

DIAMONDS ARE...

by John Hunt



For ever? Perhaps not. But they'll last a long time, being based upon substantial and expensive Mercedes and Volkswagens. We tried the latter, and chose the extraordinary Autocruiser, subject of much recent interest because it is the only VW Transporter with a shower/toilet compartment and single beds. In length and width it is smaller than a big estate car and offers unquestionably better motoring than does a motorcaravan based upon any other light commercial.

Motoring, in the superb 78 bhp water-cooled petrol Volks, is pure enjoyment for driver and passenger. The ride is comfortable, steering light yet directional stability good. Diamond's sleek, flowing high top seems to improve the drag factor and there is virtually no wind noise at speed. (What there was appeared to come exclusively from a pillar-mounted radio aerial. "Stick it on the roof" seems to be obvious answer.)

My wife and I have lost count of the number of new 78 bhp VWs we have tried during 1983. We had rather hoped Diamond's demonstrator would be the slower 60 bhp model, so that the difference could be assessed. Instead, we enjoyed an even more exhilarating experience, for this 78 model came with the 5-speed gearbox, an option that most manufacturers have told us is not worth the extra £200, for it provides closer ratios rather than an overdrive top gear. Whether it is really worth the money depends upon the buyer. £200 is a small proportion of the £10 000 or so charged for the whole package.

Suffice to say that I enjoyed driving this Volks more than any other I have so far tried. The five speed box was versatile. Fourth gave comfortable and silent cruising (up to about 70 mph if needed) and with much better acceleration than top on 4-speed models. Third was truly versatile, taking the Autocruiser effortlessly from a walking speed crawl into the fifties. Second was a town-traffic ratio and first for starting. She would take off in second without complaint on level roads but it meant slipping the clutch a little and is not to be recommended.

Gentle drivers, taking advantage of the five ratios to keep the engine turning happily but never racing, should be able to improve on what seems to be the standard petrol consumption of around 25 mpg — which drops dramatically if full advantage is taken of the 78's top speed (well into the 80s) and acceleration which leaves most traffic standing.



Yes, I enjoyed my time in the driving seat of this Volks. It felt capable of 100 mph, but I didn't try. We missed the positive location, though, of the curved backrests of the standard VW front seats, for Diamond's were made to become part of a bed. So to

The caravan

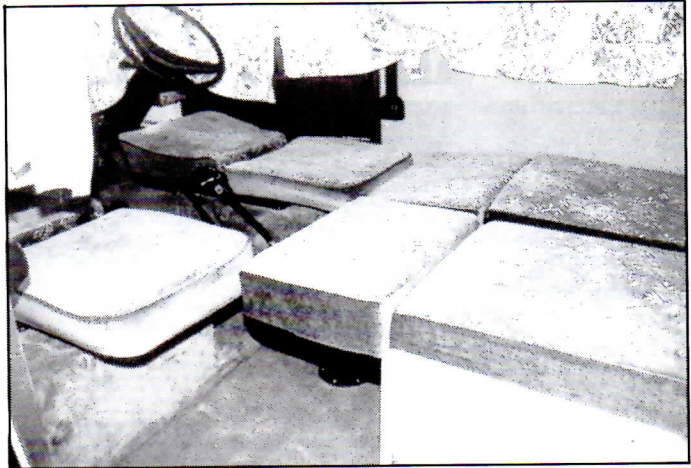
To produce any motorcaravan with twin single beds, h & c water system and shower room at less than £10 000 these days would call for careful costing and elimination of waste. To do it on a Volks, neither the cheapest nor most adaptable of base vehicles, shows extreme ingenuity. Has the exercise been successful?

Demand, since the first prototype was seen at Bowers of Harpenden last spring, would seem to indicate the affirmative. Autocruisers are made to order — and order books are full. They are selling through authorised dealers mainly to retired couples who don't want the bulk or expense of a coachbuilt, yet need full life-support systems. So my wife and I put the demonstrator through its paces with more than academic interest. ▷

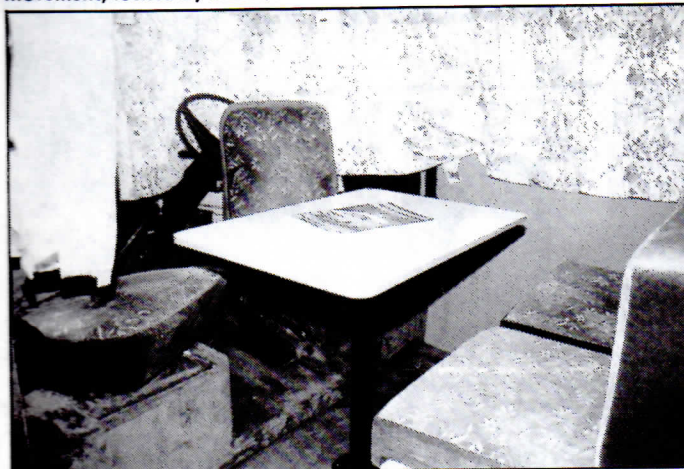
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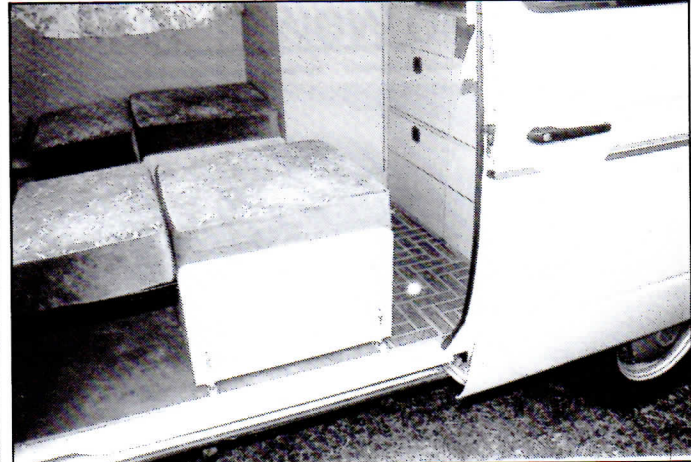
Entrance from side door, with rear seats pulled apart to provide two singles (seat box nearest camera is mounted on runners for easy sideways movement, locked by a bolt).



Part of the double bed set-up, with nearside rear seat pushed to right to meet its twin. Optional extra cushions are available to bridge gap between front seats.



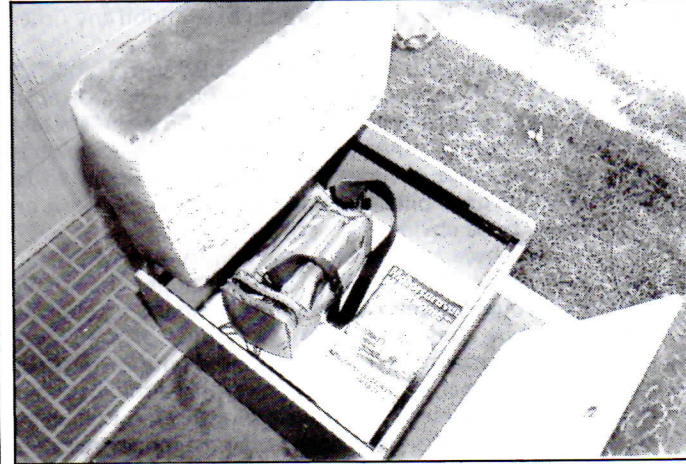
Rear seats are together here, to form a settee. Front seats are easily reversed on their swivels. This is one of the few driver's seats which will turn through a full 180 degrees.



View of side entrance with single beds in position, showing the gap through which it is possible to enter from outside. Kitchen accessible from inside via the centre gangway.



Rear seats pulled apart again to form top ends of twin single beds, matching with fully reclined cab seats. Lush floor carpet covers whole of living area, including cab.



Just a bit of the generous storage provision — a large, unobstructed locker beneath one of the rear seats (copy of MMM gives an idea of the size).

Would it suit us when I grew tired of our spacious but space-consuming Motorhome?

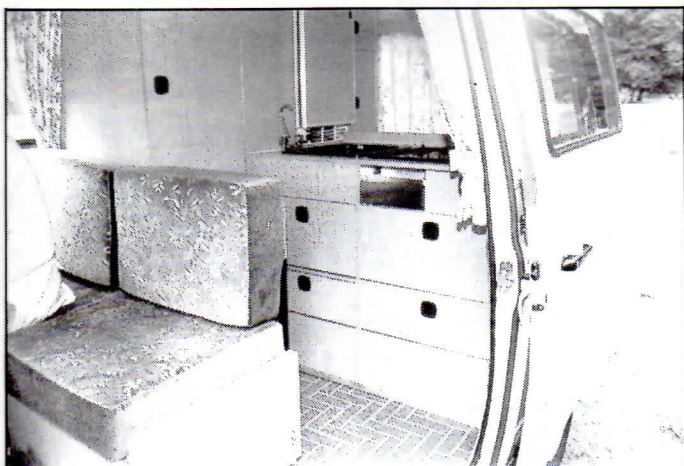
Everything was accessible, with not too much stooping or bending. The lower kitchen cupboards were shallow back-to-front, so no kneeling was necessary whilst rummaging at floor level. Deeper cupboards were higher up and easy to reach. There was a great deal of storage space scattered around and reachable. The overcab locker would swallow much of the clobber we carry and what wouldn't go there would find a permanent place on the engine deck, staying there until needed because, unlike other VW conversions, Autocruiser doesn't put the bed over the engine.

Lockers beneath the twin rear seats were generous and un-

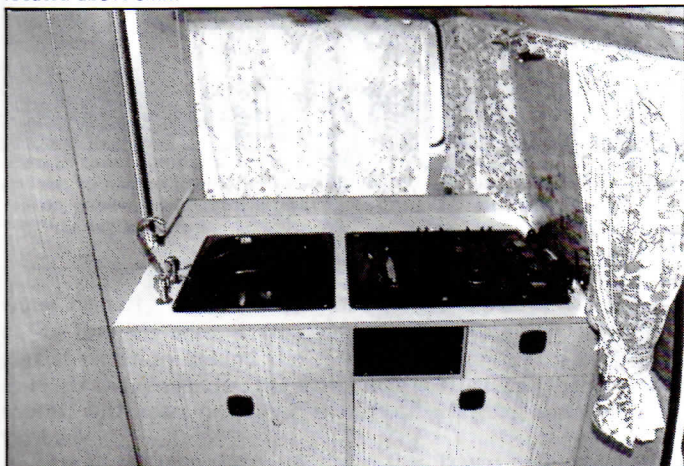
obstructed. There was a wide shelf above the kitchen and a big cupboard at high level above refrigerator and wardrobe, made rather inaccessible by a tiny door. (I couldn't get my arm into the far corners, would need a pair of lazy tongs to reach anything lodged there.) If all else failed, or we decided to carry an annexe, there's the rear roof rack.

Satisfied with storage provision, we turned our attention to seats and beds. Audrey, as she always does, tried travelling on the rear seats. No criticisms about ride quality here, for it was a VW. But backrests were dead upright and gave poor location. "All right for occasional use," was the verdict — and in this two-berth model, that's about all that was likely to be expected of them.

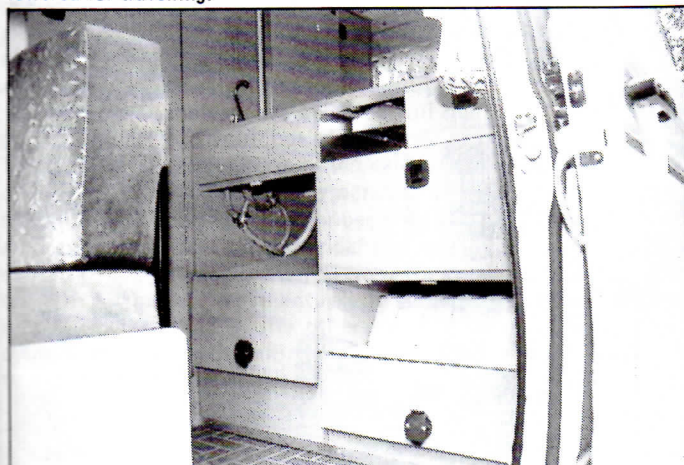
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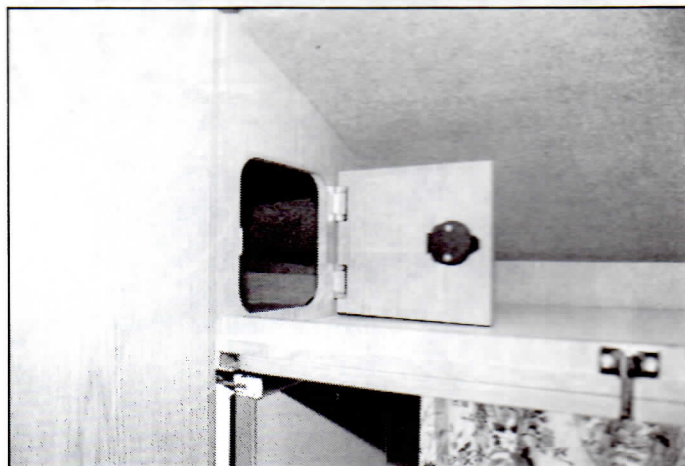
Rear seats pushed together for clear access through side door to the rear kitchen area, where floor is vinyl covered. Electrolux 122 refrigerator is located above sink.



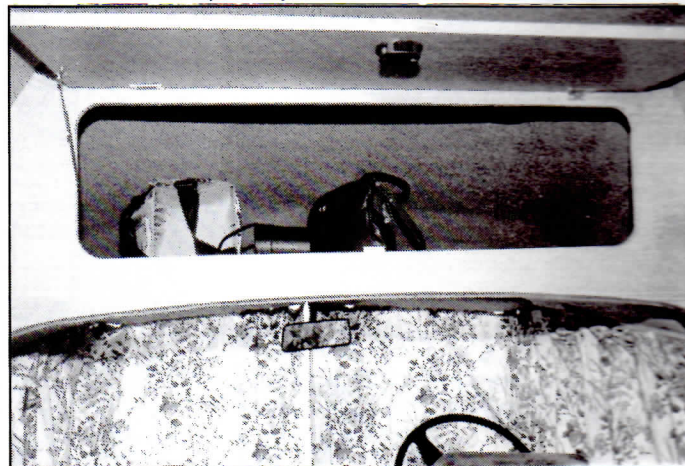
Stainless steel is now often abandoned in favour of enamel for sinks and cookers. Optimus stove's glass cover is raised here — it rattles when lowered for travelling.



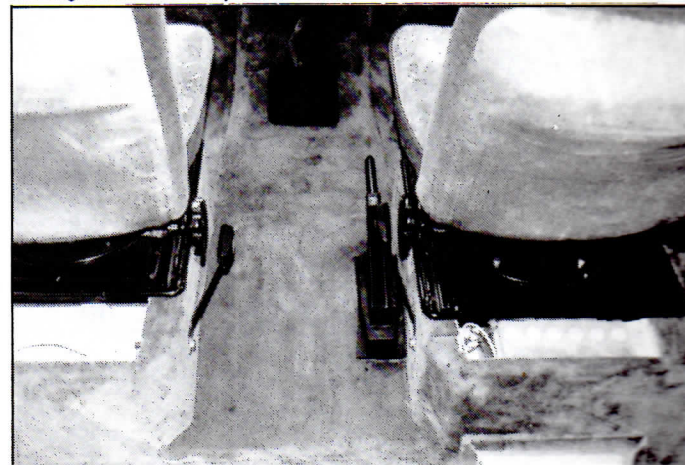
Low level view of storage beneath kitchen work top. Twin upper cupboards are deep, lower pair are shallow. Production door and cupboard catches have brass finish.



The big cupboard with the small door, above the refrigerator, which can be seen below the shelf which is above the kitchen. Table slides in runners beneath shelf, held by bolt.



Storage compartment above cab is deep front-to-rear beneath sloping roof and is carpet lined. Not much height but room for a couple of folding chairs and many small items.



Front seats pushed forward to show their swivel bases and storage compartments beneath (battery beneath driver's seat). Each seat has knobs on each side for the reclining mechanism.

The Diamond cab seats can be swivelled to any angle — easily. In fact, this was one of the very few motorcaravans in which I have succeeded in turning the driver's seat through a full 180 degrees. We sat on reversed cab seats for relaxation, reclining backrests to suit our individual tastes and resting our legs on the cushions of the rear seats. With a couple of scatter cushions, we were comfortable and the interior of the little Volks seemed spacious enough.

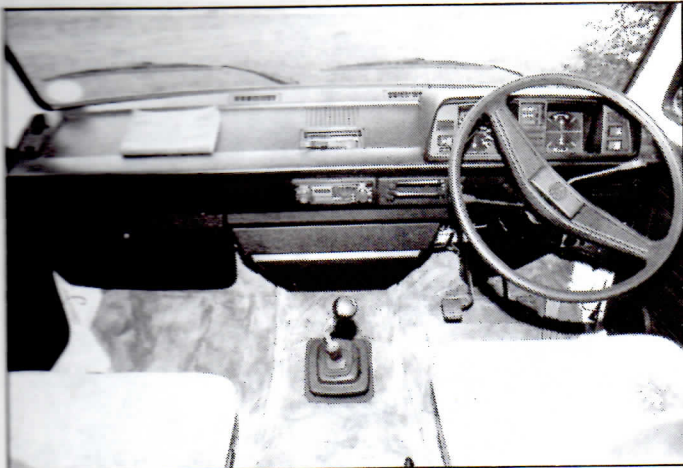
Beds were quickly made. Front seats (facing forwards again) have backrests fully reclined. Backrests of rear seats are removed on their frames and slotted in horizontally to bridge the gaps. The 5-inch upholstery made for comfort but we found the width of 22 inches barely adequate. Diamond assured us that

customers requiring wider beds could have them, at the sacrifice of some interior floor space.

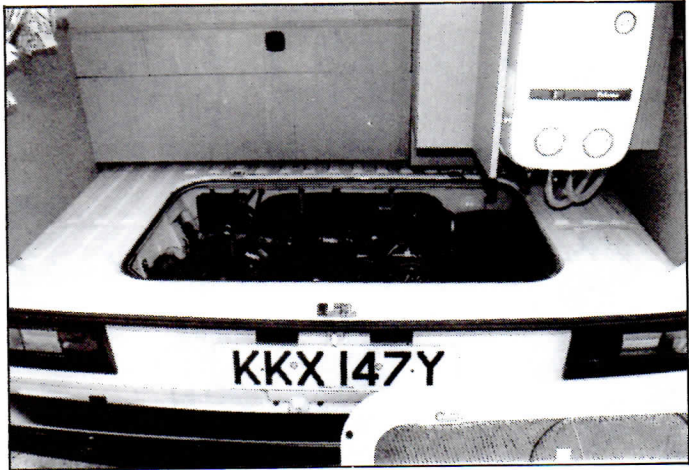
A headboard would be an asset on the lefthand bed — something simple, perhaps, to slot in to replace the backrest that has been removed to bridge the centre gap. Or couples could sleep top to tail. (The driver must sleep feet forward, to tuck them beneath the steering wheel — but he has a backrest, leaning against the forward wall of the toilet room.) A double bed option is available, using extra cushions to fill the gap between the front seats. We were glad to find that it is just possible to enter or leave the caravan, via the side door, when single beds are down.

The little kitchen was a delight. Not much working space but,

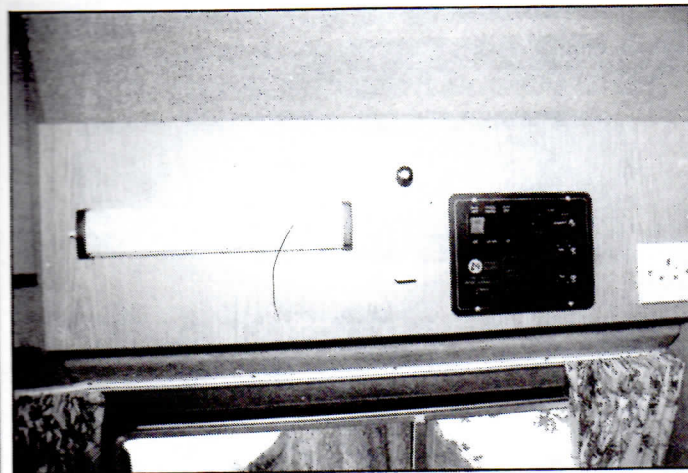
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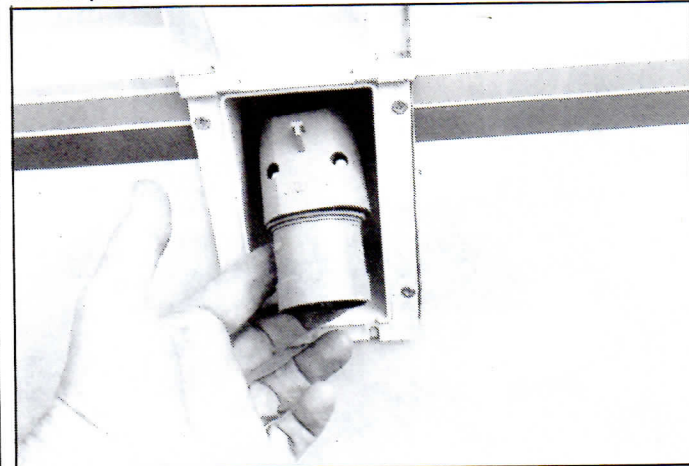
Fascia panel has usual dials and switches, plus a flashing light to indicate coolant level. Radio is extra. Books and maps slide off sloping top panel.



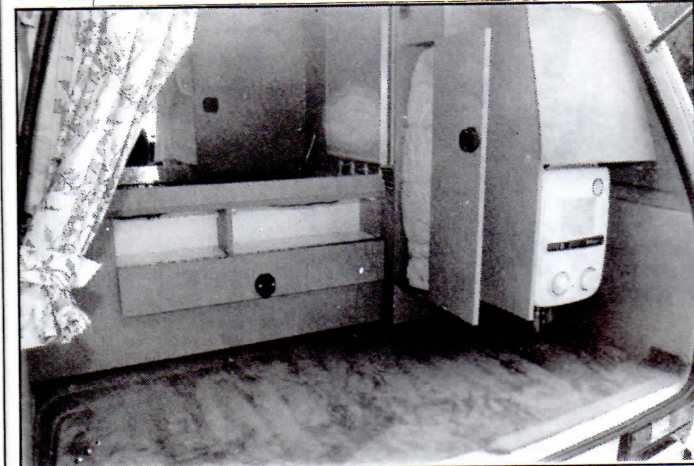
One of the easiest of the VW engine covers to remove, for there's nothing in the way. Oil and water check and service points are behind the hinged number plate.



One of the three fluorescent lamps (others are above kitchen and in loo), 12 volt and mains sockets and Zig control unit for mains and 12 volt electrics.



16 amp, three pin, DIN standard mains electric connection is on offside, concealed beneath a hinged flap. Water inlet is on rear side, behind cab door.



View through opened rear tailgate shows yet more storage space behind kitchen unit, small wardrobe and Paloma water heater which is vented through VW's side grille.



From any angle, the Autocruiser is a goodlooker, with high top that appears low yet provides adequate standing room. Simple rear roof rack folds flat when not in use.

in so small a van, the table was never far away and the shelf above provided dumping space, so it wasn't as cramped as it might appear in the photographs. The gleaming Optimus 8340 hob grill is very goodlooking — and functional in that the top of the grill provides a warming plate. That pretty glass cover rattles annoyingly when motoring. It can be silenced with a folded tea towel but it's time motorcaravanners had silent cookers.

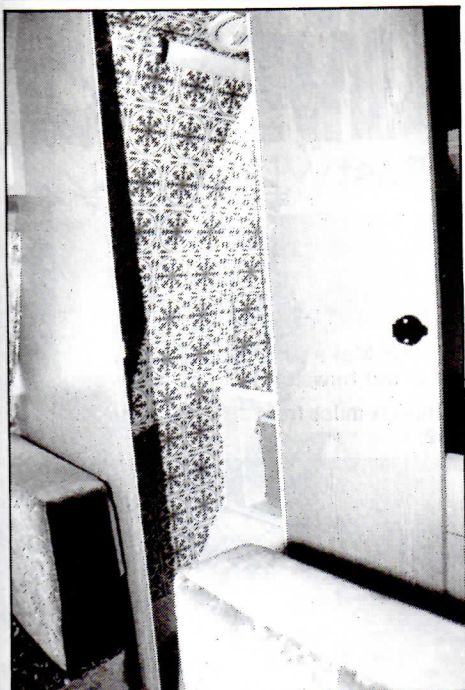
Audrey liked the kitchen, appreciated having somewhere to stand and work which she could call her own, whilst I was able to enter and leave by the side door without disturbing her at her chores, an activity that's difficult in our bigger Motorhome.

So, we come to the feature that is undoubtedly the main selling point: the shower/toilet compartment. To be honest, it's

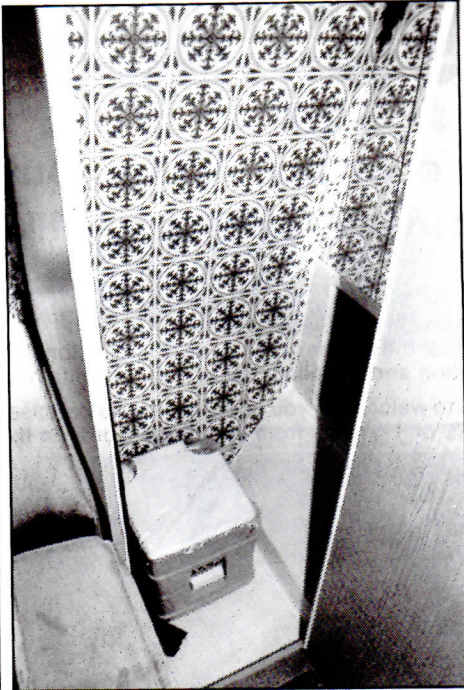
cramped. I found I could just — only just — sit upon the small Porta-Potti but couldn't get up or down with the door closed! The manufacturers concede that space is limited here and thoughtfully provide a modesty curtain which is more yielding than solid walls. The shower head, on the usual flexible hose, can be used to wet the whole body but it is essential to keep the shower curtain tucked behind the high threshold step if the kitchen is not to be flooded. I defy anyone but a midget to have a full shower — soap and all — with the door closed. Even so, after a tiring day's driving, it's refreshing just to get wet all over and this is perfectly possible in this tiny smallest room.

There is no basin. One washes at the sink, where h & c is also on tap (assuming you've gone round to the back to light the

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View of toilet compartment over rear seat appears to narrow gangway. Rear wall is all mirror, appears to increase interior size. Roof vent has extractor fan.



Toilet compartment viewed from kitchen area to show Porta-Potti and shower tray. Potti stows in recess beneath mirror when shower is in use.



The shower curtain can be extended outside the compartment to provide a little extra standing space and a measure of privacy.

water heater). This made me think. If the loo door were hinged at its forward end, it would open across the van, forming a partial partition behind the rear seats. Given, say, a curtain to shut off the remainder, the Volks would effectively become two rooms, with seats or beds in the front half, toilet and kitchen at the back.

I asked the manufacturers about this. It was pointed out that entering the loo from the centre gangway would involve first walking to the kitchen area, then opening the door, i.e. two operations instead of one. Personally, I'd be prepared to pay the penalty. If the generously long beds (6ft 5in) were shortened, the whole kitchen-toilet area could be that much more spacious. Another five inches on the loo would make all the difference!

In the final analysis, we awarded full marks for ingenuity in getting a quart into a pint pot and nine out of ten for practicality. The answer to the question posed earlier is — yes, your editorial couple COULD live in the Autocruiser and, equally important, have room to carry all the clobber they just can't live without. Audrey would insist on the wider bed already offered and John couldn't resist swinging the loo door the other way, just to find out. On one aspect we're entirely in agreement: we'd enjoy the motoring more than in any other base vehicle and take pride in ownership of a good looking package that bears no resemblance to a commercial delivery van.

Colour scheme

Exterior, white with blue striping. Mushroom carpet in cab and sitting area, tiled vinyl in kitchen. Pale blue and beige flowered Dralon upholstery. Walls, roof and side door lined with carpet-type material to tone with décor. Light oak furniture with recessed catches. Pastel coloured flowered curtains on beige background — have wire restrainers at bottoms of windows, are fitted with fasteners on production models to prevent gaps. Brown enamel sink and Optimus 8340 cooker.

I liked:

Attractive, non-commercial exterior
Five gears
Sparkling performance
Comfortable ride
Compact overall dimensions
Purpose-designed 2-berth
Sleek high top
Twin single beds
Generous storage space
Swivelling front seats
Full equipment
Kitchen always accessible

Easy seat/bed conversion
Roof rack
Good all-round finish

I would have liked:

Restraint belts on rear seats
Opening windows as standard
Shaped front seats
Wider beds
Larger loo
Headboard for l/h bed
Non-rattling cooker
Quieter sliding door

Volkswagen Autocruiser by Diamond RV

Price at test date:

£9979

Optional extras:

78 bhp petrol engine	233*
5 speed gearbox	200*
Automatic transmission	506
Diesel engine, 1.6L	642
Blown air gas heating	386
Eberspächer petrol or diesel heater	483
Winterising kit	121
Double bed	133
Double glazing	543
Louved or sliding window	POA*
VW delivery charge	170

*fitted to test vehicle. Prices to nearest £1.

Dimensions

Overall height 8ft 3 in (2.51m); length 15ft 0 in (4.57m); width 6ft 0¾ in (1.85m)

Beds — 77 x 22 in (1955 x 560mm)

Table — 30 x 21 in (760 x 535mm)

Overcab: average width 49 in (1245mm)
maximum depth 39 in (990mm)

Wardrobe: drop 33 in (840mm); width 22 in (560mm);
average depth 8½ in (215mm)

Toilet room — height 70 in (1780mm); width 27 in (685mm);
depth at waist 23 in (585mm).

Vehicle provided for test by:

Diamond RV Ltd, Unit 26, Young's Industrial Estate,
Stanbridge Road, Leighton Buzzard, tel: 0525-370137. □