



Bolton wanderer

Nick Harding heads off in a van conversion from Lancashire-based Leisuredrive

Happy Birthday Vivante! Leisuredrive's popular van conversion is 21 in 2015 and the celebrations are set to continue. We've actually joined the party a little late, but here is a high-top camper based on Volkswagen's venerable T5, in upmarket Hi-Line trim and badged '20th Anniversary Edition'.

In fact, Leisuredrive has been producing campers continuously since 1969, remaining fiercely independent over all this time. It still makes most of its sales from its latest base, in Bolton, but has always employed the services of a handful of agents across the country. There are 10 of these at present.

That determined independence comes through in the way Leisuredrive makes virtually everything for its campers in-house. That extends to key items such as the roof, the rear seats and, of course, all the furniture.

A little bit of extra thought goes into everything it does. Carpet lining is used on interior walls ("We have yet to find a better material, quality- and product-wise, that can give a warmer feel/finish and add to the insulation process," I was told) and there are thick curtains ("They are black-out curtains that are a massive plus for keeping out the light. We get asked for these every time"). Insulation is "cramped in wherever possible... we use the best, high-grade green

plastic, recycled, non-itch product". Interestingly, there's no spark ignition for the hob ("We constantly get them back on habitation services not working due to vigorous cleaning"). These are the sorts of details that inspire confidence.

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

As mentioned, that high-top – made even more distinctive by the anniversary graphics – is Leisuredrive's own design. Its windows are fixed and the section comes as standard with boards to make a double bed. Below, you actually get a choice of seating, depending on your priorities.

Leisuredrive says the rear settee and single travel seat arrangement, as here, is

preferred by the “older generation”, who like the facility to sprawl out (for watching TV for example); whereas younger folk, with kids, tend towards a set-up with two separate forward-facing seats at the back. You can easily push forward and recline the driver’s seat to create a full-length settee once you’re on site.

Leisuredrive says the black-coloured exterior on this example is gaining popularity. Admittedly, it’s still got a way to go to catch up with the Natural Grey and Reflex Silver that are the favourites. Of course, Leisuredrive can tailor the interior colouring to pretty much whatever you want.

It’s all built to National Caravan Council requirements, with Individual Type Approval. The latter qualification allows Leisuredrive to fit a lap restraint to the side-facing settee here. Whole Vehicle Type Approval (which bigger-volume manufacturers and exports have to use) doesn’t allow such a fitting – we would recommend people carefully consider whether they would want to use this seat for travelling purposes, especially for a child passenger. In addition, it’s worth noting that you can’t use a child restraint on a side-facing seat. While legal for low-volume models, side-facing seats do not offer the same level of protection as forward- or rearward-facing seats. Leisuredrive says all its seat units, plus seat belt mountings, are safety tested.

ON THE ROAD

Volkswagen’s T5 comes in various guises, but Leisuredrive makes a point of saying this celebratory Vivante comes with the 100bhp engine as a starting point rather than the cheaper (but admittedly rather wheezy) 82bhp variant. If you want a bit more refinement – and another gear, or



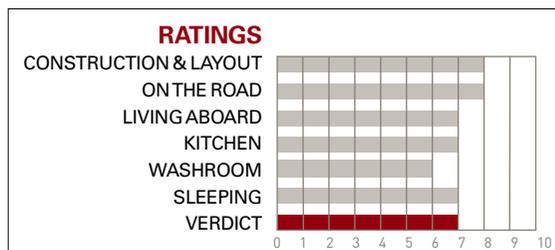
The forward-facing seat can be replaced by a second settee

“Solid engineering and five decades of knowhow underlie the way Leisuredrive does things

even DSG seven-speed automatic transmission – prices start leaping upwards. True to form for any VW, you end up with a smile on your face after settling in behind the wheel.

Because all the seating comes into play for the beds, Leisuredrive fits its own cab seats to the Vivante but, I have to be honest, I had some issues here. First, the cab seat squabs are very short so I felt like I was perching rather than sitting. I’m only 5ft 6in from head to toe, so their design >>

TECHNICAL



RRP/as tested	£41,990/£44,990 OTR
Base vehicle	Volkswagen Transporter T5
Engine	2.0-litre turbodiesel
Power	100bhp (75kW) @ 3,500rpm
Torque	184lb ft (250Nm) @ 1,500-2,500rpm
Transmission	Five-speed manual, FWD
Fuel/tank/econ	Diesel/17.6 gal (80 litres)/36-40mpg
Overall length	16ft 0in (4.89m)
Overall width	6ft 5in (1.90m)
Overall height	8ft 0in (2.44m)
Max internal height	6ft 5in (1.90m)
MRO	2,239kg (44.07cwt)
MTPLM	2,800kg (55.12cwt)
User payload	561 kg (11.04cwt)
Berths	2+2 sleeping/4 travel
NCC approved	Yes
Caravan Club insurance	The Club’s Motorhome Insurance is tailored to the needs of members using our 25 years of know-how. We guarantee to beat your renewal premium by at least £25*.

Figures from manufacturer’s literature

*Premium Saving Guarantee. Subject to proof of existing renewal, including cover and price (eg a copy of your renewal notice), when cover is on a like-for-like basis. Please note, terms and conditions, eg excess(es), may vary from your current insurer. Courtesy car is subject to availability. Subject to terms and conditions and the Insurer’s acceptance of the Risk. The Club’s Motorhome Insurance is arranged for The Club by Devitt Insurance Services Limited, Insurance Brokers. The Caravan Club and Devitt Insurance Services Limited are authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. The current average premium paid by members under The Caravan Club’s Motorhome Insurance scheme is £253.



Cab seats fold flat in night-time mode



Neat galley-style kitchen

Floorplan

might suit folk of different heights (Leisuredrive can actually tailor these seats to a degree – shortening or lengthening the squabs and/or backrests).

I also felt the head restraints were set well back, so there's quite a gap between them and your head – this is something that's under review.

Leisuredrive definitely takes the VW cab upmarket, fitting as standard features as wide-ranging as the padded steering wheel, air conditioning, upgraded stereo and dash trim. Door mirrors have electric adjustment and heating, but retracting them is done manually.

As for economy, a frugal 40mpg is a realistic possibility.

LIVING ABOARD

Vivante is well equipped, but the crucial factor is the decent amount of living space achieved here.

Unusually, Leisuredrive fits a 230V electric fan heater as standard in its normal Vivantes. It went on to provide an Eberspächer unit for the special edition models, but soon found customers actually wanted the flexibility of having both units on board. So, they're both here. There's also a mains water heater, a

Propex model, which takes up most of the rear travel seat base.

Storage extends to pockets on the back of each cab seat, a large drawer in the settee base and even a useful safe in the base of the driver's seat. The table top – a design that allows ease of movement around it – stows conveniently behind the rear nearside seat for travel.

There's excellent lighting – all-LED, both ambient and direct. It includes two spotlights on multi-adjustable stems over the cab seats. There are strips over the kitchen and the settee, where there is also a couple of touch on-off units. It's all very bright at night!

KITCHEN

Along the nearside of this rear galley-style kitchen, you get a Dometic two-ring hob and separate sink, each with a glass lid. The offside is taken by the Dometic RM5310 60-litre fridge, which has a small freezer compartment and three-way power supply (gas, mains or 12V). That's the standard offering, but you can have a compressor alternative if you wish.

Overhead is an extractor fan, while a sliding window behind the sink also provides ventilation when needed.

Here, rather unusually, there's a sliding window behind the settee, but not in the side door. Needless to say, if this doesn't suit you, Leisuredrive can adapt.

Dare I offer a bit of constructive criticism? A lip at the back of the kitchen worktop may prevent spillages creeping down the back of the unit.

WASHROOM

Part of the attraction of the Vivante is the provision of a properly plumbed-in, swivel-bowl toilet. Tucked neatly away out of view behind a tambour door and solid, hinged top, it's actually a neater execution than some offer. Additional curtaining provides privacy when needed.

SLEEPING

The two single beds are 6ft 7in x 2ft 2in. But you can also produce a double bed of the same length but some 5ft 7in wide, by pulling out a section of the settee (there's still a gap between the front seats, but it kind of works).

The top bed is really for children, who'll happily clamber up here. Don't underestimate the provision of a roof bed when it comes to resale values, though. Even if you don't use it as such for yourselves, it can always act as a great storage area.

VERDICT

If you're expecting some flashy 'Next Great Thing on Four Wheels', apologies for making you read this far. Solid engineering and nearly five decades of campervan know-how underlie the way Leisuredrive does things.

If you want some pointers to look out for on any campervan, consider these: how easy is it to make the beds (especially once all your luggage is on board?); are the kitchen units of a suitable width and height?; if there's a plumbed-in toilet, is there space (and privacy) in which to use it?; is there suitable standing space in the kitchen?; how much storage space has been created? I could go on, but you get the picture. And maybe that's why it's many happy returns for Leisuredrive.

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Left to right:
comfortable cab
environment;
now you see it...;
and now you
don't! The
swivel-bowl
toilet is neatly
hidden when
not in use