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- **AUTO-SLEEPERS VW VHT HIGH TOP**
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The test model was fitted with an Onexe front spoiler.

AUTO-SLEEPERS VHT

MMM tests a popular Volkswagen high-top from this well-known manufacturer

by Penny Smith

First introduced in November 1984, and initially tested by MMM a few months later, the Auto-Sleeper VHT is now in such demand that it was impossible for us to lay our hands on the very latest model. Nevertheless we were pleased to be offered a D-registration demonstrator for the full road-test treatment. Differences between this and the most up-to-date version are mainly cosmetic and will be explained later in the text.

At the wheel

The test VHT was built on to the Transporter most often chosen by motorcaravanners — the 4-speed 78bhp version. With just under 10 000 miles on the clock it was well run in, and motoring was 'usual pleasant VW'. Acceleration, steering and braking were all good, gearchanges were smooth, heating and distribution of air were efficient. I found the seat position easy to alter and both seats and seat belts were comfortable. VHT cab seats are those supplied by the base vehicle manufacturer; well-fitting covers have been added by Auto-Sleepers which match the caravan upholstery. Adjustable head-restraints are left with their original grey vinyl finish. These restraints do not really double as rests, being set further back and being constructed from a somewhat 'non-welcoming' and unyielding material, designed to give protection in case of accident rather than to aid comfort.

During two short motorway drives I found high speed motoring amongst heavy lorries demanded great concentration (doesn't it always!), but buffeting from passing lorries wasn't too alarming. Wind noise from the front of the roof became noticeable at around 40mph. At faster speeds the noise increased to make conditions outside sound as if they would score highly on the Beaufort scale,

but I didn't find the noise obtrusive and it was always pleasant to discover that it wasn't blowing a gale upon reaching journey's end!

All round visibility in the VHT was excellent, thanks to the lack of high furniture units obscuring the windows. The door mirrors were also sufficiently large to give a useful field of view to the rear. The Volkswagen fitted well into a crowded local car park, although I did need some assistance in tucking right up to the car bonnet immediately behind me — the front section of the low bonnet disappeared beneath the comparatively high tailgate window early on in the manoeuvre, so I thought it safer not to rely solely upon my own judgement of length! During the test I managed to persuade the editor to take me for a drive in order to try out the rear seat. (Yes, you've guessed — he was bribed by the promise of a pint of his favourite bitter at an oft-frequented hostelry — but I had to drive back!) I found the seat comfortable and the view excellent. There was plenty of leg room — too much in fact, for the lack of rear restraints in the test model imparted a feeling of insecurity with so much space in front. If back seat passengers are to be carried I'd certainly advise the fitting of rear belts. (Auto-Sleepers inform us that rear belts are now a standard fitting on latest models.)

The Volkswagen cab is notoriously short of storage space, and with such limited space it was disappointing to find room in the glovebox restricted by the vehicle fuse-box. The glovebox is rather low down, and in the test model it was also reluctant to stay closed, causing me to wish all the more energetically for the convenience of door pockets. The Onexe dashboard unit certainly helped, but personally I'm not keen on using the dash for storage, as I find it tends to create too many distracting reflections in the windscreen.

AUTO-SLEEPERS VHT



Neither gear lever nor handbrake obstruct walk-through from cab. Footwell mats match caravan carpet and are easily removable for cleaning. The Onex dashboard fitting provided some additional cab storage.



Passenger seat could be moved to hide small storage compartment below. Dining table stored behind driver's seat, yet left room for assistant editor's camera bag.



Main dining table is designed for two and was rock steady. A second table, provided as an optional extra, can be used between the two cab seats.



Extra storage is provided beneath settee forward of engine deck. Flap on front of settee base folds out for bed support. Note mains hookup ELCB controls easily accessible beneath settee.

The caravan

I must be learning at last! In spite of the front and rear roof bows, my head somehow managed to avoid all collisions with the conversion during my VHT test. Walk-through between cab and caravan is conveniently unobstructed — the handbrake is well tucked away beside the driver's seat and even the long gearlever causes no problem. Once in the rear, layout is conventional VW, with furniture units along the offside and a settee just forward of the engine deck.

Offside furniture units in the VHT start with a space for table storage immediately behind the cab seat, go on to include 2-burner cooker and grill, shelved cupboard, stainless steel sink and drainer, refrigerator, further cupboard, Porta Potti compartment, gas storage and top-opening locker, and finish with a rear wardrobe just inside the tailgate. The test model was also fitted with a Propex blown-air heater. This is installed forward of the refrigerator just behind the driver's seat. With petrol filler, Propex and refrigerator vents all located in the same area on the outside of the vehicle, it's essential to turn off all gas supplies before entering a petrol station, and advisable to obey Auto-Sleepers' instructions that no gas appliance should be used when the vehicle is in motion.

Kitchen and other storage

The food cupboard above the Propex heater can accommodate large numbers of tins and small packets, but when full it's difficult to locate items at the rear. I'd be tempted to install runners and wire baskets instead of conventional shelves, or to persuade a carpenter to construct a larger cupboard which would pull out with the opening door. The refrigerator provides plenty of additional storage space for fresh food; Auto-Sleepers use an electronic ignition model — the 2 cu ft Electrolux RM212F. There's a further

cupboard to the rear of the refrigerator, useful for pots and pans. With this door open it's easy to reach the three clearly-labelled gas isolation taps (cooker, fridge and heater).

The door beneath the pots-and-pans cupboard opens to reveal a Porta Potti 235, with room for Camping Gaz cylinders alongside. This cupboard remains accessible even with the lower bed in position, so there are no problems in pulling out the Porta Potti even in the middle of the night. If, like me, you need an early morning cuppa before being able to start the day, don't store tea making equipment in the pots-and-pans cupboard, for this one won't open up until the bed is restored to its daytime position as a settee.

All the cupboards mentioned above are topped by Fellows 2-burner cooker and grill with a good size stainless steel sink and drainer alongside. Between these and the wardrobe there's a cavernous top-opening locker, usefully fitted with three bottle clips and baskets which slide back and forth on runners at two levels. When travelling, the baskets are restrained at the forward end of the locker by studs on each of the runners. The middle basket has alternative locations at front or rear, leaving adequate height for bottles when the clips are in use.

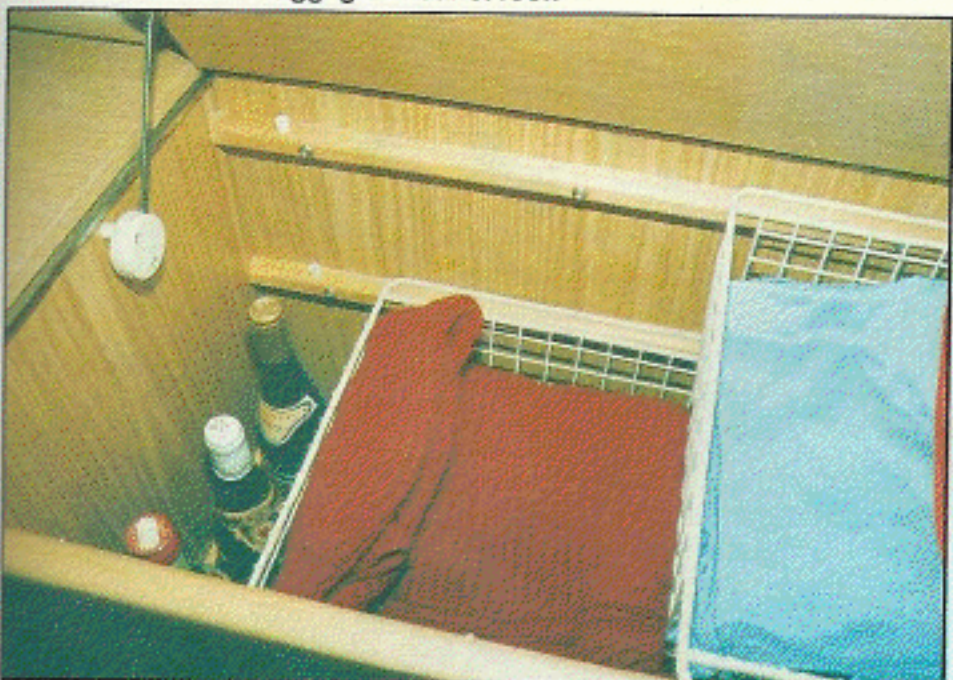
The wardrobe is the only tall furniture unit in the VHT. Positioned inside the tailgate behind the top-opening locker, it offers a maximum hanging height of 36 inches. The wardrobe door is hinged at the rear and opens through 180 degrees, so access is possible either from inside the caravan or through the open tailgate. A parcel shelf fits across the 'van behind the settee, providing an easily reached 'dumping area' above and a large storage space below. This 'behind-seat' area is particularly useful when shopping as it's conveniently reached through the tailgate and is completely hidden from prying eyes. The settee also offers 'under-seat' space just forward of the engine deck, and a small



Control panel, electrical sockets and Propex control are located above settee. Ladder locks into position across stowed upper bed providing secure restraint for luggage in rear of roof.



Shallow locker beneath upper bed would benefit from supporting stay on door. Door remains well clear of heads as it is sensibly top hinged.



Cavernous locker beside settee contains both sliding baskets and bottle clips. With bottles in position lower basket can be restrained for travelling on alternative stud at rear.



Gas isolation taps are easily reached and identified. Cupboard beneath houses Porta Potti and Gaz cylinders. VHT comes with cutlery drawer under sink — missing in test model.

'over-seat' locker above. This shallow cupboard is thoughtfully fitted with a top-hinged door, presumably designed to save conflict with heads. Unfortunately, I found it necessary to use my head as a supporting stay each time I wanted to place something inside the cupboard — a restraining catch of some kind would have been greatly appreciated!

Further storage in the VHT consists of large areas in the roof, ideal for bedding or other bulky but lightweight items. The rear roof area is not enclosed, but luggage is restrained during travelling by a wooden ladder which bolts into place. When used as a 2-berth it should be possible to remove the sliding section of the top bed completely, providing even more room for bulky items. At the front there's a large cupboard over the cab. This is divided into two sections; both have top-hinged doors, and both are fitted with supporting stays. The smaller cupboard is devoted to the crockery set, supplied with all Auto-Sleeper motorcaravans. Four cups, saucers, bowls, dinner plates and side plates fit securely into a purpose-made locker, ideally placed above the kitchen. The only disadvantage seems to be that the locker limits access to the main cupboard, so it's easy to 'lose' items which tend to work their way forwards into the dark depths of this cavernous storage area.

With a high quality roof rack and ladder fitted as standard, storage in the VHT is really generous for a small motorcaravan, and everything can be safely secured when travelling. I wondered if it might be possible to squeeze a narrow shelf over the kitchen without manufacturing a head hazard — I'd have liked a small area for dumping odd bits and pieces when actually living in the 'van.

Living in the VHT

It was a delight to find that the island-leg dining table was rock steady in use. Auto-Sleepers have made the table to the optimum size — large enough to be useful yet small enough to store behind

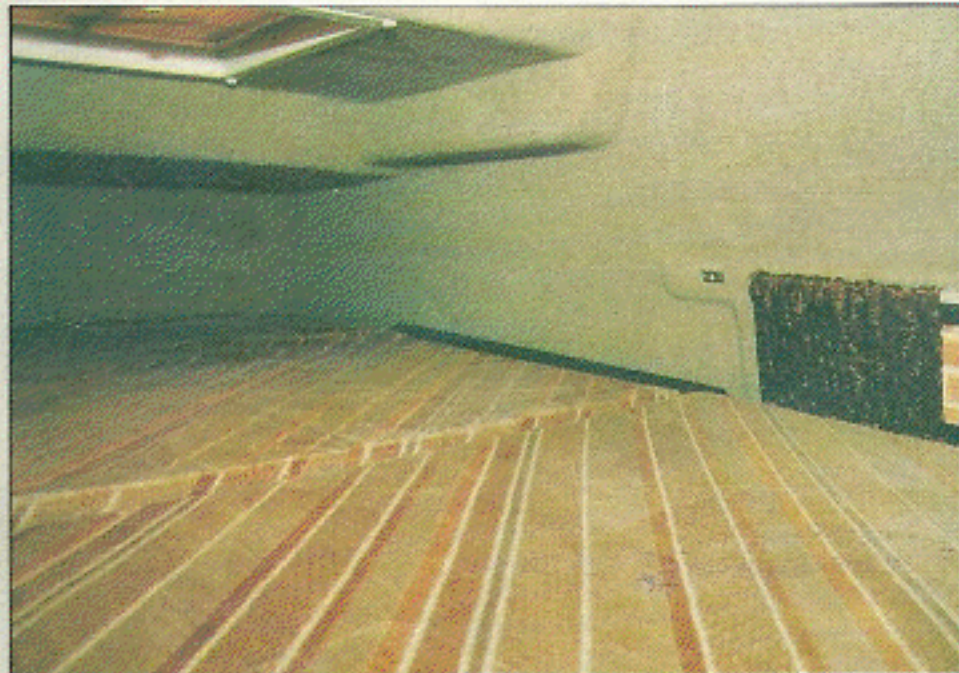
the driver's seat and to allow easy access to the settee. The rear seat is the ideal place for drying up. The draining board is close by and newly-dried items can be stacked on the adjoining locker top. This leaves the 'washer upper' with free access to cooker, sink, table and standing room, so the clearing up can be done without any of those frustrating 'collisions'. When washing up it was all too easy to lose my precious hot water by catching items on the plug chain. I also found it advisable to be on the mean side with the water — with a full basin suds once overflowed from the draining board, seeping into the top-opening locker. I'd like to see some sort of waterproof barrier or ridge between the two. Finally, in connection with washing and washing up, I'd have preferred a different tap in the demonstrator. The test model's tap proved awkward to operate with the right hand, as the natural way to reach the control was to place the hand beneath the raised spout. This tended to result in a wasteful of cold water, so I rapidly retrained myself to use the *left* hand. I was also concerned about the mounting of the tap; it didn't feel too firmly fixed and I had no wish to be responsible for pulling it away from the side of the basin. Since my test I've had the chance to look over two further VHTs; strangely both were fitted with right-hand taps, and both mountings were rather more secure. Perhaps the demonstrator was a rogue version — but it's a point to check up on before buying a particular example.

For the cook, standing room in the VHT is generous, stretching across the 'van in a band approximately the width of the side door. Even with the upper bed extended there's full standing height alongside the cooker, although washing up of early morning teacups at the sink is probably best delayed until the top bed is stowed. The swivelling passenger cab seat, supplied as standard, proved to be a real asset when preparing meals as it was so easily at hand and completely unobstructed.

AUTO-SLEEPERS VHT



Above kitchen purpose-made crockery cupboard is well placed, but does limit access to large overcab storage area. Sliding roof windows fitted to test model are an optional extra.



Height above bed tapers towards rear, although space should be adequate for children. Table leg stores between side of roof and mattress.

Burners on the Fellows cooker lit easily and had quickly-located simmer settings. A twist of the wrist was needed when grilling — the centre control knob was set rather low and tended to deposit the toast beneath the burners when withdrawing the grill pan. I also learned to lift saucepans when transferring them between sink and cooker, taking care not to catch pans on the side support and slosh the contents over the kitchen. An alternative method of support for the cooker lid would have been more convenient, particularly on the side between burners and sink.

I found working space during meal preparation to be rather limited; cooker and sink lids tended to be raised, and the table — which rapidly became cluttered — wasn't an ideal height to use except from the rear settee. It was also a bit of a stretch from the kitchen right over to the locker top. As cook, I decided these difficulties could easily be solved by ordering the second table, which would provide conveniently situated extra working room in the cab. The accompanying option of swivelling driver's seat wouldn't be essential unless using the VHT as a 4-berth. The space behind the non-rotatable driver's seat provided room for a small rubbish bin — often a problem to position in so many motor-caravans.

In my test model a flyscreened louvred window was fitted in the side of the 'van behind the kitchen. (Sliding windows have replaced the louvred type in the latest conversions.) With the kitchen work-surfaces raised during cooking, this single opening window 'downstairs' was obscured. During my early Springtime test the roof vent provided sufficient ventilation, but in warmer weather fresh air supplies may need to be supplemented by opening up the cab windows or even the sliding door.

When using the VHT for relaxing, the settee proved very comfortable both for sitting upright and for lounging. At 5ft 6in, I could just recline with back against the caravan side, legs



Upper bed pulls forward into position from above rear roof bow. Luggage-restraining ladder is used to climb up via kitchen work-surfaces. Ladder has no anchorage points.



Lower bed prohibits use of one kitchen cupboard, but fridge and Porta Potti/gas compartment are still accessible. With pillows at wider rear end, storage must be found for parcel shelf.

stretched out along the settee. The cab seat, with its adjustable backrest, also proved to be an excellent chair for taking things easy.

Sleeping arrangements

The VHT is officially classified as a 4-berth, offering a main double bed 'downstairs' at the rear and a second double in the roof. Both beds are straightforward to make. For the lower bed, the press studs holding the backrest cushion to the parcel shelf must first be unclipped and two restraining bolts on the board behind the backrest cushion can then be unfastened. A vertical supporting flap, stored against the front of the settee base, is hinged out through 90 degrees. The front edge of the settee base board is then free to slide forwards, allowing the backrest board and cushion to fall into position forward of the mattress covering the engine deck. A final slight repositioning of cushions completes the 74 by 44 inch bed. (Maximum width at the rear is 49 inches.) Thoughtful application of Velcro ensures that there's no tendency for any of the cushions to slide around during the night.

Sleepers then need to decide at which end they would like their feet. I chose to keep my pillows at the forward end, leaving the parcel shelf in position. Once or twice, when turning over in the night, I was conscious of the shelf above my knees, but it didn't disturb me and was very useful for storing bits and pieces I hadn't bothered to put away. I found the bed a little firm — fine when fit and healthy, but I'd prefer softer cushions when feeling under the weather with a cold. Fluorescent light and heater controls could both be reached from bed — it was lovely to wake in the morning and know that it wasn't necessary to emerge from beneath the duvet until the Propex had done its work!

With heads at the rear end, it becomes necessary to dispose of the parcel shelf. Once the bed is down, it can be lifted out quite



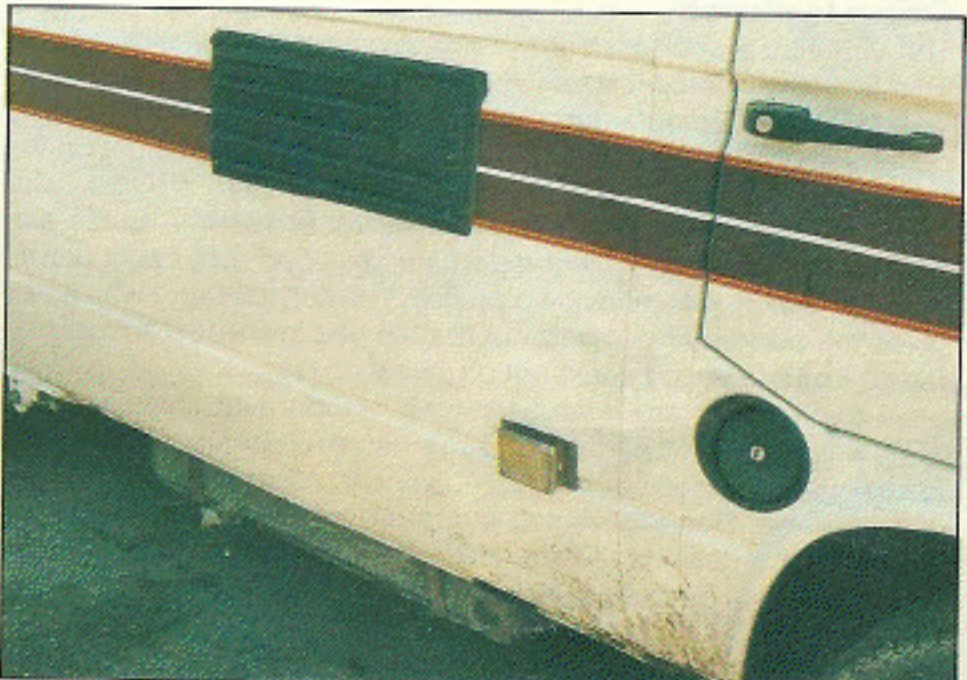
Parcel shelf can be left in position with pillows at forward end, but bottoms of curtains tend to hang away from side door. Fluorescent light and Propex control can be reached from bed.



With tailgate closed, parcel shelf conceals shopping or other goods. Wardrobe door opens through 180 degrees to allow access from inside or out.



Parcel shelf, rear mattress section and engine cover all lift out easily for engine servicing. Daily checks are carried out through hinged number plate.



Propex vent and fuel filler are very close (7½ inch gap) — Auto-Sleepers advise no gas should be used when motoring. Waste tank and drain cock can be seen beneath vehicle.

easily from inside the 'van, although it is fairly heavy. In the demonstrator the shelf could be stored between the cab seats, but with a second table in position a different 'home' would need to be found. A substantial lip running along the lower rear edge makes stowage between bed base and mattresses impractical. I wonder if removal of this strip of timber would cause the shelf to become too flexible for its principal task? VHT owners may well decide to leave the shelf at home when sleeping in the motorcaravan, keeping it handy for town trips when the 'van is being used just as a shopping car.

For returning the lower bed to its arrangement as a settee a handle is provided on the base board behind the centre section. This is grasped and lifted up at the same time as giving the whole mechanism a rearwards push. The seat reforms naturally, but before trying to slide the backrest bolts home it's advisable to check that the seat really is correctly back in place. In the test model one of the bolts was showing signs of bending due to having been forced home; if the bolt doesn't slide easily, a further rearwards shove is probably required.

Curtains in the test model were unlined, but were made of such thick material that no linings were necessary to keep out the early morning light. I understand that the dark brown fabric has now been replaced with a rust coloured material, chosen to match the newly styled velour upholstery. I found that the curtains were easy to pull and were adequately cut, but — always conscious of gaps, however small — I'd have liked more press studs to ensure complete privacy. Extra fastening for the bottoms of the curtains on the side door would also have been appreciated — these tended to hang away from the 'van side, allowing shafts of morning sunlight into a sleeper's eyes. The rear curtains were restrained by a wire running across the tailgate beneath the window.

'Upstairs' the bed is stored in two sections at the rear of the

roof. The ladder, which lies across the roof and provides luggage restraint, is unbolted and removed. The front section of the bed is fitted with a handle and can be pulled forward, until it locates on two pins standing proud from the supporting runners. At my first attempt I could not persuade the bed to locate on these two pins. On climbing up to investigate I discovered the table leg — which stores conveniently alongside the upper mattress — was preventing correct positioning. After sliding this a few inches to the rear the mattress then fell easily into place.

The bed is reached firstly by climbing on to the kitchen units. It's possible to use the luggage restraining bar as a ladder to help with the climb. Although attractive in appearance, being made from timber matching the rest of the woodwork in the VHT, I found the rungs uncomfortable for my bare feet. As there were no fixing points, the ladder also had an alarming tendency to slide sideways or to fall over unless treated with the greatest respect. Luckily the lowered kitchen worksurfaces were very substantial and could be used as 'half-way-house', being conveniently placed either for climbing up or for scrambling down again. Due to the lack of headroom, it proved to be quite a gymnastic exercise to persuade the 'foot end' of my duvet to occupy the tapered rear section of the roof. Once in bed, I found the thin mattress (1½ inches) very hard and the roof taper caused some discomfort when turning over during the night — foot room at the rear end was very restricted. To be fair to Auto-Sleepers, I haven't come across any claims that the upper bed is even designed to accommodate adults, and two small children certainly wouldn't experience the problems I found. Ventilation upstairs was better than below — the roof had the option of sliding windows in either side and the flyscreened vent was also within easy reach.

AUTO-SLEEPERS VHT



Roofrack is moulded into roof, does not jut up into airflow. Exterior coachlines have been restyled on latest models, and louvred window replaced with sliding type.

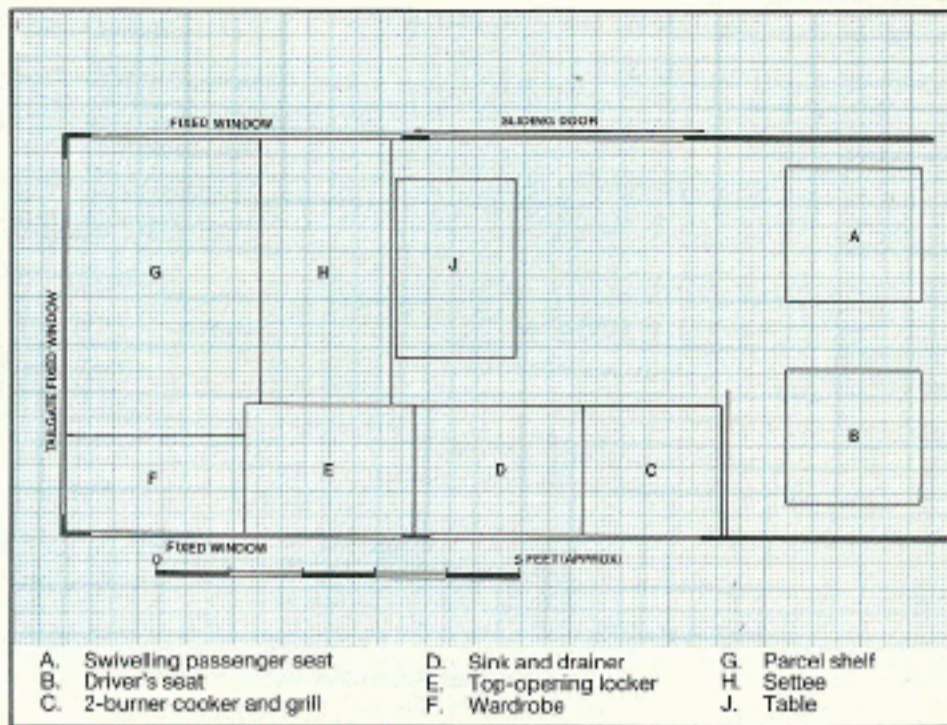
Other features

The VHT has a courtesy light which operates on the sliding door. This is SO convenient when returning to the 'van at night that I wonder why all manufacturers don't provide the same. The VHT is generously equipped with lights; there's a movable spotlight on the bulkhead next to the crockery cupboard and there are two twin-tube fluorescent lights — one on the nearside over the settee and one above the kitchen. I wondered if the kitchen light might dazzle the cook, being just at my own eye level. Unfortunately, I was never given the opportunity to find out, as the one in the test model had developed a fault and could not be switched on.

Auto-Sleepers are famed for their standard of finish and the VHT was no disappointment. All furniture units are constructed from ply and covered with light oak veneer. All straight edgings are of hardwood. Bonded edging strips are only used where curves appear in the design; all were firmly fixed and showed no tell-tale signs of lifting. Roof and walls are covered in a mushroom cord-style carpet. Sensibly, around the kitchen and the nearside rear window the covering is changed for an easy-clean cream-coloured textured vinyl. A flecked mid-brown synthetic carpet is used throughout the 'van, stretching from the rear settee right into the cab. Driver and passenger footwells have matching removable mats, fixed into place with press studs and Velcro. Cab seat and settee bases have a dark brown cord carpet finish. Roof, floor and wall coverings all hide a well-insulated base vehicle. Auto-Sleepers use quantities of glass fibre wool in both walls and roof and, beneath the carpet, a composite flooring material has been chosen for its rigidity and insulating properties.

The VHT has both fresh and waste water tanks, with capacities of ten and eight gallons respectively. The fresh water tank is underneath the 'van near the side door, being replenished through a lockable filler near the passenger door pillar. The waste tank drain is easy to reach on the offside; I noticed the tank supporting brackets had picked up large chunks of mud — presumably from a previous user's rally-going activities! I was pleased to find a fresh water level gauge incorporated into the control panel, but I'd also have liked some indication of waste water level.

Other features of my VHT were mains hookup, control panel, 12 volt and mains sockets (all standard) and Radiomobile stereo radio/cassette. The mains hookup, complete with ELCB protection, does not incorporate a charging unit — although this can be supplied, along with a second battery, as an optional extra. The control panel is conveniently placed, together with the



electrical sockets, on the offside above the settee. Fuses are easy to remove for checking or replacement. Although the only speakers were fitted in the cab doors, it was quite possible to listen comfortably to the radio from the caravan, even with the Propex heater in operation.

To sum up

During my test the VHT proved itself to be a most versatile vehicle — offering just what so many motorcaravanners require. As a shopping car, its manoeuvrability and hide-away storage areas come into their own. With parcel shelf removed and seat folded down, larger loads can be carried. Both day excursions and longer camping trips can be made with the knowledge that all facilities are on board. Auto-Sleepers proudly record that the VHT has carried off several awards since its initial introduction, including most recently the Jamboree Shield for the best Volkswagen conversion of 1987/88.

I liked:

- Clock and trip recorder on dash
- Excellent visibility for driver
- Ease of walk-through from cab
- Hidden storage area inside tail-gate for shopping
- High quality roofrack and ladder
- Generous floor space
- Generous storage areas
- Swivelling passenger seat
- Courtesy light above sliding door
- Rock steady table
- Special storage for table and leg cupboard
- Purpose-made crockery cupboard
- 180 degree hinging wardrobe door
- Good size sink and drainer
- Easily reached gas isolation taps
- Propex heater control reached from bed
- Good tie-backs for curtains
- Provision of Porta Potti and cupboard
- High quality 'finish'

I would have liked:

- Intermittent wipe facility
- Dipping rear view mirror
- Additional opening window in caravan
- Small shelf over kitchen
- Pull-out baskets in kitchen cupboard
- Different method of support for cooker lid
- Waste water level gauge
- Different mounting for tap
- Waterproof barrier between drainer and top-opening locker
- Stay for rear upper cupboard door
- Additional fastenings for curtain bottoms
- Anchor points for top bed ladder

I disliked:

- Uncomfortable ladder rungs for bare feet.



