



'WISH THEY ALL COULD BE CALIFORNIAS'

...sings Peter Vaughan after testing a Westfalia California Exclusive imported by Deepcar Motorhomes International

Westfalia campers haven't officially been sold here since the seventies. Those Type 2 campers, often in bright duo-tone paint schemes such as orange and white, were probably the smartest of their era. They had front-hinged rising roofs and a reputation for quality. Later models had rear-hinged tops, but then they faded from the UK scene. I doubt if sales volumes were considered sufficient to bother with right-hand drive Westfalia, however, have gone from strength to strength, converting not just Volkswagen, but Ford and Mercedes too. Their California is seen, in Germany, as THE Volkswagen camper and these models are sold through selected VW car dealers. There's the California Exclusive (LWB high top) and the more traditional side kitchen layout (SWB rising roof or high top) California Coach, and both are available with features normally reserved for VW's Caravelle and Multivan people-carrier versions of the T4. Now Westfalias are back, though sadly only with left-hand drive. Deepcar Motorhomes International of Sheffield has been doing a steady trade in left-hand drive secondhand Hymers imported from the Continent, and found customers looking for a similar deal on new and used German camper vans. They have recently, therefore, started selling left-hand drive Westfalia Californias. The Coach and Exclusive are reportedly sharing equal billing for enquiries here (although the LWB model accounts for a much smaller proportion of sales in its homeland). Both models will be regularly kept in stock at Deepcar's premises and will be sold at an identical price to that in Europe, as long as the pound stays strong. The Coach is not so very different from several UK-built campers, but the Exclusive is quite unique. MMM therefore took to the roads of Yorkshire to test the first California Exclusive to arrive at Deepcar's premises.



It was a 'disappointment' to find that our test vehicle was white, but it does have that distinctive high top.



No tailgate, but a small opening flap across the rear of the Westfalia for loading long loads and servicing the loo (left of photo). Bike rack was one of the options fitted to test vehicle.



Left-hand drive Transporter cab has curvier dashboard and twin airbags as standard.

Looks different

Having seen so many Westfalias in exciting shades of metallic paint, it was a disappointment to find that our test vehicle was white. Nevertheless it had the Caravelle-style nose, Caravelle wheel trims, and a distinctive (if rather massive) high top. The rear three-quarter panels wear moulded trims with the California name embossed into them, but the real difference is at the rear. Here, the usual tailgate has been replaced by a fixed panel that cleverly matches the original styling (without the window) but is more upright to gain valuable extra inches inside. The bottom of the panel (from the height of the lights down) lifts up (via an internal release only) to provide servicing access to the toilet. This facility would also enable loading of long but low items, say after a visit to the DIY store.

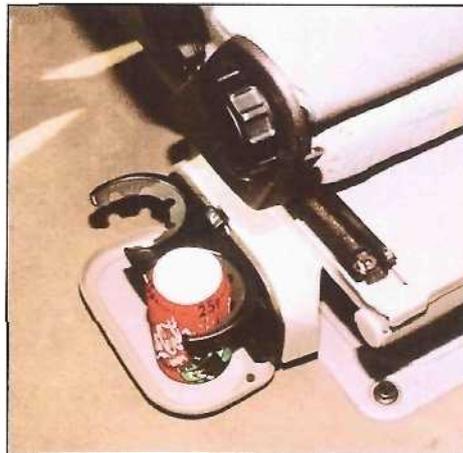
Extras, extras

Our test vehicle was a one-year-old example with under 25 000km recorded, but Deepcar can source a brand-new model if required. 'Ours' featured the 102bhp TDI engine, which would surely be the choice of most customers. The 88bhp TDI is also available, as is the 'autobahn stormer' 150bhp TDI (which is not officially sold by VW in the UK).

The cab is mostly as you'd expect from a T4 camper, just with the steering wheel on the 'wrong' side. Look more closely, however, and you begin to spot the differences. For a start there's cloth trim on the doors, and carpet around the door pockets (fitted to both doors). The cab floor also has fitted carpet, and the top of the dashboard is of a more curvy design than on RHD versions. There's an extra storage slot on the centre console but the glove box has gone, replaced by a passenger airbag and an open shelf below. The steering wheel, of course, includes a second airbag.



Above the interior mirror is this control panel for fridge and heating; battery and water levels are also displayed.



There are drink holders everywhere in the California. This foldaway one is alongside the cab passenger seat.

Now look at all the extra switches. On the top of the driver's door are two for the electric windows (each with one touch operation to fully lower or raise them) and three to manoeuvre the (heated) door mirrors into position. Above the centre mirror is a control panel with eight switches and an LCD display. Waste water level, external temperature and battery condition are shown here and there are controls for the fridge and space heating. Cab air-conditioning is also standard (and very welcome in summer).

So far, all the kit we've listed has been standard, but our test vehicle also boasted some rather appealing options - heated cab seats for the winter, plus an up-market stereo and cruise control to make those long, boring, motorway trips more pleasant. Despite its impressive spec', a brand-new Exclusive could be yours for under £30 000.

102 horses

With the 102bhp TDI engine, no T4 motorcaravan is a slouch and this example had recorded sufficient kilometres to be nicely loosened up. It seemed slightly odd at first, the familiarity of yet another T4 being confused by a left-hand seat for the driver. Left-hand drive only takes a few miles of acclimatisation though, especially in a vehicle that's little bigger than a large estate car and has the increased visibility of a high driving position I have never had any qualms about driving my 'left hooker' sports car on a daily basis and driving this T4 solo was as effortless as piloting a RHD model. Do make sure though that lights and Speedo (with mph as well as km/h) comply with UK regulations before you take delivery.

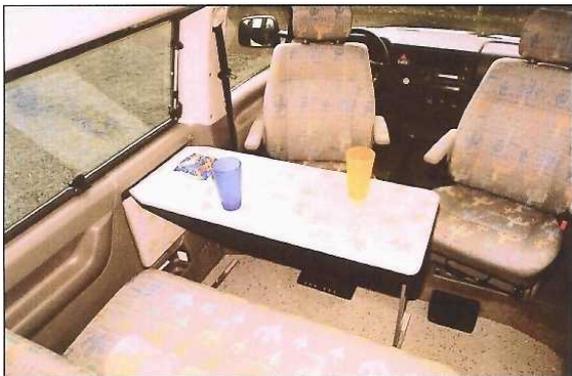
The long wheelbase T4 seems to handle even more confidently than the short version, whilst also offering an absorbent ride for the comfort of passengers. At a recent gathering of motorcaravan journalists, the question of the best driving base vehicle was raised and unanimously the T4 was the answer. Only price (in TDI form) and the relatively narrow body of the van count against it as a motorcaravan.



With both front seats swivelled there's a comfortable lounge area for up to four in this LWB Exclusive.



A small coffee table simply hinges up from the side wall for use. At floor level the black vent is the blown-air heating outlet.



The full-sized table is rather narrow but it is extremely solid with its single leg located in the sliding seat's floor channel.



Under the kitchen (with cushion removed) you can see the gas locker (left) and auxiliary battery (right). Waste water tank is also here.

Personally, I still look forward to driving a T4 TDI. Every aspect seems well judged, from the slick gearshift (just as good when using the right hand instead of the left) to the precise power-assisted rack and pinion steering. Even the steepest hills of the Yorkshire Dales were climbed in an effortless fashion, for this 2.5-litre five-cylinder engine is both smooth and torquey. And on the A1 the Westfalia kept pace with all the other traffic (cruise control on to maintain a set speed up and down the hills). It's refined too, both mechanically and in terms of the total absence of conversion rattles (the cooker lid even has a catch to stop it chattering).

The cab seats enhance the experience, for they seem to support in all the right places, and adjustable armrests complete the driver's comfort. Only the cab carpet marred the experience, because every time I got back into the Westfalia I was worried about ruining its soft texture with my muddy shoes.



Looking to the rear we see that the walk-through is quite narrow. There's storage to the rear of the (offside) sliding door. With the bathroom door folded back you can see that the only rear window is at roof level.

An Exclusive layout

Unless you've perused the campers at the Dusseldorf show, you'll probably never have seen a VW camper quite like this one. Behind the cab is a double forward-facing seat with head restraints and backing onto this is an L-shaped kitchen. Opposite the kitchen, behind the side door, is a slim storage unit, beyond which is the wardrobe. Opposite the wardrobe, in the other back corner, is the loo. The most obvious shortcoming of the design is the narrow walk-through from the lounge to the kitchen - some will simply find this an uncomfortable squeeze.

It's not just the floor plan, but the decor that is out of the ordinary. The seats (front and rear) use VW automotive upholstery with a blue, yellow and green cactus pattern on a grey background (a theme that is repeated on the table and right-hand worktop). The furniture, which feels incredibly solid, is finished in a speckled grey board, while the inside of the high top is a GRP double skin. The floor in the living area is a non-slip studded vinyl (again grey with slashes of colour). It all looks far more car than caravan, modern and practical, but possibly clinical to some eyes. Nowhere is there carpet trim on the walls; it's all beautifully shaped GRP mouldings with recessed storage pockets and cup holders. Only when you're building motorcaravans in Westfalia's huge numbers could such massive tooling costs be entertained.

Lounge etc

The cab armchairs both swivel through 180 degrees for use on site. They both turn easily but, unlike most British T4s, the driver's door has to be opened to turn that seat with the front seats rotated, the lounge area is comfortable for four and I particularly liked the small coffee table that simply hinges up from the side wall. A larger (long but rather slim) table stores on the inside of the wardrobe door. It clips to the wall and its single leg locates in the sliding rear seat's floor channel. It is certainly sturdy but is better suited to two diners than four. The rear seat has flat cushions, but an angled backrest actually makes it a fairly comfortable place to travel. Twin lap and diagonal restraints are fitted and the head restraints are height-adjustable. Rear passengers have good visibility and plenty of legroom as well as their own heater controls.

Kitchen

The Westfalia differences continue in the kitchen area. The cooker is a Cramer two-burner hob (no grill) with glass lid, and alongside is a ceramic sink fed by cold water only. The sink is slightly awkward to reach in this corner location. Completing the L is what looks like just a draining board, but lift this up and you'll find a top-loading compressor fridge. Its capacity seemed perfectly adequate for a vehicle of this type and it is so simple to use - just dial in the desired temperature on the console above the driver's mirror and switch on. It purrs away in the background, but I never found the sound obtrusive. Remember, too, that top-loading fridges are more efficient as they suffer less loss of 'coolth' when the door is opened. Below the hob is a large open-fronted locker that seemed the ideal home for a soft bag (for extra clothes) or bedding. There's a cushion in here at seat height and this becomes part of the bed, so this area cannot really be considered as part of the kitchen. Below the cushion are the auxiliary battery, waste water tank and gas locker. The gas locker will only hold one Campingaz 907 cylinder but, as this is only required for the hob, it should last quite a time.

Kitchen stowage space consists of two high-level lockers (moulded into the inner roof skin and fitted with green roller shutter doors) plus the cupboards to the rear of the sliding side door. Here you'll also find an undivided cutlery drawer and (on the inside of one of the locker doors) a rubbish bag holder. I still don't understand why British motorcaravans never seem to have waste bins. Instead, what is lacking in this German camper is worktop space and a grill. Hob-top devices are available, however, for those who cannot live without toast, or you could take an electric toaster. Another neat touch is the rail for your dishcloth.



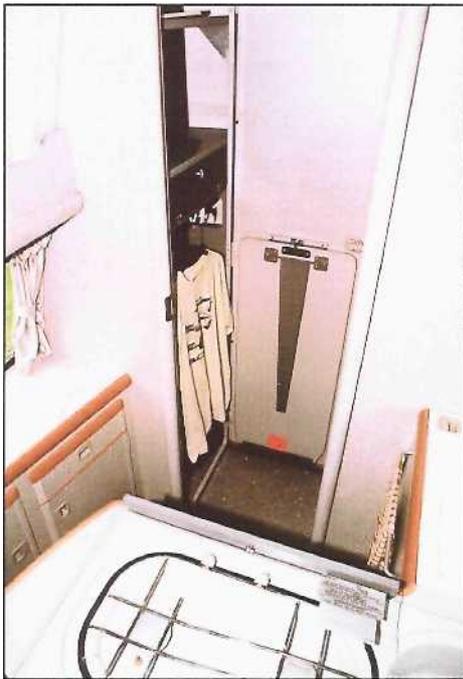
L-shaped kitchen with tea towel rail and open-fronted locker (ideal for soft bag or bedding rather than kitchen storage, due to bed design).



Kitchen again, viewed from the lounge area. Top-loading fridge open and high-level lockers with roller shutter doors also shown here.



Stowage space is available under the rear seat. The squab tips up for access and is supported by a strut.



The wardrobe has pull-out hanging rail with shelves and safe above. Table stores on the inside of the wardrobe door.

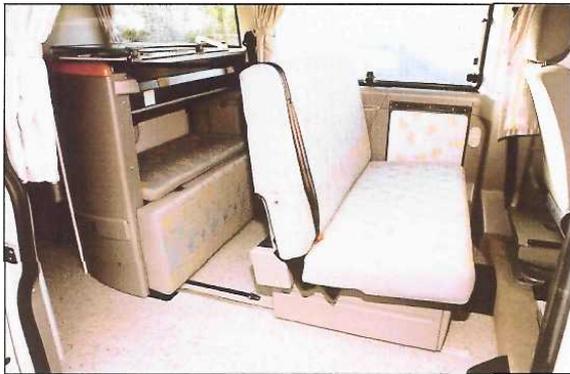
More storage

The fact that the high top roof overhangs the windscreen creates an enormous locker above the cab and a simple hinged flap ensures that the contents stay put while you're motoring. There's also storage space under the rear seat and there's a stay to support the squab while you retrieve your mains lead or walking boots from underneath. The jacket-length wardrobe has two shelves and a safe above, and an area for shoes below, as well as a couple of little recesses for underwear at the sides. The hanging rail runs from front to rear, but the rail itself slides out for more convenient access.

Bedtime

To make the main bed in the Exclusive you must first have the front seats facing forward. The rear seat then slides forward and folds flat on a rock 'n' roll mechanism (after first removing the head restraints). A hinged flap with cushion attached then bridges the gap between the flattened seat and the end cushion of the bed (which is beneath the kitchen). Bed-making is a simple enough procedure and the resultant bed is both firm and flat. Feet, of course, must point towards the rear of the vehicle, but I found no problems associated with my feet disappearing under the sink. Indeed I slept well, though the double bed is not very generous in its width.

In the roof is a second bed that is longer, almost as wide and even easier to make. In the stored position, the two-piece mattress rests with one section atop the other and, at night, you simply slide the second one out, its base gliding along runners set into the sides of the high top. This bed would be ideal for one adult or two children, but occupants do need to be reasonably athletic, as there's no ladder to help you into or out of bed.



First stage of bed-making is to slide the rear seat forward. Behind it you can now see the cushion under the kitchen that makes the feet end of the bed and the vertically stored cushion that hinges up to complete the bed once the seat is flattened.



The 'downstairs' double bed is not especially wide but it is firm, flat and comfortable.

The roof windows have blinds and flyscreens, while the rest of the 'van's windows are covered by unlined curtains. All are held in place with press-studs and the Germans now take safety so seriously that all the studs are recessed to avoid injury in the event of an accident. The cab curtains are secured solely with press-studs so that no curtain track is needed in the cab (again for safety reasons).

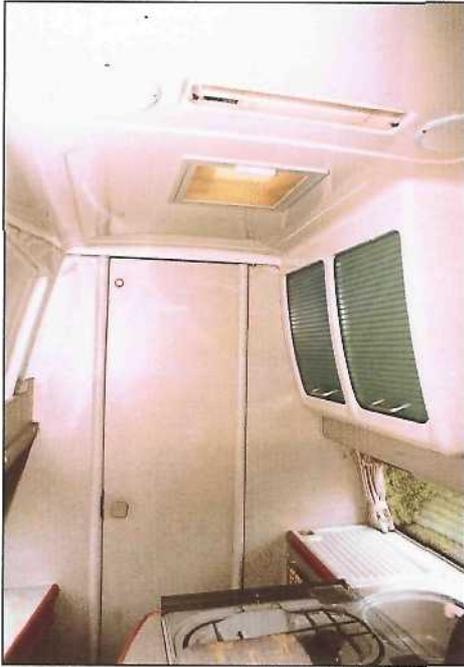
Lighting is by a trio of fluorescent double tube lights (one in the ceiling, one above the table, one in the bathroom). That's adequate, but some reading lights would have been nice.

Bathroom

In the rear left-hand corner of this camper is a Thetford cassette toilet with a folding washbasin above and a storage locker above that. The door can be clipped back in front of the loo to give better access to the wardrobe and a greater feeling of space in the rear of the 'van, but sadly there's still no through vision for the driver. (I've no idea why Westfalia don't fit a low-level window here.) You open the bathroom door through 180 degrees to gain access and shut it to the 90 degree position when using its facilities. It makes a good washing or changing area and, whilst there's no shower or hot water, the folding basin feels a thousand times more sturdy and durable than others of this type. The bathroom also has an opening roof window and a large mirror (on the inside of the door).

More features

Rear speakers for the stereo are fitted in the roof and there's a courtesy light in the step well of the sliding door. The fresh and waste water tanks are both inboard, making the Exclusive surprisingly practical for winter camping. And all except the cab windows are double-glazed. The roof windows and the left-hand lounge window are the familiar top-hinged acrylic type, while the remainder are fixed, glass double-glazed units.



Hear of the Exclusive with the Bathroom/changing room door shut. Modern, wipe-clean surfaces are used throughout and the quality is unsurpassed in this class.



Washroom has Thetford cassette toilet and the most solid feeling tip-up washbasin that I've ever come across.

Heating is by thermostatically-controlled, diesel-fired, blown-air into the lounge area. With diesel used for the heating and 12V electricity for the fridge, there's greatly reduced reliance on heavy and space-robbing gas cylinders. Finally, everything in the California feels as if it has been built to last. Quality is a much over-used term these days, but here it really does apply.

Conclusions

Will someone please donate £ 25 000 to a poor, under-paid MMM road test editor? I really do want a Westfalia California Exclusive (metallic Techno blue would be nice). Enough said, I think.



The 'upstairs' bed is ready in an instant and has unusually generous headroom. Lighting, opening windows and stereo speakers are all fitted in the roof.

In brief

Base vehicle: VW Transporter Kombi LWB

Engine: 2.5-litre turbo-diesel producing 102bhp

Make & model: Westfalia California Exclusive

Electrical equipment: Mains hook-up with RCD, auxiliary battery, two 2-pm Continental 230V sockets

Cooking facilities: Two-burner Cramer hob

Refrigerator: 40-litre compressor-type top-loading fridge

Fresh water tank: Inboard, 49 litres (10.8 gallons)

Waste water tank: Inboard, 63 litres (13.9 gallons)

Gas locker capacity: One Campingaz 907 cylinder

Rear restraints: Two lap and diagonal inertia reel belts

Other standard features: Anti-lock brakes, electronic differential lock, cab air-conditioning, electric cab windows (with one-touch operation), engine immobiliser, central locking (from both cab doors), electrically adjustable and heated door mirrors, driver and passenger airbags, swivel front seats, cassette toilet, diesel-fired blown-air heating, two tables, sliding rear seat with head restraints, fitted cab carpet, vinyl floor in living area, rear stereo speakers In roof, double-glazed windows, cup holders front and rear, four top-hinged opening windows, blinds/flyscreens for roof windows

Overall length: 5.19m (17ft 0in) - excludes bike rack fitted to test vehicle

Overall width (excluding mirrors): 1,84m (6ft 0.5in)

Overall height: 2.56m (8ft 5in)

Bed dimensions: Roof bed 2.13m x 0.97m (7ft 0in x 3ft 6m) with maximum headroom of 0.58m (23in). Main bed 1.89m x 1.12m (6ft 2.5in x 3ft 8in)

Interior height: 1.98m (6ft 6in)

Payload: 437kg (standard model)

Fuel consumption on test: 31.2mpg

Price (standard model): £29 000 (brand-new)

Options fitted to test vehicle: Heated front seats, cruise control, roll-out awning, bike rack, Gamma stereo

Price as tested: £23 995 (vehicle first registered June 1999. mileage - 25 000km/15 500 miles recorded)

Westfalia California Exclusive kindly supplied for evaluation by: Deepcar Motorhomes International, 10aVaughton Hill, Deepcar, Sheffield S36 2SW. Tel: 0114-288 2660. Fax: 0114-288 2628. Web site: www.deepcar-motorhomes.co.uk

Motorcaravan Motorhome Monthly
March 2001