

Leisuredrive are one of the longest established names in the market and pride themselves on making virtually everything in-house. We try out their latest Vivante Hi-Line model

WORDS AND PHOTOS
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What do you know about Leisuredrive? Sure you'll have heard about the brand, but I'm willing to bet you couldn't name one of their models or where your nearest agent is (they have 11 agents across the UK). For the last 45 years this UK-based manufacturer has been quietly beavering away producing great value Volkswagen conversions for a loyal band of in-the-know customers.

They make virtually everything in-house – even the glass-fibre roof – which allows them to both control the quality and the supply. "A customer of ours rarely has to wait for parts" points out Sales Manager, Paul Hewitt, "as we probably make it in-house anyway." Many of their employees have been with them for many years and all of them use their campervans, so they reckon this gives them an edge on knowing what customers really want. Time to find out, then...

On the road

The Vivante tested here was based on VW's higher-spec Highline model, which features all sorts of juicy kit including Bluetooth connection for your phone, cab air-con, cruise control, rear parking sensors, body-coloured bumpers, leather

LEISUREDRIVE HISTORY

In spring 1968 technical college graduate Peter Ravenscroft was asked to convert an old ambulance into a campervan by his parents. When the time came to sell the vehicle, the phone didn't stop ringing. Clearly there was a market for campervans.

In April '69 Peter formed Carahome, changing the name to Manchester Motor Caravan Company and then 'Leisuredrive' during 1982.

Initially building on VW T2s, Bedford CFs and Commer vans, the firm also used the Renault Trafic base during the Eighties and the Fiat/Citroën/Peugeot base vehicle throughout the Nineties.

Continual expansion saw the firm outgrow various premises, moving to their present factory in 2004. Peter is still the MD, though he does claim to be in 'semi-retirement'.

Today, the factory is a hive of activity and from start to finish a new conversion takes just three weeks. They start with a VW T5 panel van (rather than a minibus) and start by fitting the roof – either a glass-fibre high-top or a pop-roof. What sets them apart is that they actually make



Passing mountain bikers Chris Willcock, brother Jerry Willcock and mate Michael Azadi loved the Vivante. A bike rack is a £320 option...

steering wheel and gear-knob, plus 16-inch Colmar alloy wheels. In Natural Grey metallic paint it looked very upmarket.

Powered by the 102bhp version of the 2.0-litre TDI engine (one up from the entry level 84bhp unit), performance was brisk and yet again it's the smooth drive of the VW that impresses. With a slick gearchange in the perfect position to palm the next gear, an easy clutch and everything where you'd want it to be, the ergonomics are difficult to fault.

It should be economical, too – the official combined figure for the van is 38.7mpg, so 30-40mpg is realistic.

Leisuredrive replace the front seat with their own, but haven't been tempted to



the roof in-house. This means they can control the quality and supply.

It's a similar story with the interior. Raw Vohringer board goes in and then gets cut to shape to suit the particular vehicle. "Work starts on the interior well before the base vehicle arrives," says Paul Hewitt, Sales Manager, "to ensure it all comes together at the same time."

Like many Leisuredrive employees Paul has been there for many years – 45 in fact! "I started from school as a fitter" he grins, "and then worked my way up to be in charge of sales." Never mind knowing how to erect the bed, Paul knows how to fabricate it!

LEISUREDRIVE VIVANTE HI-LINE

PROS

- ✓ Great to drive VW base vehicle
- ✓ Long single beds work well
- ✓ Good lounge for short-wheelbase
- ✓ Loo and privacy room well thought out
- ✓ Unusual hexagonal table works well

CONS

- ✗ Side lap belt not ideal fourth travel seat (an extra front-facing seat is an option)
- ✗ Double bed a bit fiddly to make

fit a swivel base so the new seat is at the same height as the original. It's wider and more comfortable, being neatly trimmed to match the habitation area's grey fabric with black leather edging.

Lounge

Once at the photoshoot location, the driver's seat headrest can be removed and the backrest folded flat to effectively create a long side settee. This adds to the length of the two-seater side settee and you could probably fit four people along it.

Underneath the side settee is an inbuilt fan heater, while the wall nearby housed the controls for the Eberspächer blown-air diesel heating.

With the passenger seat swivelled and the forward-facing travel seat employed, five or six people could enjoy themselves here. Given that it's based on the T28 short-wheelbase VW, there's an impressive amount of room.

Dining

To set up the dining table, the pole can be found clipped to the wardrobe sidewall, while the table top lives behind the travel seat backrest. At first the hexagonal shape of the table seems odd, but after you slot it in place it all makes sense and it can be used either longitudinally or transversely. Or at a jaunty angle. Cut-off corners mean you can squeeze past it in any orientation.

Kitchen

The galley lies at the passenger-side rear of the vehicle and features a stainless-



Front seats are Bebb crash-tested items and are neatly trimmed and comfortable



With the driver's seat folded flat an impressively large sofa is created for a SWB van



Odd-shaped dining table works in most positions and angles



Kitchen unit has two-burner hob and plenty of storage. Dometic three-way fridge is opposite



◀ Single beds can be made up in seconds and will even suit taller folk

▶ Leisuredrive's high-top neatly overhangs on the driver's side to prevent water ingress



SPECIFICATION

Base vehicle VW T28 Highline panel van

Drive Front-wheel drive

Engine 2.0TDI diesel (Euro 6)

Power 102bhp

Economy 40mpg

Gearbox 5-speed manual

Number of travel seats 4 (3 three-point, 1 side lap belt)

Berths 4 (two adults, plus two kids)

Leisure battery capacity 65Ah

Payload 600kg

Length x width x height 4.89m x 2.23m (inc mirrors) x 2.5m

Standard equipment Two-burner hob, sink, Thetford swivel cassette loo, LED lighting, 60-litre three-way Dometic RM5310 fridge, Smev oven and grill, swivel front passenger seat, Eberspächer diesel blown-air heating, built-in mains fan heater, Fiamma wind-out awning, cab air-conditioning, cruise control, rear parking sensors, Bluetooth, Cat 1 alarm, roof bed (1.65m x 1.36m), single bed driver's side (1.88m x 0.62m reducing to 0.59m), single bed passenger side (2.01m x 0.67m reducing to 0.59m), double bed (2.01m x 1.66m)

Optional equipment TV / DVD player and aerial £450, bike rack £320, towbar £330

Warranty 2 years for base vehicle and conversion

Price From £42,480 on-the-road

Price of test vehicle £42,480

www.leisuredrive.co.uk

steel sink and a separate hob with two burners (but sadly no piezo ignition). Underneath the hob lives a stainless-steel Smev oven and grill, with a cutlery drawer above it, while under the sink there's a cupboard for a large removable water tank. Removable tanks are a good idea in a campervan (I use them in my

own) as they can be easily removed for filling or cleaning, they don't freeze in winter and if you need more storage space it's easy to fit a smaller one. It's the sort of detail that has clearly been designed by campervan users.

A trio of cubbyholes (also accessible from the rear doors) complete the kitchen cabinet, with extra storage lockers overhead. Opposite the kitchen is an extra worktop (covering the loo) with another side locker opening to reveal clips for wine glasses and bottles. The electric control panel and a double mains socket also live above this locker. At first I thought the mains panel oddly positioned, but it's there for a reason: when the beds are made up, it's best to enter through the rear doors and you'll want access to the light switch first. Yet more attention to detail.

Beds

The high-top layout hides a simple pull-out overhead bed that is ideal for kids and is reasonably spacious. Pull it out, rearrange the cushions and it's ready for use. Downstairs, you've a choice of twin single beds or a large double. The two single beds are formed by removing the front seat headrests and folding the seat backs flat, then folding the passenger travel seat flat. It's easy and the resulting beds are longer than you'd expect in a SWB VW – I'm 6ft 2in and would have been quite happy on either bed.

The double bed involves rearranging the side settee backrest and pulling out the base of the settee. An extra infill cushion positioned on a fold-out



Swivel loo and privacy curtains help create a private rear washroom

aluminum support then bridges the gap between the cab seats. It's more fiddly to make than the singles, but the resulting bed is large and well padded.

Washroom

There's no room for a shower, but opposite the kitchen, hidden under a worktop is an electric-flush Thetford with the cassette accessed via an additional wooden panel. Curtains shut off the bedroom / lounge area and the rear windows, effectively making the rear into a private washroom. As the wardrobe is also to be found back here, it effectively makes the rear of the van a changing room.

VERDICT

This is a campervanner's campervan. There are so many subtle and well thought-out details that have clearly evolved from constant development by its enthusiastic manufacturers.

It's great to see a UK firm actually making so much of the vehicle themselves – rather than simply assembling a mish-mash kit of bought-in parts (as many converters do). It's amazing they even make the glass-fibre roofs themselves.

The Vivante is a capable and competent four-berth that has excellent single beds, a good kitchen and a roomy lounge. For a family of four, we'd tick the box for an extra forward-facing travel seat.

VW's Highline base vehicle and the Eberspächer blown-air heating make it even more appealing. For under £42,500, it's cracking value for money.

“They make virtually everything in-house – even the glass-fibre roof”