

VOLKSWAGEN CLUBMAN GL

The suave Auto-Sleeper coachbuilt that is snugly for two

Report and pictures by John Page

Prising a Clubman out of the manufacturer had proved more difficult than extracting the proverbial blood from a stone; therefore, catching a glimpse of a used one in the Brownhills line-up was providential, and Roger, as ever, cooperative in loaning it for a test session. But (and I can hear you asking the same question I did) how on earth did anyone come to be part-exchanging it before it had even covered 2,000 miles? Apparently, and fortuitously, the customers had



discovered quickly that they really needed more space and the facility of an end bedroom. Brownhills were willing to take the Clubman in px for an Auto-Trail VW with the items as per customers' requirements, and the deal was done and *Which Motorcaravan* had a Clubman to appraise.

No diesel motor and no power steering: shame, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth because whatever the motor and chassis beneath, a Clubman is a Clubman. And, in a

recent issue the VW Capri test had involved the 2.4 diesel motor plus power steering. This one was 2-litre petrol equipped and no pas and offering a contrast. Built on a short-wheelbase chassis, the body is a happy amalgam with Volkswagen's finely rounded curves, and the graphics, subtle and understated as only Auto-Sleepers know how. In producing the Clubman, AS have achieved their usual balancing act of combining a quality feel to the product with a reasonable-looking

yet seen on this planet. No matter whether it's the chassis with its all independent suspension, the superb working environment of the cab, or the choice of five technically advanced engines, this is the vehicle that provides the best and most comfortable basis for a motorcaravan body. Add to the other features the options of power steering, automatic transmission and imminently four-wheel drive, and the package is more comprehensive than any from the competition. My guess is

that Fiat/Talbot, Renault and Mercedes will mount a challenge in the next year or two.

And this Clubman had the 2-litre (non-cat), 84 bhp petrol motor to run on normal unleaded juice. Front-mounted, water-cooled and transversely installed, it develops maximum power at 4300 rpm and an impressive maximum torque of 159 Nm at 2200 rpm. To put those figures into perspective — the Talbot 2-litre petrol motor develops 6 bhp less and needs 700 more rpm to ►



Auto-Sleeper's shapely glass fibre body is a fine match for the Volkswagen curves.

price tag. Where all the competition has gone for a four-berth layout (even the tiny Valentine having an overcab bed) the Clubman is two-berth and no nonsense. True there is an overcab extension but it is purely for storage, and plenty of it, too.

If you look closely at the body shape, which is in glass fibre, there are no square corners or flat surfaces in sight. This has two effects. One, it imparts strength to the shell, and two, it slips more easily through the airstream. Apart from that, from an aesthetic point of view, it looks right from any direction.

MOTORING THE CLUBMAN

With the possible exception of the Ford Transit, there is no doubt that Volkswagen's Transporter is the most technically sophisticated light commercial vehicle we have



Portrait of a cockpit designed to make the driver's task as calm as possible.

do it; and for torque, 300 more rpm are needed to produce slightly less of it. Let's be fair though, it's now some years since Talbot and Fiat developed their motors to power the Sevel-produced light commercial, hitherto almost unchallenged. It's all about progress, about cleaner engines and extracting as many miles as possible from each gallon. Actually, the mpg figure of 20.46 I obtained was not that good but this was a motor with less than 2,000 miles showing,

array, included in which is the fog light switch, could benefit from being more obvious instead of being a trifle lost in the overall grey plastic dash surround. They look super but could be easier to locate. The Auto-Sleeper fitted cab carpet was immaculate and on the move contributed to a pleasantly low noise level.

VW have been fitting automatic choke controls to their Transporters for years now and one turn of the key produced an instant response and even tick

minutes later, on the A1 and with crosswinds gusting at us, it was a different story; the big wheel took all the hard work out of it, and although we were obviously affected there was never any sense of being worried about a wind that was a great deal more than playful. Oddly enough, on the move, at speed, there isn't a large difference in the feel of a coachbuilt with pas, or without pas. Its benefits are more concerned with low speed handling.

the centre mirror. Most times, and this was one of them, the A1 is an artery of trucks, large, and mixing it with them means brisk use of the gearbox. So brisk can you be that you can't beat it to the punch — as fast as you want to move the stick, it will respond, and without so much as a snicker of metal-on-metal. And that gearchange, plus the general level of well designed driver tools, makes for a driver, calm yet in control.

At first I felt she was a mite sluggish but no, it was just me not using what I had on tap; better use of the motor's ability to rev and she went with a will to 74 in 4th cog and a useful maximum of 82 mph in 5th ratio. In common with the other VW coachbuilds the brakes on this one had a firm bite to them and it's worth remembering that VW eliminated harmful asbestos from their brake pads and linings years ago.

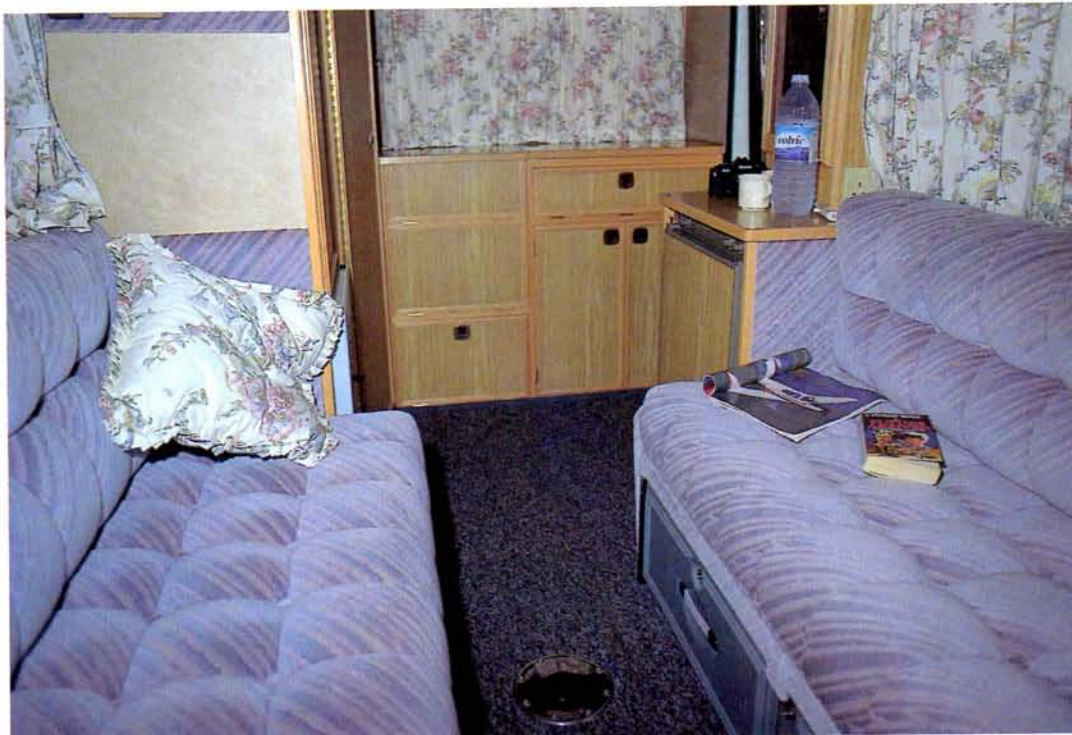
Overall this had been an enjoyable drive, and the heater, even on minimum, totally adequate to keep the cab cosy. I do wish VW would do something about the feeble note of the horn but it's a minor point when compared to the efficiency of the design and the drive that results.

THE ACCOMMODATION DETAIL

The quality of that glass-fibre body is impressive and the substantial door of the same material shuts with the sort of clunk you get only from real quality cars. It's only let down by the basic type of door lock, operated by a numbered key, obtainable at any accessory shop. A deadlock, or at least a Yale type, would be a great improvement.

The choice of centre lounge, including two settees, has a number of benefits; the seats are long enough to really spread yourself on, even to the extent of an after dinner snooze with only the backrests to remove. It is the essential pivot of an open-plan arrangement which creates a feeling of space, and for the night-times allows either single beds or a ginormous double.

The equipment specification is generous and, although I commented on the door lock and I think the cupboard catches are inclined to break your nails, one can't really argue that heating, water heating, lighting and stowage are exceedingly well taken care of. The space heater has the luxury of blown air, the stowage has the facility of slide-out drawers



A delightful lounge with a priority on space to relax.

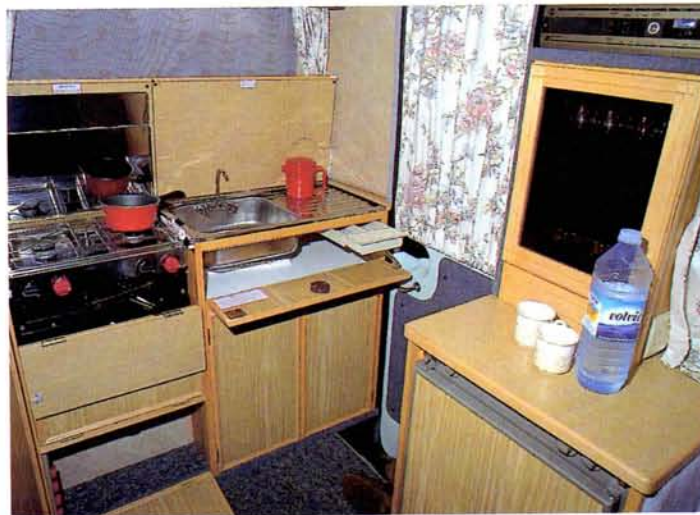
and in strong windy conditions. I think most customers will opt for either the 1.9 or 2.4 diesel motor rather than this petrol unit.

In the cab, unusually for Auto-Sleeper, the seats are purely for sitting on, are shaped for good posture by VW, and covered by AS in a fabric to match the settees. The cutaway cab roof provides good walk-in access from the rear without having to stoop, and the cab doors are wide if you enter from the front. One small detail here was not too clever in that the door sill protector, in plastic, became slippery and potentially dangerous in the wet. Its tread was neither deep or coarse enough to provide any real grip.

The hand controls and the foot pedals are nicely positioned for use with minimum effort, the heating and ventilation system is first class and only the heater controls could have been designed to be bigger and more obvious. If I was nit-picking, though, I might also comment that the button

over. Moving away through the Brownhills display, in spite of the big 18" diameter steering wheel, she needed a fair amount of muscle for full turns at low speed and I was surprised at the extra effort compared to the various VW campers I've tried. Ten

The width of a Clubman is 8" overall wider than a VW Trident camper but due to the excellent VW extension arms there is only minimal intrusion of the body into the mirror field of view, and even a little bitsy picture of those following close behind through



Meticulously fitted and with stainless steel for sink and hob.

instead of fumbling under the cushions, plus numerous roof lockers and the extraordinarily capacious and useful locker right up front above the cab. Turning to the windows; the sliding, acrylic, double-glazed units are ideal and smooth to operate: what a pity then that the guides or casings for the blinds are on the flimsy side and cause the blinds to jam. It's easy enough to sort out and many other manufacturers use the same make but basically they're not robust enough.



One of the two tables, both of which swivel in all directions.

The look of the woodwork, the choice of fabrics and the trim of wall coverings and curtains are both as professional and as subtle as we've come to expect from this oldest of Britain's motorcaravan converters and there is a meticulous attention to the detail of how cupboard doors fit and how there is a place for everything; for example, never will you find table legs rolling about loose in a locker because AS provide clips and a slot-over base. Never will you find kitchen appliances on view after the meal because the galley proper has furniture flaps to transform it into a sideboard. It is such detail and the exterior construction that help to maintain better investment through resale values. I found this a lounge to truly sprawl into and, even in December, a warm one, courtesy of the Trumatic heater which coped well on a two-thirds setting.

VICTUALLING FOR THE CREW

Victualling for me, conjures up visions of Nelson's Navy, and that's only right and proper too because there are a lot of similarities between motorcaravans and boats. Both are self contained; in both we stow the

food to cook later on our travels, and both vessels are all about the magic of travelling wherever we want to go. Mind you, any chef who served up salt pork and hard tack from this galley wouldn't be asked to come again.

Almost indestructible stainless steel is used for the hob and sink units, which takes a little effort to keep shiny but still looks good after years of use. This is not an elaborate or especially generous-of-space galley but the fridge is fitted well away from the oven and

up from floor level, there's extra workspace above it and that AS trademark, proper china crocks, are stowed in their fitted racks to remain silent en route.

While many vehicles are now fitted with three and even four-burner hob units we managed well with just the two burners. However, for some years now we've had a steamer with two compartments above the water container. It's efficient and doesn't overcook the vegetables. At mealtimes the bigger of the two tables was just about adequate for us but were it my Clubman I'd specify an even longer and wider version, with two supporting legs to keep the whole thing really steady. Using two of the scatter cushions against the backrests gave us the right amount of support to enjoy the food without having to sit bolt upright.

THE WASHROOM

It's not big but all the necessary gear, including Thetford's latest cassette loo, is supplied, the folding hand-basin achieves sensible size in a minimum of space and the shower has its own faucet which adjusted easily to get the right mix of h&c. A towel holder on the door is sensible

because my towel was out of the way and dry till I needed it. Whether or not the shower curtain is intended to wrap right round, I use it only to deep the door dry and stop water slopping outside.

As usual, in the loo, I used Potty Tabs, an American invention which is a small tablet, or rather six on a card, each one being sufficient to treat each cassette-full and biodegradable. You don't get the smell and there's no messing about with liquids, some of which are not kind to the

environment. Most accessory shops sell them.

Auto-Sleeper, I believe, are the sole British converter to go to the trouble of making a special door for access to the cassette, so that the neat lines of the glass-fibre body are uninterrupted.

SLEEPING

Here you have the best of all possible options: single beds when it's hot or the effort of making the big one is too much, or the full double size when the luxury of a 4'4" wide bed is worth the relatively small effort of slotting the tables and fillers into their grooves, pushing the big cushions into the centre and then folding the backrest cushions flat at the sides. The blinds and curtains help to keep the warmth in, and for the cab two more curtains slide out to shut off the windscreen and cab windows. What they don't do is to provide any real insulation and the alternatives of perhaps a thicker, longer curtain to shut off the cab altogether or thermal screens for the windows would make the vehicle generally warmer.

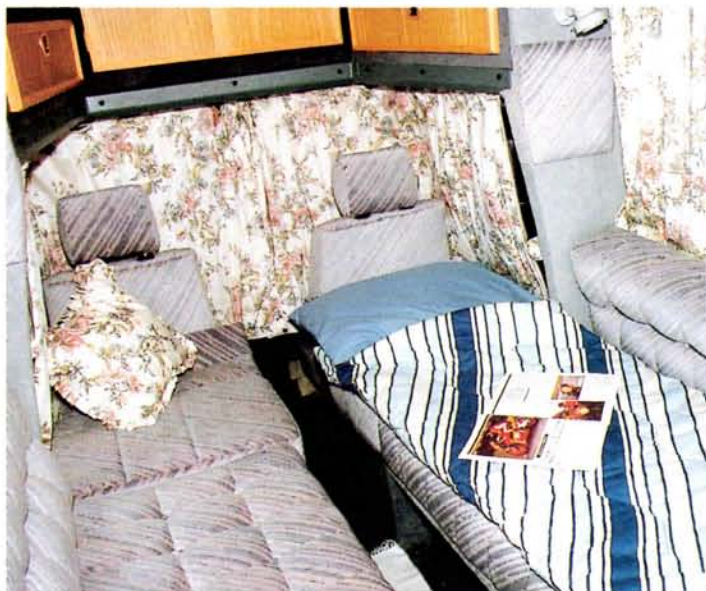
Spotlights for reading are on each cab bulkhead if you sleep with heads to the fore. No complaints with these good deep cushions and having the four only means they stayed nicely snug in place.

CONCLUSIONS

Clubman is an altogether stylish, compact and well constructed motorcaravan, and with a proven type of body that will stay beautiful for a good many years and should therefore command a ▶



The compact bathroom has Thetford flushing toilet and separate faucets for both shower and folding hand-basin



For sleeping there is a choice of these two singles or, a large transverse double bed.

better resale value. Lean on width and length, it's virtually a go-anywhere motorcaravan but yet with the life support systems to supply the home comforts.

A few details I've mentioned seem somehow out of keeping with the generally high standard of build but one can't deny that at a price of £25,559 for a 2-litre petrol-powered example, this is value for money. For those looking for even more of a bargain, this hardly used Clubman was on offer by Brownhills at £21,950.

She performed with exceptionally good manners on the road, and the stiffness of the glass-fibre body plays its part in this.

For the appearance, I thought the rather insipid eau de nil band didn't quite do justice to this so pleasing aesthetic shape of it but then I happen to know that an Auto-Sleeper customer is essentially one who prefers to keep their motorcaravan understated when it comes to the graphic side of things. ■



With Auto-Sleeper the rear end looks good too.

SPECIFICATIONS

Base vehicle

Make: Volkswagen Model: Transporter
Type: Chassis cab with transversely mounted petrol motor.
Power unit: 2-litre, 4-cylinder, fuel injected petrol motor
Dimensions: Bore 81mm Stroke 95.5mm
Power output: 84 bhp @ 4300 rpm
Torque output: 159 Nm @ 2200 rpm
Gearbox: 5-speed all synchromesh
Suspension: Independent suspension with torsion bars, upper and lower wishbones. Independent rear suspension with mini coil springs, semi trailing arms.
Braking system: Dual circuit hydraulic system with servo assistance.
Front discs. Rear drum brakes.
Fuel capacity: 17.6 gallons (80 litres)
Turning circle: 38'4" (11.7m) kerb to kerb
Maximum gross weight: 2810 kg
Kerbside weight: 2285 kg
Payload: 525 kg

Performance data

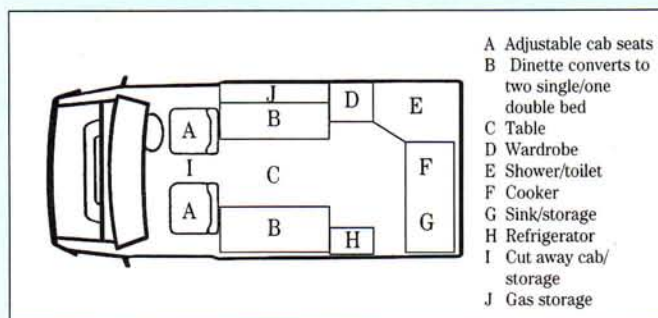
Fuel consumption: 20.46 mpg
Maximum speed: 82 mph
Comfortable cruising speed: 58-62 mph
Acceleration times: 0-60 mph 24.73 secs, 40-60 mph 19.84 secs in 4th gear

Which Motorcaravan Star Rating

Performance and economy ***	Zestful when pushed. Useful top speed
Roadholding ****	Heavy at low speeds. Excellent cruising
Lounging ****	Splendid for real sprawling
Dining **	Smallish tables, lack firmness
Sleeping ****	Best of both worlds. Singles or double
Bathroom ***	Not large but adequate
Kitchen ***	Lowish working height. Nicely concealed
Back seat travel *	Not designed for it
Aesthetics ****	Shapely and strong body
Innovation **	Traditional style rather than flair
Value for money ****	Designed for longevity

Conversion

Make: Auto-Sleeper Model: Clubman GL
Type: Overcab design coachbuilt motorcaravan
Overall length: 17'4 1/4" (5290mm)
Overall width: 6'8 3/4" (2051mm)
Overall height: 8'7 1/2" (2629mm)
Internal height: 6'4" (1930mm)
Basic construction: Glass fibre shell with plywood interior wall and styrofoam insulation.
Fresh water capacity: 18 1/2 gallons (84.6 litres)
Waste water capacity: 12 gallons (54.8 litres)
Gas storage capacity: 2x7 kg cylinders
Water heating: Carver Cascade gas water heater with 2-gallon reservoir.
Space heating: Truma 3000 gas convector heater with blown air.
Refrigerator: Electrolux 2200 fridge with electronic ignition
Cooking appliances: 2-burner hob with grill, and oven/cooker.
Toilet: Thetford cassette flushing toilet
Bed sizes: Single beds 2'6" x 6'2". As double bed 6'5" x 4'4".
Electrical equipment: Mains electric input with circuit breakers.
Automatic charging system and auxiliary battery. 12v lighting.
Window type: Double glazed acrylic
Upholstery: Diagonal pattern velour
Optional extras available: 2.5 litre, 5-cylinder diesel engine and power steering. 2.0 litre, 4-cylinder petrol motor with catalyst. 2.5 litre petrol motor. Automatic transmission. Cab arm rests. Overcab bed in place of lockers. 2 lap restraints.
Price of vehicle tested: £21,950. New example £25,559.



VEHICLE KINDLY SUPPLIED FOR TESTING BY: BROWNHILLS GARAGE (NOTT'M) LTD, OLD A46, FARNDON ROAD, NEWARK, NOTTS NG24 4SG.