @ 3,700rpm

Conversion
Basic construction: GRP cab/caravan interface. Bonded construction sides and rear
Fresh water capacity: 54 litres
Waste water capacity: 36 litres
Gas storage capacity: Exterior access locker takes two x 7kg butane or two x 6kg propane cylinders
Water heating: Carver Cascade 2
Space heating: Maxol Montana 1800C
Refrigerator: Electrolux RM4206 operating from gas/12V DC/240V AC
Cooking facilities: Spinflo three-ring hob and grill
Toilet: Thetford Cassette with electric flush
Electrical equipment: Mains input to Zig X-3 split charger and Plug-In Systems CEC 225 circuit breaker. Two 240V sockets. 12V socket and TV aerial socket. 75ah second battery. Zig control panel
Lighting: Two x twin-tube fluorescent units, single tube fluorescent over kitchen, twin-bulb unit in overcab bed, single-tube unit in washroom
Standard equipment also includes: Smoke alarm, fire extinguisher, fire blanket, TV table, two vanity mirrors, ladder for overcab bed, roller blinds for all caravan windows, two scatter cushions, cutlery drawer, cocktail cabinet, crockery holder in kitchen locker, retainer net for overcab bed, sprung interior cushions downstairs,
Windows: Double-glazed acrylic throughout caravan
Upholstery: Capiro Milano velour
Overall length: 5.41m (17ft 9in)
Overall width: 2.15m (7ft 0½in)
Overall height: 2.72m (9ft)
Maximum internal height: 1.87m (6ft 1½in)
Bed sizes: Overcab 1.96m x 1.04m (6ft 5in x 3ft 5in); main double 2.01m x 1.35m (6ft 7in x 4ft 5in)

Test dates: June 1995 (Which Motorcaravan)

Manufacturer: Autohomes, Delves Lane, Consett, Co Durham DH8 7LG, tel: 01207 503477.

www.vwT4camper.info - a useful website for owners and enthusiasts of VW T4 Transporter Campervans