



YOUR GUIDE TO CAMPERVANS

It's easy to see why campers are so popular – you get all the comforts of motorhome touring in one compact and nippy vehicle! Follow our expert guide for brilliant tips on choosing and using your campervan

CUT OUT
AND KEEP
GUIDE!



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ORIGINS

A CAMPERVAN HISTORY

It's hard to imagine the motorhome market without its thriving van conversion sector, which has come a long way since the 1950s, says Andrew Jenkinson

You have to look back to the early 1900s to see when the idea of a motorised caravan was first mooted – with some rather bizarre designs. But by 1919, using the principle of coachbuilt bodies, the Eccles Motor Transport Company had begun to produce these on a commercial scale.

By the end of the 1920s, however, the car-pulled caravan took the lead and the motorhome rather faded away. Only a few examples were built and after World War II, the idea seemed to be finished.

But now fast-forward to the early 1950s, when the birth of the commercial pressed-steel van – especially the VW Microbus – gave a kickstart to the camper market. In 1952, German caravan maker Westfalia spotted the potential, and started selling a conversion kit for the Microbus.

Known as the Camping Box, the kit converted the side-windowed VW for basic camping, but could then easily be removed if it was sold on.

The VW was seen as the ideal basis for conversion to provide accommodation. Soon, new companies were converting it, with a higher spec. But it was costly, and VW expected certain standards of quality, too.

Enter the Dormobile

Then in 1956, one of the most famous names in campervans, Dormobile, made its debut.

Using what was basically an estate car/van, the Standard Ten base was designed for sleeping only. It was seen as a new, free and easy way of getting about and exploring off the beaten track.

In addition, the VW Microbus was still being used by many UK manufacturers in the early 1960s.

However, the launch of Bedford's CA van in 1952 provided the opportunity for a convertor such as Dormobile to add accommodation, with a kitchen and seating that could be turned into beds.

This was also the start of the famous Dormobile extending roof, where two extra berths could be added almost instantaneously.

The Bedford CA was quickly taken up by other new convertors, such as Kenex, based in Kent not far from Dormobile, and these campers were smartly finished and well designed. Dormobile eventually bought out the company, dropping the Kenex name in 1962.

Other makers sprang up, such as Pitt Conversions and Calthorpe. Different types of extending roof were designed, with straight lift-ups made from glass fibre or aluminium with canvas side fillers.

Next came the high-top, with a glass fibre moulded roof section added onto the campervan after the removal of the old roof.

Nomad Converters, based in Bolton, Lancashire, patented a cranked wind-up raising-roof – which didn't always function very well!

Developments in the 1960s

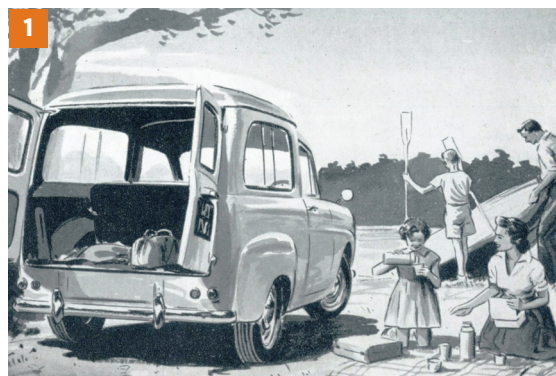
In 1957, the Ford Thames 400E commercial van was released, ushering in a new era of campervan design. The Thames was the firm's response to the CA, and convertors were particularly attracted to the model's 1.5-litre petrol engine.

Then Morris brought out the J4, which became the first choice for many convertors.

The 1960s heralded the arrival of many more specialist convertors, such as Devon, Auto-Sleepers, Richard Holdsworth, Airborne, Leisuredrive and Canterbury, among others.

By now, the idea of the campervan lifestyle had really begun to take hold, and with the arrival of other commercial vans, such as the Austin and the Commer, and uprated versions, it spread further.

In the late 1950s, if you owned a campervan, it was still considered a commercial van, so restrictions were



1 In 1956 Dormobile began converting the Standard Ten car for camping holidays

2 Campervans really took off with the advent of lightweight commercial vans





imposed, including speed limits. Peter Pitt, of Pitt Conversions, decided to protest about this, arguing that the camper was in keeping with private cars.

Pitt's campaign was so persistent that a law was eventually passed to exclude campervans from the category of commercial vans. So legally, the camper was now on a par with the private car.

This new status gave the camper a much broader appeal, and the increasing demand saw firms such as Dormobile moving to larger premises. Using VW's Kombi and Microbus, the Dormobile name became well known in the industry.

The expanding market produced better designs, and all types of vehicle were now looked at by converters.

Wild camping gains popularity

There were many more unusual vehicles to be seen then, and one of the most noteworthy was the Land Rover long-wheelbase. Known as the Carawagon, this conversion could sleep up to four, yet was compact inside. Its design meant that owners could tour even further off the beaten track, and wild camping began to grow in popularity.

Dormobile jumped on the Land Rover bandwagon, bringing its version to the market not long after. Later on, Carawagon were also built on the Range Rover, but sales of both were limited.

The campervan industry had mainly developed as a proliferation of small concerns, with most selling directly to the public and some offering bespoke layouts. The flip side of this was the reappearance of DIY kits. UK makers were offering to kit out older vehicles for buyers on a more limited budget.

In 1969, the Manchester Motor Caravan Company began converting vans to campervans. By the 1980s,

this father-and-son business had expanded and was now known as Leisuredrive. Using the VW T3, it gained a reputation for design and quality.

Small firms were making elevating and lift-up roofs for convertors and DIY. Side tents that didn't need the support of the camper were available from £28. Whale manual water-pumps were being fitted in campervan kitchens and in some, a drinks cabinet was added. ➔



3 Like Devon, Danbury favoured VW bases for its campervans

4 VW's Kombi/ Microbus proved a success for convertors such as Devon and Dormobile

5 Campervan life in the 1950s was cramped, but did get you into the great outdoors!



6 The Bedford was a firm favourite with converters such as Kenex, based in Kent

7 By the early 1960s, campervan design had improved out of all recognition, with a choice of layouts now being offered

8 The introduction of the Ford Thames 400E in the late 1950s was another step-change for many converters, including Bluebird, Airborne and Kenex

9 Torcars made micro-campers using cars such as this Austin, and by the mid-1970s, had added the Morris Marina to the range

10 Dormobile's Bedford-based micro-camper from 1967 had an excellent sales record

11 Carawagon introduced its Land Rover 'go anywhere' camper, later joined by a version based on the Range Rover

New dealerships established

Campervans were now participating in endurance races, such as a Dormobile that made a memorable 1821-mile round trip from Keighley, West Yorkshire, to Land's End, then all the way north to John O'Groats, and finally back to Keighley, in 1969.

By now, specialist campervan dealerships were being established, although a few car showrooms also took on campervans.

With the advent of more vans being launched, converters were spoilt for choice. Then the Ford Thames 400E was dropped, and within weeks of the new Ford Transit being launched, companies such as Dormobile began converting the Transit, with great success. With more interior space and a modern cab, the Transit was ideal for conversion.

Canterbury Campervans saw the Transit's potential, with a raising-roof design that sold very well, while

Dormobile also developed a good design, making the Transit one of their top-sellers.

By 1963, Sprite Caravans had merged with Bluebird Caravans, which also made campervans. Known as Caravan International Motorhomes (CIM), the new firm used the Transit for Sprite motorhomes and campers.

The larger Transit Custom van offered greater load capacity, so converters such as CIM were soon adding this vehicle to their ranges.

At the other end of the market, micro-campervans appeared, such as the Bedford-based Dormobile and Canterbury, built on the Ford Escort estate car. Sun-Tor used several such vehicles to make campervans for couples and solo users.

The 1970s saw manufacturers such as Holdsworth and Auto-Sleepers expand, and Bedford's new CF van proved to be another popular choice for converters.

Convertors come and go

Over the years, many converters have ventured into this successful market, for example with the arrival of the Toyota Hiace.

Dormobile was one of the first firms to use the Toyota, although other converters soon followed.

The British Leyland Sherpa van was another 1970s vehicle that became popular among many converters. Auto-Sleepers and Motorhomes International were the first companies to convert this to a camper.

Throughout the 1970s, campervans proved as popular as ever, and a new van from Fiat, powered





by an 850 engine, meant Motor Caravan Conversions, among other companies, had a hit on its hands.

Even though it was a relatively small vehicle, the Fiat could still provide a kitchen unit and many other motorcaravanning mod cons, and was also available with extending side tents.

A temporary dip in sales

For many customers, campervans were an excellent alternative to the coachbuilt motorhome, especially for ease of use and parking. But in 1973, with the introduction of VAT and the advent of the oil crisis, camper sales took a substantial hit. Some companies in the sector ceased trading, although the market eventually recovered its strength.

One positive factor was that in 1967, the Caravan Club added motorhomes to its remit, broadening its membership and helping to popularise motorhome and campervan ownership, and boost sales.

However, the late 1970s and early 1980s proved tough for the whole sector as the UK economy faltered – even Dormobile became a casualty.

Another casualty was CIM, which had changed its name to Autohomes, but folded in 1982 when parent company Ci went out of business.

Many familiar names disappeared over the years, but others, such as Holdsworth and Auto-Sleepers, survived and continued to produce reasonably priced campervans that offered great build quality.

Fortunately, by the mid-1980s, sales had begun to improve once more across the market, and the VW T3 proved a particularly popular base vehicle. Autohomes reappeared, introducing a range of new models such as the Komet.

Campervan spec also significantly improved, with hot-water systems and mains power being offered. Fitted fridges and full cookers became the norm.

With new, longer-wheelbase vans appearing on the market – such as the Renault Trafic, Talbot Express and Peugeot – washrooms could be placed at the rear of the campervan, allowing for more living space in the lounge area.

Mercedes vans have been used by many converters since the 1970s. There was plenty of choice across the market, which grew rapidly in the late 1980s as more firms started up and caravan manufacturers, such as Elddis and Swift, joined the fray.

Luxury brands

Now smaller concerns, such as Nu Venture, began converting Fiat and Citroën vans. Auto-Sleepers, meanwhile, was focusing on the VW Trident and Trooper – luxury campervans which proved especially popular with retired couples, who wanted a good spec and high-quality finish.

The 2000s saw the arrival of Trigano, La Strada and WildAx, among others, as the market continued to grow. Around this time, base vehicles became more car-like in terms of drive and spec, with kit such as DAB radio and cruise control now provided pretty much as standard.

The days of the first basic conversions on Bedfords, Fords and Austins may be long gone, but those brands have all played their part in the campervan story, which continues to grow and develop today.

Campervans enable so many people to take to the road for new adventures, and it should come as no surprise that they are now more popular than ever. ■

12 By 1965, Ford's Transit was a major player in the market

13 Devon campers let you remove the furniture easily, so you could use the VW as day-to-day transport, too

14 In the 1980s, Cavalier Caravans went into camper conversions on the Bedford CF, although the US styling didn't prove very popular

15 Renault was gaining ground in the 1980s, making conversions such as this Holdsworth with a GRP high-top

16 Swift Group made its first appearance in the sector with the Mondial

17 These days, modern campers, such as this one by Auto-Sleepers, are bigger, better and even more luxurious

INSIGHT

CAMPERVAN LAYOUTS EXPLAINED

Campervan floorplans differ from those of their coachbuilt cousins. Here's what you can expect to find, and the pros and cons of each

Owing to their restrictions on interior space, and the kind of touring they tend to be used for – attending music festivals, or activities such as surfing and other watersports – campervans

have layouts that are unique to them. We're not just talking about campers with raising-roofs here, but many fixed-roof vehicles, too. Here are the most common layouts you'll see on the forecourts.

Rear bench, side kitchen



Otherwise known as the Classic or VW style, this is the layout that you will find in pretty much all traditional campervans, in particular those that date back to the 1960s.

In this floorplan, you get a bench slung across the back of the vehicle, sometimes providing two travel seats, sometimes fitted with three.

Often, this bench can also slide forwards on rails, so you can make more room for carrying luggage and other kit in the rear of the camper. It also folds out to make a double bed, usually in the rock'n'roll style, where the base folds forward and the back can be lowered flat.

All of the kitchen equipment – sink, water-tanks, hob, and oven if there is one – and storage, barring possibly a locker underneath the seats, is kept to one side of the vehicle's interior.

This is certainly a classic layout, and is often found in classic campervans, which still fetch excellent prices at auction.

Positives

Ideal for anyone wanting to use their campervan as a day-to-day vehicle as well. This is the most practical layout for that, and if the 'van comes with tinted windows, people passing by outside often don't even notice it is a camper. So you can take it to the office, ready for that Friday getaway!

Negatives

Less ideal for those who want the comfort of having their own washroom in a 'van. This layout more or less precludes that, and if there is a toilet, it will be a Porta Potti, which needs storing somewhere.

1 Classic campervan layout has a movable bench seat, and the kitchen to one side

Side settee

In essence, touring in a campervan is supposed to be all about reconnecting with nature, and this layout, possibly more than any other, is designed to allow you to achieve just that.

It's simple – you can arrive on site, roll back the door, and then sit and look out at the world around you – even if it is drizzling!

Side-settee floorplans are often fitted with one forward-facing seat as well, which adds to the level of sociability and means that you can still use the camper as a day-to-day vehicle if you wish.

Sleeping arrangements are either two single beds, including one made up by connecting the single rear seat to the passenger cab seat, or a double made up by rolling the settee forward. There is usually plenty of room for luggage in the back, too.

Positives

Perfect for those who want to arrive, sit back, relax and simply watch the world – or at least the rest of the campsite – go by.

Negatives

Needing to put the beds together could prove rather frustrating: the arrangements here, as well as the limited amount of space, mean that it could be tricky to manoeuvre the cushions into position.



2 The side-settee floorplan often comes with one forward-facing seat as well



3 Arrive on site, open the door, then just sit back and watch the world go by

End kitchen/washroom

Campers fitted with an end kitchen, or even having the luxury of an end washroom, are becoming far more common these days. Here, everything is usually tucked behind two forward-facing travel seats or a large bench.

The end kitchen tends to be L-shaped, and there is often a hatchway out to the rear of the vehicle, so that you can easily serve anyone who is sitting at a table outside the 'van.

With this arrangement, the roof usually raises at the rear to give the chef a bit more headroom – although there is still the top rear of the base vehicle itself to contend with.

End washrooms can also often be accessed from both inside and outside the 'van. This is particularly useful if you tour with a dog, because when you come back from walkies, your muddy pet can be taken into the washroom to be hosed down, before being allowed inside your pristine living area.

Positives

This interior feels quite luxurious, mainly because of the amount of space it can provide. There's also usually plenty of room to prepare meals.

Negatives

You'll need to put the bed together each night, which can sometimes feel like a bit of a chore.



4 End kitchens tend to be L-shaped, often with a hatch so you can serve anyone sitting outside the 'van

KNOW HOW

CONVERTING YOUR OWN CAMPER

Converting a van is an ambition many of us would like to realise, and here we meet three couples who have turned their dreams into reality

European adventurers

In 2019, Keira and Richard Reid realised a long-held ambition to sell up, quit their jobs (marketing and forestry, respectively), buy themselves a motorhome and go touring in Europe. At the time, they were living in south-west Scotland with their children – Piper, aged three, and Jack, aged one – and dog Charlie.

“We knew we wanted to move out of the area,” says Keira. “And we thought, if we are going to be moving, why not do the trip now and then decide where we want to move to when we return?”

And that’s exactly what the family did. They bought a seven-berth Rimor Seal 9 and ended up spending five months working their way north to Norway and then all the way south to Gibraltar.

The 2016 Rimor had everything that they needed, including bunks at the back and an overcab bed at the front, and at 7m long, provided them with plenty of space – perfect for an extended trip to Europe.

“The bunk bed layout suited us to a tee,” says Keira. “We wanted the children to have their own space, so during the day we had their toy boxes at the end of their beds and it was a place for them to play, and then they could nap, and sleep there at night.”

Their route took them across to Calais by ferry, up to Belgium, then to Germany and Denmark, where they took a ferry to Sweden and then into Norway. They drove to Nordkapp, on Norway’s northern tip,



before travelling south through Finland, Sweden, Germany and Switzerland. They briefly visited Italy before returning to France, then headed into Spain and Gibraltar, before returning to the UK via France.

And what was their favourite part of the tour? “Norway – hands down,” says Keira. “Breathtaking scenery around every corner. Scandinavia made the trip for us – if we’d just gone south or to Germany, Italy and Spain, it wouldn’t have been the same.”

“I recommend anyone doing a similar trip not to overlook the Northern European countries. Germany’s Black Forest was also amazing, with really wonderful viewpoints and walks.”

The family returned to the UK feeling re-energised and with an enthusiasm for travel.

Norwegian Good!

Keira’s top three places in Norway

- Geirangerfjord fjord
- Steinsdalsfossen waterfall
- Trollstigen, part of the Norwegian Scenic Route – this drive through the mountains has around 10 hairpins, quite a challenge in a motorhome!



1 Richard and Keira bought a 2016 Citroën Relay, formerly used as a builder’s van...

2 ... and transformed it into a bespoke family-friendly campervan

3



4



5



"We learned to appreciate life and the time we have, and our surroundings, too. Before that trip, we weren't particularly interested in travel and experiencing new things," says Keira, "but doing the journey made us realise there's so much out there to enjoy."

On their return, the couple sold the Rimor. In 2020, they had another baby (Teddy), but their appetite for adventure was undiminished. A few months later, they took on their next project – converting a 2016 Citroën Relay into a campervan.

They stripped out the Relay, formerly a builder's van, and completely renovated it, which included adding a dining area that converts into a double bed, with bunk beds overhead that pull out at night and then fold back during the day.

The conversion now has family-friendly features, such as an integrated Monopoly board, which was made with resin and embedded into the table. There's a chalkboard on the outside, which folds down into

a children's table so they can sit outside the 'van, and a swing for Teddy just outside the door. The camper also has a kitchen with a fridge and a two-burner hob, a gas heater, water tanks and a Thetford toilet.

Keira says: "We were self-taught and Richard should take credit for most of the work. There's a wealth of knowledge available from YouTube and online – it was a very good lockdown project. But we were careful not to be too heavy on materials or overhead cupboards, so we could keep the weight safely down."

The family plans to get out in the 'van as much as possible, with plenty of weekend trips planned, rather than one long journey.

"The NC500 in Scotland is on our bucket list, and the Atlantic Way in Ireland looks incredible. This year, we're doing a Wainwright walking challenge, so we plan to do a mountain a month with the kids."

And Keira's essential advice for families who might be planning to go on similar adventures?

"Don't overthink or overcomplicate things – it's not that difficult to do and, while it's a good idea to carry out some research, you don't need to have a plan detailing everywhere you are going to visit and everything you aim to see. Just go with the flow."

■ You can find out more about the Reid family's adventures at touringwiththekids.com; Instagram: @touringwiththekids

3 Keira and Richard and children Piper, Teddy and Jack (l to r) on their travels

4 Converting the Citroën allowed the Reids to add clever design touches, such as a Monopoly board built into the table

5 The exterior décor really says it all!

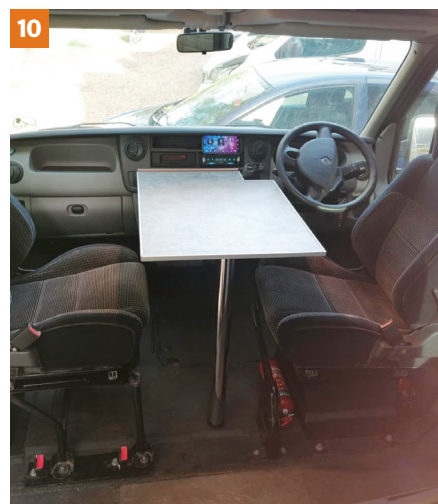
6 The 16-seater 2008 Renault Master minibuss is now a bespoke campervan

7 They adapted the original layout several times as the conversion work progressed

8 There's a garage underneath, where the heater and gas bottles are stored

9 Carl bought kitchen units that were 600mm wide, and modified them to fit the space

10 Turn the two captain's chairs for a cosy living room area



Building a bus

For Norfolk-based Jemma Baker and Carl Partridge, lockdown proved to be the perfect time to take on a van conversion project.

The pair jumped at the chance to buy a 16-seater 2008 Renault Master minibuss, which looked like an ideal candidate for conversion. Carl, who is a builder by trade, was keen to do the work himself.

Jemma says: "It's something that Carl had always wanted to do and he's pretty handy. We bought it in August 2021 and gave ourselves until March 2022 to get it done, but Mr 'I Can't Wait' spent every spare hour working on it and was done by Christmas."

Other than the front seats, the vehicle was empty when they bought it, so it needed to be completely fitted out. The couple designed the layout themselves, and that original design, which was largely in Carl's head, went through a number of incarnations as they debated where to position fixtures and fittings, and whether or not to include a shower or a toilet. Ultimately they elected to have both.

Carl says: "We put in a bed, shower, sink, cooking facilities and two captain's chairs, which rotate into the living room area. The 'van now has a diesel heater. We bought some suitable kitchen units that were 600mm wide, and I cut them down to 400mm and modified them to fit the space."

The couple's three cockapoos – Rosie and her two pups, Bella and Bertie – have their own area, along with seatbelts to keep them safe. There's a garage underneath, where the heater and gas bottles are

stored. Below the unit there's also a dog shower. The 'van has been customised for off-grid use with solar panels and on-board storage tanks.

"We've got a 100-litre water tank, and 200W solar panels on the roof, so we can stay off-grid," says Carl. "We can also charge off the battery and we can plug in on site. We can use on-site water, too."

For anyone thinking of taking on a similar project, Carl advises: "Make sure you get enough solar panels – one won't always be enough to charge the batteries. I'd suggest something between 200 and 300W."

While the finished vehicle is largely functional, Jemma freshened the interior with a smart yellow and grey colour scheme, and the final list of fittings includes a double bed, shower, sink, diesel heater, gas hob, fridge, dining area, TV, solar panels, water tank, storage, wardrobe, awning and toilet.

In the short- to medium-term, they hope to visit Somerset later in the year, and to take on the NC500 in Scotland at the end of June. Long-term, they are planning to buy a bigger vehicle and to semi-retire and travel – a horsebox is high on the shopping list!

And what would their advice be for any other prospective DIY campervan converters?

"Just do it," says Jemma. "Carl spent years wanting to – if you're in a position to do it, then do it! It's been amazing watching it all come together."

■ You can follow more of the couple's travels on Instagram, at [partbake_camper](#)

Time for a change

Back in 2018, when Essex-based Oli and Emily Arnold decided to take on a van conversion project so they could tour Europe, little did they know that they had started on a journey that would result in new careers and a brand-new business for both of them.

At the time, Oli had been looking at a change from his career in the military, and a friend who was taking on a similar project recommended a van conversion.

Emily says: "When he left the Forces, Oli had some resettlement time and in that time, he built us a 'van. We took it through France and Italy and back through Switzerland, and it was amazing. We realised there was this whole world of people travelling and living in 'vans that we had no idea about – and it opened up a freedom we weren't aware of before."

Highlights included a stay at Lake Como, in Italy. "There was a piece of land that was like a spit, jutting out into the lake, where we parked for the night with water on both sides – it was amazing."

The vehicle in question was a Citroën Relay, which they converted and named Archie. Having already taken some courses in construction and electrics on leaving the military, Oli fitted out the 'van with a solar panel, a shower room, heating, hot water, an oven, a fixed bed and a large garage below.

"Oli really enjoyed the project side of it," says Emily. "And while we were travelling, we decided to set up an Instagram account and started posting about what we were doing and where we were going."

Those posts ultimately led to the genesis of the couple's new business venture, because they were approached to do van conversions for other people. Initially, this was for a distant friend of Oli's family,

and then they received an approach directly through Instagram. Emily left her career in medicine to join Oli in the business and the couple started Vanlife Conversions in July 2019.

The company specialises in creating premium contemporary van conversions. The business also offers vans for hire. Oli is responsible for the builds, while Emily liaises with customers and heads up the marketing, admin and business operations.

Emily says: "We specialise in three types of van – Citroën Relay, Peugeot Boxer and Fiat Ducato: large panel vans that we turn into large campervans. They are high-spec, off-grid, and all with showers, hot water boilers and solar panels."

Plans are for the business to grow and they hope to double the number of conversions they carry out in a year, from 12 to 24. Each conversion takes about three months and has handmade, bespoke features. Customers can select their layout and have a choice of wood finishes and colour schemes.

And what does the future hold for the couple? "A few of our customers are planning to ship their 'vans to America, and I'd love to do that one day," says Emily. "Unfortunately, we don't have a 'van ourselves at the moment – all our effort has gone into customer vehicles – but we do have some festivals planned. We feel lucky to be part of the #vanlife community – people want to help each other, there's so much information out there and a lot of festivals – it's nice to be part of a group of likeminded people."

■ You can learn more about Vanlife Conversions by visiting vanlifeconversions.co.uk



Safety first

If you're considering converting your own camper, you should research your options carefully, to ensure that you remain within safety guidelines and legislation. All gas and major electrical work must be carried out by a competent, qualified engineer. If you're in any doubt, seek professional advice before proceeding.

11 The shower room is one of the many upmarket features of Vanlife floorplans

12 In a campervan, you can get as close to the natural world as you could wish

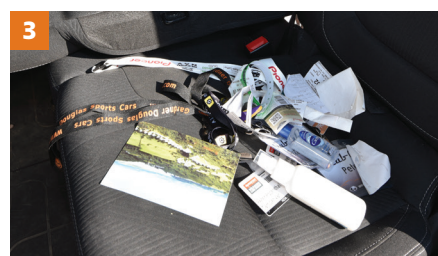
13 A fixed bed with a large garage below is a key part of the van conversion

14 The kitchens are cleverly designed to make the most of the space available

EXPERIENCE

LESS IS MORE LIVING IN A CAMPERVAN

Life in a camper is all about making clever use of the space and rationalising your kit. Peter Rosenthal outlines the art of living it small



There comes a time in every motorcaravanner's life when packing your vehicle for a weekend away becomes a chore, making you wonder why you do it. This happened to me with my previous five-berth coachbuilt. It was huge, with a vast garage that could be (safely) crammed full of all sorts of kit to cover every possible eventuality.

Years of visiting motorhome shows and filling it with the latest gadgets and 'must-have' devices meant that, despite sticking to the payload, it was simply bulging at the seams. The trouble was that after a couple of years of carting everything including the kitchen sink (and a spare one, just in case), I had begun to question why I needed so much stuff.

Keeping up with the packing and unpacking, and maintenance of the many items in the 'van, became a major task. Time for a rethink.

Swapping to a much smaller campervan was the turning point, and thinning down my touring kit to the bare necessities proved positively cathartic.

Now, only the absolutely essential touring items are carried. Many are prepacked and always remain in the vehicle, making setting off for an impromptu weekend away a fast and stress-free affair. Quite simply, it transformed my touring life, making it so much easier and even more enjoyable. So what are the top tips for successful living in a small camper?

Unpack and repack

The first task is to take stock of everything you have. Pick a dry, sunny day, then remove all of your kit and place it in bundles on the ground. This is something you want to do every year as part of your general

campervan spring clean. Although at first glance, it might seem rather a lot of faffing about, it really is a worthwhile task to see all of your camping gear laid out in front of you.

You'll immediately see duplicates, out-of-date foodstuffs and obscure kitchen gadgets that you don't even remember buying, let alone using.

A great rule of thumb is that if you haven't used an item for more than a year, you should donate it to a charity shop or leave it at home. It really has no business being in your campervan.

Seeing all of your kit laid out in one go also gives you a good sense of volume and allows you to think about which items are essential and which are merely nice to have. But if something isn't going to add to your holiday experience, why is it there?



1 Laying out your kit beside your camper shows you just how much you carry

2 Folding tables and chairs could prove to be essential

3 The junk you find when clearing out!

4 Most cabs have plenty of clever storage areas, so pick your kit to fit



Organised containers

If you're a fan of spreadsheets and geometry, you'll love getting your touring kit organised in containers. A selection of boxes is essential to keep your stuff together in one place and stop it sliding around while you're in transit. It also prevents smaller items from falling into crevices or jamming up tambour doors.

There are lots of containers on the market – The Range (www.therange.co.uk) is one of many good sources – and you can find them sized to fit every compartment in your vehicle.

You don't need to buy new, though: you could upcycle plastic food storage containers, washing pod boxes, takeaway packaging or any other plastic boxes. Clear containers work best, however, because you can see their contents at a glance.

For frequently accessed items, it's better to go for trays, or simply leave the lid off the box – it can be a bit annoying to have to remove the whole box and lid to reach into it. It also means you'll need two hands to get your stuff, which isn't always convenient.

Another tip is to use non-slip matting on all shelves to keep your kit in place and reduce rattles – you can buy a roll large enough for all of a small side-kitchen campervan for under a tenner online.

Things that fold up

If you're just starting out in a small camper, it's worth considering the bulk of every item you pack. While there are lots of space-saving devices out there, not all are worth carrying and some can be irritating.

For me, the latter includes compact folding barbecues – having to spend ages building a device before you can cook on it when you're hungry is a pain, and then you have to get rid of the coals, clean it and pack it away

each time you use it. A rigid barbecue will be much easier to clean and is well worth the space sacrifice.

However, fold-up kitchen pots and pans are brilliant in campervans. I've had a folding kettle for years and this has been joined by a similar pan and washing-up bowl. I also prefer them to all-metal pans because you're less likely to burn yourself.

It's a very good idea to choose items to fit specific cupboards, too, so in the case of my mug cupboard, it holds four mugs, each of which houses a glass for maximum space saving. The mugs themselves are all sized to fit neatly under the coffee machine. Anything that doesn't fit into a cupboard needs to be swapped for a different-sized item, or replaced.

One of the best tips for space saving is to switch to microfibre towels, rather than the oversized fluffy things you use at home. Massive bath towels steal lots of cupboard space and when damp, take an age to dry out properly. Microfibre towels take up a fraction of ➔

5 This Thule pocket storage system, sold as a shoe rack, hangs off the seat headrest and is really handy

6 Every cupboard was overflowing before the clearout

7 Storage trays are a good way to keep your gear together

8 Check the dates on all foodstuffs you keep in the camper

9 An easy-to-clean diesel hob/heater, such as this Wallas XC Duo, means no need for a gas locker



10 Dedicated cupboards for frequently used items like mugs and glasses make good use of space

11 As well as a Ring RAC900 compressor and a 1/2-inch socket set, smaller tool sets are ideal for fixing habitation kit

12 Collapsible items, such as this Outwell kettle, are ideal for campervan lockers

13 Trial sachets and miniatures are great for small spaces

14 After clearing out clutter and old stuff, there's loads more storage and it's easy to find things, too



the space and dry rapidly – drape them over a door wing mirror on a sunny day and they'll be dry in under an hour. You do have to adopt a slightly different drying technique in the shower – they're more like a chamois leather for wet skin – but once you get used to them, they really do work brilliantly.

Doubling up

Certain items, such as towels and toiletry bags, and some clothing, such as hats, gloves and coats, are worth duplicating and keeping permanently in your campervan. Shampoo, shower gel and toothpaste are not expensive and having two sets saves time when you are packing and unpacking.

Travel-size toiletries work really well in compact campervans. You can adopt the same plan for clothes cleaning, too, with sample and trial sizes of laundry soap and softener taking up minimal space.

Some people will pack an entire duplicate wardrobe in their vehicle and this can be a good idea, especially if you work during the week and want to make the most of your precious weekend. It's one less thing to think about and saves time.

Tools to pack

The same goes for toolkits. It's well worth packing either a small set of essential tools (Lidl and Aldi do some cracking compact sets that are ideal), together with a selection of common consumables, such as fuses, electrical tape, self-amalgamating tape (for sealing leaks in plumbing or coolant hoses), gaffer tape and a range of cable ties.

Modern campervans are pretty reliable and it's rare that you need to fix the base vehicle (and that's what breakdown cover is for), so I tend to focus the toolkit



on fixing the habitation equipment. Things like loose hinges, blown fuses and misbehaving water pumps are the most common things you'll have to tackle.

For larger tasks, borrow tools from your campsite neighbours – there is always someone on the site with far more tools than you!

Reassess your kit annually

With everything laid out on the ground, it's very easy to identify the less-used items in your campervan (typically, it's the stuff at the back...).

In our case, three inflatable settees were the least used things. These are quite difficult to inflate because you have to run around like a loon trying to get them to billow with air and then rapidly fold up the ends. They also blow away when it's windy.

For these reasons, they've only been used a handful of times. But on the plus side, they don't take up a lot of room, so they have a stay of execution – for now.



15 New from this year's NEC show is this clever shower and bucket system from Colapz, which includes a rinse-off head – perfect for cleaning muddy dogs or mountain bikes!

16 Before the spring clean, the rear of the camper was looking a little crowded...

17 ... but with a bit of a reshuffle, a great deal more space has been freed up

18 These elasticated pouches are perfect for attaching to rear doors and fit simply with self-tappers

19 Microfibre towels are another top tip – the one on the left is as large as the domestic towel, but takes up minimal storage space

Removing all of your kit is also a good time to spring clean the vehicle and create more space, by binning accumulated rubbish, checking foodstuff sell-by dates and then repacking in a more organised way.

Tony Robinson and his Time Team would have had a field day excavating the strata of parking tickets that had built up in our driver's side door pocket!

Bulk versus luxury

Some of the items that are taken away on tour come down to personal preferences. For example, the two luxuries in our campervan are our Duvalay mattress/bedding sets, and the Nespresso coffee machine.

The Duvalays are easily the two largest things in our 'van and they do take up lots of boot space. Although a sleeping bag is more space-efficient, we much prefer the Duvalays, because they are more like a domestic bedding set and are really comfortable to sleep on. So for us, they are an essential luxury.

Equally, we're caffeine addicts and having a proper fresh coffee from the Nespresso machine is a treat. Although the pods and the machine itself only take up minimal space, the NDS 1500W inverter needed to run it is rather bulky. But being able to enjoy freshly brewed coffee at any location is just brilliant.

Summary

Buying yet more stuff is not the answer to kitting out your campervan. Packing the minimum amount of carefully selected items really is the key.

There's an advert on TV at the moment, featuring Ewan McGregor, which ends with the line: "Do you think any of us will look back on life and regret the things we didn't buy? Or the places we didn't go?"

This is the whole point of campervan living. Don't worry if you don't have the 'correct' kit right now – you can always refine it as you go along – just get out there and start enjoying the world! ■

GADGETS

CAMPERVAN ACCESSORIES

Make the most of your tours and your camper's space with these great accessories, says Jo Davies



Sitting comfortably

You can rest easy in Vango's Osiris chair, especially because it's made from 100% recycled plastic. With the bonus of a handy insulated cup holder, this chair is durable, compact and comfortable.

Price £34.95 **Web** www.towsure.com



Staying hydrated

Finding the right water bottle can be a bit daunting, but this nifty 500ml flask from Ocean Bottle is a great choice. Vacuum insulated, it keeps your water cold and your tea hot, and the double opening means the lid can be used as a cup.

Price £35 **Web** oceanbottle.co



Cleaning windows

Eager to get away in the morning but don't want to wait for your windows to demist?

Get on the road quickly with this small but powerful window vacuum from Titan, which operates for 30 minutes per charge.

Price £34.99 **Web** www.screwfix.com



Waterproofing your phone

If you're using a mobile to map your rambles, this handy waterproof pouch will keep your device safe in a shower, while still allowing you to snap a picture – or track down the nearest café to take shelter in!

Price £8.99 **Web** www.decathlon.co.uk



Banishing muddy boots

After a challenging hike, avoid treading the mud into your 'van with the thoughtfully designed Boot Buddy. This double-ended tool provides a brush, scraper and water flow to help tackle the most stubborn dirt.

Price £18.99 **Web** www.amazon.co.uk



Keeping your hands warm

Add luxury to your walk with OCOOPA's neat handwarmers. Just pop them in your pockets or gloves and say goodbye to frozen fingers.

With three settings, they also double as a power bank for your mobile phone.

Price £21.99 **Web** www.amazon.co.uk



Multitasking firepit and barbecue

Put your feet up by this portable, multi-use firepit. Measuring 28.6 x 27.8cm, Wolf Grizzly's model uses wood or charcoal and functions as both grill and campfire. Perfect for a chilly night, it is purpose-built for a long-lasting burn.

Price £79.95 **Web** www.amazon.co.uk



Chopping up the fruit and veg

Nothing beats a hot meal after a long day outside! But tired cooks can speed things up by letting this neat food slicer do the hard work. It comes with three different blade designs for fruit and veg and features a non-slip base.

Price £16.99 **Web** www.amazon.co.uk



Camping kitchen kit

Ideal for compact camper kitchens, this smart little bag contains all the tools you need – tongs, a spatula, serving spoon, bottle opener, scissors, knife, peeler and even a cutting board.

Price £29.99 **Web** www.amazon.co.uk