



Condition inside and out testifies to previous owner's care in maintaining the vehicle.

AN IN-DEPTH APPRECIATION OF 1982 VOLKSWAGEN AUTO-SLEEPER 2000cc

by Nell and Jim McCabe (photos by Jim)

Nine years' experience of motorcaravanning, first with a Fiat Fiesta and more recently a Toyota Rio, had left us with pretty firm ideas of what we would be looking for when the time came to make another change. Size and shape would once again be governed by the dimensions of our garage for we like to keep our van under cover and the door height of seven feet three inches dictated another model with elevating roof. In this respect, however, we felt that after two variations of fabric-sided roofs our next van would have something of a more solid nature. The reasons for this were firstly the hope that such a design would provide greater warmth and, more important, would help eliminate the nuisance which we have all too often experienced from the late night murmurings of nearby thoughtless tent dwellers.

Such self-imposed restrictions must, of necessity, greatly curtail the range from which our selection could be made and after much diligent research in the pages of recent back numbers of 'MMM', it became obvious that the choice was indeed a small one. In the end it came down to a Volkswagen conversion and, by a unanimous vote, the verdict came out in favour of the Auto-Sleeper.

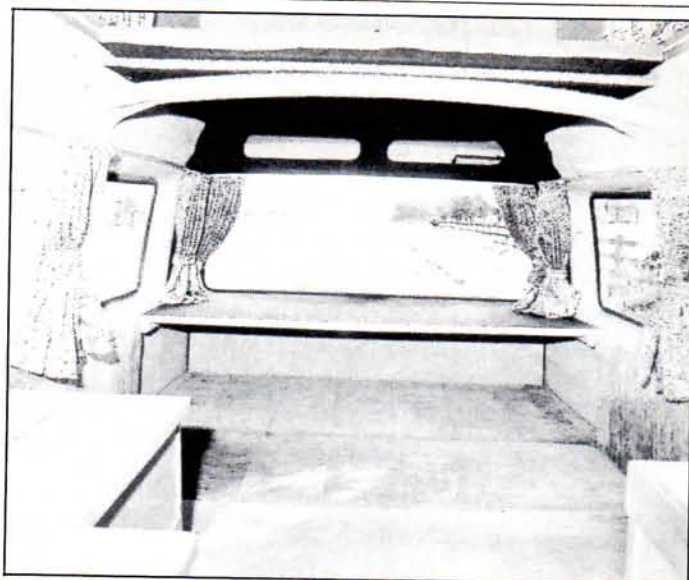
Although our intention was to keep our Rio at least until after our 1984 summer holiday, we commenced planning for its eventual replacement by writing off to Auto-Sleepers requesting information. This came by return but unfortunately the company did not have a dealer in Northern Ireland where their VW conversion could be inspected. Almost immediately, however, a local motorcaravan specialist, Tinsley Motors, advertised a two-year-old example for sale. This gave us the opportunity to have a look although we were aware that the model in current production differed from this by having the new 'Boxer' water-cooled engine and including a rear wardrobe but otherwise the specifications were identical.

We had never been in an Auto-Sleeper before but our first impressions were good. We were, of course, "just looking" for our intention was still to purchase a new model at a later date, although this was a particularly fine example, well cared for, and with only 12 000 miles on the clock. The asking price of £8250 was, at first sight, higher than we might have expected to pay for a two-year-old van, even one in good condition and with such a relatively low mileage. However, it was obvious that this particular Auto-Sleeper had been carefully

1982 VW AUTO-SLEEPER



Table provides comfortable seating for 2 or 3 diners. 4 might find it a tight fit. Roof bed above provides space for daytime dumping when both sections are pushed to the rear.



Rearward view showing full width double bed ready for use. Note trim around side windows and useful storage cubbyholes over rear window.

maintained and was virtually unmarked both inside and out. Further, the log book showed that it had been used only from April till October during each of the two years of its existence. No winter motoring. At Mr Tinsley's invitation we went for a short test run. Before taking up motorcaravanning we had owned a succession of VW Beetles and it was somehow reassuring to hear again the familiar sound of the air-cooled engine behind us. Still, we were not really ready to change our Toyota just yet and anyway we were set on having the new model with water-cooled 78 BHP engine. Or were we? Two things really changed our minds.

The first was the very fair trade-in offer which Mr Tinsley made against our existing van, proving yet again that it pays in the long run to keep a vehicle in as good condition as possible. The second was the fact that the Auto-Sleeper was blue! For reasons best known to themselves, motorcaravan manufacturers seem determined to finish a high percentage of their production in varying shades of white. Standing in the showroom a gleaming white van certainly looks very attractive but when those inevitable stone marks and rust patches begin to appear they stand out much more prominently against a white finish than they do with a darker colour. White too, is difficult to keep clean, particularly in town where the soot-infested rain soon leaves a white van looking a mess and it is also more difficult to match if touching up should become necessary. We speak from experience, our first two vans both having been white. If this particular Auto-Sleeper had been white we might well have hesitated but it was blue so we bought it and drove off feeling very pleased with ourselves. Now, six months later and with a three-week trip to Switzerland, a week in Yorkshire and numerous week-ends nearer home behind us, are we still as pleased as we were? The answer most definitely is yes! In all but a very few respects it has fulfilled our expectations completely.

Before leaving for Switzerland we had the VW fully serviced and the engine Crypton tuned. A new throttle cable was fitted to cure a stiff pedal action and a few spares such as fan belt and light bulbs were purchased to take with us. Our trip of just under 2500 miles included meandering, motorways and mountain passes and the resulting figure of 25.28 mpg was creditable enough from a 2 litre engine. At the half-way stage the figure had been as high as 26.83 but the return journey included rather more 'exploratory' motoring, particularly around the Black Forest, and perhaps a little heavier use of the right foot on the motorways! Oil consumption was negligible but the performance on hills was found to be disappointing, possibly due to top gear being somewhat high and compared unfavourably with that of our 1600cc Toyota. The engine

always started first time, even after stops of nearly a week, and easily produced a road speed of 70 mph with plenty in reserve when called on to do so. Engine noise, at any rate on the inside, was far from intrusive.

The combination of all-round independent suspension and radial tyres make for a comfortable ride and the steering is pleasantly light, no doubt in part due to the weight of the power unit being at the rear. When parked on an incline, however, the handbrake is about as effective as a chocolate fireguard unless pulled up with real force, in which event it becomes difficult to release. This could possibly be cured by adjustment but, meantime, it is provident to ensure that first gear is engaged when parked anywhere that is not absolutely level. Cab seats are comfortable and adjustment is excellent, giving a range wide enough to suit most drivers' needs. Wheel-changing, as we found during our first week of ownership due to a wayward nail, is made much easier than on many vans by car-type jacking and easy access to the spare wheel which is stored in a tray under the cab. The brakes too, are excellent with a progressive action which instils confidence, bringing the vehicle to a straight-line stop with no trace of locking up the wheels. Surprisingly, a grab handle to assist entry to the cab was fitted on the passenger side only, although this was easily remedied by purchasing and fitting another on the driver's side where blanked-off sockets had been provided.

The caravan

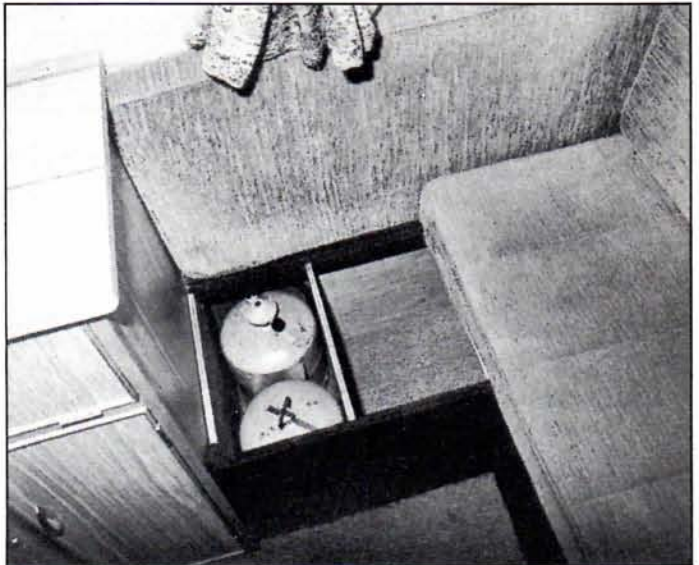
In its various marques, the VW Transporter has been a favourite base vehicle for motorcaravans for the past twenty years but prior to 1980 the available space was just a little limited. The introduction of the VT20, however, more or less solved this problem, even if the necessity to retain the roof bow in elevating roof models is something of a nuisance. In practice, however, this has proved to be much less troublesome than we had anticipated and the padded bow forms a most substantial support for the upper bed.

If there is a solid-sided roof easier to operate than the Auto-Sleeper's we would love to see it. Simply undo a catch at the front, pull down the rear locking bar and a rearward push elevates the roof and end panels. The side panels are then pushed up and secured by fore and aft bolts and before you can say "I've started so I'll finish" the job is completed without leaving the van. For ventilation, the side panels can be opened slightly or, if required, one may be lowered completely in warm weather. Auto-Sleepers, however, do not recommend both side panels being left in the fully open position in the interests of stability. One word of warning: These insulated side panels — which incorporate double-glazed acrylic

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Roof bed provides space for 2 children or a smallish adult — but sitting up suddenly is not recommended.



Underneath offside wingseat is a ventilated locker holding 2 Camping Gaz bottles. A piece of sorbo rubber pushed down between the bottles reduces rattles.



To prevent sink top sliding along the chrome bar it is necessary to fit a piece of plastic tube (split lengthways) when van is being driven. Above fire extinguisher is 12 volt plug and water tank gauge.

windows — are quite heavy and if one is allowed to drop when they are being lowered could give a nasty crack on the head to any unsuspecting person standing underneath! The upper bed is made up of two padded base panels which, when not in use, are carried one on top of the other. When required, these are slid apart to provide a sleeping area measuring some 5ft x 4ft which can accommodate one or two children, provided they can perform the necessary acrobatics to get up there! Headroom, is, of course, somewhat minimal when this bed is in use.

Seating arrangement is in the shape of a flattened, inverted 'U' made up of a forward facing full width seat with single seats facing inwards on either side. These provide accommodation for four diners around the usual pedestal leg type table the dimensions of which, however, are more suited to a two or three place setting. The table top, when not required, is stowed neatly behind the front passenger seat where a plastic clip ensures that it is rattle-free. Converting the seats to a double bed measuring 6ft x 4ft 9in is a unique Auto-Sleeper arrangement of the utmost simplicity. After discarding the two side seat cushions, the main seat is slid forward and the back, which has retaining bolts at either side, laid flat to fill the space between this and the rest of the bed which is on top of the engine compartment. In practice it is an exercise much easier to perform than to describe!

We were surprised by the amount of storage space which has been squeezed into the VT20 by Auto-Sleepers' designers. Underneath the cooker, immediately opposite the side door is a cupboard of generous proportions and fitted with a lipped shelf. There is a space at the rear left-hand corner of this cupboard, presumably to facilitate ventilation to the adjoining fridge, where small items such as tins of food might well find their way and become temporarily lost. This can easily be taken care of, however, by first placing such items inside large polythene or cardboard containers. To the left of the side door and backing on to the passenger seat is another large cupboard intended for use as a wardrobe (later models are fitted with a wardrobe in the rear side of the van). Being somewhat casual in our attitude to what we wear when on holiday, we have never found the necessity to hang the anoraks, track suits and sweaters which we normally carry with us. This cupboard has, therefore, been fitted with an easily removable set of shelves and a storage box to hold jars of coffee, tea and drinking chocolate. Bottled drinks are carried on one of the shelves and restrained by a short length of plastic covered curtain wire secured by miniature cup hooks at either end. A spare battery can be carried in the bottom to provide power for our portable television set, when required.

Under the rear seat is a useful storage space which extends beneath the two adjoining side seats, although on the off-side this is partly occupied by a ventilated compartment holding two gas bottles. During the day large items such as sleeping bags can be stored over the engine compartment, hidden underneath the removable shelf. There is a small recess under the rear curve of the roof which extends the width of the van and is useful for holding newspapers, magazines, guidebooks, boxes of tissues and other such necessary impedimenta. Another small space can be found beneath the front passenger seat.

The Auto-Sleeper's 'kitchen' fits neatly along the off-side occupying the space between the back of the driving seat and the dining area at the rear. Above the two-way Electrolux fridge is the sink unit which is uncovered by pulling out and swivelling the rail-mounted cover through 180 degrees until it rests on the back of the driver's seat, providing a useful worktop. Unfortunately no restraining clip has been fitted to hold the sink cover in place when travelling so that it can slide back and forwards along the chrome rail when cornering. This was easily cured by slitting a suitable length of plastic hose lengthways and pushing it on to the rail so that the cover is held firm when closed. This fitting may have been improved in later models but if not, it should be a simple matter for the converters to invent a clip of some sort to do the job. The sink is

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Table top fits neatly behind front passenger seat when not in use. On right, sink cover has been swivelled over to rest on back of driver's seat to form a worktop.



View through side door shows storage cupboard under cooker, 2-way fridge with sink above and wardrobe on left which has been converted to provide extra storage space.



Wardrobe has been converted to hold drinks bottles (note curtain wire restraint), coffee jars etc. Table leg stows in spring clip (left) and spare battery fits in the bottom.

fitted with a folding type faucet incorporating a switch for the electric pump which is mounted out of sight behind the fridge. The wastepipe fitting in the centre of the sink stands fractionally higher than the surrounding metal, thus allowing a slight residue of water to remain and although this disappears with the movement of the vehicle it can be a nuisance when staying put for a few days at a time. Water is fed from an eight gallon plastic tank slung externally underneath the Volkswagen's body on a wooden platform. This somewhat spoils the appearance of the van and, more important, it is not fitted with a drain tap so, should the pump fail, there is no way of getting at the water supply. Between trips it can only be drained by pumping out through the faucet which is both a nuisance and an unnecessary drain on the battery and there is no way to ensure that the tank has been completely emptied as is the case with a low mounted drain tap. Fortunately there is an accurate water gauge fitted above the sink, activated and illuminated by a pressure switch so, with practice, it is possible to take on the approximate quantity of water estimated to cover, say, a week-end jaunt. It is, however, advisable to carry a plastic container as a standby. Adjacent to the sink is a Fellows cooker fitted with the usual two burners and grill. This has a useful simmer setting and is enclosed by a drop-down front which makes a useful shelf and a hinged top cover which is held by a plastic clip when in the open position.

Other fittings include two fluorescent strip lights, a louvred window with removable flyscreens and a 12 volt socket and plug. To these we have added a fire extinguisher, radio cassette, intruder alarm and kitchen roll holder.

As has often been stated, van conversions are generally something of a compromise between what the designer would like to achieve and what he can do within the limitations imposed upon him by the shape and dimensions of the base vehicle. In this respect, Auto-Sleepers have, in our opinion, done a good job, particularly in view of the Volkswagen's engine being at the rear. Perhaps a family of four would find the available space just a little restricting, particularly at mealtimes and when retiring for the night, but we have certainly no complaints on this score. No attempt has been made to include the cab area into the living space by, for example, fitting swivel seats for driver and passenger. Again, in our opinion, this is to the good for it would be difficult to match the comfort and range of adjustment provided by the standard VW seats covered, incidentally, to match the seating in the rear. An improvement could be made, however, by the provision of head restraints.

No assessment of a Volkswagen-based conversion would be complete without some mention of the much maligned sliding side door to which John Hunt invariably refers in his test reports! Our own first experiences in this connection more or less confirmed all that we had read for we found it extremely difficult to close ours from inside. A few minutes attention with an oil spray, however, soon had it closing with the effortless efficiency of a post office counter clerk just when you are about to buy a stamp. It is, of course, still a somewhat noisy operation so for our nocturnal comings and goings we tend to use the front passenger-side door if there are other campers nearby.

To sum up, we are more than pleased with this, our third, motorcaravan and during the warm summer of 1984 we took every opportunity to avail ourselves of its facility for providing us with relaxing week-end trips. We look forward to spending many more pleasant holidays in it and, who knows, when the time comes to change perhaps it will be replaced by the water-cooled version which we started out to purchase in the first place!

We like

- Effortless driving and parking
- Easy car-type jacking
- Accessible spare wheel
- Simple roof operation (entirely from inside)
- Fly-screened louvred window
- Reliable water gauge
- Neat and rattle-free table storage
- Ample floor space when bed has been made up
- Easy conversion of seats to double bed
- Efficient insulation
- Swivelling water tap
- Good storage space
- Simmer setting on cooker
- Exterior colour scheme (blue)

We would have liked

- Drain tap in water tank
- Front seat head restraints
- Clip to prevent sink top sliding when closed
- Patterned carpet to avoid showing up marks
- Grille between main cupboard and rear of fridge

We dislike

- Nothing



Latest Auto-Sleepers VWs incorporate several detail improvements.

Auto-Sleeper update

I was very interested to see Mr McCabe's article on the VW Auto-Sleeper elevating roof model in the July issue of MMM.

Having personally used a similar vehicle with my wife and three small children, I agree with him that it is a delight for driving and living in.

His only comments to which I would like to draw your readers' attention are:

- 1) A catch is now fitted to the sink lid which stops it sliding about when the vehicle is driven.
- 2) The height of the elevating roof has been increased, providing more headroom for the upstairs bed.
- 3) The latest VW Auto-Sleepers, both elevating roof and high top models, are now fitted with a drain plug for the water tank and head restraints for the cab seats.
- 4) We are now using a different type of waste fitting in the sink, enabling the water to drain away completely.

As a matter of interest, I would mention that this year we have sold a record number of Volkswagens and this, we feel, is not only as a result of the high quality to which we build our vehicles but also to our very competitive prices. It was doubtless for these reasons that the VW Auto-Sleeper High-Top was chosen as Motor Caravan of the Year — Best Conversion.

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