

BILBO'S NEXA



MURVI MALLARD



DIFFERENT STROKES

Two takes on the new Euro 5 compliant VW T5: long wheelbase panel van conversions from two respected British converters

Words by Di Johnson, pictures by Pete Johnson



Campervans have always had a romantic appeal for the adventurous, and for many good reasons. They bridge the gap between the 'roughing it' ethos of sleeping under canvas and the 'downright softy' motorhome. The, 'I must have everything including a domestic-sized oven

and ironing board' approach of larger motorhomes isn't for everyone. VW campers entice the in-betweenies with a bit of conscience salving. 'We'd really like to be living under canvas,' they say to themselves, 'but there's my back trouble, dodgy hip, cronky knee...'

I understand this. It eases things for those too embarrassed to own up to possessing a 'motorhome' by being able to call it a campervan. So that's all right then. Friends of mine bought a motorhome far larger than was necessary for the two of them - the idea being to lend it to their daughter and family. Isn't that nice? However, daughter said, 'oh no! We're too young to be seen driving a motorhome, we'd rather have a camper and a tent.' What can you do with them? Ungrateful wretches.



But they do have a point. There's something intrepid about campervans, they're not heading for the nearest campsite are they? No, they must be heading for the Spice Trail or Timbuktu at the very least. Clearly, 99 per cent of them are probably heading straight for Tesco - Margate or Newquay, maybe - but that's missing the point. Anyway, enough of



MOTIVE POWER

I've always loved driving VW T5-based motorhomes. They are my favourites and at this size, difficult to beat. Though the VW base adds to the final bill, it's indisputable that they are the most car-like in performance.

How could you improve on such a good-tempered vehicle? Well, the old version was good, but the facelifted one's better. Both our test vehicles are fitted with the 2.0-litre, 140PS (138bhp) Euro 5 compliant engine (all motors are now 2.0-litre, with different output options). The photographer and I agreed that performance is now more refined, quieter, crisper and altogether slicker than the old model.

Standard equipment now includes Hill-Hold Assist. I'm sure regulars know what this is however, for those new to these clever devices, it's an automatic mechanism which, on hills, holds the brakes on for three seconds after you remove your foot from the pedal. This trick allows you to dispense with the handbrake when pulling away on inclines: good eh?

There's also an uprated ESP (electronic stability program) and an emergency brake light function, which flashes the brake lights when braking hard. A boast is that there is also a ten per cent reduction in fuel consumption, but as we headed for narrow, rough lanes to try to find a quiet spot to test the VWs, it wasn't a fair test.



Both vehicles had all the usual goodies, including two armrests for the front seats - plus some additional ones, such as (useful) parking sensors. The information was displayed on the larger-than-average screen of the radio/CD player, which gave a clear visual representation of the space behind. On the tested Mallard there was, in addition, information displayed for the front of the vehicle. There's not a huge difference in the new VeeDub's facelifted external appearance: one less bar on the radiator grille, rearranged light clusters and a more aerodynamic design of wing mirror. Inside, the dash has had a subtle redesign. That's just about the total of the visible changes, which give the van's in-and-out visage a sharper look. The Nexa was

this, lets get down to business.

If you're going to test campervans let's make it some of the best, and here we've laid out, for your delight, two high-end, stretched (long wheelbase) Volkswagen T5-based 'vans that are produced by a couple of British manufacturers, both of whom have my admiration. While our test 'vans are two quite different animals they can both be described as campers, though the Bilbo's, with its rising roof, is a more faithful representation and can sneak beneath height-barriers and into garages. The Murvi is a high top, which provides way more storage and a more traditional layout, but you'll have to forgo height-barred car parks.

Murvi and Bilbo's both offer a choice of rising roofs or high tops on the VW base, and both have years of producing market-leading van conversions. So this was a test that I relished tackling. 'Let's at em.'

1 Subtly facelifted cab looks good - here enhanced with leather covered wheel and gear knob
2 The radio screen provides a visual display of parking sensor function

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3 Nexa's rising roof makes for a versatile vehicle
4 Kitchen and storage are located aft, served by a central aisle
5 The lounge makes the most of four single seats - all with three-point belts
6 Nexa's table can also be used outside

decked out in fetching Fresco Green, while the Mallard was a bright, scintillating Reflex Silver. Neither colour displayed road grime as much as darker shades might do.

ON THE ROAD

Both conversions only suffered from those rattles caused by our rushed packing: after stopping and doing the job properly they were equally quiet. Volkswagen has, it seems, aimed for a flatter torque curve to give smoother and more progressive power delivery. If you're used to taking short cuts up through the gears - here, you'll find you need to use them all (well you've paid for 'em), as there's quite a high second gear. I found the gear-stick was a tad stiff and hard in the hand - quiet at the back - but I suppose it might 'un-stiffen' after use. I liked the positive steering, which also made three-point turns a doddle. We both found the driving position to be comfortable (he tall, me at a more modest altitude), with good visibility.

The suspension is impressive, with no hint of harshness over speed bumps or rough roads, and there's only a very gentle sway disturbing passengers during cornering. This design has been refined over the years until it really is an excellent, almost car-like driving experience for those discerning folk that also want a campervan.

LOUNGE AND DINE

On entering the Bilbo's Nexa, the first thing that has to be attended to is raising the roof. I easily launched the (offside-hinged) roof, as it's simply a matter of releasing two straps and then gas struts perform the job for you. Bringing it down proved more difficult. I was flattered to find I didn't have the weight to get it started. I'd find a way if I had to, but it was easier to call in the heavy gang. Once it was initiated on its downward trip it was an easy matter to tuck the fabric away tidily and secure it. With the high top Murvi no such preparation was necessary, but don't forget there's that height barrier issue.

The two single-bed equipped Nexa has a lounge/dinette created by swivelling the cab seats to face two forward-facing (RIB) rear seats, either side of a central walkway. The rest of the facilities are in the rear - kitchen on the nearside, with storage and fridge opposite. The Mallard layout is more conventional, with a classic camper style interior. Front seats swivel, and the facilities are ranged along the offside, with a forward-facing rear bench seat across the

BILBO'S NEXA

I LIKED

- Ability to beat most height barriers
- Excellent dual-use vehicle
- Table that can be used outside
- Small bedtime cubbyhole for the offside bed
- Ease of bed construction
- Insulated wastewater tank

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Separate sink and hob unit
- More storage space

I DISLIKED

- Hard, car-style upholstery
- Difficulty starting the roof lowering process

MURVI MALLARD

I LIKED

- The vast amount of storage space
- Colour and feel of upholstery
- Separate sink-drainer and hob
- Plenty of well-placed LED lighting
- The bench seat's ability to move forward and back
- Two pillow-shaped cushions

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Insulated wastewater tank
- A dual-use table

I DISLIKED

- Not being able to reach the Heki roof light's handle

'van. This converts to a longitudinal double bed - again, utilizing a RIB bed mechanism.

One of the reasons we've always opted for van conversions rather than coachbuilds is that lovely sliding door. It enables you to believe that you're still in the great outdoors while actually being protected and cosy inside. The Mallard exploits this opening with an unobstructed doorway while the Nexa has one of its rear seats partially blocking it.

Decor in the Nexa was a bit austere, with two-tone grey, zigzag patterned front seats being replicated for the rear seating. Very hardwearing I'm sure. The Mallard had cornflower/heather-coloured faux suede fabric, which sounds dire, but looked very welcoming and cosy on a grey day.

Cabinetwork in both majored on grey, rather than imitation wood, which worked well. As expected they were both solidly made and well thought out. I'd have expected nothing less from these two top-flight converters.

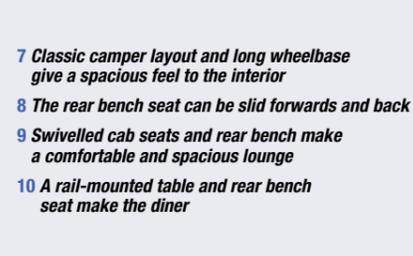
The Nexa's four single seats - facing inwards - provide a good lounging space. To get feet-up relaxing simply sit in the front seats and utilize the bed mechanisms of the rear single seats. This somewhat blocks your exit through the sliding door, but you can still escape through the rear where, however, there's a big step down. You also still have access to the kitchen, either side of the central aisle.

In the Mallard's lounge you're a bit further apart, though this can be varied as the rear bench seat can be slid forward and back according to need. You can seat four, with two on the rear bench and a further two on the swivelled front seats. Feet-up can also be achieved in this vehicle, as in the Nexa, by bringing the RIB bed mechanism into play, and there's access to the side kitchen to make yourself a cuppa.

Dining is similar in both vehicles, but not the same. In both models there's a strong, but lightweight, rail-hung table with single folding leg. In the Nexa it's the driver's seat and the offside rear seat that become a dinette for two. There's a section of table-rail on the base of the nearside seat, just inside the sliding door, allowing alfresco dining. A neat idea, as no picnic table need be carried.

The Mallard provides dining from the rear bench seat. Both tables can be slid forward and aft for more flexibility, but in the Mallard the rail is fitted the entire length of the kitchen unit, offering a supplementary food preparation surface.

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7 Classic camper layout and long wheelbase give a spacious feel to the interior
8 The rear bench seat can be slid forwards and back
9 Swivelled cab seats and rear bench make a comfortable and spacious lounge
10 A rail-mounted table and rear bench seat make the diner



BILBO'S NEXA

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HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

BILBO'S NEXA

PRICE (with VAT at 17.5 per cent)

- From: £37,090 OTR
- As tested: £44,070 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)

- Berths: 2
- Three-point belted seats: 4
- Warranty: Base vehicle 3 years, conversion 2 years, 12 years anti-perforation
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: Yes
- Construction: Steel body with sliding door and top-hinged rear tailgate. Side-hinged Low-lie rising roof
- Length: 5.29m (17ft 4.5in)*
- Width: 2.04m (6ft 8.5in)* (mirrors folded)
- Height: 2.00m (6ft 6.5in)*
- Wheelbase: 3.40m (11ft 2in)*
- Rear overhang: 996mm (3ft 3in)
- Gross vehicle weight: 3200kg*
- Payload: 600kg (after deductions for weight of driver and essential habitation equipment)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Volkswagen T5 LWB window van
- Engine: 2.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 138bhp
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round, with ABS, ASR, ESP, EDL, Hill-Hold Control
- Suspension: Independent all round on coil springs with telescopic shock absorbers and anti-roll bars
- Features: Flashing stop lights during emergency braking, day running lights, electric folding and heated mirrors, dual airbags, trip computer, rear parking sensors, remote central locking with deadlocks, VW alarm system, radio/CD player with MP3 input, colour-coded bumpers, privacy glass, factory-fitted sliding side windows

INSIDE

- Layout: Swivelling cab seats ahead of two forward-facing seats, kitchen and storage in rear, all either side of central aisle
- Insulation: Floor, walls, roof 15mm
- Interior height: Roof lowered 1.50m (4ft 11in), roof raised 2.16m (7ft 1in) max

KITCHEN

- Sink/hob: Inset Smev stainless unit, fold-down mixer tap, combined with three-burner hob. No spark ignition
- Cooker: As above, plus Smev gas grill/warming oven with spark ignition

E&OE

FRIDGE: Waeco Coolmatic compressor-type with freezer compartment. Capacity 50 litres

WASHROOM

- No washroom
- Toilet: Thetford Porta Potti 465 stored in dedicated locker

BEDS

- Lounge singles
- Lengths: 1.86m (6ft 1in)
- Widths: 600mm (1ft 11.5in)

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water tank: Inboard, 36 litres (8 gallons)
- Waste water tank: Underslung, 35 litres (7.7 gallons)
- Water heater: None fitted
- Space heater: Webasto Airtop 2000 diesel-fired with blown-air
- Leisure battery: 135 amp hr
- Gas: 2 x Campingaz 2.72kg cylinders or 1 x 3.9kg cylinder
- Lighting: Two fluorescent strips above kitchen worktop and table position. Two halogen bendy-stalk reading lamps on cab B-pillars
- Sockets: 230V 2 (in kitchen). 12V: 1 (in kitchen)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: 140PS engine upgrade (£1400), long wheelbase option (£1950), cab air-conditioning (£800), trip computer (£270), leather pack A - steering wheel, gear knob (£145), metallic paint (£900), mud flaps (£110), rear parking sensors (£230), privacy glass (£260)
 - Conversion: Winter Pack - diesel-fired space heater, cab thermo screen, removable carpet (£915)
- Other options (contact converter for full - very long - list, examples below)
- Base: 180PS engine upgrade (£2650), DSG automatic gearbox (£1700), Cruise control (£210)
 - Conversion: High top roof option from (£700), starter pack comprising gas cylinder, mains lead, water filler hose, mains adapters, hob igniter, gas level indicator (£100), double bed option (£400)

COOKS QUARTERS

Trying to cook in a confined space - with little or no worktop - can drive the most placid chef to the nearest pub. Both our test campers have better than average worktop, though the Bilbo's has more surface that doesn't double as a lid over hob or sink. The Mallard concentrates its facilities on the offside, opposite the sliding door, and forward of the bench seat, while the Nexa puts them in the rear, either side of the central aisle.

The worktop in the Nexa is an attractive and practical granite-effect and set into it is a combined stainless steel sink and three-burner (drained) hob, with grill beneath. There's spark ignition for the grill only. A 50-litre compressor fridge (operating on 12 volts) sits opposite, with shelf space above when the roof is raised. There's some cupboard space and a cutlery drawer. Part of the kitchen area's storage space is taken up housing the Porta Potti toilet, and this is the arrangement in both 'vans.

The Mallard has a separate four-burner hob, stainless steel sink, small drainer and grill beneath. There's spark ignition for all, so no matches required. There appears to be less dedicated worktop, as the tops also do duty as the two lids for the sink and hob. The lids have stylish satin-finished aluminium rolled edges decorating their fronts. The Mallard's separate sink and hob take up more space, but are oh so useful since you're going to be washing here, if not on a campsite with facilities. Murvi also provides a hardwood chopping board, a vegetable basket and a plate rack. Beneath the sink is the three-way 60-litre fridge and a drawer filled with Murvi's blue and white Melamine cups and plates.

BATHING SPACE

Here's where it gets tricky. Of course, you'll have worked out by now that there isn't anywhere to closet yourself away in this style of motorcaravan. Having said that, the Nexa supplies a piece of fabric that drapes across the aisle to provide some degree of privacy. One of the best solutions - for certain operations - is for the significant other to go for a walk, but if it's raining... When sharing a motorhome with no washroom, suffice to say that you need to be exceptionally good friends, married, or partners, and you have to learn not to be too embarrassed about bodily functions. Realistically, most campsites have facilities,

but having spent several years in a campervan, I can reassure you that getting used to a lack of privacy doesn't take long. Here, both 'vans have a Thetford Porta Potti, kept in a cupboard beneath the kitchen units - the Bilbo's the larger 465, Murvi's the 335 model.

When washing at the kitchen sink in the Bilbo's, you'll be using the combined sink/hob. The hob's drained, but I'd prefer not to be splashing water all over the burners. In the Mallard, not only are the hob and sink two different units, but there's also a small draining area separating them. Additionally, there are separate lids for the two facilities, which means, when you're splashing about, the lid of the hob can be left down. Of course this matters not one jot if you are only going to use full-facility campsites.

BED TIME

The RIB seat/bed mechanisms are used for both 'vans, but here the similarities end. The tested Nexa comes with two single beds, though Bilbo's can provide this 'van with a double. To make the beds, firstly swivel the two front seats. The forward-facing rear seats' squabs hinge from the front, so release the lever and tip them over and forward to meet the two front seats. Now it only remains to release the rear seatbacks to tip forward to fill the void to complete your single beds.

A double bed's the usual option for the classic camper layout and the Mallard is no exception. Lets start by saying that behind the bench seat you can chose to have a tall luggage space or a two-tier version. The separating shelf is the head-end of the bed, which can be vertical or horizontal. If it's horizontal then the first step in the bed making process is already done. Next, rotate the bench seat-squab forward so that it's

11 The kitchen offers plenty of worktop and a grill/warming oven

12 The compressor-type fridge runs on 12V at all times

13 No washroom, but a decent-sized loo lives in its own locker

14 Two lids provide worktop surfaces when closed over the superior hob and sink

15 Mallard's fridge is a three-way model

16 The 'essential facility' lives in its own little cupboard

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

MURVI MALLARD

PRICE (with VAT at 17.5 per cent)

- From: £35,665 OTR
- As tested: £44,623 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)

- Berths: 2
- Three-point belted seats: 4
- Warranty: Base vehicle 3 years, conversion 2 years, 12 years anti-perforation
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: All steel body with sliding side door and top-hinged tailgate. Moulded GRP high roof
- Length: 5.29m (17ft 4in)*
- Width: 2.04m (6ft 8.5in)*
- Height: 2.74m (9ft 0in)*
- Wheelbase: 3.40m (11ft 2in)*
- Rear overhang: 996mm (3ft 3in)
- GVW: 3200kg*
- Payload: 600kg (after deduction for weight of driver and essential habitation equipment)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Volkswagen T5 LWB window van
- Engine: 2.0-litre turbo-diesel producing 138bhp
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round, with ABS, ASR, ESP, EDL, Hill-Hold Control
- Suspension: Independent all round on coil springs with telescopic shock absorbers and anti-roll bars
- Features: Alloy wheels, flashing stop lights during emergency braking, day running lights, electric folding and heated mirrors, dual airbags, trip computer, front and rear parking sensors, remote central locking with deadlocks, VW alarm system, DAB radio/CD player with MP3 input and additional rear speakers, colour-coded bumpers, privacy glass, sliding window in side door, first-aid kit, warning triangle, spare bulb kit

INSIDE

- Layout: Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside kitchen, forward-facing rear bench seat
- Insulation: Floor 13mm, walls and roof 50-100mm
- Interior height: 2.10m (6ft 10.5in)

KITCHEN

- Sink and hob: Smev stainless steel unit, drainer, fold-down mixer tap, combined with four-burner hob. Spark ignition
- Cooker: As above, plus Smev gas grill. Spark ignition
- Fridge: Dometic three-way with freezer compartment. Capacity 60 litres

WASHROOM

- None
- Toilet: Thetford Porta Potti 335 in dedicated cupboard

BEDS

- Lounge double
- Length: 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- Width: 1.60m (5ft 3in) max

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water tank: Inboard, 45 litres (10 gallons)
- Waste water tank: Underslung, 30 litres (6.6 gallons)
- Water heater: None fitted
- Space heater: Webasto Airtop 2000 diesel-fired with blown-air
- Leisure battery: 80 amp hr
- Gas: 2 x Campingaz 2.72kg cylinders
- Lighting: Nine LEDs: two spots in cab, two spots and one strip over bed-head, one strip over kitchen unit, one strip over sliding door, one each side of rear seat
- Sockets: 230V: 2 (in kitchen). 12V: 1 (in kitchen)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: SE motorhome base - surcharge on Transporter window van (£1175), 140PS engine upgrade (£1352), long wheelbase option (£1950), cab air-conditioning (£911), trip computer (£276), cruise control (£212), metallic paint (£576), mud flaps (£112), front and rear parking sensors (£394), privacy glass (£253), Alloy wheels (£564), VW alarm system (£188), DAB radio upgrade (£206)
 - Conversion: Webasto diesel-fired space heater (£699), Porta Potti 335 toilet (£90)
- Other options (contact converter for full - very long - list, examples below)
- Base: 180PS engine upgrade (£3232), DSG automatic gearbox (£1700)
 - Conversion: rising roof version (Meteor) (£154)

E&OE

BILBO'S NEXA



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- 17 Single beds are easily made up using the four single seats
- 18 The small hanging wardrobe includes shelves to the side
- 19 Two Campingaz 907s will fit in the gas locker

BILBO NEXA LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

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turned over completely. Now pull the seatback forward and down to fill the void and that's it. Because this Mallard's built on the long wheelbase VW, the bed's wider at the head (the rear) than you'd normally find in a campervan: this is because there are no kitchen units in this area. At the head end there's an extra 1.37m x 500mm (4ft 6in x 1ft 7.5in) block of bed space.

STORE ROOM

Here's where it's a clear choice between height-barrier-friendly talents or storage space. It's the nature of the beast that high tops are going to have way more storage than rising roof versions. In this case, it's particularly marked, as the Mallard provides an almost ridiculous amount of storage space. In the Nexa there's storage space under both rear seats, for bedding maybe, and a couple of cupboards under the hob and sink, plus a cutlery drawer and a deeper drawer. Opposite there are two more cupboards, one of which is divided into two parts with the top tier only accessible when the offside bed's made. Nightie, books and curlers perhaps?

Strewth, where do I start? With the Mallard there's all that high top to fill, so let's start there. There are two capacious lockers front and rear - just one of which would swallow all your bedding - six lockers decorate the sides, plus two open cubbyholes and a large area around the window of the high top that could act as a shelf, as it has a retaining bar. There's a large amount of space behind and under the rear bench seat. The foot platform of the bench seat provides two large shallow areas suitable for big flat objects, or masses of tins on their sides. Other lidded nooks and crannies are also secreted around the Mallard's interior.

LIFE SUPPORT

There was no water heater fitted in either 'van, but you won't be cold on frosty mornings as a Webasto Airtop 2kW diesel-fired space heater is fitted to both. Lighting provided in the Nexa comprises two fluorescent strips and two

halogen spots. Murvi have gone down the LED route throughout, and fitted five strips and four spots, well distributed about the interior.

LEDs are far less demanding on batteries, which may be the reason Murvi fits just an 80 amp hr leisure battery. Bilbo's fits a 135 amp hr unit, but part of the reason for this is the fact that it also has to run the power-hungry 12V fridge. 12V and twin 230V sockets take care of plug-ins in both campers.

Water is taken care of by, for the Nexa, a 36-litre fresh water tank and a 35-litre waste, while the Mallard carries 45 litres of fresh water and 30 litres of waste. Both 'vans have inboard freshwater tanks and underslung waste, while gas lockers take two 907 Campingaz cylinders. It's worth noting that the Nexa has an insulated waste water tank and can accept a single 3.9kg propane cylinder if you prefer.

CONCLUSION

While both 'vans are based on the more spacious long wheelbase VW, they are very different beasts. One is aimed at those who wish to travel for longer periods in a greater degree of comfort, and that's the high top Mallard.

Bilbo's Nexa makes a better dual-use vehicle due to its pop-top, but offers far less storage space - both due to layout and rising roof. Single bed fans who are happy to travel light should find Nexa fits the bill

My instinct is to go for a high top, and I'm helped in this decision by the number of times I thumped my head in the Nexa. You certainly can do things in the back without lifting the roof, but keep your head down. Do bear in mind, though, that the Nexa is also available with the option of a high top roof.

Part of this test was to assess the delights of the facelifted VW, and both motorcaravans get full marks in this respect - sharper styling and the delights of the new engine make the T5 even better than the excellent vehicle it was before. These really are two cracking British-converted campers, well designed, and built using top quality materials. ■

MURVI MALLARD



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- 20 The large, flat double bed provides plenty of space, especially at its head
- 21 Plenty of storage space lurks all around
- 22 There's yet more storage space in the rear beside the gas locker

MURVI MALLARD LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

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