



# DIAMOND VW AUTOSTRADA

**A simple conversion with sophisticated options**

by John Hunt

The people who run the Diamond factory at Leighton Buzzard enjoy motoring as much as motorcaravanning and it is therefore not surprising to find them choosing the top of the range Volkswagen as the firm's demonstrator. We were very happy to borrow the latest model for a week, having enjoyed last year our first experience of the 5-speed, 78 bhp water-cooled Transporter.

Last year's demonstrator was the unique Autocruiser high roof conversion; the one with the little toilet/shower compartment and twin single beds. Our latest test was of the entirely different and more conventional Autostrada with a rising roof, but, again, with 5 gears and 78 bhp.

Perhaps because it was run in, with several thousand miles on the odometer, this was without doubt the best VW we have travelled in. All the characteristics of the deservedly popular marque were there in abundance. Acceleration was lively, suspension soft yet not soggy, roadholding superb (particularly noticeable after stepping straight out of our bigger Bedford coachbuilt), the ride quiet - and top speed 'way up in the unmentionable. After a brief burst of "seeing what she'll do", passing everything on the motorway, I decided to settle to a cruising speed more in keeping with my sedate personality - and invariably found the needle creeping imperceptibly beyond the 70 mark.

This was certainly a vehicle for long distance, fast cruising in comfort. Hours of stretches at the wheel were aided by a relaxed sitting position, high up with commanding view of the road, on the comfortable, adjustable, original-equipment Volkswagen seats. Proof of this suitability came from my wife, who dozed off more than once in spite of the high cruising speed maintained.



**Chocolate and vanilla paint and orange roof apron makes a pleasing combination when the roof is raised.**

Unlike many other 5-speed gearboxes, the VW's top gear ratio is virtually the same as with the 4-speed box, i.e. it is not an overdrive. So it follows that the gears are more closely spaced. My impression was that there were two 'third' gears, most useful ratios for town and minor road motoring. The higher of those two gears (fourth) also provided rapid acceleration for overtaking. Coupled with a flexible motor and transmission, third could be used for everything but starting - and even managed that once or twice when it was selected in mistake for first. The unusual gate layout, with reverse and first in the left hand plane, against a spring, confused me at times when I wasn't concentrating. And this particular box exhibited one quirk spasmodically (confirmed by staff at Diamond RV) in that second sometimes wasn't there, being replaced by fourth.

Even so, when moving up through the gears, the obliging motor took first-to-fourth without complaint. It is difficult to obtain accurate fuel consumption figures in just one week. Using the tankful-to-tankful method, we made it 22 mpg. The official DIN figure for this van is 24.1 (25.9 for the 60 bhp version and 35 for the 50 bhp diesel). Alistair Whitmore of Diamond, who has put in more miles on this same vehicle than anyone else, reckons a worst of 25, rising to 28 or so on longer runs - figures confirmed by a few readers who are owners.

(I find that I often do worse on fuel consumption than some others and the reason was brought home to me when driving a Citroen BX car recently. The 'excessive consumption' lamp came on too often, indicating that my right foot is heavy.)

### The caravan

The Diamond people, brimming with unusual ideas, recognise that there is a steady demand for more conventional products and the Autostrada fits firmly into the latter category. However, there are so many options listed that each customer is offered many variations on a basic theme and, in addition, the converters are always willing to consider modifications requested by the buyer.

The test vehicle carried many of the listed extras and some not listed, like a tripod stand allowing use of a table outside and a superb Sharp radio/cassette player with automatic tuning, four speakers and graphic equaliser. The CB unit in a pod above the windscreen remained firmly switched off while the vehicle was in my possession. I don't understand the jargon but I gather such a device would be invaluable if one broke down in some lonely spot.

Readers should, therefore, carefully check the options list, for not all the goodies mentioned in this report are included in the base price.

### Roof and beds

The side-hinged rising roof was simplicity itself to put up, with two superior, self-locking exterior catches to be released before pushing it. The gas-filled struts eased the operation and held the roof fully extended in a strong wind. The orange Plastolene side walls were not trapped when lowering. The GRP roof cap was lined internally with a warm-feeling, light brown cloth but the unlined apron gave rise to some condensation, lessened when the wind-up, flyscreened ventilator was opened. (An insulated apron is now available to order.)

A lined, high top version is available at no extra cost and, if the 7ft 4in high rising-roof Volks will not fit the garage anyway, it's an option worth considering. A bit of headroom would be lost, but the caravan would be more cosy in indifferent weather.

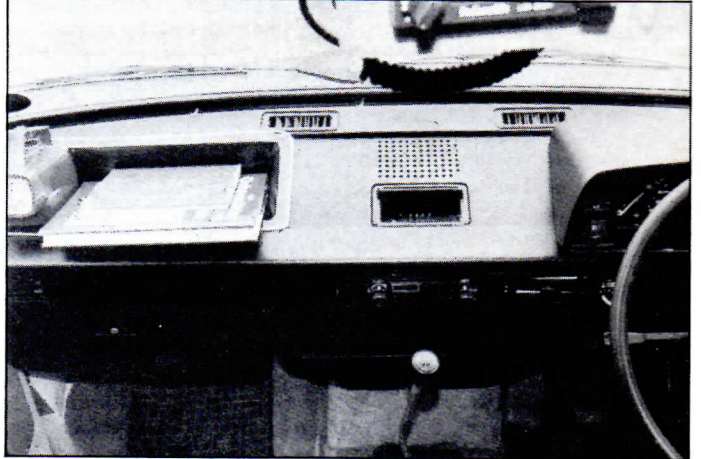
The roof has a proper bed, based on 4-inch foam mattresses. The one in the demonstrator was just 5ft 10 inches long but can be made a full 6ft if required. Whilst none of the obligatory VW roof bows had been removed, access to the upper bed is simplified by the big hole in the roof of the cab. As an alternative to one big roof bed, the mattress sections may be split into separate beds for two small children, one sleeping over the cab, the other above the engine deck. This arrangement preserves full standing room in the most-used centre of the caravan.

The lower bed is rapidly made ready for use by pulling forward the bench seat, reclining the backrest to mate with the large cushion which lives permanently over the engine. There are no additional supporting legs to remember and the operation takes only a few seconds. The head of the bed feels cosy, thanks to a thickly padded panel on the lower part of the tailgate. A spotlight is provided for those who read or drink in bed. With both beds in use, the kitchen remains accessible and there is a reasonable amount of clear standing space - more if the optional swivel-and-slide fifth seat is not fitted.

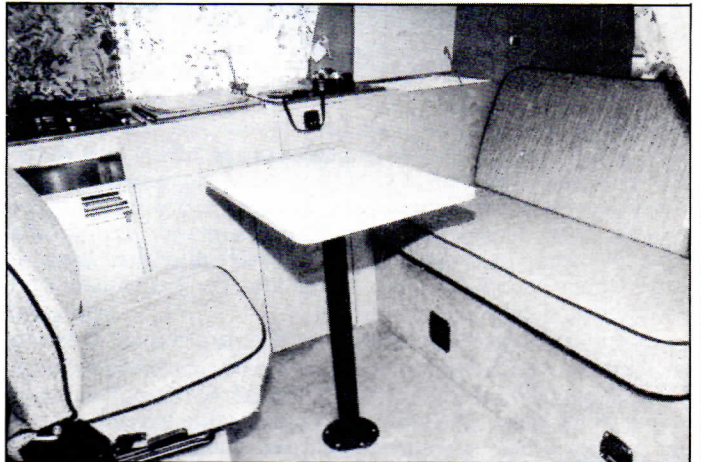
Privacy at night was only barely assured by the curtains in the test vehicle. Whilst that over the kitchen was just full enough, we judged the one covering the tailgate window to be really mean, hardly filling the gap. Nearside and cab curtains were cut more generously. All were held with Velcro or wire restrainers where necessary.



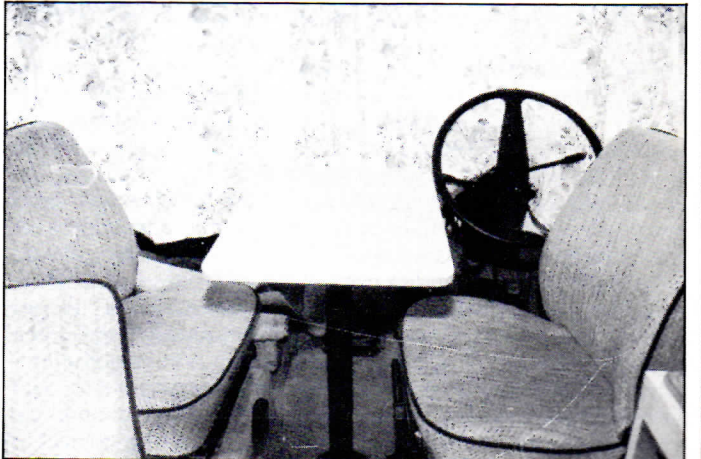
Elite pack consists of ivory wheel discs, wide front grilles with four headlamps and matching bumpers with front spoiler.



Diamond have found some space on the sloping fascia to provide a trough for maps or drink cans.

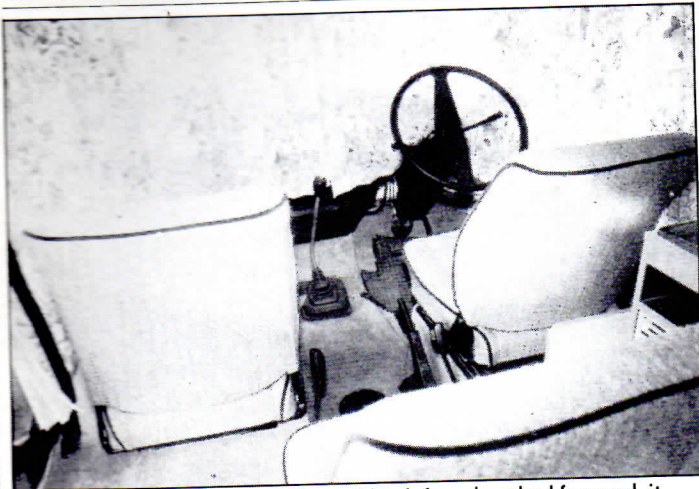


View through side door with larger table in position and fifth seat in reversed position.

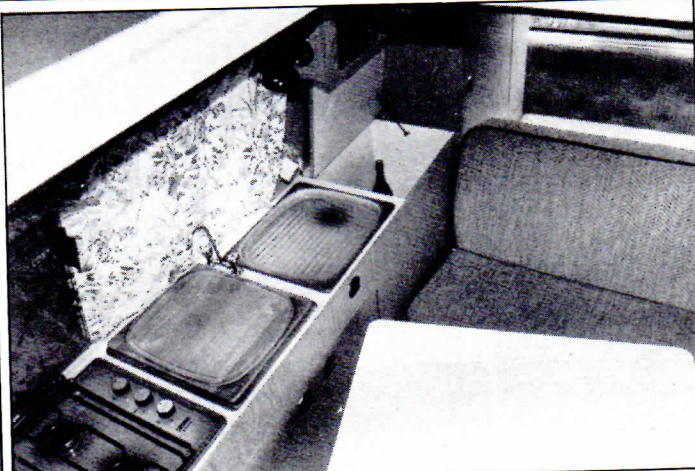


Cab set for dining, with seats swivelled and table in place. Fifth seat is in left foreground.

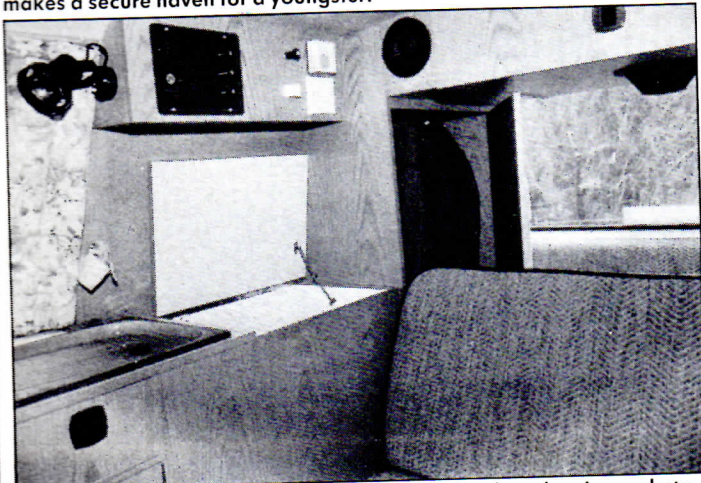
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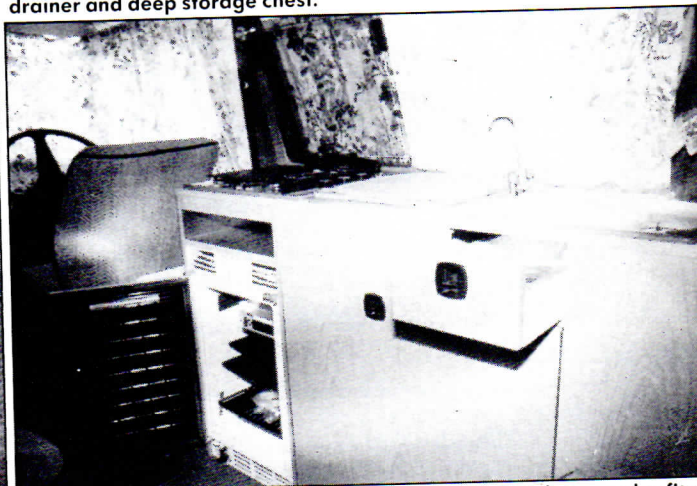
Fifth seat in travel position. When slid to left and pushed forward, it makes a secure haven for a youngster.



Offside kitchen unit showing, L to R, Optimus cooker, sink with cover, drainer and deep storage chest.



Above kitchen: Zig unit, water pump switch, 12 volt and mains sockets and Hot Box thermostat. Spot now replaced by fluorescent.



Glass cooker cover needs silencing with tea towel. Sink cover also fits drainer. Cutlery drawer is on right.

## Seating

Standard, factory-fitted VW cab seats are excellent and, in the test van, were covered in a herring-bone patterned cloth to match the rest of the upholstery. Both seats are mounted on swivels, fairly simple to turn to face the interior or the little table which can be mounted on an island leg between them. A larger table has its own leg, serves the rear bench seat and occasional, sliding seat amidships.

During a demonstration run, I had the rare chance of riding on the rear bench seat with my wife. No complaints about either, though I'll refrain from extolling the virtues of the one in favour of the other. The bench was amply wide enough for our not inconsiderable combined bulk; we had an excellent all-round view and my prying fingers discovered that the backrest rake was immediately adjustable by operating a single lever at the side of the seat. When getting out, I was a little alarmed to discover that there was no positive fastening for either base or backrest. One could simply lift the former or press on the top of the latter to have the whole bench tilting backwards. So I sat on the seat and tried to tip backwards, without success. Subsequent trials revealed that the bench is rock steady when travelling. Diamond RV have got their sums right, it seems. The sliding-tilting mechanism, made in their own works from square steel tube, is simple in concept, faultless in operation.

If Audrey and I had an Autostrada, we decided, we'd do without the fifth seat, judging the extra amount of clear floor space made available to be worth the sacrifice. Larger families might think otherwise. Turned forward, located in the gangway between cab seats, it provides for a third passenger almost in the cab. Slid across behind the passenger seat and pushed fully forwards, it forms a safe little 'U' in which to place a travelling young child, with no danger of being projected forwards when braking.

Having criticised, in the past, the lack of anywhere to put a

road map in the new shape VW, we were delighted to find that Diamond have pinched a bit of wasted space on the fascia to provide a trough which accommodated an atlas happily. It comes with two recesses for drinks cans, in the best American tradition.

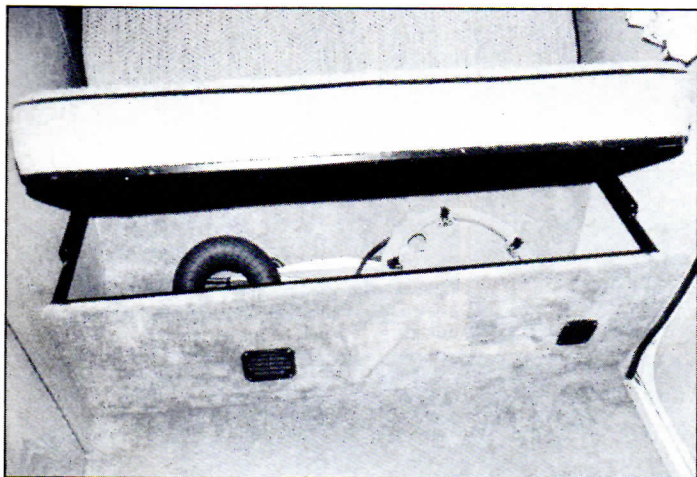
## Kitchen

Conventional but well planned - that sums up the kitchen. Stretching in a line along the offside, from behind the driver's seat to the wardrobe at the rear, there are the new-look Optimus 8348 enamelled hob with two burners, grill and hotplate (and rattling glass cover, silenced by one of our tea towels), matching sink and shallow drainer with its own waste outlet, hinged lid concealing a big locker, deep enough for the tallest wine bottle. A wooden chopping board forms a cover for sink or drainer. There is a useful cutlery drawer beneath the drainer. Below all this are the Electrolux 122 refrigerator and a reasonable amount of storage space, amongst which is the ventilated gas bottle locker, large enough for a 10 lb Calor bottle - just as well, for it gives the owner the opportunity of carrying the similar-sized Calor propane in winter, when the usual butane might fail to vaporise.

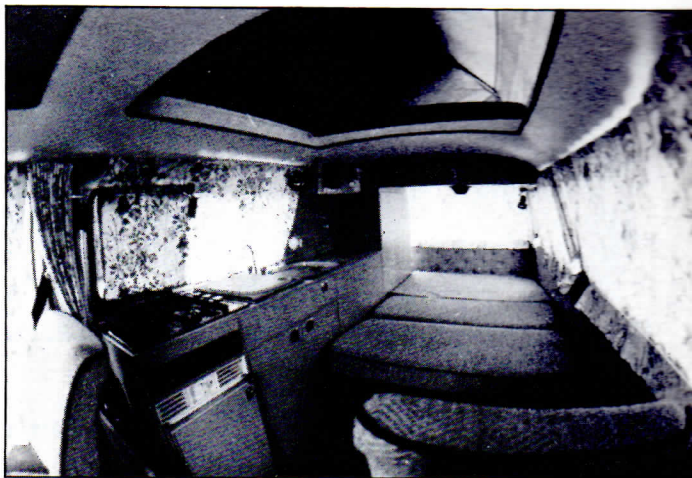
If the motorcaravan is to be used year-round, the Hot Box blown-air gas heater is listed among the options. We revelled in the one fitted to the demonstrator. Getting it going was merely a matter of pushing a switch, when the fan came on and the gas was ignited by a spark plug. Operation was very quiet, with air for combustion drawn from and exhausted to the exterior. Current drain on the battery is only 2 amps when the heater is running and, with the thermostat set for a comfortable ambient temperature of between 65 and 70 degrees F it wasn't on all the time. Output is 5000 BTUs or 1.5 kw. If running all the time, the makers say a 10 lb bottle of gas would last 36 hours.

This is a heater I'd be happy to leave on overnight, with the

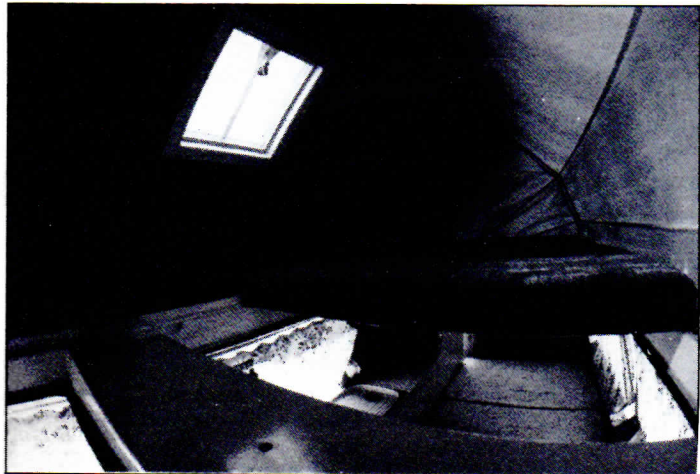
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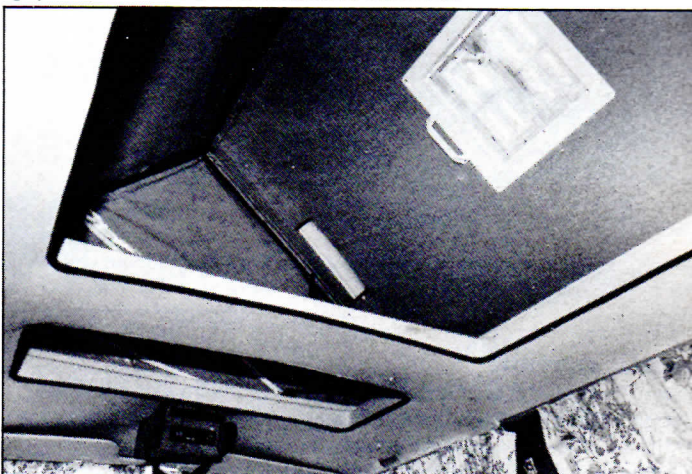
Back bench seat is easily lifted to gain access to carpet-lined storage space. Front grilles are for heater.



Bed-over-engine is comprised of three cushions which locate without gaps. Wire strainers hold curtains to sidewalls.



Roof bed has good headroom, 4 inch mattresses and wind-up ventilator. Insulation now available.



Forward end of lined roof cap seen through centre opening. Both mattresses have been pushed to rear.

thermostat set fairly low to conserve gas.

Another extra fitted to this vehicle was a Paloma instant water heater, located behind the wardrobe above the engine deck, as in the Autocruiser. No ugly extraneous chimney is called for, the heater being ventilated through the redundant engine air-scoop at the rear of the window line (no longer needed because VWs are now water-cooled). The Paloma was easy to light and supplied hot or cold water to the sink via a mixer tap. Water ran fairly freely from the sink to the waste tank immediately below.

Water is drawn from a 12 gallon underfloor tank, filled through a lockable orifice near the passenger's cab door. The waste tank is of similar size, on the offside of the vehicle. For year-round use, a winterisation package is available. This wraps all water pipes, insulates both fresh and waste tanks. In really cold weather, the Achilles heel might be the water heater, for its internal pipes cannot, of course, be lagged. Warmth from the engine when motoring and from the Hot Box when camping should protect it but draining the system would seem a sensible precaution when the motorcaravan was out of use.

## Electrics

Above the kitchen there is a Zig CF8 unit which incorporates four cartridge fuses, battery condition indicator lights, switches for mains input, 12 volt supply and charging of auxiliary battery from mains or the car's alternator. There are mains and 12v sockets. The second battery is placed beneath the cab passenger's seat, when ordered.

Lighting on the demonstrator was not generous, with one fluorescent in the roof, two spot lights in the caravan and a courtesy lamp in the cab. Production models, we were assured, have a fluorescent lamp above the kitchen.

In contrast, exterior lighting was judged to be above

standard, for this model had the Élite package with four headlamps in an eye-catching GRP front grille. The option includes those easy-clean wheel discs and a GRP wrap-around bumpers front and rear. As original VW bumpers are left in place, the others are merely a beautifying skin, adding imperceptibly to the overall length of the Diamond.

## Storage

Furniture consists of ivory coloured work tops surmounting light oak effect woodwork, well constructed, with extensive use of piano hinges on doors. In addition to the cutlery drawer, there are large cupboards to the rear of the refrigerator and a deep, white melamine-lined chest, top opening, forward of the wardrobe. I was glad to notice that the positioning of the kitchen unit allowed a fair degree of rake to the backrest of the driver's seat. Smaller table and two table legs are clipped here, the larger table slotting in beneath the cupboard above the engine deck. This has a door which, when closed, latches into place and holds the table securely - but there is no stay to support the top-hinged door when opened. The occasional seat has a storage box beneath, accessible through a hinged flap in one side. The rear bench, when lifted, reveals more space for clobber but no provision is made for carrying a chemical closet.

Whilst there is a little room between the lowered roof and the bed beneath it, bedding will usually be carried over the engine, behind the bench seat. The wardrobe there offered storage for jacket-length garments on hangers.

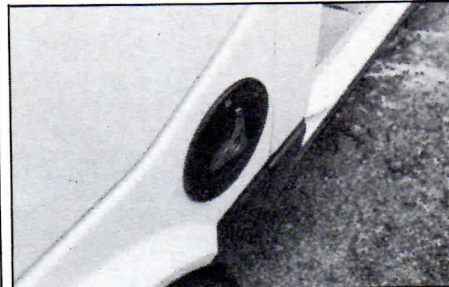
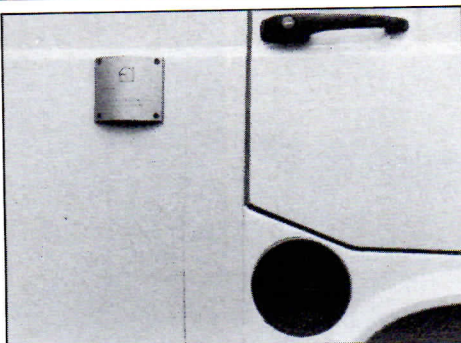
Inevitably, a rising roof conversion offers less storage space than a high top on the same vehicle but there are pros and cons for each. We liked the Autostrada, though Diamond RV have made a sensible decision in keeping the basic price below £10 000, leaving the prospective owner to decide which of the many options he wants or can afford.

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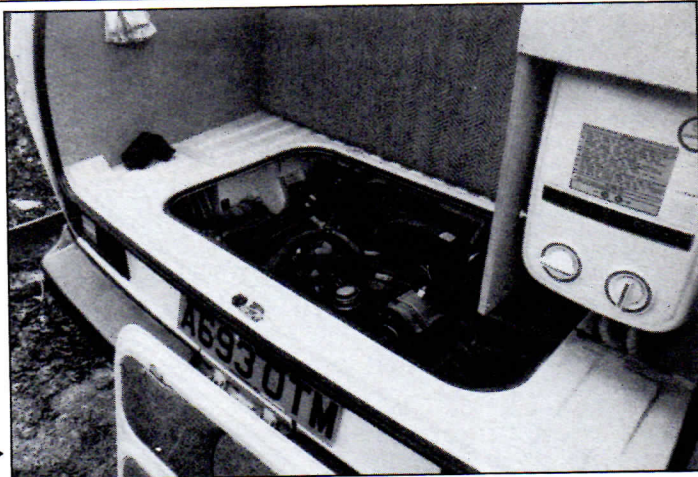
Access to upper bed is one of the easiest, thanks to the big hole cut in the cab roof.

Plenty of space to remove rear engine cover. Optional Paloma water heater is accessible on right.



Lockable water filler cap, below passenger's cab door. Funnel or hose needed for filling.

On offside, refrigerator vent looks rather close to petrol filler - so turn off one before removing the other.



## Colour scheme

Exterior white with Élite pack of chocolate brown front grille incorporating four headlamps, matching wrap-around bumpers, sills and roof side panels, white wheel discs.

All upholstery (including cab seats) in herringbone fawn/brown cloth. Curtains delicate floral pattern, blue/pink on fawn background. Carpet, plain light brown, carried into cab. Ivory worktops, light oak woodwork. Brown enamelled cooker, sink and drainer. Roof interior lined with light brown cloth. Orange Plastolene apron. Upholstery and colours can be varied to suit customer's choice.

## I liked:

- Get-up-and-go performance
- Quiet cruising at 70 mph
- Confidence -inspiring brakes
- Smooth ride
- Good roadholding
- Powerful headlamps
- Ergonomically correct cab seats
- Accessible spare wheel (in pan at front)
- Easy jacking
- Practicable, conventional layout
- Easy roof
- 4 inch mattress on upper bed
- Cab access to upper bed
- Quickly made lower bed
- Adjustable rake on bench seat

- Fasteners to prevent gaping curtains
- Swivelling seats
- Two tables
- Storage trough on fascia
- Deep storage in kitchen
- Hot water
- Quiet space heater
- Insulated plumbing system
- Eye-catching exterior

## I would have liked:

- Easier gate in gearbox
- Restraint belts for rear passengers
- Quieter sliding door
- Fuller curtain at rear
- Refrigerator vent further from fuel filler

## Dimensions

Overall length 15ft 1 in (4.59m), height 7ft 4 in (2.23m), width 6ft 1 in (1.85m).  
 Interior headroom 94 in (2390mm) max.  
 Upper bed 70 x 41 in (1780 x 1040 mm), 4 in (100mm) foam.  
 Headroom over upper bed 32 in (815mm) max.  
 Lower bed 74 x 48 in (1880 x 1220 mm), 5 in (125 mm) foam.  
 Kitchen chest 25½ in long, 13 in wide, 13 in deep (550 x 330 x 330 mm).

Wardrobe 34 in hanging height, 20 in wide, 13 in deep av. (865 x 510 x 330 mm).

Tables 21½ x 29½ and 22½ x 19½ in (545 x 750 and 570 x 495mm).

Box beneath fifth seat 13½ x 15 x 7½ in high (345 x 380 x 190 mm).

## Specification, vehicle

Standard: VW van with 1.9 litre 60 bhp water-cooled Boxer engine and 4 speed gearbox. Independent suspension all round with front anti-roll bar. Rack and pionion steering. Dual circuit brakes, disc front, drum rear.

Options: 1.9 litre, 78 bhp engine (£238); 5 speed gearbox (£200); automatic transmission (£744); 1.6 litre, 50 bhp diesel engine (£656); Diamond Élite package (£1449).

## Specification, caravan

Diamond Autostrada conversion of VW van with rising roof (or high top at no extra cost). Two double beds; Electrolux 122 gas/12 volt refrigerator; Optimus hotplate, sink and drainer; 12 gallon underfloor water tank; electrically pumped cold water supply; 2 fluorescent, 1 spot, 1 courtesy lamps; furniture as described.

Options: Fifth seat (swivel and slide) (£151); hot water system (£299); mains electrical package including 3-way refrigerator, Zig unit, second battery, 12v and 240v outlets (£290); Hot Box blown-air heater (£386); double glazing (£544); winterising kit (£121); sliding windows (£73); louvre windows on nearside (£91); 12 gal waste tank (£103); Diamond 3 year protection plan (£199).

## Price

At test date, from £9997 plus VW national delivery charge (£178).

All prices have been rounded.

## Diamond Autostrada

Converted and supplied for evaluation by Diamond RV, Unit 26, Youngs Industrial Estate, Stanbridge Road, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire.

Coming soon in MMM: How Diamonds are made. □