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VW 'vans still on top

CHRIS BURLACE reporting



ABOVE: Karisma by Autohomes, the only motor caravan with a TV set as standard! Hightop is sleekly styled with roof rack at the rear. ABOVE, RIGHT: Elevating roof version of the Diamond Autostrada. Access to upper bed is through cutout in cab roof. Elite model has four-headlight conversion and spoiler. Vents at end of spoiler duct air to brakes.



The second Motor Caravan Test Day held by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders brought disappointment in the form of a drop in the number of exhibitors compared with 1983. Encouraging, on the other hand, was the proportion of new and revised models, the appearance of innovative designs, and signs that specifications are still being improved. Volkswagen enthusiasts had particular cause to be happy, with eight of the 21 'vans on show (and mostly available for test driving on a circuit on the edge of the Chilterns) based on the VW Transporter. Those who worry about the state of the British motor industry, however, had cause for concern, noting that only three of the exhibits were on UK-built base vehicles — two Bedford CFs and a Sherpa...

Volkswagen models on parade were: from Autohomes, the Kamper and the new Karisma hightop; from Auto-Sleepers, the well established VT20, with improvements; from Richard Holdsworth, his Villa model and the innovative new Variety hightop; and from relative new boys Diamond RV, the Autostrada and Autocruiser models, available in elevating roof or hightop form and with some new thinking on layouts and equipment.

It was interesting to note that all the VW Transporters this year had the 78 bhp engine. When one is paying around £10,000 for a motor caravan, an extra couple of hundred is not much to find for the very significant improvement in performance.

I took four Transporter models out for a test drive. It is still the case that the VW engine improves with use and some moderate-to-hard driving. The Auto-Sleeper and the Diamond Elite Autostrada

had accumulated the most miles and were the livelier, the Elite having the edge thanks to its 5-speed gearbox, the extra cost of which, again in my opinion, is money well spent.

The Karisma hightop with just a couple of thousand on the clock felt as if it was loosening up nicely but had more to come. The Holdsworth Variety, however, with enough mileage accumulated to be coming into good form, was disappointingly sluggish. Richard told me it had been sent for a 'physical' and Volkswagen's computer had passed it fit but failed to effect any improvement! It goes to show how seemingly identical mass-produced engines can vary widely, or perhaps it just needs a kindly human touch to sort out the problems, not a box of transistors!

The new generation of Transporters have made the motor caravan designers put their thinking caps on, and there's a baffling choice of

models for those seeking a family 'van or a 2-berth. Conventional, side-kitchen layouts are used in the Autohomes Kamper and Karisma, the Holdsworth Villa, the Diamond Autostrada, and with variations in the Auto-Sleepers VT20.

Holdsworth's Variety and the Diamond Autocruiser have rear kitchens, and use reclining cab seats teamed with the rear seats to form a pair of single beds (with an optional kit to convert to a double). The Variety's U-plan kitchen I rate the best in a VW, but the Autocruiser has the merit of providing a tiny toilet room. Karisma, a 2-berth



Kitchen and storage units occupy the rear of the Holdsworth VW Variety in a novel layout. Rounded corners bring a look of up-to-the-minute style and quality to the furniture.

(although a cab bunk could be fitted) has plenty of free floor space and includes a water heater and a built-in TV in its spec, as well as a second battery, built-in charger and mains hook-up.

The *Variety* and *Autocruiser* can add upper berths to become family 'vans, and both have constant-flow water heaters. Blown air heaters are on the options list, as they are too for the Autohomes models, but Diamond are the only company to offer the option of double glazing for the caravan windows on their models.

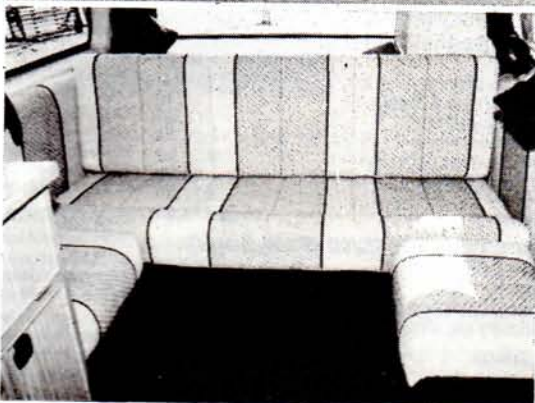
Auto-Sleepers had just improved the spec of their model in time for the Test Day, with new tweed-type upholstery, 'Scotchguarded' for stain resistance, a Porta Potti in a tailored cupboard and a fitted set of Worcester-shire crockery, as in the other models from the Willersey factory.

Their immaculate light oak cabinetwork is still 'number one' in my book for quality, but for style and eye appeal I think the rounded edge furniture in the Holdsworth *Variety* — woodgrain ply set off by contrasting blue detail bands and by upholstery and trim in blues and greys — now has the lead.

For exterior style, and definitely something different from the rest of the bunch, Diamond were out in front with their 'Elite Pack' adding front and rear spoilers, 4-headlight conversion, side 'ground effect' skirts and flush wheeltrims to any of the models from their range. Custom paintwork and other goodies, including sunroof and TV according to model, are included in the 'pack', but the price tag leaps by £1,449, making the £12,000 Transporter a reality!

As always, the SMMT Day highlighted the fact that larger motor caravans can be had for no more than the cost of a VW Transporter conversion. Obvious competitors at around the £10,500 mark were the hightop conversions of the Talbot Express/Fiat Ducato by Autohomes, Auto-Sleepers and Holdsworth.

They all offer two single berths formed from cab and



caravan seating, or convertible to a giant double; a second, firm-based double in the hightop; toilet compartment, and well planned and equipped kitchen facilities. Each has its appealing features.

I like the innovative and practical design of the Autohomes *Camelot* with centre kitchen, cooker one side and sink/drainage the other, seating re-arranging to give two 2-place dinettes, and rear toilet cubicle enlarged and turned into a dressing room by a folding partition to shut off the rear of the conversion.

In the Fiat *Fanfare HT* from Holdsworth it was the attractive, rounded cabinetwork and neat toilet room, as well as a kitchen using both sides of the conversion, which won high marks. Auto-Sleepers' clumsily labelled *CX1000GTL*, for its part, was anything but clumsy in design. There was forward facing seating converting to an inward facing, 4-place dinette, a long kitchen worktop with 2 cu ft fridge opposite, and plentiful storage space. The rear toilet cubicle could be enlarged by a fold-out partition (not as neat as that in the *Camelot*) to enclose the rear of the interior. Light oak cabinetwork of first class quality was another plus point.

On the road the Express/Ducato is second in my book to the VW as a driver's vehicle. The quietest of the front-engined base vehicles, it handles well and rides smoothly. In most examples I have driven, however, the gearchange has been poor. I had noted that down as the Achilles heel of the model until, at this year's Test Day, I drove the Autohomes *Excalibur* (best selling coach-built of 1983) demonstrator.

With a poor change last year, the 'van had accumulated mileage and improved its 'change by the time I had it for a weekend in June 1983. By this April, with 18,000 miles behind it, and a number of visits to a Talbot workshop, the gearchange had improved out of all recognition. The motto: if you have a vehicle which is not up to scratch (when you know others which are satisfactory) badger your dealer until it's right!

Other models to take my eye at the SMMT event were a couple which will compete with motor caravans based on the Volkswagen LT. The *Leisure Executive* on the enlarged Sherpa 285 with 2-litre engine and 5-speed 'box was Auto-Sleepers'

TOP: Fiat Ducato Fanfare, Variety and Villa VW models, and Renault Romance made up the Holdsworth display. ABOVE, LEFT: New upholstery brought a bright look to the Auto-Sleepers VT20 model on the Transporter. ABOVE, RIGHT: Cab and caravan seats come together in the Auto-Sleepers Sherpa-based Leisure Executive to form a comfortable 4-seater lounge.

offering, a hightop with the inevitable, but superb, oak furniture.

Identical, swivel seats are used in cab and caravan, turning to form a comfortable 4-place lounge or dining group, and reclining to make a pair of single beds.

There is a spacious L-plan kitchen, fully equipped, and a good corner toilet cubicle. Two extra berths are provided by a pull-out bed in the hightop. The price of £12,646 will undercut anything built on the LT.

From Diamond, the *Auto-bahn* on a Mercedes 310 petrol-powered base, 2.4-litre engine, 5 gears, was another hightop, and pricey at just over £16,000. Caravan seating is L-plan opposite a sliding side door; cab seats are luxurious Wolfrace 'Captains chairs' swivelling to face the rear. The kitchen is arranged in a 'U', a pier behind the



For that trip to the shops or to explore the byways a Yamaha lightweight motorcycle is offered to mount on the front of the Autohomes Excalibur on the Talbot Express.



Autohomes' Camelot on the Talbot Express is full of innovation. On the road it was a lively performer with 2-litre, 77 bhp engine and 5-speed gearbox.

seating has the Optimus sink/drain, on the offside is the 2-burner hob with grill and oven under, and across the rear a worktop with 2 cu ft fridge below.

The toilet cubicle, with fixed toilet discharging to a holding tank, takes up the nearside corner. The spec includes water heater, blown

air heating, cab sunroof, double glazing and mains/charger system with second battery. Cabinetwork is in light oak; upholstery, buttoned, in rust and there was a very thorough level of trim.

Unfortunately neither the Diamond Merc nor the *Leisure Executive Sherpa*

were available for a test drive. I would back the Merc to give an LT a good run for its money, but the Volkswagen to see off the Leyland 'van!

VW Transporters, even allowing for the way they outnumbered other models, seemed to be most popular with the Press and disappeared with monotonous regularity to buzz around the road circuit. Stopping to photograph vehicles at a turnoff from the longest straight on the course, I could

observe the pleasurable look on the faces of drivers of other test 'vans as they sped by; there was no doubt which marque was winning top scores on the road!

The VW looks set for another successful year in the motor caravan field. The choice has never been wider and specifications never better. They're all good and unfortunately all pricey, but if you can find the money, send for the brochures and study the field...