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Road
test

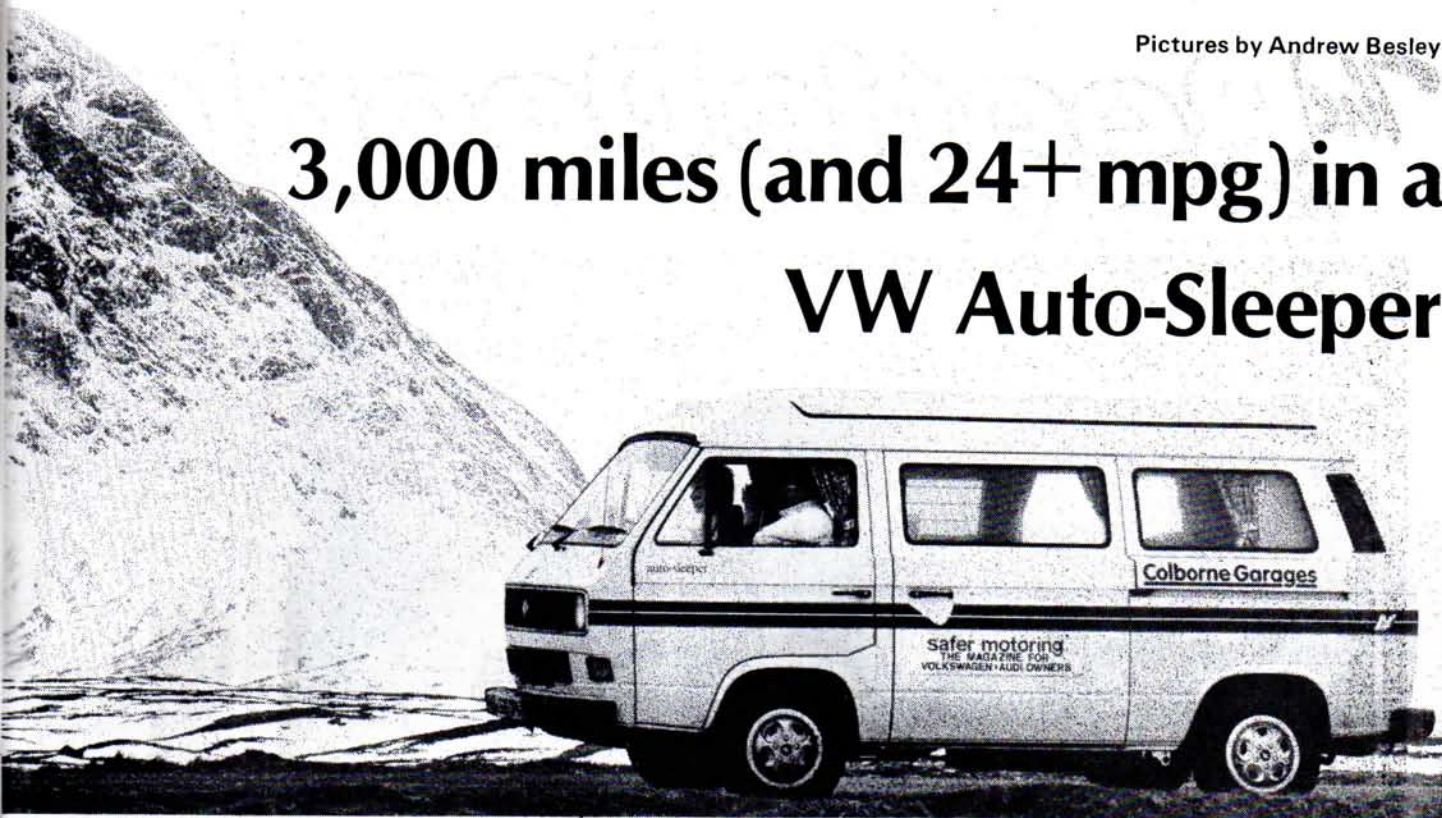
Polo Classic Formel E

Beetles abroad



Auto-Sleeper marathon test

3,000 miles (and 24+ mpg) in a VW Auto-Sleeper



DENNIS GREENSLADE has been at it yet again! In rather more leisurely fashion than his solo record drive in the Audi 80 Quattro last September (reported in our October '83 issue), he has just undertaken the Land's End — John O'Groats return trip again, this time with additional drivers.

Following his inauguration of the Land's End — John O'Groats Association, which had its first business meeting in January, it was decided that a nationwide journey should be undertaken to promote it.

Photo-journalist Andrew Besley, from St Ives, Cornwall, had offered himself as Publicity Officer but needed to qualify for membership by completing the journey. It was agreed that Dennis, in view of his long-distance driving experience, should accompany him, and they were joined by Andrew's son Paul (an aspiring rally driver) and Dennis's 12-year-old daughter Chantal, who has some experience as a passenger in her father's Beetle and Brasilia on classic trials.

The initial plan was to use an Audi Avant for the trip, but Peter Colborne-Baber, of long-established VAG dealers Colborne Garages (himself a member of the Association) offered to make available their demonstrator Auto-Sleeper conversion of the latest VW Transporter, which it was generally considered would make a most interesting test vehicle, particularly from the comfort and fuel consumption points of view.

Dennis takes up the story having just collected the 'van, which he had never driven before . . .

As I progressed in the dark along the vastly improved A303 to base at Salcombe Regis, it began to dawn on me how quickly became acclimatised to my latest mode of transportation — it really was little different from driving a large family saloon! I cannot speak from any experience concerning motor caravans, but had always assumed such vehicles to be rather slow, clumsy and heavy on both steering and fuel. It would seem that with today's modern motor caravans such assumptions are far from correct, at least in this particular case.

The Auto-Sleeper is based on the Transporter and is fitted with Volkswagen's new 1.9 litre water-cooled boxer engine. There is a 10,000-mile main service interval

and a twelve months unlimited mileage warranty provided by the manufacturers. This latest engine is 20% more powerful than its predecessor and delivers a healthy increase of 36% in torque.

Despite this extra output, it remains remarkably low revving and, bearing in mind that we would certainly cover well in excess of 2,000 miles and that on the day of collection all major roads in Scotland were blocked by deep snow, I was delighted to have the rear engine over rear wheels, thus providing me with very familiar and ideal handling for the anticipated conditions.

The engine in this case was the 1913cc unit producing a very welcome 78bhp (there is a similar unit which produces



The start at Land's End — left to right: Andrew, Chantal, Dennis, Paul.



The Auto-Sleeper in the snow alongside the mountain chairlift.

60bhp), the increase in power being obtained by fitting a newly-developed twin-choke downdraught carburetter. The water cooling achieves a considerable reduction in noise level. The entire light alloy power unit is very compact and, presumably because of its quietness and distance from the driver, a rev limiter is fitted, ensuring engine safeguards from even the most careless of pilots.

It quickly became apparent, as my daughter and I set off on a very cold and windy February night for Land's End, that the Volkswagen Auto-Sleeper was going to be right in every respect for our proposed tour. The water-cooling, for instance, provided rapid functioning of the heater system throughout the entire vehicle.

Auto-Sleepers, who are based at Willersey, in Worcestershire, are Volkswagen approved converters, and the excellent workmanship of the company is well known in that they also convert other

vehicles for similar purposes. I was immediately impressed with the efforts which have been made to ensure a most comfortable ride, not only for travelling passengers but also in the cab for both the driver and the occupant of the remaining front seat. Over years of experience, Auto-Sleepers have carefully chosen and designed the fitments to ensure maximum efficiency for this holiday unit.

It is interesting to note that the roof may be raised from inside the vehicle with ease, thereby providing additional height and also upper sleeping arrangements which are ideal for young children. The motor caravan is fitted with washbasin, fridge, cooker, a gas fire and a considerable amount of storage space. Much thought has been given to design, and throughout the four day journey there were never any complaints relating to lack of space.

Early the following morning in blustery conditions at the corner of the State House, Land's End, both Andrew and I were interviewed for Independent Radio News, before heading north for a brief visit to the studios of Television South West at Plymouth. Having left the naval port of Plymouth behind, we drove as far as Strensham Services on the M5 to be met by Editor Robin Wager and Tony Johnson, Publicity Manager of Auto-Sleepers, who wished us good fortune as we continued our journey northwards anticipating problems with deep snow. The drive towards a colder climate was quick and exceedingly comfortable. One tremendous advantage over a saloon is the higher driving position, which ensures a clear field of vision allowing much larger margins for road anticipation.

Little snow was in evidence until the following day and, as we left Moffat to

circumvent a grey Glasgow, taking the long, narrow, twisting route passing Loch Lomond and heading towards Fort William, very deep snow could be seen in all directions. Much credit must be given to the Scottish authorities, who clearly are very efficient in ensuring safe passage along the major roads, as apart from the occasional slight slide where ice had formed, these were perfectly clear.

Our route through Strathclyde passed the small Loch Tulla, when some five miles later we stopped beside the busy roadside mountain chairlift for lunch. Snow level at this point was some 7-8ft high and skiers were much in evidence heading upwards to the piste. Here we used the Auto-Sleeper's gas cooker for the first time, finding it to be most efficient and conveniently placed.

Having persuaded my daughter that we were not suitably dressed to undertake a ride on the chairlift, our journey continued alongside the route of the Caledonian Canal, passing Loch Lochy and the dark forbidding Loch Ness, by-passing Inverness by using the A833 which took us through Beaully and the Muir of Ord to the Cromarty Firth.

Relentlessly we continued our journey along coastal roads now very familiar to me, to reach John O'Groats. Much to our surprise the Hotel was full of guests, most of whom were in kilts, obviously enjoying a wedding reception and we were advised that there was 'no room at the inn' — having covered almost 1000 miles! Consequently, we returned to Wick for the night, but not before experiencing some slight problems with the vehicle.

Surprisingly the Volkswagen failed to start at John O'Groats, giving all the signs of a dead battery. It was easily push-started, and whilst at Wick it was discovered that the main terminal to the starter motor had broken. This main feed terminal is made of copper, and in my opinion is not of sufficient strength or size for the job that it is required to do. I am



As Chairman of the Land's End — John O'Groats Association, I am greeted at John O'Groats by Duncan McCleod, the President of the Association.



Stopped by the snowdrift on a 1 in 3 gradient on the Wrynose Pass.

Auto-Sleeper and occupants prior to departure at Land's End, with the Longships lighthouse in the background.



Van and crew at the John O'Groats Hotel.



aware that similar problems have occurred on Beetles, and it would seem to me advisable for Volkswagen to tackle this problem, either by fitting stronger terminals or, if the break had occurred because of engine movement, then perhaps by lengthening the cable. Whilst our own repair was achieved within an hour or so, it would be most disconcerting to be in the middle of the French Alps, immobilised for this rather fatuous reason!

Our problems overcome, on the Saturday morning we undertook a visit to the Dounreay Atomic Energy Establishment, subsequently following a very narrow but flat route through Strath Hallandale and the Strath of Kildonan to Helmsdale. From here, almost out of fuel, we stopped at a most dilapidated filling station containing three pumps, one of which was diesel, the second out of order, and the third looking as though it would collapse at any moment.

I half expected the aged proprietor to wind the pump manually but, after considerable delay whilst he solved the more intricate problems of operating a cobweb-covered credit card machine, the vehicle was refuelled and we headed south. Our journey continued on through the beautiful snow-covered scenery of the Cairngorms as far as Lockerbie where we spent our last night in Scotland.

With time to spare the next day we decided to check out some roads through the Lake District, and whilst in that area decided to test the vehicle's power and traction by crossing the near 1300ft Wrynose Pass. The upper reaches of this Pass have a gradient of 1 in 3 — as steep as some of the more notorious trials climbs. The Volkswagen Auto-Sleeper was climbing the narrow, bumpy road with no problem until virtually at the summit, where we encountered a 30ft long, 2ft deep snowdrift.

I managed a re-start on the 1 in 3 gradient in an effort to drive through, but without success. After reversing in the region of half a mile to enable a turn to be effected, we continued our long journey back to England's most westerly point.

Apart from the problem with the starter motor feed the Auto-Sleeper performed well, and during the period of my test covered a little in excess of 3,000 miles. I must say that I was very impressed indeed with the overall fuel consumption of 24.3mpg, which I believe to be quite incredible for a vehicle of its size built for a specific purpose. I can, however, best summarise by quoting below an extract from my daughter's report on the weekend, which she wrote for her school:

'The trip was very good fun and we all enjoyed it very much, although what made it was the Auto-Sleeper because it was so comfortable, with comfortable seats, a fire, fridge, and a sink and was very good on petrol. I would like to thank Colborne Garages very much for supplying the vehicle.'