



AUTOHOMES EXPLORER 4

on lwb 2.4-litre 5-cylinder diesel Volkswagen

Mike Jago commandeers the 4-berth for MMM's usual thorough road test

Right from its 'birth' in 1992, in Poole, Dorset, the Explorer made an immediate impression with its extensive use of GRP mouldings to the exterior – luton, cab interface, one-piece roof, rear panel and side skirts. The smooth lines and aerodynamic coachbuilt frontage successfully combined with the then new Volkswagen's sleek cab to give a totally integrated look. In fact, the finished product looked very impressive – one might have expected to find a designer label hanging from a cab mirror!

Naturally, since Elddis Caravans' takeover of the Autohomes outfit, one would expect to see a few changes; for 1994 two versions of the Explorer were introduced – a 2-berth based on the swb Transporter chassis cab and a lwb 4-berth (the subject of this report).

Externals

Simple graphics consist of a thin dark blue line at roof level and broader coachlines on three sides at headlamp height. The dark blue of the GRP rear bumper and side skirts is carried through the cab doors to the front spoiler. It strikes me that the overall effect of the graphics makes the 'van appear deceptively shorter than the nineteen and a bit feet she really is. This is not just 'estate agent' jargon; I really did pace along the side of the body one morning to satisfy myself that overnight rain hadn't caused just a *little* shrinkage.

Good quality Seitz acrylic double-glazed windows are fitted all round the caravan – three top-hinged, three fixed (caravan door and each side

of the luton), plus one slider on the offside – ideal for keeping rear seat passengers cool when on the move.

The lockable fresh water filler cap, Carver Cascade 2GE water heater flue and Thetford Cassette toilet servicing hatch can all be found on the offside, while opposite is the locking fuel filler cap, TV aerial point, mains hook-up point, caravan battery (75 amp hr fitted), gas bottle compartment (2 x 7kg) and finally, towards the rear, the stable type caravan door.

There are no externally-accessed storage compartments (gas excepted) – something I would perhaps be looking for on a 19ft coachbuilt – but a climb up the aluminium fixed rear ladder reveals useful built-in roof bars from the luton rearwards. From this position the rounded profiles of the GRP roof can be clearly seen; the rear of the luton flattens out at a higher level than the three projecting roof vents, helping to keep wind buffet and other noise to a minimum.

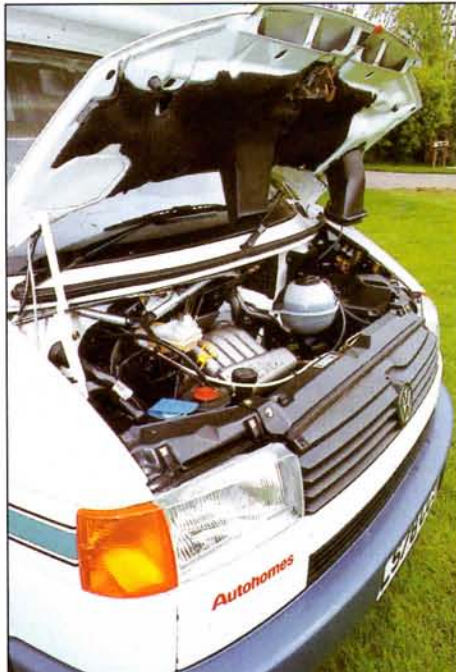
The attractively-shaped rear panel, also of GRP, contains the fridge flue and various vents, while below the rear bumper (with flush fitting light clusters) are a pair of (necessary) wind-down corner steadies, a tap for draining the waste water tank and the vehicle's spare wheel.

No MMM test would be complete without the assistant editor donning his overalls to reconnoitre a motorcaravan's lower ground floor – and here his only observations were the location of the spare wheel in a cradle under the rear of the body and a large screw-on cap (for cleaning purposes) fitted to the base of the centrally-positioned waste water tank.

AUTOHOMES EXPLORER 4



Volkswagen's inviting cab, with wide step and good storage, has been further enhanced by Autohomes' addition of fitted carpet and full upholstery to the captain's chairs.



5-cylinder diesel is neatly shoehorned into uncluttered engine bay and, lest you should forget, is clearly marked in large lettering – 2.4-litre diesel. General servicing points to left. Vehicle battery under cover on right.



Business-like rear end has fixed ladder, wind-down steadies and emptying point for waste water tank. Exhaust tail pipe supported by strap looks a bit ugly though.



TV aerial point, mains hook-up immediately left of caravan battery, large gas bottle compartment, stable door and clip-on wheel trims. High-level marker lamps are not repeated at front of body.



Grey interior has working parts highlighted in black. Fresh-air vents in centre of dash allow cab occupants to keep cool heads while toasting their feet. Clear instruments include analogue clock.

A plus point is the tank's capacity of 15½ gallons: just a gallon short of the inboard fresh water tank. There is nothing worse than having to pack the 'van in order to move to a dumping point long before the 'fresh' needs replenishing.

I do like marker lamps fitted to a coachbuilt motorcaravan; it does warn other motorists of the vehicle's size (and shape) when driving on narrow roads at night. The Explorer sports such lamps only at the rear.

Pull lever . . .

. . . on left of dash, and up pops the bonnet. There's no mistaking that this VW is powered by a 2.4-litre diesel – it's written in large letters on top of the engine! The compact unit allows plenty of space for general servicing; washer bottle, power-assisted steering fluid reservoir, oil filler, dipstick and brake fluid are all grouped together on the left, while coolant expansion chamber and vehicle battery can be found to the right.

Autohomes have located the 12V relays for the split-charging system and refrigerator, together with a fusebox, beneath the right hand bulkhead. The wiring job is very neat – but if a fully enclosed fusebox (with a common busbar to avoid so many live connections – therefore less to go wrong) is not commercially available, then the least I would expect is for the female blade connectors to be fully insulated.

A layer of insulation material has been attached beneath the bonnet and together with an engine undertray helps to subdue diesel decibels. There was no sign of a compartment light (such as I'd seen fitted to a petrol model previously tested); apparently this has now been discontinued by Volkswagen.

While searching for the vehicle jack and tools (stored under the passenger seat plinth) I came across the T4 owner's handbook. A quick

glance through found the answer to a question commonly asked by correspondents in MMM's pages: *At what mileage should the cambelt be replaced?* According to VW: 2.4-litre diesel – 80 000 miles. But check with a dealer – there may be a time/age limit.

The cab

A wide and low step makes for easy entry to the cab and the chunky-looking doors, with deep storage pockets and sensibly-sized handles, clunk reassuringly as they shut.

Little bare paintwork shows as virtually all surfaces are covered with light grey rounded plastic mouldings matching the smooth lines of the dashboard. All working features (winders, handles, vents, switches, gearchange etc) are coloured in contrasting black and give the cab a very functional and pleasing feel.

Captain's style seats, incorporating adjustable head and armrests, have been fully upholstered, by Autohomes, in a velour to match the caravan. The converters have banished any remaining hint of commercial vehicle by covering the seat bases and adding a medium grey fitted carpet with bound edges.

Seats are also adjustable for reach and rake, and taller drivers (and passengers) will be pleased to find that there are no obstructions at the front of the caravan (immediately behind the cab) preventing their full rearwards movement. Coupled with height-adjustable upper seatbelt anchorage points, owners will appreciate the 'car-like' comfort offered by the VW cockpit. Swivel seat bases have not been included in the specification and are probably not necessary – although as an owner I would be tempted to add a swivel to the passenger seat. Not only does this add an extra throne when entertaining – but also, in my view,

a good cab seat fitted with head and armrests can be one of the most comfortable places to relax in any 'van.

Storage is more than ample, with deep door pockets, a large glovebox (illuminated and lockable) and two handy cubby holes positioned each side of the steering wheel. The areas under and behind the seats will become a useful home for all those vital bits and pieces motorcaravanners seem to collect.

The test vehicle was supplied with an excellent Panasonic stereo radio/cassette player (removable for security), which provided a good range of tone via flush-fitting dashtop-mounted speakers.

At first, with the luton bed in position over the cutaway cab, I found it a slight struggle to move from the driver's seat to the caravan. But with a bit of practice, and a fiddle with the positioning of the armrests, I soon got the hang of it. To avoid strain of the writer's bulk, however, the rearmost section of the luton bed could be hinged-up, and by means of press studs on leather straps, clipped and stored in a vertical position. This allowed walk-through access to and from the cab – and we were still able to store bedding for three (along with the spare bed cushions) in the remaining front portion of the luton.

From the driver's seat

Having collected the Explorer from Autohomes' dealers Plymouth Motor Caravans, and en route to the adjacent superstore to brim fill the fuel tank, I made a quick unscheduled halt to examine the contents below the bonnet. So quiet and free-revving was this 2.4-litre diesel engine that I hadn't wanted the embarrassment of pulling into the incorrect fuel bay.

Just to add to my confusion the 5-cylinder indirect-injection unit fired into life on the first turn of the key – with no evidence of a glow plug warning lamp. There is a warning lamp, which lit up for only about five seconds before the first motoring trip of the day. It then, generally, disappeared until a long period at rest required just a few seconds of combustion chamber 'heat-up' before starting.

Heading up the M5 into a slight headwind, the Explorer refused to top more than about 60mph, although we didn't push it as she had only delivery mileage on the clock. The motor felt slightly tight but never strained – a few hundred miles under our belts and things were much improved. Hazardous a guess at a top speed (on the flat) of somewhere in the low seventies I would point those who require a realistic motorway legal limit cruiser in the direction of the optional 2.5-litre petrol engine.

This is not to say the normally-aspirated diesel is not lively; those who don't mind using the slick gearchange to the full will find driving the large coachbuilt, especially on country roads, a real pleasure. Others, who are against too much swapping of cogs, will find the VW a little like the 2-litre petrol Ford – fine on the flat, but a slouch on hills.

I did like the (standard) power-assisted steering which allowed effortless manoeuvring in town and supplied plenty of feel on the open road. Only passing motorway coaches caused the Explorer, with its all-round independent suspension, to rock a little but a slight correction at the steering wheel was all that was needed to keep the outfit on a straight and steady course.

Although the coachbuilt suffers from some body roll, everything seems under control. After the first few miles of driving, one gains enough confidence in the Explorer to power into and around corners without lifting off the gas. The lwb chassis plays its part in the good handling characteristics, but most of all, weight distribution is a deciding factor – Autohomes have obviously paid attention to this very important detail.

Foot controls are well placed and light in operation, but I found the brakes on this particular vehicle – although progressive – to be lacking any bite whatsoever. In order to bring the 'van to a quick halt very heavy

pressure was required. However, like engines and tyres, brake pads and shoes do need a degree of running-in before optimum performance is attained. I'm pleased to report that the anchors were showing signs of improvement before the end of the week-long test.

Forward visibility from the Transporter's cab is excellent; the advantages of being able to look over traffic, hedges and other obstructions are obvious. The interior central rear view mirror is more or less redundant; the rear window (as all the caravan windows) is set a little high to give any useful view of traffic on either side or behind. The truck-style door mirrors, however, compensate and do an adequate, if not excellent, job.

On smooth surfaces motoring proved extremely quiet – with a distinct lack of wind buffet from the overcab area or rattles from the caravan. In fact on occasion, a slight hint of road noise – from a fixed vent on the forward-facing side of the recessed caravan step – could be heard above the sound of the sweetly purring diesel engine!

Cab comfort could not be faulted; the Transporter should prove to be a very relaxed long-distance tourer. Heating and ventilation is up to the mark and there is the benefit of two centrally-positioned independent fresh air vents. This allows the cab occupants to receive a blast of hot air to the feet while directing cool air to the face. Whatever the weather outside, a stuffy, drowsiness-inducing atmosphere is now a thing of the past – at least for motorcaravan specification T4 owners.

There were no complaints from our rear seat passengers on a short trial journey – although there were reservations about the suitability of the dinette's low seat back for longer trips. They made use of the two lap restraints fitted to the forward-facing dinette seat and enjoyed the smooth ride. Restraints can be tucked away into the seat box when not in use.

The overall economy achieved of 27.5mpg was quite pleasing as the test included all types of driving – fast motorway, negotiating narrow country lanes and short runs to the local supermarket. 30mpg-plus should not be out of the question on longer tours.

The caravan

Those who remember the original 1992 Explorer will find major changes to the layout. Entry is now via a nearside rear stable door which leads directly to an across-the-rear kitchen and corner washroom. A neat touch is the provision of a manually-operated courtesy-type lamp on the wall of the caravan step – most helpful when returning from the local hostelry after dark.

Forward of the door and opposite the wardrobe is a furniture unit with table top which effectively encloses the exterior-accessed gas bottle compartment.

Occupying the front half of the 'van are the lounge, dining and sleeping facilities. On the nearside is a side settee which forms a single (or day) bed. Opposite, a conventional fore/aft dinette converts to a large single or (with extensions) a double bed. A further double berth is available over the cab.

We don't need to be mathematicians to realise that the above adds up to a grand total of five berths – in a motorcaravan designated as a four berth. The simple explanation concerns the available payload of the conversion – between 410 and 512kg (see specification table) – which Autohomes say complies with the NCC/SMMT Habitation Code's guidelines for an occupancy of four.

Lounging and dining

Autohomes have plumped for a neutral grey upholstery colour. This is successfully set off by a hint of blue in the carpeted bulkheads, ceiling and floor, together with the dusky pink of the lined curtains, and light oak furniture.



Unusual grey upholstery with corded edges combines well with dusky-pink curtains and trim, and the light oak finish of the furniture. We felt seat backs to be a little low and made full use of the four scatter cushions supplied.



Caravan entrance leads directly to rear kitchen next to corner bathroom. Table-top opposite wardrobe doubles as a worktop and/or TV station.

AUTOHOMES EXPLORER 4



Front of luton bed hinges up to provide walk-through-to-cab facility. Remaining space in overcab was large enough to store our bedding (for three), spare bed cushions and ladder.

Seating, in mid grey with a small blue/pink/white geometric pattern, has a good firm filling (in fact the base cushions are sprung) and is finished with blue/silver corded edges. The front section of all base cushions incorporates a narrow plywood base fitted with retainer blocks. This ensures they stay firmly in place when being used.

Four matching scatter cushions are supplied and were used to the full, as we felt that all backrests could have benefited from a bit more height. The versatile layout though, does allow a variety of feet-up lounging positions and good space for entertaining.

The free-standing dining table is stored on the right hand wall of the wardrobe and can be removed through a separate narrow door. It is best set up by first inverting across the dinette seating in order to unclip its legs. Solidly made, but not too heavy, the table top has a cream textured marble-effect laminated surface and deep wood edging. It is also of a good height and size for four diners.

It was while sitting on the inside forward-facing dinette seat, munching on some fish fingers, that I became aware of a strange person opposite, also munching fish fingers – *the same fish fingers!* I'm not convinced about the usefulness of the mirrors fitted to the forward bulkheads. I'd be tempted to replace them with Old Masters, or etchings of past Autohomes' models, or...

Good quality cassette flyscreens/reflective blinds are fitted to all opening caravan windows and these are supplemented with lined curtains in the lounge. Further ventilation is supplied by two 14-inch 5-way roof vents with integral flyscreens and night blinds (rather fiddly in operation).

The cab curtains draw around the top of the windscreen and can either be left to drop free or fixed to the dashboard by means of four press studs, thus helping to eliminate draughts.

Space heating is by means of a Carver 3000S convector heater (with the luxury of electronic ignition), which has a Trumatic blown air

(warm or cool) system supplying outlets to the rear dinette seat base and washroom. The Truma control is situated next to the Carver water heater switch on the wardrobe's forward-facing wall. The flue runs through the wardrobe to a small chimney on the roof.

General storage

All underseat areas can be accessed either from the top, by removing the cushions, or from floor-level drop-down cupboard fronts. The dinette seat bases contain the 16½ gallon fresh water tank and pump, and the Carver Cascade storage heater with associated plumbing. This leaves little room for any but the smallest odds and ends. Larger items will find a home under the settee where only the caravan battery compartment intrudes.

On both sides of the lounge there are three identical overhead lockers with shallow lips, positive brass-effect push-button catches and latching stays. No internal shelves had been added but each locker was big enough to take my two camera bags side by side – a personal yardstick used to test capacity.

The wardrobe is also of good size, and has a side-to-side hanging rail with a decent drop of 46 inches to its false floor. Removing the base panel reveals the hiding place for the Zig X-2 battery charger and RCD (mains electricity safety device).

Lighting

The Explorer's interior incorporates an unusual lighting scheme. Six individual 8-watt fluorescent mini-tubes are located flush with the overhead lockers at ceiling level, plus one each over the wardrobe and drinks cabinet. Each of two switches on the Zig control panel brings on a different set of four lamps (two to each side) and provides more than adequate lighting for most purposes.

A neat touch is a hole drilled into the recessed casing of each lamp, thus lighting the contents of the lockers.

However, die-hards among us, who rely solely on the caravan's battery power (rather than hooking up to mains electricity) may find that four (or eight) lamps left on for any length of time could be an unacceptable drain on the battery. Perhaps the number of switches could be increased to three – allowing the option of switching just two lamps for general background lighting.

All is not lost though. Autohomes have fitted four individually-switched swivelling spotlights beneath the overhead lockers, to each corner of the lounge. We used these to good effect for dining and reading, and found that their switches could be reached from the lower bed(s).

More conventional fluorescent units are fitted above the hob and in the bathroom, while the contents of the cocktail cabinet are automatically lit on opening its right hand door.

In some motorcaravans the light for the overcab bed is barely adequate for reading. The Explorer's is very bright. The light is of the low-energy 2D type, contained in a diffused square-shaped case.

Bedmaking

The lower dinette bed is made by first pulling out wooden slats from their wall storage box, so bridging the gap between the seats. Cushions are then simply rearranged to form a firm mattress of 6ft length and 3ft 2in width. This bed extends to a 4ft double by drawing out metal extension



Sturdy free-standing table, with laminated top and deep solid wood edges, can also be used outside. Crockery for four is supplied as standard. Caravan windows are double-glazed acrylic and are complemented by good-quality cassette flyscreens/ blinds.



Identical high-level lockers have shallow lips, strong stays and secure brass-effect push-button catches.



Shown above the offside overhead lockers (and nearside – reflected in the wardrobe's three-quarter length mirror) are a few of the diffused light fittings.



Secure wooden flat-runged ladder assists climb to luton bed which has a small fixed window to either end but no direct ventilation. Safety boards (removable) and privacy curtains divide upper boudoir from remainder of caravan.



A narrow gangway remains when side extensions and spare cushions are used to convert dinette to double bed. Luton bed ladder does not obstruct. Thanks to bulkhead there is little danger of bedding coming into contact with a hot outer casing of Carver heater.



Good-sized wardrobe has separate narrow door (right) to aid removal of dining table. RCD, mains fuses and battery charger can be found in compartment beneath hinged wardrobe floor.

frames from the seat bases and filling the extra width with a piece of shaped plywood and two spare oblong cushions. In this configuration there is a very narrow gangway left between bed and side settee. Thanks to a wooden headboard/footboard there is no danger of bedding coming into contact with the outer casing (possibly hot) of the Carver convector heater.

One of the cushions (the rear seat's backrest) has a U-shaped hole, cutaway to enable seat restraints to pass through from the lower frame. This cushion could easily be placed at the end of the bed but, just to be awkward, I tried it positioned centrally and it made no difference to a very comfortable night's sleep. We found the density of the firmish 6in deep foam to be a good balance for both lounging and sleeping.

The overcab double can be left made-up if desired although we preferred to fold the front section away in order to use the walk-through-to-cab facility. The carpet-lined chamber has two fixed side windows with lined curtains but no direct ventilation. The large insulated gap between inner and outer roof shells forms wide window sills – and handy shelves! Access to the bed is via a flat-runged wooden ladder which has good secure fixing points. Safety boards, rather than a safety net, are installed to prevent the little (or the big) 'uns falling out at night. These can be unbolted and removed. Perhaps if the larger of the two was fitted with a socket (or legs) it could double as an occasional coffee table!

Size-wise, the bed would suit two children or two small adults – remembering that headroom, although a good 23½in at entry, does reduce to a low 10in right at the luton front.

The reasons for describing the settee as a day bed have been explained, but by removing the backrest its 2ft width makes it suitable for an alternative or extra bed. As we required only two berths we preferred to make use of the settee plus the dinette made as a single – leaving the full width of the gangway free.

The kitchen

The Explorer's layout provides a rear kitchen adjacent to the caravan door, and it would be difficult to imagine how it could be better equipped.

Cooking equipment consists of a Spinflo four-burner hob and grill with counterbalanced glass lid, and a Maxol Monte Carlo ti3000 glass-fronted oven. All have electronic ignition.

It was with the hob that we found a couple of potential problems, and this formed our only real criticism of the Explorer.

Firstly, the single igniter is tucked away in the rear corner behind the row of burner controls. As both hands are required to light a burner (one to depress the individual burner knob, the other to press the igniter) it was all too easy to light the wrong burner – and sod's law dictates that it will always be the one directly below your outstretched arm. In this confined space single-handed operation would be much safer. We thought the process to be too awkward – so gave in and resorted to using a taper.

Secondly, there's a possibility that the sink cover (in its lowered worktop mode) could be singed because of its close proximity to the right hand burners. Elddis are reluctant to spoil the look of the kitchen

by providing a stainless steel cover – and, in compliance with the NCC/SMMT Habitation Code, have fitted a sticker which warns the user to raise the cover while cooking (a sticker which, in a damp area, is likely to detach itself). We were frustrated by having a worktop which couldn't be used when it was most needed.



Well-equipped kitchen with electronic ignition to four burners, grill and oven. Good variety of storage should prove adequate. Smoke alarm, fire extinguisher and blanket are standard.

AUTOHOMES EXPLORER 4



Above the gas bottle compartment is a handy drawer, worktop and shelf with fiddle rail. Below large drinks cabinet is the Zig 12V control panel, mains socket, mains water heater switch and combined TV aerial/12V socket.



Bright and airy washroom has Thetford Cassette toilet with electric flush, tip-up basin and shower with separate controls. Heavy-duty shower curtain partly obstructs blown-air heating outlet.



A neat hole drilled in the rear of each lamp enclosure illuminates the contents of the overhead lockers.



Pictured under the bonnet are the relays and fusebox for the caravan's 12V electrics. A tidy wiring job – but I'd prefer the female blade connectors to be fully insulated.

A matching drop-down cupboard front below the oven opens to reveal floor-level storage and individual shut-off valves for the gas appliances.

The area directly below the square, cream enamel sink (with right hand drainer and Whale mixer tap) offers some useful storage. Flat cooking pans and smaller items will fit beneath the sink bulge, while to the right are two pull-out compartments – a deep cutlery drawer and three tiers of wire baskets.

The Electrolux RM4207 60-litre refrigerator has 3-way operation (12V while motoring, 240V or gas when on site) and the advantage of electronic ignition with automatic restart when running on gas.

Above the range are two forward-facing overhead lockers secured with push-button catches. The right hand locker contains a full set of Biltons crockery for four, while the other was large enough to cope with most of the groceries we needed for our short trip.

Making up for the lack of fixed worktop is a furniture unit forward of the caravan door. This has a table top, with drawer under, which doubles as work surface for the cook and, with a 240V and combined 12V/aerial socket adjacent, is the obvious location for a TV set. This is the only mains socket fitted to the Explorer and I foresee occasions when use of appliances will almost certainly clash. Ideally, further sockets would be required in the kitchen and living areas.

Electrical controls are grouped neatly on the bulkhead and include the switch for mains operation of the Carver water heater and a Zig Mk III control panel incorporating a fresh water tank level gauge and a warning LED for a full waste tank.



Space to the right has been formed into a small alcove with shelf and fiddle rail, while above is a plush-lined drinks cabinet containing four wine glasses and straps to secure bottles – but unfortunately no wine!

It was reassuring to note the presence of a fire extinguisher, fire blanket and smoke alarm – all supplied as standard.

The bathroom

Taking up relatively little space in the rear offside corner is the well-equipped washroom. As in many other conversions using a similar end-kitchen layout, it must be remembered that access cannot be gained to the loo while the grill flap (or oven door) is open.

With all-white fittings, walls in a pale floral design, an opening window with translucent blind and a roof vent, the compartment feels bright and airy by day and is almost as well lit after dark, by courtesy of a single fluorescent lamp.

A tip-up sink – with concealed mixer tap, toothbrush holders and soap dish – hinges down over the Thetford Cassette toilet (boasting an electrically-operated flush). A small mirror-fronted vanity unit with sliding doors (flexible fiddle rails prevent the contents from spilling out) is supplemented with an open shelf and further soap dish.

The shower has an independent hot and cold supply, an adjustable-for-height shower head with on/off and variable spray control, and yet another soap dish! The shower curtain is made from a heavy-duty pale apricot material and can be drawn around all sides of the compartment.

Other accessories include a second (wall-mounted) toilet roll holder, towel ring, non-slip rubber-backed carpet for the shower tray and most essential for off-season comfort – a blown warm-air outlet.

Conclusion

We enjoyed our short time with the Explorer.

VW's 5-cylinder diesel engine is a refined economical unit and surprisingly quiet at any speed. What the 2.4-litre may lack in out-and-out performance is more than made up for by the comfortable cab, the smooth ride and a slick gearchange – all of which combine to make the Transporter a pleasure to drive.

Extensive use of rounded, aerodynamic GRP mouldings to the exterior helps to minimise wind noise and buffeting – and gives the Explorer a modern, clean, functional look.

The interior boasts a high level of standard equipment – there's nothing left wanting – except perhaps for a tilt-tolerant fridge and minor alterations to the hob. Fittings are all top quality – no signs of penny-pinching here.

The Explorer represents a new generation in British coachbuilding – and, at the time of writing, there were no comparable conversions built on the low Volkswagen T4 chassis. The main competition, therefore, will come from coachbuilt models of a more traditional shape.

If a coachbuilt motorcaravan on the Volkswagen chassis appeals to you, then the Explorer 4 is certainly worth careful consideration.

It remains among the top contenders on my desirable list – but will the bank manager listen?

I liked

Quiet and economical 2.4-litre diesel engine
Comfortable ride and good handling
Power-assisted steering
Slick gearchange
Good cab storage
Dashboard clock
Independent fresh air vents
Single key for all caravan doors and lockers
Operation of radio without ignition key
Removable radio/cassette
Interior colour scheme
Attractive upholstery with firm cushions

Provision of four scatter cushions
Individual spotlamps for reading
Heating to bathroom
Loo with electric flush
Quality reflective blinds/flyscreens
Secure push-button catches to overhead lockers
Safety equipment as standard
Electronic ignition to all gas appliances
Large waste water tank
Twin gas bottle storage

I would have liked:

Extra power on hills
Front high-level marker lamps
Externally-accessed storage compartment

Relocation of fixed vent on side of caravan step
Higher backrests for caravan seating
Tilt-tolerant fridge
More than one 240V socket
Extra switch to allow a reduction in background lighting
Insulated connectors for under-bonnet 12V caravan electrics

I disliked:

Position of electronic ignition control for hob
Proximity of folding sink-cover to hob



SMMT/ NCC HABITATION
CODE OF PRACTICE 201



APPROVED
MOTOR CARAVAN

Footnote:

Following our usual practice of sending a copy of the road test report to the vehicle supplier prior to publication, we are happy to print the following comments from Elddis's National Sales Manager for motorhomes, Gary Rowlands.

While finding Mr Jago's in-depth road test on the Explorer 4 constructive and informative, I felt I must question his comments regarding performance and braking of this excellent base vehicle.

The vehicle made available for MMM test was fresh off our production line and had not covered more than 100 miles before being taken by transporter to Plymouth Motor Caravans for collection by Mr Jago. 'Running in' seems to be a thing of the past with higher engineering standards, but diesel engines do take longer to loosen up and therefore it is inevitable that performance will be affected until there are a few thousand miles on the clock.

Now, after covering a mere 2500 miles, this Explorer is already achieving a cruising speed in the high seventies with ease.

In reply to the comments regarding the brakes' *lacking any bite whatsoever*, maybe some consideration ought to have been given to this

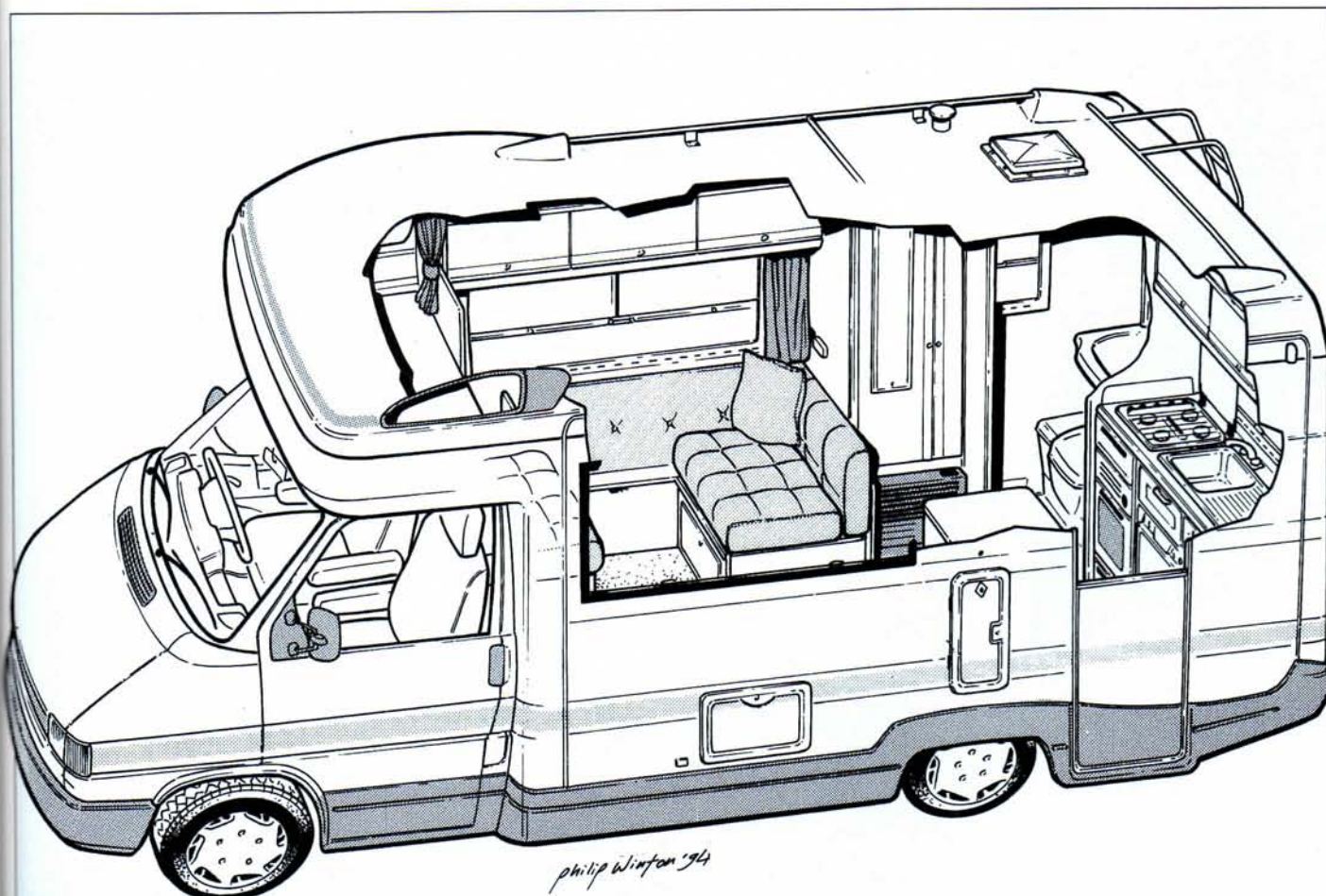
fact and not as stated after a few miles gaining enough confidence to power around corners without lifting off!

I would be only too pleased to make this vehicle available at a future date to gain Mr Jago's comments after it has covered a more respectable mileage.

Gary Rowlands, Elddis Caravans (Consett) Ltd.

Regular readers will already be aware that we only report what we find on a particular vehicle AT THE TIME OF OUR TEST. Inevitably the majority of our test vehicles are brand new; we often comment that better performance/fuel consumption figures can be expected when vehicles are well run-in. As far as braking is concerned, as an experienced driver Mike Jago is unlikely to make the mistake of having to apply his brakes WHILE cornering – and readers will surely expect to find some reference to cornering ability in a full test report. Ed.

Our thanks go to Plymouth Motor Caravans for their co-operation in making arrangements for this test.



Philip Winton '94

SPECIFICATION

The vehicle

Base vehicle & engine type: Volkswagen T4 lwb chassis cab with 2370cc up-front transversely-mounted 5-cylinder in-line water-cooled indirect-injection diesel engine.

Output: 78bhp (57kW) @ 3700rpm

Max torque: 121 lb ft (164Nm) @ 1800-2200rpm

Achieved 30-50mph acceleration time: 3rd & 4th gears: 16 seconds (poor conditions).

Compression ratio: 22.5:1

Gearbox & drive: 5-speed manual, floor change. Front-wheel drive.

Brakes: Front discs and rear drums. Dual-circuit system split front/rear, servo-assisted with load sensing valve. Centrally-located floor-mounted mechanically-operated handbrake.

Steering: Power-assisted. Rack and pinion with collapsible steering column.

Suspension: Independent all round. Front: torsion bars, upper and lower wishbones and short telescopic shock absorbers. Rear: semi-trailing arms, mini coil springs and telescopic shock absorbers.

Tyres fitted: Kleber C2S 195/70 R 15 reinforced tubeless radials.

Spare wheel position: Under body at rear.

Fuel tank capacity/type of fuel: 17.6 gallons (80 litres) diesel.

Fuel consumption during test: 27.5mpg (10.3l/100km)

Instruments: Fuel gauge, coolant temperature, six digit odometer with trip recorder, speedometer and clock.

Warning lamps: Ignition/battery, main beam, parking lights, oil pressure, turn indicators, hazard warning lights, handbrake, foglight, glow plugs.

Windscreen wiper controls: Stalk operated. 2-speed, intermittent and 3-sweep wash/wipe.

Other features: Diesel cold starting aid, instrument dimmer, 4-speed fan-assisted heater, central independent fresh air vents, removable stereo radio cassette player with dash-mounted speakers, cigar lighter and large ashtray, vanity mirror, large door pockets, lockable illuminated glove box. Large central courtesy lamp. Fully upholstered cab seats, adjustable for rake and reach, fitted with head restraints and adjustable armrests. Height-adjustable front seatbelts. Fixed rear ladder and roof bars. Wheeltrims. Rear steadies, Vehicle instruction manual.

The caravan

Body type & construction: Overcab coachbuilt with GRP roof, cab interface/luton, rear section and side skirts. Laminated side walls.

Insulation: Plywood floor. Walls of Styrofoam sandwich with aluminum outer and plywood inner skins. GRP panels filled with glass fibre wool between skins.

Windows & doors: Seven double-glazed acrylic windows - 3 top-hinged, 3 fixed and 1 sliding. Stable-type door at rear nearside.

Additional ventilation: Two 14-inch 5-way roof vents with flyscreens and night blinds. One 10-inch 5-way roof vent with flyscreen in bathroom. Extractor fan over hob.

Blinds/curtains: Cassette blinds/flyscreens to opening windows. Blind to door window. Lined velour curtains to cab, luton and lounge windows. Privacy curtain for overcab bed.

Mains electricity/sockets: 20m hook-up cable. Plug-in-Systems RCD with 5A and 10A MCBs. 240V socket. 240V supply to water heater and fridge. Zig X-2 battery charger.

Batteries & 12V control panel: 72 amp hr vehicle battery. 75 amp hr caravan battery located in compartment on nearside of body. Combined TV aerial and 12V flat-pinned socket. Zig Mk III control panel with battery change-over switch, 5 circuit switches and 4 fuses. 12V supply to fridge via ignition-controlled relay.

Lighting: Courtesy lamps over cab and by caravan step. Eight 8-watt saloon-style diffused fluorescent lights. Single 8w fittings in kitchen and bathroom. 2D fitting for overcab bed. Cocktail cabinet light.

Cooking facilities: Spinflo 4-burner hob and grill with electronic ignition. Maxol Monte Carlo t3000 oven with electronic ignition.

Extractor fan/cooker hood: Over hob.

Refrigerator: Electrolux RM4207 60-litre 3-way model with electronic ignition and small 2-star freezer compartment.

Sink & drainer: Square enamel sink and right-hand drainer with folding cover.

Water system: Pressure pump type, electrically operated. Hot & cold supply to kitchen and bathroom sinks and shower. Whale Elegance mixer taps.

Hot water: Gas and mains operated Carver Cascade 2GE storage heater.

Fresh water tank: Inboard, capacity 16.5 gallons (75 litres)

Fresh water level gauge: On Zig control panel.

Waste water tank: Underfloor, capacity 15.5 gallons (70 litres)

Waste water level gauge: Warning LED on Zig control panel.

Space heating: Carver 3000S space heater with thermostat and electronic ignition. Truma controlled blown-air (cool or warm) to lounge and bathroom.

Gas locker: Exterior-accessed compartment on nearside of body. Takes two 6/7kg cylinders (not supplied).

Shower compartment: Thetford Cassette toilet with electric flush and toilet roll holder. Tip-up basin with mixer tap. Toothbrush holder and soap dish. Glass-fronted cabinet with shelf and fiddle rails. Small open shelf and additional soap dish. Adjustable shower head with separate mixer tap and soap dish. Wrap-around shower curtain. Towel rail.

Top-hinged window with opaque blind/flyscreen. Floor-level vent and roof vent. Fluorescent light. Day mat for shower tray.

Seating/dining/sleeping: Nearside settee forms day bed. Offside dinette forms large single or (with extensions) double bed. Overcab double bed. Table between dinette seats provides dining for four.

Tables: One free-standing table stores in wardrobe.

Wardrobe: At offside rear with separate door for access to table. Side-to-side hanging rail.

Flooring: Short pile carpet throughout.

Rear restraints: Rear forward-facing seat has two lap restraints.

Additional features: Fire blanket, fire extinguisher, smoke alarm. Full set of Biltens crockery for four. Two mirrors on bulkheads. 3/4 length mirror on wardrobe front. Four scatter cushions. Ladder and wooden retainers (removable) for occupants of luton bed. Walk-through-to-cab facility. Cocktail cabinet. Caravan instruction manual.

Dimensions

Overall length: 19ft 10in (6045mm) including fixed rear ladder.

Overall width (excl mirrors): 7ft 1/2in (2145mm)

Overall width (incl mirrors): 8ft 1/2in (2450mm)

Overall height: 9ft (2745mm)

Turning circle (kerb to kerb): 40ft (12.2m)

Driver's max leg length: 41in (1040mm)

Step-up height to caravan: 14in then 10in (355 then 255mm)

Door aperture: 20in W x 71in H (510 x 1805mm)

Interior length from dash: 15ft 3in (4650mm) to rear window.

Interior length behind cab: 11ft 8in (3555mm) to rear window.

Interior width at waist level: 6ft 7in (2005mm)

Interior height: 6ft 3in (1905mm) maximum.

Work surface height: 36in (915mm)

Table dimensions: 33 1/2in L x 21in W x 27in H (850mm x 535mm x 685mm)

Bed dimensions:

(1) Lower double

Mattress length: 6ft (1830mm)

Mattress width: 4ft (1220mm)

Mattress depth: 6in (150mm)

(2) Overcab double

Mattress length: 5ft 7 1/2in (1715mm)

Mattress width: 3ft 8in (1120mm)

Mattress depth: 2 1/2-3in (60-75mm)

Available headroom: 10-23 1/2in (255-595mm)

Note: Lower double made as single reduces width to 3ft 2in (965mm).

Day bed measures 6ft L x 2ft W x 6in D (1830 x 610 x 150mm).

Wardrobe (from rail): 23in W x 23in D x 46in H (585 x 585 x 1170mm)

Gas locker: 22in W x 20in D x 22in H (560 x 510 x 560mm)

Gas locker door aperture: 10in W x 21in H (255 x 535mm)

Gross vehicle weight: 56.5 cwt (2870kg)

Unladen weight: 46.4 cwt (2358kg)

Load capacity: Min 7.9 cwt (410kg). Max 10.1 cwt (512kg) -

manufacturer's figures - includes fuel tank filled to at least 90 per cent of capacity and allowance of 75kg for driver. Payload can vary between minimum and maximum.

Price for standard model (2.4-litre diesel) at test date: £29 298-63 ex works (including VAT but not delivery or on-the-road charges).

Optional extras available:

Base vehicle options: 2.5-litre petrol engine (catalyst) £804-87, ABS braking system £1512-23, dash air conditioning £1742-53, automatic transmission £1557, electric windows £290-23, tow bar £352-50. Syncro (4-wheel drive) available to special order.

Caravan options: None - see your Autohomes dealer for extra equipment.

Explorer supplied for evaluation and converted by:

Autohomes, Delves Lane, Consett, Co Durham DH8 7LG.
(Tel: 0207 503477)

