

weekend away | auto campers day van classic



back to basics



Auto Campers now offer a full-size van-based conversion for under £25,000. Is this clever packaging or an exercise in austerity? We find out

VAN converters have seemingly been locked in a battle for years to see who can stuff the most equipment into the popular base vehicles. The problem with all this equipment is that it takes up space, adds weight and increases the price.

There's a yawning gap in the market between one of these full-house conversions and an MPV. While a handful of manufacturers have offered a middle way fitted with less equipment, they've failed to adjust the price far enough downwards. That is until new manufacturer Auto Campers arrived with their Day Van – and a £24,995 on-the-road price.

If the term 'day van' instantly makes you think of plush velour interiors and a huge V8 engine tucked beneath a Chevrolet badge, fear not – the Auto Campers' Day Van is based on a 2.2-litre diesel Ford Transit. And if you want velour you'll have to wear your own. The Day Van is actually much better equipped than the majority of its American namesakes. It has a crash-tested RIB double seat/bed, a fridge, double hob, sink and an integrated wardrobe/storage unit at the back of the vehicle.

We'll take a better look at the interior later on, for now it's into the driver's seat to see how the Day Van deals with travelling. On lower-priced camper conversions it's often the base vehicle that bears the brunt of the cost-cutting, and, true to form, this vehicle features Ford's basic spec 85bhp Euro IV engine with a five-speed gearbox. The simple equipment levels have evidently kept the weight of the whole vehicle down because the Transit feels remarkably lively from a standing start and is happy to cruise on the motorway at 70mph. Tightly-spaced gearing keeps the engine on the boil and makes the most of that seemingly meagre power output.

The Euro V engines that are now being fitted to Transits kick off with 100bhp as standard and have an extra 44lb ft of torque over the Euro IV units. Even more



the day van has been designed to provide basic equipment for trips out and the occasional overnight stay

impressive is that maximum torque will come in at just 1300rpm. Combined with the new six-speed gearbox, you may not need more than the base 100bhp package to make your Day Van fly along. If you do, Euro V engines are available in 125bhp and 140bhp versions on the Auto Campers' options list.

Engine choices aside, the Transit is a great vehicle to drive, it's still a van in size and shape, but for driver comfort, visibility and manoeuvrability it has more in common with a big estate car. The Day Van looks good, too. It's understated enough not to shout 'expensive leisure equipment inside, please steal' but plenty smart enough with its striping, subtle

decals and privacy glass not to require a 'no tools left inside this van' sticker.

That same mix of understatement and smart touches is true of the interior of the Day Van. The RIB seat/bed is covered in a fabric that rebels against the world of chintz found in many a conversion and matches in neatly with the driver and passenger seat covers. For those still in need of a touch of bling, the main LED lights can be quickly switched from bright white to relaxing blue. The heart of the conversion is a one-piece polypropylene unit - no wood here! - that is fitted down the offside, starting just behind the driver's seat and finishing pretty much flush with the line of the Transit's rear 'barn' doors. It's a relatively narrow unit



FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £24,995

PRICE AS TESTED
£26,081

OPTIONS FITTED TO THIS VEHICLE Awning (£594), Dometic toilet (£102), Thule pocket storage organiser (£30), Waeco 35-litre fridge (£360)

BERTHS 2

TRAVEL SEATS (INC DRIVER) 4

DIMENSIONS 4.86m L, 1.97m W, 1.99m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT 1.40m

MAXIMUM WEIGHT
2600kg

PAYLOAD 600kg

BEDS 1.93m x 0.92m/
1.30m

FRESH WATER 28 litres
(under kitchen unit)

WASTE WATER 28 litres
(under kitchen unit)

LEISURE BATTERY
90Ah

MAINS SOCKETS None

BASE VEHICLE

FORD TRANSIT SWB

ENGINE 2.2TDCi 85bhp
Euro IV (2.2TDCi 100bhp
Euro V in future)

MPG 31.0

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING Diesel-powered two-ring hob

FRIDGE Waeco 35-litre compressor fridge

HEATING Webasto Airtop blown-air diesel heating available (£960 option)

and in conjunction with the two-seat RIB bench allows for a wide corridor for easy movement round the vehicle. The rigidity of this construction was obvious on the road; there wasn't a squeak or rattle to be heard and the tough grained finish is clearly going to be very hard wearing.

The front end of the unit contains a diesel-powered ceramic double hob with usable workspace to the left and a sink with cover creating additional workspace to the right. The benefit of a diesel-powered hob is that you don't need to carry a gas cylinder, and, as long as you have diesel in the tank, you can use the hob. Time to put the kettle on. For those used to gas hobs, the diesel-powered variety is a lot slower to heat up; it takes 10 minutes to get the plate to temperature and then a further five minutes to boil a full kettle. Boiling pans of water for pasta takes ages, but regular fry-ups and heating pre-cooked food is fine on the ceramic hob. This type of hob does take a long time to cool down after work too, so you need to have your wits about you after cooking, particularly if there are kids in the vicinity.

Below the hob is a slide-out fridge hidden behind a concertina-type door. As standard the Day Van has a 14-litre capacity fridge, but this test model has a 35-litre unit fitted as a £360 option, providing plenty of cool food and beer space for two. The fridge can

parked in the country



What had been planned as a visit to Wellington Country Park turned into an overnight stay when I discovered that the 350-acre park also includes a large campsite. The site itself nestles deep in the woods well away from the visitor centre and main car parking area. Campers get a key to a security gate at the top of the road to the site and this is kept locked permanently to keep the area secure.

The site has 87 pitches on a mix of hardstandings and grass with electric hook-up available on 34 of the pitches. The campsite can take motorhomes up to 8m in length and features a clean, centrally-positioned

washroom and an on-site warden. Non-electric pitches start from £15.50 a night and electric pitches start at £17 a night.

Those staying on the campsite get free access to the rest of the park, which features a 35-acre lake, four well-marked nature trails (designed for every level of walking ability) and a vast array of activities for children.

The park is also home to herds of red and fallow deer. For most of the year visitors can get to see these creatures up close. But access is restricted in October when the red deer stags are in the rut – few things are likely to spoil a day in the country more than an encounter with a well-aimed set of antlers.

Wellington Country Park
Odiham Road, Riseley, Reading RG7 1SP
0118 932 6444
www.wellington-country-park.co.uk



be pulled out into the living area, and, with the offside sliding door open, it can be slid into the open air. This facility makes it ideal for picnics and for stocking up with cold food before your trip. With the sliding door open there's also access to the water tank filler and clear space to use the hob from the outside should you wish – good thinking Auto Campers.

Dedicated storage in the kitchen area is limited to a small drawer at the far end of the unit, and a deep double shelf unit behind a concertina door above the sink. You'll need to pack light or resort to stacking tins and utensils in the storage cubbies below the RIB seat/bed.

Storage is less of an issue in the rear section of the unit that is covered with a pair of smooth-sliding concertina doors. The upper section includes a wardrobe and shelving area that would shame some coachbuilts. Below the wardrobe there's a dedicated space for a portable loo and a deep, wide storage area ideal for storing loose camping gear. There's even more



storage for bulkier equipment behind the RIB seat/bed. From this position it is easy to appreciate just how much space there is left inside a Transit conversion that's not replete with the usual motorhome 'extras'. On the subject of extras, Auto Campers do offer a lengthy options list including everything from swivelling seats to a reversing camera and almost every motorhome addition you can imagine in between. Pretty much all of the options can be retro-fitted, allowing buyers to up-spec as funds allow.

If you already have a twin-sliding door Transit (post 2000), you can have the entire Day Van package retro-fitted to it. This costs £9995. For existing Transit owners or those who can buy a keenly-priced base vehicle, this conversion option looks like good value, particularly when you take into account the rock-hard residual value that a professional conversion brings to a van.

Headroom is limited inside the Day Van, with just 1.40m from floor to fixed roof. That's between six and 8cm more than most

FOR

- LOW PRICE
- QUALITY OF CONSTRUCTION
- CONVERSION CAN BE CARRIED OUT ON USED BASE VEHICLE
- UNDERSTATED STYLE
- EXTERNAL ACCESS TO COOKER AND FRIDGE
- EXTRAS CAN BE RETRO-FITTED
- NO GAS REQUIRED

AGAINST

- WOBBLY BED EXTENSIONS
- HOB SLOW TO WARM UP AND COOL DOWN
- FRIDGE ONLY ACCESSIBLE FROM OUTSIDE WITH BED MADE UP
- LIMITED KITCHEN STORAGE
- NO STANDING ROOM

RIVALS

- G&P MAXI-TOUR
- REIMO CITYVAN





go with the flow



After the shade of the woods, the tropical temperatures in and out of the water at Coral Reef are most welcome. Whether you're travelling with children or grandchildren or just fancy a dip by yourself, Coral Reef can offer a full day's entertainment. The adventurous can ride the three serpentine flumes, run the gauntlet of the water cannon or shoot the Wild Water Rapids.

Smaller children will enjoy the calm shallows of the Little Corals pool, and the Blue Lagoon Lounger offers a more relaxing spot. A neat feature of Coral Reef is its Beach Café that offers snacks and drinks at poolside. For those in need of more substantial grub, the Coconut Grove restaurant is upstairs – you'll need to towel off and put on some dry clothes first, however.

Entry to Coral Reef is £7.55 per adult, under 16s are £5.25 and children under 4 get in free. If you want to indulge yourself a bit more, £10.80 buys entry into the pools and Sauna World. This area features a Japanese steam room, a Finnish sauna, a spa pool and the refreshing experience of the Cool Pool.

Coral Reef Waterworld, Nine Mile Ride, Bracknell, Berkshire, RG12 7JQ (01344 862525 www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/be)



Volkswagen T5 conversions offer, but most of these include a lift-up roof, of course, to give you full standing room when parked. You can opt for Auto Campers' Leisure Van spec that uses a medium-roof Transit and adds another 30cm to the headroom for £750. Or you could just take the Day Van at its name and use it as a base for outdoor pursuits in warmer weather – with its inside/outside kitchen the vehicle is ideal for this. Auto Campers do not plan to offer any form of rising roof.

As I've already mentioned, the Day Van can become a 'night van' with its double RIB seat/bed. This slides and folds out in the efficient manner you'd expect from this quality manufacturer to form a bed 0.92m wide by 1.93m long. As with many travelling seats that double as beds it makes a firm but comfortable place to sleep. The bed's width can be extended to 1.30m by

QUALITY COUNTS



This is a top-quality conversion. The use of rigid polypropylene for the one-piece main unit ensures there are no rattles.

And the fit, finish and pure attention-to-detail found throughout the Auto Campers' Day Van are on a par with conversions costing twice as much. Rival manufacturers take note.

fitting a pair of cushions on top of table legs that slide into sockets. And, yes, that arrangement is every bit as precarious as it sounds with the extensions having a tendency to tip and topple if pressure is applied at the wrong point. Best to stick with the RIB bed minus extensions and snuggle up, we reckon. With the bed in position, access in and out of the camper – unless you want to clamber over the bed through the nearside sliding door – is by the rear doors only. And if you want something from the fridge you'll have to access it from the outside! Although, this last point actually puts the Day Van ahead of a few van conversions whose fridges become completely out of reach at bedtime.

With its simple spec and low price tag, the Auto Campers' Day Van Classic is inevitably going to be described by some as 'entry-level'. This is the catch-all tag given to anything that sits at the bottom of the price bracket for a given sector. But the thing is the Day Van doesn't attempt to be an all 'bells and whistles' van conversion, or a low-rent imitation of one with shoddy materials and poor finish. The Day Van has been designed to provide basic levels of equipment for trips out and the occasional overnight stay. It does this superbly. This vehicle is actually defining a sector, rather than being part of one.

WHICH motorhome says ★★★★★

Well-built, well-packaged, well-priced. This is a sector-defining camper that's part-day-van, part-MPV.

