

Power to the



With 150bhp of TDI power and all the gizmos of an executive car, this T4 is hardly in the people's car tradition of its maker. **Peter Vaughan** reports on a camper built for the autobahn

WHICH motorcaravan test

MODEL:	Westfalia California Generation
BASE VEHICLE:	VW Transporter Kombi SWB TDI 150bhp LHD
STARTING PRICE:	£29,995 on-the-road
AS TESTED:	£29,995 on-the-road
WARRANTY:	12 months - base vehicle, and conversion

...at a glance

Westfalia have a unique relationship with VW that allows them access to some very special versions of the Transporter. If you want stonking performance, how about a V6 petrol-engined automatic? Too thirsty? Then the 150bhp TDI may not be as powerful but, with an electronically limited top speed of 160km/h (99mph), it's no sluggard.

Did I say 150bhp? Yes, for although Kombi turbo-diesels destined for the UK come with 88bhp (and a blue I on the TDI badge) or 102bhp (and a silver I), German customers get a third option. And the 'red I' 150bhp model is available here for the first time (albeit in left-

hand drive only), thanks to Westfalia specialists, Deepcar Motorhomes International.

Which Motorcaravan was offered the very first 150bhp Westfalia to be imported by Deepcar but, prior to the test, it had already been sold. We are doubly indebted, therefore, to David Elliott and his colleagues for not only sticking to their promise, but for supplying a 102bhp model for back-to-back comparison.

NEW GENERATION

Our gleaming silver Westfalia California test vehicle was a Generation model, complete with special seat trim and other additions to the

people



standard spec. Every year Westfalia, Europe's number one VW camper builder, offer a special edition and the Generation (now sold out) was the 2001 model. The storage pockets on and around the wardrobe, a bike rack, and the removable living area carpets were amongst the features that are usually found on the options list.

Also options are three styles of roof. The slimline elevating roof of the test model is sure to be the most popular, but a compact high top or larger high top (with roof bed) are available. Then you can choose from a selection of stunning metallic paint finishes, as well as the

mentioned engine options. Opt for the 150bhp TDI and there's no automatic transmission on offer (it couldn't handle the torque) but the alloy wheels gain an inch in diameter (at 16in) and the rear brakes are discs in place of drums.

There's no doubt that the test vehicle was one of the smartest campers we've ever featured. With colour-coded bumpers and mirrors, five-spoke alloy wheels, dark tinted windows and a roof that is discreet when lowered, this is one sleek looking VW. The TDI badges only give away the extra power to those in the know, while graphics are restricted to

low-key California Generation logos on bonnet and tailgate.

EXECUTIVE DECISION

Choose a new car these days and it comes loaded with electric 'toys', but buy a camper and you'll usually be faced with a costly options list. A £15,000 hatchback has the sort of features that could add £5,000 to the price of a standard £30,000 motorcaravan. Not so with the California, our Generation being equipped with air conditioning, six speaker stereo, driver and passenger airbags, remote central locking, electric windows and mirrors, and heated seats.



Both cab seats swivel to integrate the cab into the living area. Heater ducts can be seen at floor level

The Westfalia also has the sort of interior trim that you'd find in a hi-spec Caravelle people-carrier, rather than a Transporter panel van. There's plush fitted cab carpet with removable matching over-mats, cloth trim on the doors, armrests, height and tilt-adjustable head restraints, and a lockable storage bin on the driver's door. Chromed interior door handles are another detail, while special seat bases get around the usual problem of swivels making the seats too high for taller drivers.

Much of the trim in a California, including the mouldings around the cut-away for the rising roof (so much neater than carpet) are unique to Westfalia. So, too, is the control panel above the rear view mirror. This includes displays of battery and fresh water levels and external temperature, as well as controls for the compressor fridge and diesel-fired space heating. Both the fridge and the heating can be set digitally to the desired temperature and then just left to do their duty.

AUTOBAHN CRUISER

Despite arriving with just 760km recorded,

this TDI immediately showed its pedigree. Smooth and refined, as with every example of VW's five-cylinder 2.5-litre turbo-diesel, this one performed like a greyhound. Out of the blocks it was instantly quicker than the 102bhp version, while needing fewer gearchanges and offering more grunt at lower revs.

I can imagine many buyers being sceptical about the need for all this extra go, but it does add up to a more relaxing drive. Overtaking is easier and safer, hills are dispatched as if they no longer exist, and the California can keep pace with most modern cars. The difference between this model and the 102bhp version is best summed up by a particularly steep hill we encountered north of Malvern. Despite road signs warning lorry drivers to stay in crawler gear all the way up this considerable climb, the T4 stormed the ascent in third gear. We actually had to ease off for the corners, as there was power to spare. The 102bhp model followed, not too far behind, but in second.

Even with the extra power, and the



16-inch alloy wheels come with the 150bhp engine



Red 'I' is nothing to do with sub-standard portrait photography!

temptation to use it, the 150bhp Tdi is still reassuringly frugal. We managed 32.1mpg, against 32.5mpg for the 102bhp version - with equal mileages the advantage might swap in favour of the higher performance model.

Driving the T4 from the left-hand chair posed few problems. You soon adapt to driving a left-hooker, especially one this compact and with good all-round visibility and a raised driving position. The biggest snag in using a California in the UK may well be the position of the sliding door, rather than the steering wheel, for passengers are unloaded into the middle of the traffic. It's just as well that the side door is fitted with a childproof lock.

Once accustomed to keeping the left-hand side tucked close in to the kerb, the driver can relax. And more so on reaching the motorway. As soon as the desired speed has been reached, the cruise control can be selected. Now the pilot almost feels superfluous, but he can also feel smug in the knowledge that few rivals feel so stable.

Those in the back can revel in the VW's



Rock-solid table clips to kitchen, but it doesn't slide easily and cupboard doors are obstructed



Metallic paint and bike rack are part of the lengthy standard equipment list on this Generation model



Left-hand drive only, but Westfalia does come with a level of spec that no UK rival can match



Top-loading compressor-type fridge has only 40-litre capacity, but is ideal for this size of camper

superior ride quality, which does cause a degree of cornering lean, but nothing too dramatic. The back seat can also be moved forward on its runners to put rear passengers closer to those up front. The massively engineered seating system comes with three-point belts and height/tilt adjustable head restraints, but it also had an annoying squeak when travelling. Rear passengers have their own heater ducting and a separate temperature and fan control.



Typical VW side kitchen layout with basic galley facilities, but there is no doubting the top-class build quality

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

Westfalia have been building VW campers since the days of the split-screen; longer than any rival, in fact. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that the latest California is a version on the traditional VW camper theme, though refined to the nth degree.

The rear-hinged elevating roof is a quality item that is easily raised from inside the vehicle with just one centre catch to release and a pair of gas struts to take the strain. Flyscreened vents on either side provided much needed

ventilation when the August weather was on form, but there was no way of having daylight without fresh air. A window in the front of the roof would have been welcome. So too, would easier closing. Clearly the securing catch on our test vehicle needed adjustment, for the only way we found to lock it down was to climb on top of the vehicle and sit on the roof!

The interior layout places the furniture along the side wall, opposite the right-hand sliding door, with a two-person bench seat in

V sign

Peter Vaughan drives the fastest T4 derivative, the V6

It looks innocuous. A rather fetching shade of metallic blue paint and those same 16-inch alloy wheels as the Westfalia California do little to give the game away. Then you spot the silver and red V6 badges, nose and tail. Little would you expect that this Caravelle boasts 204bhp from the same 2.8-litre six-cylinder motor as the top go-faster Golf.

In the Caravelle, the V6 is mated to a four-speed automatic transmission, resulting in really effortless motoring. Just engage Drive and squeeze the throttle for traffic light grand prix performance that would leave most motorhomes for dead. In truth, though, what the V6 T4 does best is waft. Waft quickly, comfortably, effortlessly. Switch on the cruise control and long motorway journeys shrink to feel like a nip to the corner shop. And, if slow traffic should interrupt A-road progress, rapid overtaking proves that all 204 horses can be made to gallop at once.

Our V6 test vehicle, kindly loaned by



Volkswagen (UK), was a Caravelle Limousine, complete with World of Leather-style armchairs for seven. At over £39,000 this is one phenomenally expensive T4, but you could create a V6 motorcaravan by starting with a Multivan V6 at £29,803 (or rather less if you could find a used one). It still wouldn't be cheap, far from it, and we only recorded 19.5mpg on test, so running costs will be high, too. But, if you want the smoothest, fastest, most refined VW camper ever, this could be the way to go!



WHICH motorcaravan ...travel

HILLS AND WATER

Malvern is a delightful town, known for its dramatic hillside setting and its mineral water. You can fill up your drinking water container with the latter from a spring just outside the town, and it won't cost you a penny. A Morgan sports car is not so cheap, but you can arrange to see these traditional hand-built motors taking shape in Malvern.

Nearby Ledbury also has a number of attractions. Visitors should head for the black and white covered market building in the high street and wander up the narrow, cobbled Church Lane stopping off at the small museum and visitor centre along the way.

We stayed at the newly modernised Blackmore Camping and Caravanning Club site, an excellent base for touring the area. The site has a pleasant setting and even in August did not seem over-crowded. With 40 square miles of the Malverns to explore we wished we'd had time for a longer stay.

We did find time for one excursion, though, to Witley Court, north-east of Worcester. Once one of England's greatest country houses, Witley was gutted by fire in 1937. Today the magnificent ruins can only hint at its former glory, but English Heritage is working to restore the gardens and ornate fountains.

Blackmore Camping and Caravanning Club Site, Hanley Swan, Worcestershire.
Tel: 01684 310280 (not after 8pm).

Historic Ledbury's covered market



SPECIFICATION DATA

Water heating:	✗	
Space heating:	✓	Diesel-fired blown-air
Fridge:	✓	Electrolux top-loading compressor-type
Hob:	✓	Cramer two-burner
Grill:	✗	
Oven:	✗	
Toilet:	✗	
Mains hook-up:	✓	
Auxiliary battery:	✓	130 Ah
Mains sockets:	✓	One Continental two-pin
Swivel cab seats:	✓	Driver and passenger seats
Roof vents:	✓	Two flyscreened panels in elevating roof
Rear seat belts:	✓	Two lap and diagonal belts



BASE VEHICLE

- **Make & Model:** VW Transporter Kombi SWB LHD
- **Engine:** 2.5-litre five-cylinder turbo-diesel producing 150bhp
- **Options:** Base vehicle fitted as standard with electric windows and mirrors, air conditioning, heated cab seats, metallic paint, alloy wheels, colour-keyed bumpers and mirrors, remote central locking, driver and passenger airbags, six speaker stereo
- **Fuel consumption:** 32.1 mpg

CAPACITIES

- **Berths:** Four
- **Travel seats:** Four
- **Maximum gross vehicle weight:** 2,800kg
- **Payload:** 660kg
- **Fresh water:** 25 litres
- **Waste water:** 27 litres
- **Gas:** One Campingaz 2.72kg cylinder
- **Fridge:** 40 litres

DIMENSIONS

- **Length:** 4.79m (15ft 8.5in)
- **Width:** 1.84m (6ft 0.5in)
- **Height:** 1.99m (6ft 6in)
- **Internal height:** 2.12m (6ft 11.5in)
- **Bed dimensions:** Roof bed 1.96m x 1.06m (6ft 5in x 3ft 6in) with max headroom of 0.71m (2ft 4in), lower bed 1.95m x 1.18m (6ft 5in x 3ft 10.5in)



Vehicle kindly supplied for testing by:

Deepcar Motorhomes
International
10c Vaughton Hill
Deepcar
Sheffield S36 2SW.
Tel: 0114 288 7557

OUR VERDICT

	Performance	Few others come close
	Roadholding	Softish suspension but well able to cope with the power
	Lounging	Surprisingly spacious with both cab seats swivelled
	Dining	Table is solid as a rock
	Sleeping	Two near-instant double beds, but neither is very wide
	Kitchen	Great quality, neat fridge, lacks grill
	Back seat travel	Sliding seat with three-point belts and adjustable headrests
	Aesthetics	Looks a million dollars
	Innovation	Loads of equipment and fabulous detailing

CONCLUSION

Many potential Westfalia customers will be put off by the lack of right-hand drive. However, if you can live with LHD, then the California has a lot to offer. Superbly built and packed with kit, it is priced significantly below a similarly equipped British-built T4 camper. And many of the options fitted to our test vehicle are simply not available on a RHD Kombi.

The California is not ground-breaking, but it is an autobahn stormer in this 150bhp guise. The T4 handles the extra power with ease and the acceleration is astonishing for a diesel motorhome. If you want to get to the beach before the Germans, you know what you have to buy.

PLUS POINTS

Base vehicle absolutely loaded with extra spec, 150bhp motor gives storming performance, well-designed conversion and top-class build quality

MINUS POINTS

Left-hand drive only, squeaks from rear seat when motoring, roof hard to close

marks out of 10



THE RIVALS



CARTHAGO MALIBU 28.1

- **Based on:** VW Transporter SWB
- **Prices start at:** £29,950 (2.5TDI)
- **The lowdown:** Another German-built VW camper, but this time with right-hand drive. The odd thing is that the sliding door is still on the right – not ideal if you regularly carry passengers. Well built and loaded with equipment, the Malibu is an unusual variation on the VW camper theme.
- **Which Motorcaravan test date:** n/a
- **Importer:** Lowdham Leisureworld, Gunthorpe, Nottingham NG14 7ES. Tel: 0115 966 3838



MURVI METEOR

- **Based on:** VW Transporter Kombi SWB
- **Prices start at:** £23,473 (1.9TD)
- **The lowdown:** If you like the idea of this style of camper, but want a wider bed, this could be the answer. The Meteor does away with the wardrobe to create a much larger double bed that is still a doddle to make. The kitchen is well appointed and Murvi quality ranks at the very top of the league.
- **Which Motorcaravan test date:** January 1999
- **Converter:** Murvi Motorcaravans, 4 East Way, Lee Mill Industrial Estate, Ivybridge, Devon PL21 9PE. Tel: 01752 892200



BILBO'S CELESTE

- **Based on:** VW Transporter Kombi SWB
- **Prices start at:** £24,411 (1.9TD)
- **The lowdown:** Still the best all-rounder in the British-built VW camper stakes, the Celeste has an excellent kitchen and lots of storage space. It is a practical design that shows Bilbo's 20 years of experience in converting VWs. Don't under-estimate the cost of VW options, though, which can take the price way past £30,000.
- **Which Motorcaravan test date:** March 1999
- **Converter:** Bilbo's Trading Co, Eastbourne Road (A22), South Godstone, Surrey RH9 8JQ. Tel: 01342 892499