



Of course it's got a personalised number plate. And that full body kit is just the start of the modifications Bill Stringer has made to his Topaz.

TOP TOPAZ!

Bill Stringer's Auto-Sleeper Topaz is no run-of-the-mill high top. He told Nick Harding about the many changes he has made to it.

I first came across Bill Stringer when he owned a Clubman. A very smart Clubman. In fact, the smartest Clubman I'd ever seen. But he had also owned a Topaz before that. And, if you remember the Surf concept camper, well, he nearly bought that too.

Currently, Bill owns another Topaz. His loyalties obviously lie with two organisations. As he puts it: "There are only two options. Auto-Sleepers and Volkswagen." He continues: "This is now our fifth vehicle since we started motorcaravanning in 1985. All five have been Auto-Sleepers, and all five have been Volkswagens. In the current VW-based panel van range from Auto-Sleepers, the Topaz – with all its amenities – is the only one we considered."

So a Topaz was what he ordered. But wait a minute. The Stringers live in Bedfordshire. Their Topaz was supplied by Cleveland Motorhomes, hardly their local dealer. There is, of course, a story behind this as well.

Cleveland have supplied their last four vehicles. There was a time when the Stringers made regular trips to the north-east of England, using their first Auto-Sleeper, a VHT. Whilst there, Bill would often use the opportunity to visit dealerships, just for a browse, mind you.

Says Bill: "We drifted into Cleveland one day with absolutely no intention whatsoever of changing our first 'van, but we saw the



The proud owners – Bill and Audrey Stringer. "Bill is a bit of a perfectionist," says Audrey.

Trident (with 2.1 fuel-injection engine) that Ken Jackson had in his showroom, and of course one thing led to another. Ken offered me a price for ours, and I thought, blimey, I'd be daft not to think about this."

The VHT had been theirs for around six years, with 60 000 miles on its clock. "The offer that Ken made me, we'd have been mugs not to think about it," says Bill. "To cut a long story short, we bought the Trident. From there on, because he gave us a cracking good deal which nobody else could get anywhere near, we've been back to him each time. We consider ourselves part of the family."

The standard Auto-Sleeper Topaz should need little introduction to MMM readers. A high top conversion of Volkswagen's long wheelbase Transporter, it's a clever package that fits everything into a rather compact van.

Having already owned one Topaz, Bill and his wife Audrey moved on to a coachbuilt Clubman, and it took some soul-searching before deciding to go back to a Topaz. The key reason was the decision to run one vehicle rather than two. So, exit Clubman and Volkswagen Polo car, enter – or rather, re-enter – Topaz.

Bill Stringer's version of the latest Topaz is an absolute stunner, and an example of how good DIY modifications can be if carried out properly.

TOP TOPAZ!



You may recognise the front spoiler Auto-Sleepers' Surf concept vehicle. It's a similar kit, from SBG Sport.

It never was going to be an ordinary 'van. For a start, Bill made sure he waited until the 2.5-litre turbo-diesel base vehicle was available. Then, he had the audacity to ask Auto-Sleepers not to finish the 'van with their usual stripes, and to make a few interior changes, including a different upholstery.

Funnily enough (presumably because of some sort of administrative error) Bill's Topaz ended up looking like every other Topaz, with the usual green coach stripes. This was soon to change, and Roger Tucker – who acts as a design consultant to Auto-Sleepers and, ironically, was also involved with the Surf project – was responsible for the rather smart exterior of Bill's 'van.

Bill says: "I've always had the desire to have something just a little bit different to everybody else's. Call it what you like, snobbishness or what, I don't know. But I've always liked playing around and doing bits and pieces. Much as I admire Auto-Sleepers, they are not motorcaravanners. They build motorcaravans, and it's the likes of us people who can step into a 'van and say this should be here, and we could do with that there, whatever. So, I've added these bits and pieces to it – all I hope quite tastefully done – and the end result is a completely different 'van from the norm."

Without doubt, the most eye-catching aspect of this special high top is the body kit from projekt zwo. It comprises a front grille, headlamps and fog lights, and side and rear skirts. (Or you can buy it in sections.) Needless to say, Bill went for the whole lot, mainly because he had been inspired by what he saw of the Auto-Sleeper Surf.

Bill picks up the story: "We'd seen photos, small though they were, of the Surf in the Auto-Sleepers annual magazine. And I thought, that looks stunning. The next thing we knew we were dropping in at Brownhills and there, in the middle of the showroom,



The Auto-Sleeper Topaz should need little introduction.

was Surf. Well, I spent the whole morning drooling over it. I thought, that's got my name written on it, because it's so different. The only thing that put me off was the fact that it wasn't a motorcaravan – never intended to be, agreed, but not practical for our needs."

The other thing that put him off was that it had the standard 2.4-litre diesel engine. "I was anxious to go for the 2.5 TDi. But I was very tempted because Surf looked stunning, absolutely stunning."

True, most of us can only dream about the kind of money Bill has obviously spent on his masterpiece – wisely, he's keeping mum about that. Consider some of the additions he has made (Eberspächer heating instead of the standard Carver appliance, and Strikeback alarm system) and add this cost to the top-of-the-range VW Transporter base vehicle (with that smooth and powerful 2.5-litre turbo-diesel engine) and you know from the start that money was no object.

Our original meeting had to be postponed. Bill had damaged the sliding door. "I haven't stopped crying," he joked. At least, I think he was joking.

But little had prepared me for the delight I eventually saw parked on Bill's drive – not even an enthusiastic comment from Auto-Sleepers' Charles Trevelyan. (Remember, Auto-Sleepers is not a company to go around shouting about 'improvements'

made by individuals to their products.) But Charles did hint: "Bill always customises his Auto-Sleepers, but thankfully he always does them in a tasteful way."

During my time reporting on motorcaravans, I've had the pleasure (pleasure?) of witnessing DIY modifications ranging from the competent, to the innovative, to the clumsy, to the downright unsafe. If you take this as a spectrum, I'll tell you right now – by far the majority of cases lean towards the latter two areas. Here, though, is something to behold. An Auto-Sleeper Topaz which has been 'improved' in just about every department, with enhancements totalling in the region of thousands of pounds, but also with many ideas which cost but pennies – and which anyone could consider introducing to their motorhome.

Inside, despite many additions, Bill hasn't fallen into the trap of compromising what is already a pretty cramped living area. Rather, with a bit of imagination and motorcaravanning know-how, he's come up with some super solutions to what was always the Topaz's bugbear – limited storage.

I've tried to detail just some of the modifications in the pictures accompanying this article. But there's a whole lot more to Bill Stringer's Topaz than that.

Here are some of the things the camera hasn't captured:

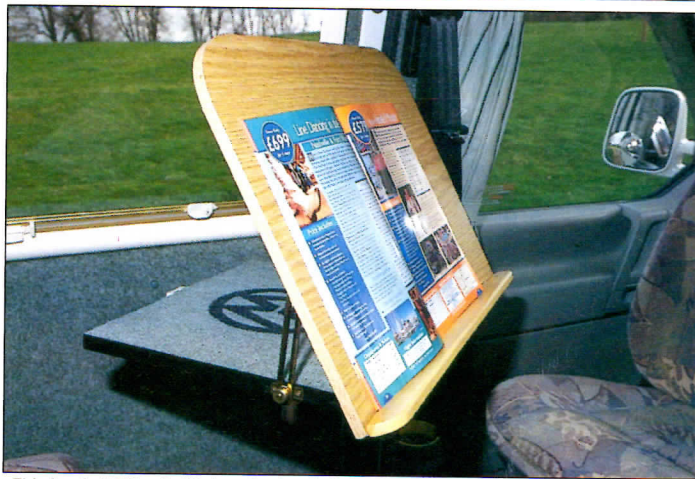
- Eberspächer heating system using



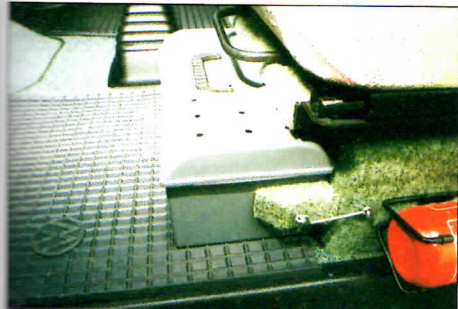
Bill hasn't been able to resist adding a few extra gizmos to the dashboard, including that wood-rimmed steering wheel. Note the cup holder on the door armrest. Additional instrumentation includes altimeter, compass and landmeter. Lid cover makes good use of the otherwise useless scooped-out section of dashboard in front of the passenger. The box on top takes cassette tapes.



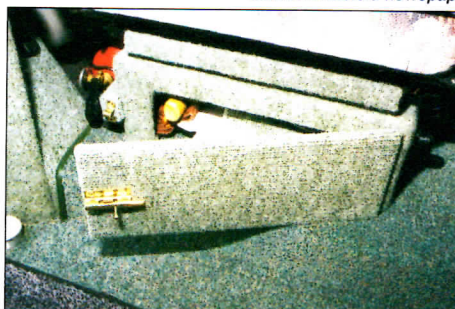
Cassette blinds are prone to damage, and not always effective. "They're a curse," says Bill. These removable boards overcome the problem completely, and have a dedicated stowage spot behind the wardrobe door.



This is what Bill calls his 'music stand'. He's adapted the table top to make it – with full adjustment for angle of tilt so it can fold flat at mealtimes. And it's just the right size for a tabloid newspaper.



Cab storage has been improved immeasurably. Just one example is this box – neatly harnessed under the passenger seat.



A variation on the cab seat base safe theme is this flap. Of course Bill has fitted a safe, we're just not saying where...



This magazine rack is on the side of the rear seat adjacent to the sliding door. It's hinged for easy cleaning.



A plate warming rack over the hob. "This is one idea that's not mine," admits Bill.



Slide-out tray under forward-facing rear seat is used to house vital documents.



Here's how to make use of wardrobe space. The hanging area remains the same, but Bill has taken account of the sloping walls to add extra shelves. The finishing touch – interior illumination when the door opens.



How do you stow your mains lead? This option means it's all tidy, and any mess is confined to the rear of the 'van.

vehicle's fuel supply. "Expense no object – we'll go for the Eberspächer."

- Strikeback alarm. Proven over the years as arguably the best motorhome security system.
- Cutlery tray and two small trays under the sink unit, plus two-way spirit level on the locker flap here.
- Support for grill pan so it can operate at two different heights. "For bacon in two minutes rather than two hours."
- Extra shelf over the leisure battery in kitchen locker (cooker side). "To stop things sliding backwards and forwards."
- Two extra speakers on the kitchen locker bulkheads.
- Mains-operated reading lamp over the far end of the settee.

- RYD polarity change-over switch, for use abroad where needed.
- Second gas bottle aperture fitted by Auto-Sleepers for gas cylinder change-over inside the 'van.
- Shelf in the locker over the wardrobe.
- Double coat hook in the washroom, so wet coats can drip-dry into the shower tray below.
- Shelf over tailgate for oddments storage, with towel rail above.
- Shelf and trim added to washroom vanity unit, plus original shelf semi-enclosed.
- Swivel catch for keeping toilet seat up.
- Aluminium strip added to the inner step inside the sliding door, to prevent slipping.
- Fiamma awning, with wind-out handle clipped to rear of washroom.

- Washroom outer walls adjacent to tailgate re-trimmed to match living area.
- Solid wood levelling ramps and a warning triangle are located in the otherwise wasted space on the floor behind the driver's seat.
- Mug holder just inside sliding door, within easy reach of swivelled cab passenger's seat.
- Slim overcab recess takes two atlases.
- Mirrored front to overcab locker sports Auto-Sleeper logo.
- Digital clock over washroom door.
- Pedestal table leg now relocated just inside the washroom.
- Heavy-duty screw-tight clip for cooker lid to help suppress rattles when on the move.



The washroom may not be big enough for showering, but it's amazing what you can fit in with a bit of imagination. The 'pole' holds up the tailgate (made 'weighty' by the body kit) but it also has attachments for 'van cleaning'. Bill Stringer's Topaz is distinctive from all angles. Just don't ask about the cost...

- 'Wood' trim everywhere (including cab doors).
- Colour-coordinated door mirrors.
- Alloy wheels.
- High-level brake light.
- Fresnel lens.
- Awning is finished with stripes and a VW logo.

There are also a few other items – which I won't mention, for security and personal reasons.

Of course, the one drawback with the Topaz in comparison to the Clubman was the lack of storage space.

"In fairness to Auto-Sleepers, how the hell can you put something where there isn't room for it anyway," says Bill. "But one thing which stuck out like a sore thumb to me, was the wardrobe. It's a reasonable size, but it's got a pokey little hanging rail, and nothing else. The rest of the place is wasted space."

Bill's solution was to make three shelves going round the corner of the wardrobe.

This left the same amount of hanging room, but created lots of space for soft clothing etc. Perhaps this aspect is something Auto-Sleepers should seriously consider for future Topaz models.

All Bill's work is topped off with discreet signwriting (in the Topaz style) on the front wings. *Festina Lente*, a motto from the Irish side of the family – which translates, make haste slowly.

The cost of all this? Let's just say Bill and Audrey Stringer know... I've now got more than a rough idea... and you'll have to try and guess for yourselves.

Bill admits he's pretty much finished now. "I don't suppose there are too many people like me who are maniacs on their 'vans. I'm boasting about it, and I'm not afraid to admit it. The last thing in the world I want to do is make a Christmas tree out of it, but there are always those moments of not knowing what to do with myself and thinking, what else can I do in the 'van..."

Useful addresses

The suppliers of many of the items fitted (such as the Strikeback alarm system from Van Bitz) feature regularly in MMM.

Those that don't, include:

The alloy wheels and projekt two body kit were from SBG Sport Ltd, 1 Faraday Close, Drayton Fields, Daventry, Northamptonshire NN11 5RD. Telephone 01327 312501.

Dashboard 'wood' trim from Viscount International, Woodford Green, Essex. Telephone 0181-505 3259.

Ital Volante wooden steering wheel with leather spokes, and matching gear lever knob, from Direct Race Equipment & Distribution (DRED), 58 Alston Drive, Bradwell Abbey, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire MK13 9HB. Telephone 01908 221666.



If anything, this particular Topaz looks even more stunning on the move.