

Horsing AROUND



The 20-inch alloys may not be to everyone's taste, but work well and suit this stylish creation

Volksleisure's Neil Worthington practices what he preaches and uses his T5 to pull a horsebox to riding centres with his family...

WORDS & PHOTOS PETER ROSENTHAL

A VW campervan isn't the first vehicle you'd think of when it comes to carrying horses (they can never do up the seatbelts with their hooves, for starters...), but Neil Worthington, the co-owner of Volksleisure, reckons it's a far more practical proposition than a horsebox.

"We used to have a 7.5-tonne truck to carry the horses, that had also been converted to a campervan inside," he explains, "but it used to block all the sunlight for other campers when we pitched up on a campsite! Plus, you couldn't easily go anywhere in it and we didn't really use it in winter."

After selling the horsebox, he bought a compact trailer to carry two horses (grandly named Dobbie and Jonnie) and then fitted a towbar to his Volksleisure demo vehicle. "It was a revelation and gave us the best of both worlds," he grins.

But, before we open the sliding door to his latest creation, it's worth rewinding to 2011, when Volksleisure first started.

Neil's background is in graphic design and he runs design agency, Worthington

Brown, which also does the website for Wellhouse Leisure. Neil is good pals with the owner of Wellhouse, David Elliott, and spotted a gap in the market. "David does the mass market campervans but he's always avoided VWs," says Neil, "but, as I wasn't looking to sell 200 a year, I thought I'd have a go at it. The aim was to go really premium and use the Volkswagen Transporter California as a benchmark."

Ever since he was a student, Neil has always had a VW in his life, starting off with Beetles. "I had five of them when I was at art college," he recalls, "and only one of them had an MoT. I'd just put the numberplates on whichever one started in the mornings!"

However, it was the purchase of a 1974 L-reg VW Type 2 Devon conversion that was the turning point for Neil. "I paid £250 for it and drove all over north Yorkshire in it. I finally sold it 18 months later for £1,000! Ever since then, I've always had a VW campervan of some sort."

So, the VW connection seemed a natural fit for Neil and, as he had good



GG The aim was to go really premium and use the Volkswagen Transporter California as a benchmark **GG**

▲ George's smaller horse, Dobbie, obligingly lifts a hoof so he can get his shin pads fitted

relations with Wellhouse, it seemed obvious to buy the components from them and use their expert fitter, John Stevenson – who's based in Devon – to build them.

The combination of Neil's creative flair and John's building expertise saw the partnership display their first model at the NEC motorhome show in 2011. This first model featured slinky gloss white cabinets. "We were one of the first to use the gloss white cabinets," reckons

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Neil, "and loads of other firms have copied us since then."

Encouragingly, this new model got a great reaction and, after listening to customer feedback, Volksleisure then spent a whole year tweaking and developing the product. As Neil and his family are keen campervan fans, they also used their experience to fine tune it.

The fruit of their labour was relaunched at the 2013 NEC motorhome show, where Neil was delighted to take six orders for the new model. "We only aim to build around 20 a year," says Neil, "so that we can keep the quality up." John builds them almost single-handedly and has great attention to detail – even the wood grain on the cabinets continues across the doors. Few converters do this as it inevitably uses more material, but it undoubtedly gives a slicker finish.

The current demo model is this 2014-registered Silver special edition model and it's based on a 140bhp Highline version of the Transporter. The first thing that strikes you is the oversized alloy wheels that were carefully chosen to match the colour scheme of the interior – the silver spokes of the 20-inch wheels echo the silver dividing trim of the cabinets. They might look a bit



VOLKSLEISURE T5

PROS

- ✓ Great looking VW base vehicle
- ✓ High quality conversion
- ✓ Practical Reimo sliding seat
- ✓ Stylish interior with lots of LEDs
- ✓ Lots of thoughtful detailing

CONS

- ✗ May be a bit too blingy for some
- ✗ Erm...

FROM THE TOP
Sliding seat can be pushed rearwards to maximise space; the hob and sink unit is stylish; the cab's Remis blinds

too blingy for some, but they fit the look of this campervan well.

The black colour of the Calibre wheels also visually ties together the graphics, Thule wind-out awning and the roof. It certainly looks designer and upmarket.

On the road

But, don't for a minute think that all this style is at the expense of practicality – sliding open the door soon banishes that idea. As Neil travels with his family, it has to accommodate his wife, Nicola, his daughter, Isabella, (who's 13) and George (11), so the layout features a sliding Reimo seat base, which can be moved fore and aft via floor rails. It's not the narrower two-seater unit either but the wider three-seater version, which gives a 1.2m wide bed.

We're big fans of this Reimo sliding seat base as it's not only really versatile, but it's also a crash-tested unit engineered by Germans. It's not cheap to fit, but it's a very effective system.

The table leg slides along with the seat base and avoids having to use any kind of fixings on the side cabinets for a sleeker look.

Kitchen class

The bank of cabinets are finished in a gloss walnut-effect wood with all the doors featuring proper bonded-on edging, rather than the knock-on vinyl

trim that you see on some models. The catches, too, are of higher quality than you normally find in campervans, while the CAN twin-burner hob and sink unit has been custom made to fit in this van (it's unique to Volksleisure) and makes a refreshing change from the default Smev combination unit. The CAN unit looks easy to clean too, as it's a simpler design.

There's a little worktop space around the hob to prepare food, together with useful storage – underneath is a cutlery drawer and a wide fold-down cupboard, while above you'll find some eye-level storage cupboards, useful for smaller items.

As well as the hob, the demo van also featured a Smev oven and grill unit, though Neil admits it hasn't had much use. "I think for the next demo vehicle, we'll omit an oven in favour of more storage, I reckon that's more use in a campervan."

Cooling duties are performed by a Waeco CR50 fridge, while the tambour door in the base of the kitchen hides a Dometic loo.

A neat touch is that the underside of the worktop is lit by a strip of LEDs that add some mood lighting – and a bit of bling – to this stylish interior. Circular individual LED lights are also dotted into the roof and, unusually, even the roof bed has been fitted out with lighting for maximum illumination at night. And, the tambour-doored wardrobe features LED lighting inside.



The whole family can fit in the van – plus a journalist – when it's raining...

▲ Tambour doors mean the storage can be accessed easily, even when the bed's made up

◀ Rear shower is useful to rinse off muddy boots

THANKS TO
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SPECIFICATION

Base vehicle VW T5 Transporter Highline
Drive Front-wheel drive
Engine 2.0-litre TDI
Power 140bhp
Economy 40mpg (estimated)
Gearbox 6-speed manual
Number of travel seats 5
Berths 4
Leisure battery capacity 90Ah
Payload 640kg
Length x width x height 4.89m x 1.91m excluding mirrors (2.28m inc mirrors) x 2.0m
Standard equipment Air-con, rear parking sensors, twin front swivel seats, Reimo 333 Variotech sliding rear seat/bed (2.05m x 1.2m), Reimo elevating roof (bed 1.9m x 1.1m, 1.22m to edge of canvas), Sargent electrical control panel, 35-litre fresh water tank, 35-litre waste tank, Waeco 42-litre compressor fridge, CAN two-burner hob, Smev mini grill with electronic ignition, rear shower system, LED lighting throughout
Optional equipment 20-inch alloys £1,350, Westfalia towbar £680, two-berth roof bed £490, full leather upholstery £1,850, Thule 2.5m awning £650
Warranty 3 months on base vehicle, three years for conversion
Price From £48,850 on-the-road (on a T6)
Price of test vehicle £47,000 (2014 with 5,000 miles, over £52,000 new)

Not many people use a campervan to tow a horsebox but it has been well received in equestrian circles as Volksleisure have sold a few to fellow horse riders!



Do you have one of these?

Write in with your stories and the modifications you've made



On the dull day of our photoshoot, it certainly helped brighten the interior up and, thanks to LED technology, it should sip leisure battery capacity, too.

Night-time niceties

While it boasts five travel seats, the Volksleisure sleeps four, but they are four genuine adult-sized berths, with two downstairs on the flattened Reimo seat system and another two in the roof bed. Volksleisure use either Reimo or SCA roof and bed systems (this one features a Reimo unit). Given the choice, we'd favour the SCA system as it features the neat cam-lock catches and the Froli-spring style bed base.

Irrespective of the roof, you'll certainly enjoy a good night's sleep in this van. Blackout curtains seal off the sides and rear of the van, while the windscreen is covered by a Remis blind system that neatly tucks away into the A-pillars and is much better than wrestling with a large insulated screen and lots of suckers. It is a £420 option, though, but it's such a good system that you wouldn't regret it (and it keeps the dash cool in summer as an added bonus).

As you can't get Remis side blinds, silvered screens are used on the side windows.

Thoughtful touches include rear LED lights that are perfectly placed for reading in bed and all the tambour doors and cupboards being openable when the bed is made up (so many campervan beds block door access at night, which can be really annoying). These points are clearly no accident and another example of good design.

Rear stores

Opening the tailgate reveals that the table is stored on the rear of the Reimo seat and that there's plenty of storage space – especially if the rear seat is slid fully forward. Practical vinyl flooring is fitted throughout the van so muddy wellies are not a problem.

However, thanks to another of Volksleisure's ingenious designs, they're unlikely to be muddy for long... Inset into the rear bank of cabinets is a shower point that a shower simply clips into.



It's a cold-water-only system but has proved invaluable in hosing off muddy clothing and boots at equestrian events.

Rather than cut a hole in the steel bodywork, the water fill point is also located in this rear cabinet, together with a large, sealed gas locker. This usefully links through to a barbecue point mounted in the rear cabinets too. "You can even barbecue with the tailgate up if it's raining!" says Neil, speaking like a true hardened camper. Why let rain spoil your grub, eh?

Further storage in this bank of cabinets houses the wind-out awning handle (in a space originally designed to house water bottles) and another tambour-doored locker. Open storage pods also house the shower head and piping.

Horsing around

With such a well-sorted campervan, Neil and his family have had great fun taking it to horse shows and competitions. His wife, Nicola, has always been around horses and has even bred them, while his daughter, Isabella, rides competitively

CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP
This stylish Vee-dub looks superb

Kitchen cabinets house a hob, sink, oven, grill, fridge and loo...and still provide plenty of storage

Neil is never happier than when he's in a VW

Rear storage space is generous and – thanks to that sliding seat base – can be expanded or reduced

and has qualified for the Horse of the Year show, which is one of the most prestigious equestrian competitions in the world.

"Lots of people have seen us at equestrian events with the campervan and horsebox," says Neil, "and we've even sold a few four-wheel-drive models to fellow horse fans!"

While the equestrian competitions and training take the family all over the country, Neil's passion for boats and watersports – he has two boats and a jetski – have also seen it being used for family holidays in Abersoch. "I love it around there," grins Neil, "as the sea is gorgeous."

While Neil does also have a Land Rover for launching duties, he's currently debating making his next demonstrator vehicle a 4Motion version, which should also help haul the horsebox out of slippery fields.

campervan VERDICT

By focusing on low volume and high quality – both in terms of design and build – we reckon Volksleisure have nailed it with this conversion. It's not the cheapest on the market – not least because it's based on a high-spec VW with a 140bhp engine – but it is beautifully crafted.

Volksleisure's aim was to offer a vehicle built as well as VW's own California campervan – but with a better kitchen – and we reckon they've got it right. With great style underpinned by an excellent understanding of how real campervanners use their vehicles, this is a cracking conversion that should be on anyone's list of must-sees. With only 20 or so vehicles built each year, it'll be a pretty exclusive vehicle on the campsite, too...



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