
Review: The Jerba Tiree

Retro, with a modern twist



I think I first became aware of campervans in 1977 when a friend's family bought a bright orange bay-windowed VW. Even in the 1970s, when orange furniture and curtains adorned our living rooms and orange melamine kitchenware jostled for attention, their bright, brand spanking new campervan stood out. It made a statement.

So fast forward forty years, and I find myself walking up to a brand new VW T6 campervan that I've been loaned for a long weekend. It's that exact same orange that I remember from my childhood. A wide smile breaks out; things are off to a good start.

Based in North Berwick, Jerba Campervans have been producing VW campervans for 12 years. Run by Simon Poole and his partner Cath Brookes, this innovative and growing company have their eye on an expanding niche. Their customers have a sense of that timeless appeal of a VW camper but are looking for the flexibility, reliability and modern gizmos that bring the experience bang up to date. Let's call it retro – with a modern twist.

Jerba Campervans are an officially-recognised vehicle body builder for VW Commercial Vehicles. They offer five standard conversions of the base T6 Transporter van but with a long list of VW factory options and extras. This means that a range of short- and long-wheel layouts, engine sizes, gearboxes, seat fabrics and so on are available to order. At their North Berwick factory the Jerba cabinetmakers and mechanics then set to work building and finishing the van by hand, also including several cutting-edge innovations.

Back outside the factory, Simon Poole introduced me to the Jerba Tiree short wheelbase camper, which sleeps four and at 5 metres is no longer than many cars on the road. Customer Manager

David Miller briefed me on how to operate the ‘camping’ side of the van: elevating roof, fridge, sink, hob, heater, electrics and fold-down rear bed. Between them they know a thing or two about campervans, Simon having owned and driven campers in various far-flung parts of the world and David having sold me my VW California when he previously worked at the VW Van Centre in Edinburgh.

I stayed the first night just a stone’s throw from the Jerba factory, at Tantallon Camping and Caravan Park, overlooking Bass Rock and the Fife coastline. It was so near I don’t think the smile had even left my face!



A well-designed interior



A flexible vehicle

I found setting up the van for an overnight stay easy and straightforward. The downstairs bed folds down flat in under a minute just by shifting a couple of levers. It’s flat and comfortable too but like most campers, benefits from an extra mattress to sleep on. The blackout curtains are robust and well designed, fixing with press studs. Customers can specify their own curtain material, a great illustration of how you can design your own van. There are lots of well-positioned LED lights for reading, cooking and other tasks.



Plenty of headroom for cooking

Jerba stand out from the crowd not only in the colour choices of their vans but also in the design of the elevating roof. Having seen too many instances of the metal 'scissor' mechanism damaging roof material in factory-built as well as campervan conversions, Jerba set out to design some ingenious solutions. First, their own-design roof is operated manually. It's well designed, simple to operate and with a bit of practice, it's easy to lift and retract the roof. Lowering the roof manually doesn't eliminate the potential for damage completely but it makes it much easier to spot since you're in full control.

But in order to fix any damage, Jerba have patented a removable roof canvas. So rather than incur the expense and complications of refitting a new canvas (a procedure that could take a couple of days in a workshop), theirs is a zip-off solution that can be swapped over in quite literally 5 or 10 minutes. You don't need to be a qualified fitter to perform the tasks, so it's quite possible to do at home without even leaving your drive.

As I discovered, zipping off the roof canvas soon gets you as close to a convertible campervan as you will ever get. Sitting in the van with a view over the sea and the sunshine pouring in was a fantastic experience – roll on Summer!



View with the roof elevated ...



... and with the roof canvas zipped off

When the sun dipped below the horizon and the temperature dropped I soon zipped the roof back on to cook my evening meal. I found that the roof canvas, made from Ventile, is not only waterproof but also very effective at keeping out the wind.

After being treated to a rare sighting of the northern lights directly from the campsite I meandered the next day south along the coast to Dunbar and Cove Bay, one of Scotland's hidden gems, before heading west across the Borders and Dumfries and Galloway.

The Tiree was a joy to drive and once you're used to the higher driving position, it's easy to forget you're driving a van. Compared with my California I found the Tiree much lighter to handle and while its base-level 102bhp engine might be a little underpowered for some, I was happy with its performance. The campervan experience is all about the journey after all, not getting from A to B as fast as possible.

All Jerba T6 campers come with a host of mod cons to support the driving experience including a touchscreen digital radio with AUX and USB connectors, a CD drive and Bluetooth. Blue Motion Technology improves fuel economy (there's a start/stop engine system when stationary as well as a regenerative braking that charges your vehicle battery as you brake) while various driver alert and brake assist systems provide additional safety features.



After a great journey across the back roads of Southern Scotland I stayed the next night at Solway View Campsite near Kirkcudbright. By this point I was starting to get to grips with the storage on board. As every seasoned campervanner knows, there's a place for everything and everything must have its place. Not having a 'system' can be a recipe for family strife, as well as lost belongings, but I found appropriate cubby holes for everything. There are lots of little storage lockers for food, crockery, books, clothes and other gear. I soon discovered, though, that once the downstairs bed is made up you no longer have access to the two large cupboards below – so make sure you retrieve your wash kit and change of clothes first!



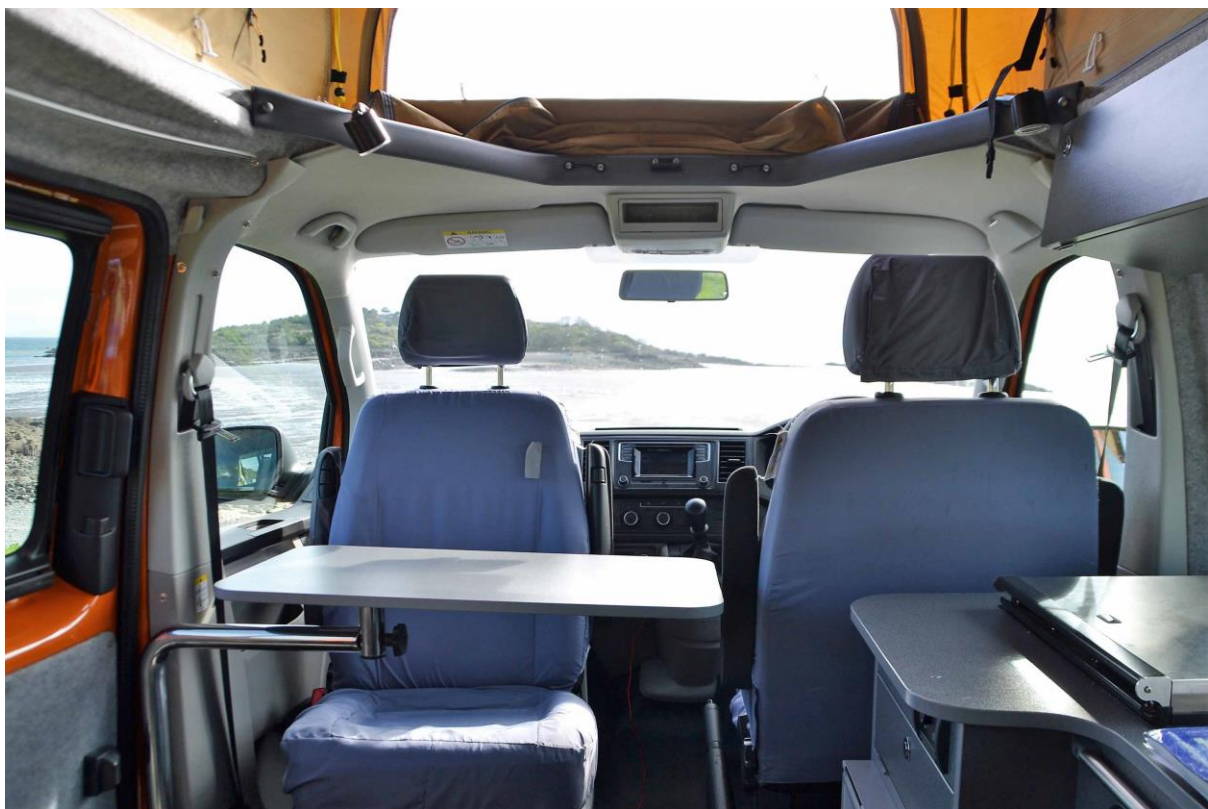
The Wallas twin-burner hob, with fridge below

Another distinctive innovation offered by Jerba as an internal conversion option is the Wallas twin-burner hob. Not only does it run on the van's diesel – there's no gas in the van at all, saving space and weight – but it also doubles up as the internal heating.

This was a completely new feature to me, having been used to gas burners and separate cooking and heating equipment. The hob takes 5 to 10 minutes to heat up sufficiently for cooking (use this time to prepare your food) and the temperature can be controlled during cooking. After use, the hob stays hot but in cooler temperatures you can use this warmth to heat the van. Ingeniously, the hob lid is lowered to convert it into heating mode and it blows out hot air from the front of the unit.

It did take me a while to get used to this arrangement. I can definitely see the advantages in having a combined cooker and heater, particularly from a space-saving perspective, but perhaps because I'm so used to the immediacy of gas I did find cooking slower than I'd hoped for. The heater too was less effective than the Webasto heater in my California and since the warm air was blown out at waist height it didn't circulate evenly around the van. The combined hob and heater is also a slightly noisier solution than I'm used to and so for all of those reasons I wasn't completely won over.

However, a more powerful Webasto heater is available as an option, installed below the driver's side of the van, and able to blow out hot air from the base of the side pillar within a few minutes.



The front seats swivel, with two tables giving several internal configurations

As for other aspects of the camping equipment, the good-sized fridge was useful and the sink large enough to wash up. While there's no waste water tank on board any water draining from the sink can be collected underneath the van. There are handy USB charging points beside the kitchen and a 3-pin socket for when the van is hooked up to a mains power source. Talking of which, the electric hook-up is cleverly hidden behind a panel just below the driver's side rear light cluster, and a 100-watt SunFlex roof-mounted solar panel continuously switches between the main engine and leisure batteries to keep them both charged. While I didn't have the opportunity to test this, Simon told me that using the solar panel you could easily stay off-grid for several weeks during the summer months.



Given glorious weather I took the Tiree to the beach on my final day. This is where the flexibility and comfort of a campervan really comes into its own. With the roof up and the 'upstairs' windows open the sunshine flooded in, cooled by an onshore breeze through the side mesh windows. It's useful to know that the mesh is not only mosquito-proof but also midge-proof!



The 'upstairs' bed and mattress



Ample rear storage

Both front seats swivel and there are two internal tables allowing a range of configurations for sitting and eating. But on this sunny afternoon at the beach, I instead folded down the lower bed and raised the rear section so I could relax while keeping an occasional eye on the comings and goings at the seashore.

That evening I paid an overdue visit to the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory, near Dalmellington in Galloway Forest Park. The stargazing session I was booked into finished late at night, well past locking-up time for any campsite. This was a great opportunity to find an informal 'campsite' just off a forest track and to try the van off-grid. The van performed admirably and I slept peacefully.

However, it was a chilly night with hail showers in the morning. In cool weather I would personally prefer to choose the option of double glazing in the side and rear windows – which as an added benefit would also decrease the likelihood of condensation forming on the inside of the glass.

Overall, I really liked the Tiree and would recommend this as a very good option for anyone considering buying a campervan. It's ingeniously-designed, flexible in use and provides all the mod cons you'd want in a modern camper. And in a retro colour option it really does make a positive statement!

<i>What I liked:</i>	<i>What I wasn't so keen about:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Easy to drive and good fuel economy• Well-designed and ingenious elevating roof design• Water, wind and midge-proof roof canvas/window• Ample and well-designed storage• Effective blackout curtains• Lots of well-positioned LED lights and USB connectors for tablets/phone• The roof-mounted solar panel• The gorgeous colour!• The long list of options available• Jerba's focus on innovation and attention to detail	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Combined diesel-powered hob and heater unit a little slow and noisy• The 102bhp engine might be slightly underpowered for some tastes• I recommend double-glazed rear and side windows for cooler weather

