



# Carry on campers

Auto-Sleepers first introduced the Volkswagen-based Trident at the 1988 Earls Court Show, since when it has kept its place in the company's line-up. **Paul Carter** traces its evolution from its early days on the T3 Transporter to to the current T4-based model

**T**he Trident is a good example of the long - and successful - partnership between Auto-Sleepers and Volkswagen UK, an association which extends back for about half of Auto-Sleepers' 40-plus year company history. Back in the early to mid '80s, Auto-Sleepers tended to use codes for their different models - the Trident's forerunner was the VHT, an abbreviation for Volkswagen High-Top.

From the very beginning, Auto-Sleepers recognised the need to work closely with Volkswagen in areas that involved motorhome design and construction. The interchange of engineering expertise became especially important where roof panels had to be cut, in order to fit the high-top or elevating roofs which were essential in motorcaravan production. The benefits came in recognition (from the base vehicle importer) of the engineering quality of the finished product. As a result, Auto-Sleepers enjoyed not only tacit approval and endorsement from the base vehicle importer, but the supply of chassis which featured a special motorcaravan specification.



1997 Trident looks little different from earlier T4-based models





Throughout Trident's life an elevating roof version - the Trooper - has also been offered



Second table adjacent to swivel cab seat in later Tridents

Trident's single common factor which changed not at all throughout its evolution alongside the T3 and T4 Transporters, was - and still is - its floorplan. The cab passenger seat has always featured a swivel base, while the main furniture units - essentially kitchen and storage units - extend down the offside from behind the driver's seat. Kitchen appliances have changed little over the years, reflecting only the detail changes in style that naturally occur with time. In 1988, as in 2002, cooking facilities comprise a stainless steel two-burner hob/grill, matched to an adjacent sink/drainage with an electrically-pumped cold water supply. Also unchanged is Auto-Sleepers' inclusion of a four-person set of chinaware.

The kitchen base unit houses an Electrolux three-way fridge, plus mainly cupboard storage, supplemented by a deep locker cut into the worktop aft of the drainer and containing either one or two removable wire trays, depending on the Trident's vintage (it's currently one). Another constant feature has

been the provision of a portable toilet, housed in a dedicated floor-level cupboard which, in earlier Tridents, also accommodated the Trident's gas cylinders. In keeping with current codes of construction, the gas locker is now a separate compartment beneath the wardrobe, with access through the tailgate.

Clothes storage takes the form of a rear corner wardrobe, with a door by the settee, or with alternative access through the Transporter's rear tailgate. Here, behind the settee backrest, the rear cushion for the double bed is ideal for storing bedding and creates a reasonable amount of concealed 'boot' storage.

To make the best use of interior floor space, the Trident's transverse rear settee is set as far back as possible and converts to provide a good-size double bed. Over the years, the methods of converting the Trident from day to night-time have been refined and improved, to the point where virtually a single action is all that's now needed to make the conversion from settee to bed and back again to settee. The earlier lap restraints on the rear settee eventually gave way to more effective three-point seatbelts.

Similarly, the Trident's 'basic camper' image has been continuously refined by Auto-Sleepers, mainly by the provision of more and more luxurious soft furnishings, with corresponding attention to detail in coordinated interior trim, carpet and curtains. That's not to say that Auto-Sleepers have neglected the Trident's specification, particularly following the introduction of the T4-based versions, when blinds and flyscreens were added, along with top-hinged, double-glazed high-top windows, the second offset-leg occasional table and an auxiliary battery with split-charge to operate the Trident's 12V systems. A mains input with RCD protection was always a standard feature. Trident customers also have the choice of upgrading their high-top camper by specifying the optional blown-air heating system and a full hot and cold water supply.

## OWNER OPINION

Chris and Dave of Hastings have owned their 1992 Trident for about six years. By sheer coincidence, within the context of my visit to Bromley Motor Caravans in connection with this feature, they bought their Auto-Sleeper at the Motor Caravan Jamboree, in the days when Bromley Motor Caravans ran the event at the Brands Hatch racing circuit.

Their J-registered Trident had two previous owners from new and currently has just over 18,000 miles on the clock. 'They were keen to make a sale,' recalls Dave, 'and we managed to negotiate £1,000 off the asking price. We decided on the Trident because, as it was our first motorhome, we wanted to make sure that we would enjoy the life. We've never regretted it.'

Chris loves 'her' Trident: 'Living in Hastings, we can take lunch or tea to favourite spots locally along the coast, and the beach and sea become our front garden,' she pointed out. 'It's so comfortable and convenient,' she continued, 'and the great thing about it is that it's always ready to go, whether for a day out, a weekend to our favourite New Forest, or for longer trips. We take a couple of bikes on the rear carrier, so we can go off exploring. We haven't crossed the Channel yet, but that's not to say we won't in the future.'

Dave is the practical one, although he agrees with everything Chris likes about the Trident: 'The VW is so easy to drive, and parking and access are never a problem. It's also very handy when we need to carry awkward loads. Long loads can be fed in through the tailgate - bulky things through the sliding door. It's the ideal combination of everyday transport and holiday camper.'

Chris and Dave's Trident is fitted with the standard 2-litre fuel-injected petrol engine and five-speed manual gearbox. 'She'll cruise at up to 80mph (I shouldn't admit that should I?),' said Dave, 'and returns between 23mpg and 25mpg depending on the run.'

Dave does all the regular servicing and maintenance, and was very complimentary about this aspect of the VW Transporter: 'Everything is so easy to find in the engine compartment,' he remarked. 'The engine is playing up a bit at the moment. I've just had a new exhaust fitted, but I think it's leaking and will have to be put right because it makes the engine perform really badly. The hydraulic tappets are a bit noisy, too; it's about time for a pre-season service.'

What about the future? Chris and Dave enjoy the motorcaravanning life so much that they are determined to continue. 'We'll probably go for something a bit bigger next time,' said Dave. 'The Trident is great, but we'd be looking for a coachbuilt model, which would give us more independence, interior space and comfort. Having a washroom with a shower and toilet would be ideal. Also, we think we'll stick with Auto-Sleepers because we like their interior décor style, quality furniture and furnishings. In all the six years we've owned the Trident, nothing has broken or dropped off, which is a tribute to the converter.'



## AUTO-SLEEPER TRIDENT DATELINE

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1988

**Brief specification:** Volkswagen Transporter with round front headlights and rear 1,913cc water-cooled flat-four engine driving rear wheels through four-speed manual gearbox. GRP high-top with fixed side windows, stainless steel rear ladder and roof bars, tailgate access to rear storage. Cab with upholstered seats, carpet and trim, passenger seat swivel, dashtop storage moulding. Kitchen appliances comprise a stainless steel two-burner hob/grill and sink/drain, Electrolux 230V/12V/gas fridge; storage in cupboards, including a compartment with lift-out wire trays, four-person chinaware set; offside rear corner wardrobe. Transverse rear settee with two lap restraints, converts to double bed; second pull-out bed in high-top; island-leg dinette table. Electrically-pumped cold water supply, 230V mains input with RCD; 12V supply from vehicle battery. Portable toilet in floor-level cupboard.

**Optional extras, base vehicle:** 1.7-litre diesel, 1.6-litre turbo-diesel and 2.1-litre injection petrol engines; five-speed manual gearbox or three-speed automatic on petrol engines; four-wheel-drive Syncro; power-assisted steering; anti-lock brakes, electrically operated door mirrors.

**Optional extras, conversion:** driver's seat swivel and second table; opening high-top windows with flyscreens; blown-air heating; auxiliary battery/mains charger; waste water tank.

**Price at launch:** £14,825

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1989

**Brief specification:** Main changes were to the Volkswagen Transporter, which had benefitted from a major facelift during the spring of 1989. The single round headlight model was replaced progressively during the year by the new-look Transporter. Distinguishing features included twin rectangular headlights, a new front bumper with integral lip spoiler and a new rear bumper. Cab improvements came in the form of a new-style steering wheel and a fresh look for the dashboard and instrumentation. Base vehicle engine and transmission etc options remained unchanged.

**Conversion:** Cosmetic changes only to upholstery, soft furnishings and trim. Optional extras also as for 1989 model year.

**Price at launch:** £15,670



Rare Syncro 4x4 version of the rear-engined T3 Trident

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1990

**Brief specification:** The facelifted Transporter again took the stand at the London show, with no modifications to the base vehicle and, again, only cosmetic and minor changes from Auto-Sleepers. By now, however, the replacement front-engine, front-wheel drive T4 Transporter was on the horizon and 1991 marked what the trade calls the 'run-out' of the existing T3 model. As the year progressed, base vehicle options, especially engines, became increasingly scarce as stocks of the T3 ran down.

**Price at launch:** £16,675

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1991

**Brief specification:** Having been launched to the press and trade the previous September, the Trident for the 1992 model year, based on the new T4 Transporter made its official public debut in London during November. The T4 Transporter's more curvaceous cab had a bonnet for the first time, beneath which the standard power unit was a transverse 1,968cc petrol engine driving the front wheels through a floor-mounted five-speed gearbox. Power-steering was an extra with this engine, but standard with the optional four-cylinder 1.9-litre and five-cylinder 2.4-litre diesel power units. The new Transporter was voted International Van of the Year 1992. Auto-Sleepers improved the Trident's double bed mechanism to facilitate bed-making. Also introduced was an offset-leg table to be used in conjunction with the swivelled cab passenger seat. Added to the list of optional extras was a Carver Cascade water heater.

**Price at launch:** £19,274

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1992

No major modifications either to the base vehicle or the conversion for the 1993 model year. VW introduced power-steering as standard across the T4 range during 1993.

**Price at launch:** £19,665

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1993

No major modifications were made to the T4 Transporter. However, Tridents for the 1994 model year were improved with the provision, as standard, of a mains charger for the 12V supply. Also, to comply with the SMMT Code of Practice, an underfloor waste tank was added

and a pair of lap-and-diagonal seatbelts replaced the lap restraints on the rear settee.

**Price at launch:** £20,268

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1994

VW's 1.9-litre turbo-diesel replaced the normally aspirated 1.9-litre diesel, while a new 2.5-litre five-cylinder 110bhp fuel-injected petrol engine was added to the list of options. The automatic transmission option returned with a new four-speed gearbox, available with selected engines. The T4's braking system was upgraded to discs all round during the 1995 model year. Auto-Sleepers introduced cassette blinds and flyscreens as standard on 1995 models.

**Price at launch:** £20,730

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1995

No major changes to the T4 Transporter. On the conversion front, high-top windows on 1996 models were changed from sliding glass to top-hinged double-glazed acrylic panes.

**Price at launch:** £21,500

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1996

T4 Transporter is given a minor facelift, including a smaller, four-spoke steering wheel along with a digital odometer and clock. Introduction of the five-cylinder 2.5-litre TDI engine brought increased engine choice. Auto' transmission was optional with both the 2.5TDI 102bhp and the 2.5-litre petrol engines.

**Price at launch:** £22,431

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1997

No major changes to either the base vehicle or the Trident conversion.

**Price at launch:** £23,083

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1998

New for this year, Transporters powered by five-cylinder engines - petrol or diesel - feature a restyled long-nose cab, developed from Volkswagen's popular Caravelle people-carrier. Detail changes include clear front indicator lenses and a revised grille. Cosmetic changes only to the Trident conversion.

**Price at launch:** £23,441

### Launch date: Earls Court, 1999

No modifications to either the T4 or the Trident conversion for the new millennium.

**Price at launch:** £23,706

### Launch date: Earls Court, 2000

No modifications to either the T4 or the Trident conversion.

**Price at launch:** £23,706

### Launch date: Earls Court, 2001

Standard Trident engine is now VW's 2.5-litre 88bhp TDI power unit, with options of the higher output 102bhp version of this engine or the existing 2.5-litre fuel-injected 110bhp petrol. Auto' transmission is also available with the optional engines. Other T4 improvements for the 2002 model year are colour-coded front and rear bumpers and mirror housings with electrically adjustable mirrors; remote central locking and electric windows are also standard features.

**Price at launch:** £26,888



## DEALER DIALOGUE

Paul Carter talked to Ryan Butcher, Sales Manager at Bromley Motor Caravans, who proved to be very well acquainted with the Auto-Sleeper Trident.

'The most popular engine on both T3 and T4 Tridents, not surprisingly,' he said, 'is the standard 1.9 or 2-litre petrol, both of which have proved to be reasonably reliable. It's a great help, though, if they've got power-assisted steering.'

'We don't get many problems with Trident bodywork, either on the earlier T3, or the T4. A lot depends on how the owner looks after his Trident - most Auto-Sleeper owners see their motorhomes as an investment and take good care of them.'

Asked about the optional engines, his opinion was that the normally-aspirated 1.7-litre diesel was 'extremely under-powered' but the 1.6-litre turbo-diesel put in a reasonable turn of speed and cruised well. 'Best of all for smoothness and speed was the 2.1-litre fuel-injected petrol engine combined with automatic transmission. It was the most expensive option, excluding the Syncro four-wheel-drive, which hardly anyone took up.'

'It's true to say that just about any Auto-Sleeper Trident in good condition is going to be sought-after. Models from around 1989/90, based on the facelifted T3 Transporter, and produced just before the introduction of the T4, are still very much in demand. Auto-Sleepers occasionally produced some Tridents with metallic colour finishes. They never hang around on the forecourt for very long before finding a buyer.'

On the question of the Trident's fuel consumption, Ryan reckoned that the T3's 1.9-litre petrol engine would return around 22 or 23mpg, with not a great deal of improvement with the contemporary diesel engines. The T4's 2-litre petrol showed a slight gain at 23 to 24mpg, but that later diesel engine technology stretched the gallon to between 30 and 35 miles. 'Of course,' he concluded, 'the fuel-injected 2.5-litre petrol engine mated to an auto' box would bring the figure down to around 18mpg.'



Side kitchen layout and traditional Auto-Sleeper cabinetwork remain constant right through the Trident's history

## TRANSPORTER TECHNOLOGY

The history of the Volkswagen Transporter goes back a long, long way - too far for all the story to be told here. Since this feature is devoted to the Auto-Sleeper Trident, we'll take up the Transporter story from the high-top's launch in 1988.

Standard power unit of the day was the 1,913cc 78bhp petrol engine, with options of 1.7-litre diesel, 1.6-litre turbo-diesel and, at the top of the range, the 2.1-litre fuel-injected petrol. Base transmission was four-speed manual, with an optional five-speed and a three-speed auto' on petrol engines only. Power-steering was also on the list of options, along with Syncro four-wheel drive, the latter an expensive and not very popular option.

The Transporter's popularity derived, as much as anything, from its car-like handling and control - as true today as it was back in the '80s. Overall compactness on the road was a factor in its favour, but more important in achieving these characteristics was all-round independent suspension. Predictable stopping power came from dual-circuit brakes with discs at the front and drums at the back.

From 1988 the next major change to the Transporter was mainly visual and came during the spring of the following year, in the form of twin rectangular headlamps, redesigned front and rear bumpers with a sporty-looking spoiler at the front.

Next in the Transporter's long history of evolution came the launch in 1991 of the all-new T4, bringing with it not only a completely new body style, including different wheelbases and the availability of chassis-cabs, but also a radical change in driveline technology. Out went rear engine/rear-wheel drive and in came front engine/front-wheel drive. Gone - at long last - was the Transporter's rear hump, so long the bane of converters and motorcaravanners alike.

Initial engine availability was restricted to the standard 2-litre petrol, with options of a 1.9-litre four-cylinder diesel and 2.4-litre five-cylinder diesel. Five-speed manual gearboxes were standard across the range, but automatic transmission wasn't available at launch. Also, power-steering came as standard with both engine options, but was an extra on the 2-litre petrol. It eventually became a standard feature in 1993.

Maintaining the Transporter's renowned handling and ride characteristics was a similar independent suspension set-up to the previous, rear-wheel drive model. However, with the new T4, emphasis was placed on maximising interior



Early T4 cab with the larger steering wheel

space. Front double wishbones came with hydraulic shock absorbers which were compact in design and did not intrude into the cab. A similar result was achieved with the rear suspension, which comprised diagonal trailing arms and shock absorbers which were installed beneath the floor. The T4's braking system at launch was also similar in design and layout to the T3's - split-circuit with discs at the front and drums at the rear.

By the mid-'90s VW upgraded the T4's braking system to discs all round. On the engine front, they replaced the original 1.9-litre normally-aspirated diesel option with a livelier turbo-diesel engine of the same capacity. Also now available was a five-cylinder 2.5-litre fuel-injected petrol engine, while an automatic transmission option made a welcome return in the guise of a new four-speed system.

Just about five years after its launch onto the UK market, the T4 came in for its first facelift. This redesign featured radiused front grilles and a deeper, rounder front bumper. With power-steering standard across the range, it was possible to fit a smaller, four-spoke steering wheel, along with a digital odometer and clock. The addition of a 2.5-litre 102bhp five-cylinder TDI powerplant increased engine choice, with automatic transmission available as an option on this new engine and the 2.5-litre petrol.

The latest T4 styling changes were introduced at the start of the 1999 model year, when any five-cylinder Trident ordered was built on the Caravelle-style cab. This benefit continues on current 2002 Tridents, which are now powered by a choice of 2.5-litre turbo-diesel engines, the 88bhp version being standard, plus a further option of the 2.5-litre fuel-injected petrol. The latest models can instantly be recognised by their colour-matched bumpers. ■

Model	Engine	Type	Cylinders	Max. power
T3	1.9-litre	Petrol	4	78bhp
T3	1.7-litre	Diesel	4	57bhp
T3	1.6-litre	Turbo-diesel	4	70bhp
T3	2.1-litre	Petrol injection	4	112bhp
T4	2.0-litre	Petrol	4	84bhp
T4	1.9-litre	Diesel	4	61bhp
T4	2.4-litre	Diesel	5	75bhp
T4	1.9-litre	Turbo-diesel	4	68bhp
T4	2.5-litre	Petrol	5	110bhp
T4	2.5-litre	Turbo-diesel	5	88bhp
T4	2.5-litre	Turbo-diesel	5	102bhp