

weekend away | jerba cromarty

# opposites attract





## **There's a brand-new premium VW camper brand in town, and first appearances suggest it's taking no prisoners. We head north to border country to sample Jerba's LWB Cromarty**

**J**ERBA: it's a funny old name when you think about it. Google it, and while the manufacturer of this Volkswagen campervan emerges top of the resultant list, it turns out that Jerba is actually North Africa's largest island, situated in the Gulf of Gabes, south-east of Tunisia.

A further foray into cyberspace, later that day, revealed that while I was listening to the increasingly angry sea-winds howling in off the North Sea and was just minutes away from being subjected to some of the most ferocious rain storms I've ever seen - and this in an elevating roof camper - Jerba was basking in temperatures of 34 degrees Centigrade and sweltering under 89 per cent humidity. Jerba, then, may not be the most apt name for a camper built in North Berwick. Cromarty, though - well, that's a sea-port just to the north of Jerba's small factory, as well as being one of the more pronounceable names on Radio 4's shipping forecast. Hot and cold, north and south - Jerba's biggest T5-based contender seems to be a model steeped in Polar opposites, and I've not even climbed behind the wheel yet.

Truth be told, I'm just a little anxious about testing the Cromarty. Editor Vaughan beat me to the Jerba punch in *Which Motorhome's* re-launch issue, back in April, when he returned from a brief sortie in the Cromarty's gas-free little brother, the SWB T3ree, waxing lyrical about its 'bespoke build and great finish'. What if my findings are as Polar opposite to his as the vehicle's two names are?

No matter. With the Cromarty packed, and Jerba's founding father, Simon Poole, on board, the better to steer us onto our first photoshoot location of the day (a firm, sandy beach upon which the tide is fast encroaching, not far from the factory), I get cracking, and straightaway wish there was something just a little more potent under the bonnet than the 102bhp 2.0TDI engine



managing a draw with one of the true superstars of the VW camper world is no mean feat

provided. It feels brisk enough most of the time, but I later discovered that overtaking manoeuvres in particular can get a little protracted, especially when driving into a headwind. If you're planning to drive any great distances in your Cromarty, I'd strongly recommend the 140bhp motor, which has usefully more fire in its belly and brings with it the added bonus of a sixth cog in the manual gearbox.

In most other respects, however, the latest T5's dynamics certainly represent a useful leap over the already impressive model it replaces. The cabin feels of a higher standard, more car-like and less van-like, and the central digital display calls to mind premium German saloons, not Gaz's daily builder's hack with a copy of the Sun propped on top of the dashboard. Our test model's electric windows and central locking add a further dash of luxury, but you really can go mad with Jerba's extensively bespoke approach to manufacturing if you're not careful. Six-disc CD multichanger, perhaps? DSG transmission? 180bhp under your right foot? All-wheel-drive? Or maybe sir or madam would like to tick the options box marked 'heated cab seats' or 'satellite navigation'? Personally speaking, I'd add 'cab air-conditioning' (down to you for £911) to the bigger engine upgrade (£1888, or north of £3000 if you want DSG as well) I'd treat our test model to were it my money on the line, and probably leave it at that,

although if I had a large family, specifying the VW-sourced removable central bench seat would be hugely tempting.

Probably the most impressive dynamic aspect of driving the Cromarty, though, is its almost spooky lack of conversion noise. I'm not saying it's just quiet - it's silent. As in Eura Mobil silent. As in daily driver passenger car silent. Despite having a kitchen and all manner of lockers and what-not fitted out back, I detected not one rattle, squeak or creak in nearly three days. That would be impressive enough in a high-top conversion, but one with an elevating roof?

A yes, the elevating roof. If you've assumed, as I initially did, that this is just another VW camper fitted with a Reimo roof, then I'm afraid you're mistaken. In fact, Jerba's LWB contender warrants a roof from German specialist manufacturer, SCA. Quite apart from being a thoroughly well-engineered affair that opens up a whopping 7ft 6in of standing headroom at its highest point when deployed, it also folds down in such a way as to render the entire camper just 1.99m high - and that's enough to squeeze the Cromarty into most domestic garages and beneath most car park height restrictors. It's not quite as kindergarten-simple to operate as the side-hinged affair used by Bilbo's, but it's not far off, and the large windows, while requiring those long of arm or tall of body in order to reach the zips, look and feel beautifully integrated.

#### FACTFILE

**PRICE FROM** £36,850

**PRICE AS TESTED**  
£41,417

**BERTHS** 4

**TRAVEL SEATS (INC DRIVER)** 4 (6 optional)

**DIMENSIONS** 5.29m L, 1.90m W, 1.99m H

**INTERIOR HEIGHT** 2.30m

**MAXIMUM WEIGHT**  
2514kg

**PAYLOAD** 686kg

**BEDS** Double bed 1.86m x 1.30m, roof bed 1.87m x 1.11m

**FRESH WATER** 38 litres (underfloor)

**WASTE WATER** Not fitted (29-litre underfloor tank optional)

**LEISURE BATTERY** 120Ah (optional)

**MAINS SOCKETS** 2

#### BASE VEHICLE

**VOLKSWAGEN T5 TRANSPORTER LWB WINDOW VAN**

**ENGINE** 2.0 TDI 102bhp

**MPG** 29.3

#### COOKING/HEATING

**COOKING** Smev 3-burner spark ignition hob

**FRIDGE** Vitrifrigo 62-litre compressor

**GAS** 1 x 3.8kg/1 x 907 Campingaz

**HEATING** Webasto diesel-fired, with blown-air

**BOILER** None fitted. Webasto Thermotop optional



## holy island

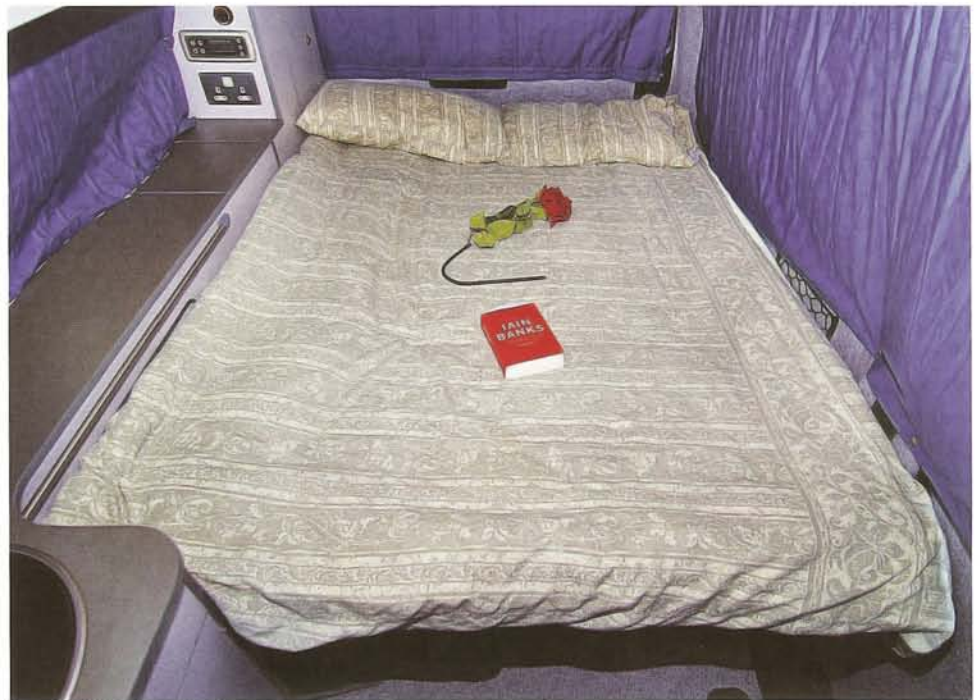


Also known as Lindisfarne, Holy Island, located just off the main Northumberland coast near the small village of Beal, and joined to the mainland only by a tidal causeway, has a fascinating and varied history that's almost certain to enthral you whether you're religious or not.

That said, Lindisfarne's early history is steeped very much in religion. The island retreat was established in AD 635 by a monk called Aidan who, at the behest of the then-king, Oswald, helped to establish a priory there (the truly amazing remains of which can still be seen today) with the help of Cuthbert, another monk who would go on to be canonised in later years. The Lindisfarne Gospels, considered to be among the very finest examples of medieval art, were written here too, around 700 AD.

Since then, the island has been inhabited by Benedictine monks and was occupied later still by King Henry VIII as a garrison during his many battles with the Scots.

Today, the island stands as a world-famous tourist attraction that, on the right day (preferably when the weather is favourable) is probably one of the most haunting and visually stunning places in the country. The Lindisfarne Centre affords a fascinating look into island life, while a volcanic mound called Beblowe Craig has at its breathtaking summit Lindisfarne Castle, which affords jaw-dropping panoramic views for miles around.



The day's going well. The weather is improving by the minute. In fact, I'm so ahead of schedule that I decide to stop at a McDonald's just off the A1 and enjoy a spot of lunch. Getting a standard-sized motorhome into a Macca's car park would require finding two back-to-back spaces somewhere over in the far corner, out of everyone's way, but with the Jerba, I breeze into the first space I happen upon and find that it's only slightly longer than the painted bay. Better still, the Cromarty doesn't actually look like a camper at first sight - and certainly not from my vantage point in fast-food-land. For reasons that I'll come to later on, there are no visible services cut into the sidewalls and no gaudy stickers and badges loudly proclaiming its camper status. It looks, in fact, just like a big MPV, and nothing more - and that's got to be good from a security perspective.

With the inner man satisfied, I pressed on south and arrived at the Caravan Club's Seaview site mid-afternoon to find the place almost chock-a-block. The sensible thing to do at this site is to leave your rig parked up opposite the shower block and head off on foot to find a suitable pitch, because Seaview has a couple of cul-de-sacs and one-way systems to negotiate. Get it wrong in a Wheelhome Skamper, and it's no big deal, but get it wrong in a tag-axle Kon-Tiki - or worse, a caravan outfit - and you're in big trouble. In the Cromarty, though, I was oblivious, and having explored and rejected a couple of potential pitches, I selected a sheltered-looking pitch at the end of one cul-de-sac, and set to with my pitch-up process.

### FOR

- HIGH-QUALITY CONVERSION
- RIB REAR SEAT
- OPTION OF THIRD ROW VW SEAT
- AMPLE STORAGE
- LARGE, EASILY MADE BED
- SCA ROOF
- STYLING
- VAST ARRAY OF OPTIONS

### AGAINST

- HIGH-SET RIB SEAT
- NEEDS 140BHP ENGINE

### RIVALS

- BILBO'S CELEX

As it turned out, this was almost laughably straightforward. Switching on the gas is easy enough, but the location of the mains electric and water inlet - behind a hinged portion of the rear bumper is positively inspired, and negates the need for invasive hole-drilling in the sidewalls. Then it was indoors, release a couple of straps, push the roof bed up on its gas struts and shove the entire canvas roof skywards, before opening the windows (one mesh, two plastic) and switching the optional Webasto diesel-fired heater onto its lowest setting to take the edge off the chill.

With the remainder of my box brownie duties completed, I relaxed on the beautifully integrated RIB crash-tested rear bench seat, and straightaway noticed that my size nines were dangling helplessly in space. To be fair to Jerba's Simon Poole, he's aware of the problem, but short of truncating the bench to clear the source of the problem - the rear wheelarches - there's not a lot else he can do. Oh well, I can always kick off my shoes and curl my feet under me, I suppose!

I'm still comfortable, though - the main table (which clips away behind the driver's seat when not in use) slides a useful distance fore and aft to serve as a side-by-side dining table up close, or somewhere to plonk your plonk and books a little further away. Or slide it all the way towards the galley and create a sort of giant L-shaped kitchen for those marathon cooking sessions.

There's a second lounging area up front (complete with its own, smaller table) in the shape of the cab seats, and while the usual T5 rules apply (leave the vehicle in gear, drop the handbrake and raise the seats to their



highest positions before swivelling), there's a decent amount of space to bear, as well as his 'n' hers bendy reading lights, which is good to know if you want to make up the bed early and still have somewhere to relax.

The kitchen itself is typical VW fare, albeit particularly well engineered and installed. The hob boasts three spark-ignition burners and forms part of a single unit that also encompasses the surprisingly substantial stainless steel sink, while lower down sits the little 62-litre Vitrefrigo compressor fridge, a cutlery drawer and a two-shelf cupboard. The little switch with the blue LED light, incidentally, is the master switch for the fridge. Further storage space is provided at lower level to the right of the kitchen, while serried ranks of shoulder-level flap lockers offer more stowage space for small tins, boxes and packets. As camper kitchens go, then, this is one of the better examples you're likely to see.

Dinner for one proved to be an easy test for the Cromarty's hob, and with the crocks sluiced at the shower block (a boiler is an expensive - at £2495 - option, but comprises Webasto's excellent diesel-fired Thertopot C combined heating/boiler system) and an ill-advised spooky film shivered through on my laptop (thanks to Jerba's generous provision of two mains sockets close to the rear bench, I could re-charge my mobile phone, too), I decided to call it a night.

This is crunch-time for any VW camper, and the part of a test where a given subject is revealed to be either a hero or a zero. A bit of forward-planning is always required if you don't want to end up having to go outside,

#### QUALITY COUNTS



There's usually something awry to which picky motorhome testers can point when evaluating a given model, but we simply couldn't find anything of any note to complain about with the Jerba. Amazingly, in fact, it was more impressive than our long-term VW California in some ways: certainly, what little conversion noise the Cali generates was absolutely non-existent in the Jerba, and while having a bike rack bolted to our California's tailgate has compromised the gas struts' ability to self-raise the door (and elicits one hell of a rattle when you slam it closed), the Jerba's similarly-adorned tailgate behaved impeccably - and silently - throughout.

If I'd wanted to be super-critical, I suppose I could have accused the nifty little door which hides away the mains and water inlets in the rear bumper as being a little stiff in operation and that it might benefit from a slightly wider opening arc, but that really is it.

but a camper's bed should be straightforward to make up, even if Pinot Grigio has been consumed at some point during the evening. Thankfully, the Jerba's RIB bench proves to be well-behaved: pulling on a lever allows the seat base to flip over 180 degrees, while manipulation of the padded bar beneath causes the backrest to flop neatly into position. As long as you've remembered to keep the rearmost portion of the bed clutter-free during the day, the conversion from lounge to bed should take no more than two or three minutes in a Jerba Cromarty, and you're left with a dedicated LED reading light at the far rear of the vehicle.

As for night-time privacy, both sides of the Jerba - and the tailgate window - can be tightly curtained-off by single drapes, while a huge fabric affair keeps prying eyes out up front. Certainly, this latter is preferable to the bizarre fabric 'n' poles drop-in affair with which our otherwise brilliant long-term California is cursed.

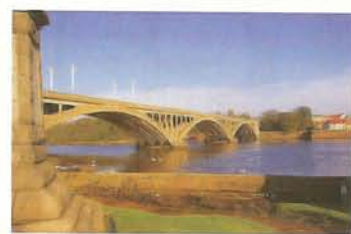
I suppose the best way to sum up the Jerba is whether or not it's better than a Bilbo's Celex, and I'm afraid the answer is 'no'. Crucially, however, neither is the Bilbo's a significantly better bet than the Jerba. Managing an honourable draw with one of the true superstars of the VW camper world after just four years in the business? That's no mean feat.

WHICH motorhome says



A classy newcomer to the VW camper scene that would have earned a further half-star, if we awarded such things.

## berwick-upon-tweed



If, like me on this occasion, you choose to pitch up at the Caravan Club's Seaview site when visiting this region, then Berwick-upon-Tweed, England's northernmost major town and a place that has been subject to violent wars between the English and Scots over the centuries (and which is still the subject of border dispute mutterings to this very day), will be your closest major town.

And while it offers all the usual urban attractions of shops, bars and restaurants, Berwick is actually a visitor attraction in its own right, with some beautifully ancient-looking harbour-front streets, impressive defence ramparts, well-preserved barracks buildings and not one, not two, but three consecutive bridges spanning the River Tweed to its name.

The oldest of these, the aptly-named Old Bridge, and which still carries road traffic today, was built between 1610 and 1624, while Robert Stephenson was responsible for the imposing railway viaduct, named the Royal Border Bridge, further inland. The third Royal Tweed bridge, built in 1925, was originally designed to carry the A1, but has since been bypassed on safety and preservation grounds.

A fourth bridge, dubbed the Union Bridge, and located some five miles further inland, remains the world's oldest surviving suspension bridge.

Interestingly, Berwick-upon-Tweed was only subsumed into the county of Northumberland - and even then only for Parliamentary purposes - as recently as 1885; prior to then, Berwick was recognised as a county in its own right.

