

On Test - VW Cromarty campervan from Jerba Campers

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IT'S been a few years since I've owned a VW camper. In that time other manufacturers have challenged VW's dominance as the public's choice as a base vehicle for campervans but despite the success of the likes of Renault, Mercedes, Toyota, Ford and Hyundai in creating base vehicles for campervan conversions there is little doubt that in the eyes of most enthusiasts the VW T-series is still the iconic campervan.

Having said that the real, genuine icons are no longer with us. The split screen and bay window models of yesteryear have now generally been put out to pasture in museums and even the most ardent of campervan nuts would admit the painfully low fuel consumption of the old models is no longer really economically feasible in these days of higher fuel costs.

Carrying on with the legendary VW camper tradition, Volkswagen introduced the T6 model last year. There was little in the way of bugles and drums from the manufacturer largely because there wasn't a huge amount of difference between the old T5 and the new T6.

There were a few subtle changes to the front shape of the vehicle and some additions to the driver's fascia but in truth the vehicle is much the same as its predecessor. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. The T5 is a hugely popular and successful model so why change it for changes sake? The more notable inclusions feature Bluetooth mobile connectivity, digital radio with colour touchscreen and full Blue Motion Technology.

The last VW camper I owned was an T4 Autosleeper so when Simon Poole of Jerba Campervans offered me the chance to try out one of his newly converted T6's I was delighted to take him up on his offer.

Jerba Campervans are based in North Berwick and work closely with Volkswagen. Jerba make bespoke conversions so can lay-out designs to suit the customers' needs. The company has a full ISO9001 accreditation and they have won a number of industry awards over the years.

Jerba also hire out three of their design models, largely to allow prospective purchasers to try out the van before committing to buy. This also allows the company to try out new products, fixtures and fittings before offering them as part of their conversion options. And Jerba is most certainly a

company that likes to try out new ideas, a truly innovative mindset can be seen at work in all of their designs.

The model Simon offered was the Cromarty, a spacious 5-seat carrier with an abundance of cupboard space. All Jerba's new VW T6's are equipped with a Euro6 2.0 litre diesel engine and the Cromarty model I was testing had a 102bhp engine, which I found to be slightly underpowered. To be fair my own Hyundai i800 camper has a 2.5 Turbo Diesel 168bhp engine and has automatic transmission, so shifting up and down gears to negotiate hilly roads is something I'm not used to.

The vehicle I was trying out was from Jerba's new hire fleet and Simon explained to me that all their hire vehicles were based on the 2 litre 102bhp engine. Campervanning is a leisure activity and most folk are probably happy enough to move along at a relaxed rate of knots when they are on holiday. However, if you were looking to buy a camper from Jerba you'd have the option of going for something a bit more gutsy, the VW 150 or even the 204bhp engine.



Two front swivel seats are comfortable and ideal for an apres walk snooze



The finest feature of the Cromarty is the amount of living space. Unsurpassed in a camper of this size

The Cromarty has a classic VW camper van layout built on a long wheel base T6. I was delighted how much more living space this gave. Even with 4 people eating around a table there was still a feeling of spaciousness and the fact that both drivers and passenger seats swivelled meant that it was dead easy to have a couple of guests in for dinner or to share a bottle of wine. The Cromarty has belted seating for 5 and together with the spacious pop up roof bed meant this was an ideal camper for a family of 4.

The Jerba designed pop up roof is interesting. It has fully zipped and removable Ventile cotton canvas walls, a very unusual feature. It means the whole unit can easily be replaced but it could also be unzipped and rolled up on sweltering days when the interior of the van felt uncomfortably hot. And to my knowledge no other van converter uses Ventile on pop up roofs. My own experience of this fabric goes back to my very early outdoor gear days when Ventile was de rigueur for mountaineering and hillwalking jackets. The material is tough, waterproof and breathable and we endured enough rain on our week-long sortie with the Cromarty to know how well it actually works!



The removable pop-up roof is innovative and spacious

I actually slept in the pop-up roof during our week-long trial and I found the slatted bed to be very comfortable. However, if you are over six foot in height you might find it a bit on the short side, although I'm sure Jerba would be happy to fit a longer bed for you. In essence though this pop-up roof bed is best for youngsters – there's loads of room and the kids love having their own space. You can buy a safety net to fit over the end of the bed as an optional extra.

I thought I was being fairly gallant offering to sleep "upstairs" leaving my long-suffering wife with a bit of luxury. The downstairs bed folds down easily and quickly from European safety tested belted seating for three into a luxuriously 130cm wide double bed, considerably wider than the bed in my Hyundai. She reckoned she slept better than normal and found the bed to be extremely comfortable – praise from someone who rarely sleeps for more than 4 or 5 hours a night!

Jerba offer a choice of cooking hobs - you can have a stainless steel SMEV 3 burner hob and combination sink unit with a smoked glass top, or as in the vehicle I tested, a Wallas flat glass plate diesel fuelled hob. This also worked as the main diesel fuelled hot air heater and was less successful as a heater than it was as a hob. Let's look at the heater function first.



Cooking is by way of a diesel powered hob

Working on the fact that hot air rises it seems sensible to me that an effective heater outflow should be a floor level. With the Combined Wallas hob-cum-heater there is a stainless steel hob lid that folds down over the hob and acts as a cover. In van heater mode a rather Heath Robinson affair stops the lid from folding completely flat and hot air comes out of the gap between the hob and the lid. This means that the warmed air outflow is at waist height and on very cool days you can have chilly feet and legs, even though the upper part of the van is warm. It's not a system I'd choose for winter campervanning in Scotland. On our April testing tour we had the heater on full most evenings, although, on the plus side, it didn't appear to use very much diesel from the van fuel system.

The diesel-fuelled hob was more successful, if you are patient. It takes a few minutes for the hob to get up to speed so boiling a kettle takes longer than it would on a gas hob, but hey, you're on holiday. Be patient...

The big plus with this kind of hob is obvious - you don't have to carry a bottle of gas which gives you some extra space, eliminates the need for a gas alarm and, I suspect, saves money.

There are other advantages too – there is no open flame; the fuel is non-explosive and non-pressurised; you don't get any condensation and the hob is extremely easy to clean.

Having said all that, there is something about lighting a gas flame when you pull up for the night that fills me with a deep sense of nostalgia. There's something about the smell of lighting a gas stove that takes me back to my childhood and my parents' old caravan. I forever associate that smell with holidays, exploration and adventure. But maybe I'm just an over-emotional old fool...

Curiously enough I felt slightly emotional handing this vehicle back to Jerba at the end of our week. I reckon we were averaging well over 40mpg on our little trip and that includes a diesel heater that was being run every night because of the cold weather and my wife had certainly fallen in love with the amount of cupboard space. Indeed, there were two or three cupboards that we didn't even use...

The new T6 VW updated Transporter meets all new emission and fuel economy targets (reducing the annual road tax bill) and as standard all of Jerba's T6 campers will now include all of the following:

Touchscreen Digital Radio - with 5" Colour Display, AUX-IN & USB in glove box (for connecting MP3 & iPod), SD card slot, CD drive and four Cab Loudspeakers.

Bluetooth System - that will Connect your Mobile Phone through the Touchscreen Digital Radio.

Trip Computer – displays Fuel Consumption and predicted Mileage from the Fuel in your Tank.

Blue Motion Technology – improving fuel economy and reducing road tax duty. Start/stop engine system when stationary, low rolling resistance tyres and regenerative braking that charges your vehicle battery as you brake.

Automatic Post-collision Braking System – triggers braking after a collision, with the aim of preventing secondary collisions.

Driver Alert System – uses visual and acoustic warning signals to recommend that the driver takes a break as soon as it registers driving behaviour that indicates tiredness.

Brake Assist System – registers the speed at which the brake pedal is pressed. During a reflexive or emergency braking action, it ensures that full brake pressure is built up more quickly.

All in all it's a pretty impressive list and although it doesn't come cheap (no decent campervans are cheap) you can be assured that you are getting years of innovation and build experience, from both VW and Jerba, for your cash.

The Jerba Cromarty is a lovely vehicle that could be the centrepiece of years of exploring, journeying, camping and having fun. It's the ideal size for two adults with or without a couple of youngsters and the bright and airy interior has a superb feeling of spaciousness. We loved using it and it will certainly be a contender if and when we feel we want to move on from our own present campervan.

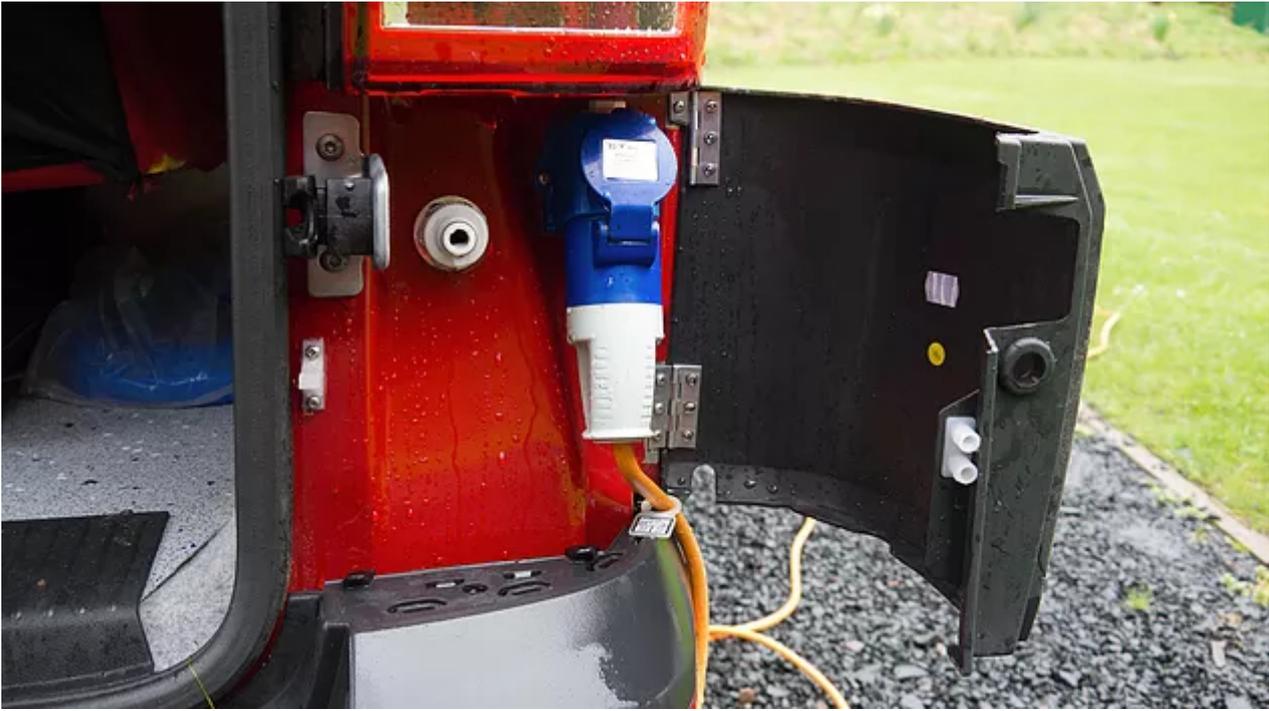
The Cromarty is a VW T6 Conversion with seating for 5. On the road price is from £42,100 – and that includes a full tank of fuel. You can find out more from www.jerbacampervans.co.uk



The long wheel base Cromarty not only drives well but offers a huge amount of living space



Plenty of storage space in the back, but there's lots of cupboard space too



Some more neat innovation. Water inlet point and electric power point are concealed behind rear bumper



A big selling point. The VW Cromarty gets in excess of 40 MPG, and 45 if you're careful