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CaravanShow brings new conversions

by Chris Burlace

Motor caravans took a more prominent place at the recent Earls Court Caravan Show than for many a year. The number of exhibitors had shot up to 17, there were new companies, new models and new layouts.

The water-cooled VW Transporter has continued to attract plenty of attention from motor caravan constructors since its introduction, and no less than eight exhibitors showed models based on Volkswagens. As in 1982, however, vying with VW for interest were the new 'international' models built in Italy by a Peugeot/Citroen/Fiat consortium and sold here as the Talbot Express or the Fiat Ducato.

With the Transporter backed up not only by the LT but also by the Golf, however, Volkswagen were just about able to keep abreast of the new competition on a tally of models offered.

Over the past year manufacturers have been setting their sights firmly on a part of the market previously not too well catered for, the 2-berth sector. At a time when there's not too much money about, those able to contemplate the purchase of a new motor caravan are often couples whose families have flown the nest.

Diamond set the ball rolling with their innovative *Autocruiser*, featuring a well-equipped rear kitchen, small toilet/shower cubicle, and individual rear seats set further forward than usual, able to team up with reversible cab seats to form a lounge/dinette and a pair of singles or a double bed.

At Earls Court, established companies **Autohomes** and **Richard Holdsworth**, and **M1 Leisure Centre** (formerly Motorhomes International) presented their answer to the newcomer from the relatively new maker.

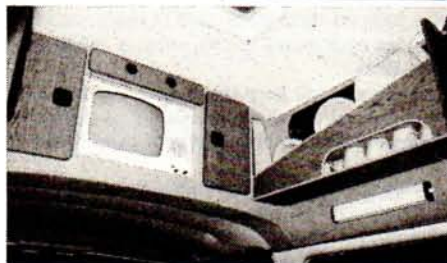
Autohomes' new model is called the *Karisma*, and follows the floorplan of the company's best-selling *Kamper* — rear seat, with watertank below, converting to bed and a kitchen/storage unit along the offside. The 2-berth, however is a hightop, steeply raked to cut through the air up front and stepped at the rear to accommodate a roof rack.

Inside, I found the central feature in the forward roof area to be a TV set, easily viewed from the comfortable rear seat. To the sides are capacious lockers and another luxury feature, a slide-out cocktail cabinet.

I was surprised to find the same rather plain sink/cooker combination used in the *Kamper*, and no trim around the window, but in other respects the *Karisma* provides a lot for its competitive price of £10,195 with the 60 bhp engine. Standard fittings include a second battery with associated Zig control panel; Porta Potti; storage type water heater by Carver; waste tank; swivelling cab passenger seat; and a fitted crockery set.

Providing competition for the *Karisma* from its own stable was Autohomes' new hightop on the Talbot Express, the *Camelot*. The £10,625 price tag is very close to that of the VW model when one considers that the *Camelot* comes on the Express complete with 2-litre engine and 5-speed gearbox.

The Karisma, hightop version of the best-selling Autohomes Kamper, a high specification luxury 2-berth. BELOW: Front section of the hightop in the Karisma provides capacious lockers, one fitted as slide-out cocktail cabinet, TV is standard as is fitted crockery set.



There's considerable new thinking in the 'three-compartment' layout of the new model. Up front, cab seats swivel to join with the pair behind in creating a couple of 2-place dinettes; they also recline and join to make two single beds and, with the help of an ingeniously contrived raising floor section, even become part of a double bed.

Units in the centre of the 'van provide a well equipped kitchen. Sink, drainer and 2-burner-and-grill cooker are from the smart, vitreous enamelled range by Optimus. There's an oven, a fridge, and a neatly built-in, constant flow water heater.

Other standard items are a rooflight with extractor fan, Carver SW1800 heater and a waste tank. At the rear I found a toilet recess on the offside, expanding by means of a folding door to enclose the rear of the 'van as a toilet/shower/dressing room, with the shower tray revealed on removing a lift-out floor panel.

Holdsworth was another of the leading manufacturers to introduce seemingly competing models on the VW, and this time the badge-engineered brother of the Express, the Fiat Ducato. The new VW *Variety* is first and foremost a 2-berth, although roofbed sections can be provided for those who insist on more sleeping accommodation.

The *Fanfare* models come in elevating roof form, or as hightops using the standard Fiat roof and retaining the full-height rear doors. The model with the Holdsworth Giant Riser roof and the basic HT version of the hightop will probably be bought for family use; the de-luxe hightop, the HTL, with the benefit of a corner toilet/shower room, will appeal to couples seeking luxury in compact dimensions.

G.T. Motorised showed their Miami model on the 6-cylinder VW LT. Plain exterior hides a spacious and well equipped living unit.

The most eye-catching feature of the new models from Reading is the rounded edge detail of the furniture — expensive to manufacture and bringing the Holdsworth 'vans up to the standards set by some of the best motor caravans from Europe.

Innovation is again very apparent in the Holdsworth VW *Variety*. A U-plan kitchen over and forward of the front portion of the engine deck has cooker on one side and separate sink and drainer opposite, again Optimus fittings. Below are cupboards and an Electrolux 122 fridge. The layout provides the most spacious kitchen arrangement yet seen in the small VW.

At the rear are a big wardrobe and matching cupboard opposite, while further high level lockers in the hightop ensure that the *Variety* is not short of storage space. Behind the swivelling cab seats, which form a 2-place dinette, are two versatile Holdsworth Flexi-seats. They face forward for travel, fold forward to make two bench seats for dining and lounging, and team with cab seats to make single beds; they can also be quickly lifted out to create load space.

Fibreglass mouldings and carpet are used to good effect for trim and I liked the new blues-and-greys colour scheme. As befits a luxury model, both the 78 bhp engine and a water heater are included in the standard price of £10,752.

Ducato *Fanfare* models ranged from just £9,744 for the basic elevating roof model (1800 engine and 4-speed 'box) to £11,586 for the HTL with 2-litre engine and 5 speeds. Neat fibreglass interior panels were again in evidence; Flexi-seats fulfilled their role up front, and rear



furniture was similar to that in Holdsworth's Renault *Romance* models with 'wrap-around' kitchens, practical and well fitted, and plenty of cupboard space.

Auto-Sleepers made minor, mainly cosmetic, changes to their VT 20 model on the VW Transporter earlier in the year, and it's unchanged for '84. There's a U-shaped rear seat unit, kitchen unit on the offside with the sink/drainer top folding forward over the driving seat to provide a worktop, and good storage provision with a capacious cupboard beside the side door and a large wardrobe/cupboard at the rear.

Extremely high manufacturing standards ensure that an Auto-Sleeper is always in contention, and the VW has the usual, immaculate light-oak cabinetwork teamed with superb upholstery and trim. Setting an example to others, Auto-Sleepers trim around the windows in the caravan area. With the 60 bhp engine, and standard fridge and louvre window, the VT20 is keenly priced at £9,550.

Diamond, who started the 2-berth trend, showed their vehicles on the Travelworld stand, and once again this dynamic young company had something interesting to offer. The *Autostrada* VW, previously almost identical to the model inherited from the original Danbury company, has been completely revised.

Available in either elevating roof or hightop form, it features swivel cab seats combining with a single, similar seat in the centre of the 'van to make a 3-seater group, and with the rear bench seat to accommodate five — all facing forward for travel. The rear seat slides and reclines to make the bed with the over-engine cushion, and two bunks can be fitted aloft.

The offside kitchen is Optimus-equipped; there's smart, light oak cabinetwork; comprehensive trim (including around windows); thorough insulation and lined curtains. Options include water heater, waste tank, mains input and central heating.

Both Diamond models, Autocruiser and Autostrada, on the Transporter are now also available with the 'Elite'



is set at the forward edge of the engine deck, and well equipped. Numerous cupboards make for ample storage, one being dedicated to the Porta Potti, while louvre doors at the centre of the rear unit give internal access to the rear storage well. A clever arrangement of a folding door and a door sliding out across the rear worktop partitions off the space at the offside of the kitchen area as a toilet/shower compartment.

Channels in the flat floor provide for drainage when showering, but I am doubtful of their likely efficiency. At the front of the 'van swivelling cab seats and a double seat behind provide seats for travel, dining and lounging, and, this clever system can also provide a permutation of bed arrangements. I didn't see a price on this interesting newcomer, which contrasted with the dated look of the rest of the 'vans shown by M1.

Volkswagen's LT has lost ground to the Mercedes 200 and 300 series vehicles as a motor caravan base in recent years, and price has had a lot to do with that. It was good to see the VW back in contention this year, rejuvenated by superb 6-cylinder petrol and diesel engines which deserve to bring the model success.

Auto-Trail had a coachbuilt of conventional, rear dinette, layout on the LT35. Cabinetwork in a light oak finish and upholstery are excellent, although I would have expected a higher specification for a 'van in this class. The round, stainless sink and 2-burner-plus-grill cooker are such as one finds in budget-priced panel van conversions, but there is an oven and a Paloma V water heater.

VW LT Miami has large rear toilet compartment, kitchen complete with 4-burner and oven cooker, and dinette plus 'Gauchon' settee forward.

Light oak was again the choice for cabinetwork, the light colour contributing to the air of spaciousness, and there was blown air central heating and everything else one would expect for the price.

The Miami might be the 'van to dream about, but few could raise the price. Those who contemplate a new VW-based motor caravan today have to think of raising around £10,000, and for that price there is now a completely new concept VW-based motor caravan available. It's built on the Golf pick-up (the Caddy, sadly not normally available in the UK and only built in left-hand drive form), it drives like a car and it's a vehicle for everyday, for pleasure or business.

For both performance and economy it will better virtually anything that calls itself a motor caravan. It's called the Bischofberger *Family*, is built in Germany and imported by Madisons Motor Caravan Centre of Preston.

The *Family* body is all fibreglass, sleek and stylish, and is demountable using four jacking legs. On the Golf Caddy it gives an overall length of 16 ft, with only 1 ft 8 in overhang beyond the Caddy's load platform; is 6 ft 3 in wide and 6 ft 6½ in high. A front-hinged elevating roof provides headroom and accommodates an upper bed, a full double, which pulls out from above the cab.

Inward facing seats in the forward part of the body convert to a transverse bed, but only 5 ft 7 in long, or by extra-cost options a 6-foot-plus bed can be formed extending into the cab. Units at the rear provide on one side a kitchen unit with sink, 2-burner cooker, fridge and a small worktop area, and opposite a wardrobe and a large cupboard with gas bottle locker in its base. For travel the caravan seating can be rearranged to form a car-style, forward facing seat for two.

The compact Bischofberger unit provides all that one expects in a good panel van conversion, while its level of insulation should be better than that of any metal-bodied 'van; it has 25mm thick plastic foam lining and double glazed windows. Available with the 1.6 litre petrol or diesel engines, it can provide outstanding economy by motor caravan standards — over 30 mpg in petrol form, while those with a gentle right foot might squeeze 50 mpg from the diesel. The basic model will cost £9,995 ex-works, although the Show model, dressed up with Kamei extras (including the replacement front grille with 4-headlight conversion and spoiler) and with virtually the whole range of optional extras, would have cost nearly £2,000 more.

Madisons, who have been importing *Tabbert* motorhomes since early last year, have become specialists in German motor caravans. Also on their Earls Court stand were A-class (purpose-built body and cab) models from Germany's leading producer *Hymer*. The Ford Transit based 522, a 17½-footer, looked exceptional value at £14,995, spacious with a high standard of construction and well equipped. Other models are all on the Mercedes chassis and run up to prices of over £40,000!

There's no VW LT-based model in the Hymbermobil range yet, but the new 6-cylinder Volkswagens are too good to ignore. Perhaps next year we'll see German-built motorhomes on the LT to add still more interest to the London show for Volkswagen fans.



New concept interior of Holdsworth's VW Variety. U-shaped kitchen provides most space ever in a Transporter, storage is grouped in rear and Flexi-seat units give versatile arrangements in lounge/sleeping area.

package. Externally it adds a sparkle to the Diamonds which cannot be ignored. There's a 4-headlight conversion, bumper cowls front and rear with integral spoilers, and in the same bronze colour, roof side panels and ground effect skirt panels.

Internal extras with the package, which lifts the Diamond models into the £11,000 bracket, include standard water heater and central heating and a 'winterizing' kit to make the 'vans true all-year-rounders.

Last but not least of the new Transporter models at Earls Court was the *Hilton* from M1 Leisure Centre. The novel kitchen arrangement

The price is keenly pitched at £14,941, just a few pounds less than the same body on the Mercedes 207D chassis, although that offers the advantage of a diesel engine (£1,400 extra on the LT).

For the really well-heeled VW motor caravan enthusiast with around £20,000 to spend, *GT Motorised* showed their *Miami* body on the LT40 chassis (and offered as an option to supply the model on the 105 bhp turbo-diesel LT50!). There was rear toilet room, centre kitchen with 4-burner-and-oven cooker and the big Electrolux RM400 fridge mounted opposite, and a long settee and a dinette in the forward part of the living area.