

California comes to Britain

Chris Burlace investigates the new T5 motor-caravan which Volkswagen is building itself...



FOR OVER 50 years Westfalia built motorcaravans which were sold as a Volkswagen's 'own brand'. It came as a shock when Wolfsburg announced that, with the arrival of the T5, it was to break the link and build motorcaravans itself. Only rarely - such as Commer in the Sixties and GMC in the Seventies - has a motor manufacturer involved itself so directly in the motorcaravan business.

Volkswagen's 'Business-Unit Special Vehicles' was set up in 2003 to produce the new California motorcaravan and conversions of the Transporter and Multivan for the police, customs and postal services. It employs about 120 people in a new plant in Hannover and at VW's factory at Poznan in Poland, and manufacture of the California started in April this year, with a workforce of 70 set to turn out 4,000 motorcaravans per year (the old California was selling 3,000 per year). As with the T5 production, robots play a part in the process. One, for example, manoeuvres the whole kitchen unit while it is pieced together.

At first glance, the new California doesn't look very different from the T4 version. There has been a big change, though, in the construction materials, allowing a leap forward in production methods. The many technical improvements in the T5 are complemented by detail changes and a better 'domestic' specification for the motorcaravan.

Deepcar Motorhomes International, based near Sheffield, imported the old model and now has the new T5 California in stock. It comes in left-hand-drive only, with a choice of three TDI PD engines - the 105 PS 4-cylinder 1.9-litre, and the 5-cylinder 2.5 with 130 PS or 174 PS, either as a basic model or the more enhanced 'Comfortline'. It was the latter, with the 130 PS TDI, and a still further loaded specification, which Deepcar first had available for our assessment.

The T5 ensures optimum driving position and comfort with height and lumbar adjustment for its seats, as well as the reach and rake variation, aided by the steering wheel height and reach adjustment. For safety, it comes with ABS, ASR and EDL and it now has driver and passenger airbags as standard. Manual air-conditioning caters for comfort, hot or cold, and there is a supplementary diesel-fired heater to speed engine warm-up and produce enough heat to warm both the cab and the rear passenger area.

'Only rarely has a motor manufacturer involved itself so directly in the motorcaravan business'

Further technical enhancements eliminate the crashing of closing doors on the campsite. Just pull the sliding door to the nearly closed position and an electric servo takes over to quietly complete the closing, the tailgate boasting the same feature. The supplementary heater and servo closers come as part of the Comfortline package.

Effortless, too, is the operation of the California's roof. An electro-hydraulic system raises or lowers it in about 20 seconds. On lowering, the skirt is automatically pulled in by elastic inserts in its fabric and then a roller shutter is provided to encapsulate the folds of fabric in the cab roof area. It's the roof, too, which sees one of the major changes of construction; instead of a GRP moulding, it is now an aluminium pressing. The saving in weight is 28 kg and the roof can still be fitted with carrying rails and take a maximum load of 50 kg - which the lifting system can hoist if it has to. Aluminium is also used for the 15 kg pressure die-casting which serves as a roof cut-out reinforcement, acts as a spoiler in front of the lowered roof cap and provides the housing for the heart of the electro-hydraulic gear.

Motorcaravan furniture has traditionally been made in wood - natural, plywood, chipboard or MDF - sometimes in GRP. Now Volkswagen, borrowing a material used in aircraft, ocean liners, spacecraft and more, is using 'Aluwell'. Structured like corrugated cardboard, with two thin aluminium sheets bonded to either side of corrugated aluminium, it is about 5 mm thick, around a third as thick and as heavy as commonly used plywoods. It is estimated that this material saves roughly 35 kg compared with conventional furniture construction and gives an increase of nearly 2 cu.ft in storage space.



*Interior details, clockwise: The kitchen unit prevents driver's seat turning a full 180°
The work table, for cooking-or with two to table
Plenty of headroom, with roof raised
Ready for bed, seatbelts can be moved aside
The camping table fits to the kitchen unit or can be used outside
The central control panel*

'In its basic layout, the T5 California repeats that of the T4-based models...'

Aluwell can be bent easily and given a variety of finishes - in the California it comes with a maple-effect plastic foil.

In its basic layout, the T5 California repeats that of the T4-based model. The kitchen has a stainless steel combi sink/ two-burner hob and a top-opening fridge but the cupboards below now have sliding doors. The so-called working table hangs to the side of the seat, slides out on a rail and is supported by a hinged leg. The camping table, carried clipped into the trim of the T5's side door, fits into the kitchen rail or can be used, free-standing, outside - together with the pair of chairs which stow in the hollow of the tailgate.

The side unit houses both fresh- and waste water tanks, the gas bottle locker and, if the diesel-fired blown-air heater is fitted, a second caravan battery (the first is housed under the driving seat). Above are a decent jacket-sized wardrobe to the front and a shelved cupboard to the rear, these two both featuring a hinged plus a sliding shutter door for easy access.

The California's steel sliding seat unit has integral seat belts and floor rails with the advantage of cover strips to keep out dirt. It has, of course, passed the obligatory crash tests and includes headrests which adjust both vertically and fore and aft. It moves forward for travel and bed-making, slides back for maximum floor space on site and, together with the rear bed section, can be removed from the 'van when load space is the order of the day. Comfort-wise, it is well proportioned with rake to both back and squab, while under the latter is a large drawer - capacity just over 2 cu.ft. A flap beside the drawer allows load-through for carrying long items and, tucked away towards the back of the seat unit, are the California's tool kit and a get-you-home package of a 12V compressor and tyre sealant in case of punctures. This T5 carries no spare wheel.

Behind the seat is about 15 cu.ft of load space above the fixed bed cushion and 10 cu.ft below, but that bed-end can be fixed in a partially raised position to accommodate loftier loads. Overhead, meanwhile, under the curve of the roof, is the high-level locker which always features with this layout. To be different, this one hinges down for access, VW stipulating a max. load of 2.5 kg, enough for one's'small's'.

Curtains are a thing of the past in this new-generation camper. For the side windows and tailgate, roller blinds are concealed in the neat, moulded plastic trims to the windows, for the widescreen blinds emerge from both A-pillars to meet in the middle and finally spring-wire frame screens snap into place at the cab windows. These latter stow in pockets on the backs of the cab seats. For ventilation, the T5 has a sliding window by the kitchen and the roof skirt big mesh panels with zipped covers to its sides.

Beds in the new California are both 6ft 6in long and gain around 3 inches on widths thanks to the broader-in-the-beam T5. Down below, the double seat is quickly flattened and bed make-up is no chore. However, the upper berth is no longer just 'the kids' room'. Pull down the bed, supported up in the roof-top by day by its gas struts, and you'll find that not only is it now the largest bed but it has the benefit of a fully slatted base. With couples on board this will now be number one bedroom and 'downstairs' can be left ready for breakfast

The T5 is a big step forward from the T4 in terms of safety, refinement, handling and ride quality, plus range of engines and gearboxes for performance with economy. The T5 California continues a practical and well proven layout in a slightly larger base vehicle. With its new Aluwell furniture it gains extra storage space and load margin, while clever use of door cavities to stow the table and chairs is still more space won and the door arrangements

give better access to storage. The up-top bedroom is larger and more comfortable, the hide-away blinds and twin tables are a bonus.

All these are simple detail improvements, though; the hi-technology comes with the new control panel. It raises and lowers the roof, shows its status, controls the diesel-fueled blown-air heater and the fridge, indicates tank levels, shows battery condition, the amps drawn, if mains is connected, has a clock function with date, time and a wake-up alarm, *and* it tells you the temperature outside!

There's no doubting the quality of the conversion. It's a Volkswagen within a Volkswagen. If it has any weak points, they are the limited cooking capability of the two-burner hob and the lack of dedicated storage for a portable toilet. One could be stowed at the rear and brought forward at night, though. And what about winter camping? A VW test team in a T5 California survived a night at nearly -40°C in the Arctic. OK, the roof wasn't up, water did start to freeze in the tanks but the blown-air heater managed to hold the temperature not much below freezing; the air gap insulation created by closely fitting blinds was thought to be one good heat-retaining feature. British winters should be no problem!

Volkswagen's manufacturing methods and the new furniture system are reckoned to have cut costs. That seems to be borne out by the UK list prices showing the basic 105 PS model at £28,725, up to the Comfortline 174 PS with 6-speed Tiptronic at £35,953. For the specifications and quality they look good value for money. Of course, you can stack up the options. Our test model Comfortline TDI 130 had metallic paint, alloys, Climatronic air-con, sat-nav and more, to lift its price nearer to £37,000.



FACTS & FIGURES: T5 California (Comfortline 130 PS)

Price: £32,344
(subject to exchange rate fluctuations)

Dimensions

Overall length: 16ft.0.5in. (4.89m)

Overall width: 6ft.3in. (1.91m)

Overall height: 6ft.6.5in. (1.99m)

Max. authorised weight: 3000kg

Payload: 520kg. approx.

Fuel tank: 80 litres

Engine/transmission

2.5 TDI 130 PS @3500 rpm,
251 lb.ft. @ 2000rpm, 6-speed manual
also available:

2.5 TDI 174 PS @ 3500rpm,
296 lb.ft. @ 2000rpm, 6-speed manual

1.9 TDI 105 PS @ 3500rpm,
184 lb.ft. @ 2000rpm, 5-speed manual

Caravan data

Lower bed: 78in. x 45in. (2000 x 1140mm)

Upper bed: 78in. x 47in. (2000 x 1200mm)

Wardrobe: 36in. max H x 20in. W x 16in.
max L (915 x 510 x 405mm)

Tables: 25in. x 16.5in. (635 x 420mm) &
34in. x 19.5in. (865 x 495mm)

Water tanks: Fresh & waste 30 litres

Gas: 1 x Gaz 907 (2.8kg)

Batteries: 2 x 75AH

Standard equipment includes:

ABS, ASR, EDL, driver and passenger
airbags plus side* and head* airbags,
electric windows*, electric mirrors*,
remote central locking*, heated front
seats*, front foglights*, diesel heating
with timer and remote control*,
manual air-conditioning, dual-tone horn,
colour-coded bumpers and mirrors*
(* = Comfortline only)

Performance (manufacturer's figures)

Top speed 103 mph

0-50 mph 10.4 sec.

0-62 mph 16.4 sec.

Economy (manufacturer's figures)

Urban cycle: 29.5 mpg

Extra urban: 42.1 mpg

Overall: 34.5 mpg

CONTACT:

Deepcar International Motorhomes Ltd.

10a Vaughton Hill, Deepcar,

Sheffield S36 2SW

Tel: 0114 288 2860

fax: 0114 288 2628

www.dmiuk.com

Volkswagen Driver
October 2004
Issue 53

Please note: The correct telephone number is: 0114 288 2660.