

VW's Surprising Van

A Viable Alternative

It may have been noted before that a prophet is often without honor in his own country.

When Ford, Chevy, *et al.* were selling vans by the each to bakeries and motorcycle dealers, and all the Cool Cats were driving '55 Chevs with "giant" 302 motors, VW stoically cranked out what it called a station wagon, everybody else called a bus, but was really a van. The Bus had a small, fiercely loyal band of followers, mainly in Southern California—Bruce Meyers' famous dune buggy got its start when Meyers began fooling around tryin' to put wide tires on a Bus for sand travel—but by and large your hipper sort of person didn't think it fit his lifestyle (a word that hadn't yet been coined) and it sold mainly to surfers, multiple parents, giraffe movers, and other members of the not-quite-lunatic, but certainly quasi-weirdish, fringe.

The development of the van, as a social institution and as a vehicle, has been adequately documented here and elsewhere. What once sold in the dozens now sells in the thousands, and for every stripped-down, sheet-metal-interior six-banger hauling extra large loaves of enriched white, there must be five hauling waterbeds and 50 hauling shag carpet.

V8 engines, stereos, CB radios, air conditioning, for Lord's sake, all are part of what we suppose must be called The Van Scene. Virtually everything you can

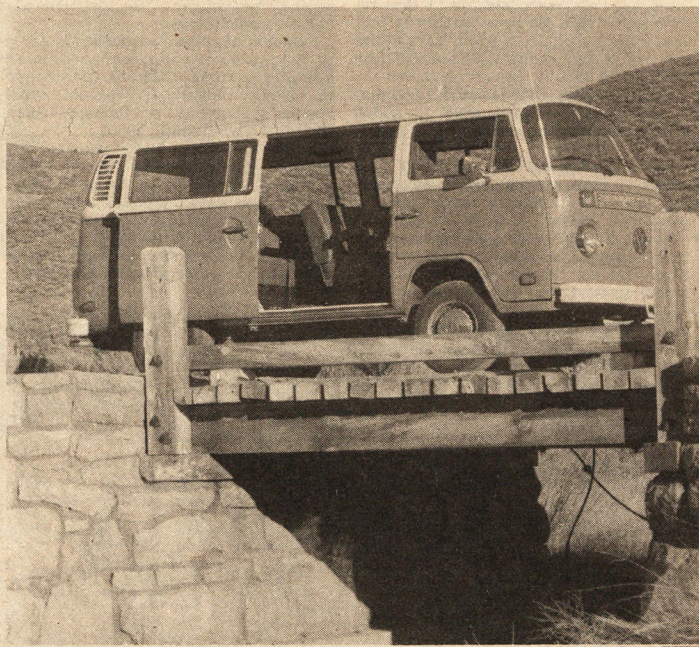
Angeles to Reno, particularly on a Sunday night after a day in the smog at Ontario covering the NASCAR race, which was when it had to be done.

It turned out to be the nicest surprise we've had since the 10th grade when Jackie Lee Tucker's father got transferred back into town: that little sweetheart has really changed since we saw it last.

The older model of VW bus was a scary vehicle to drive at best under anything but dead calm and level conditions. It would dart about at the merest breath of wind, and the faintest threat of a hill—no, even tilting the map as you held it in your lap—would bog the engine and force you into second gear. Worse, any decent downgrade would send you into a terrifying career, undecided whether to shift or go blindly racing headlong in whatever gear circumstance found you, brakes alternately locking and fading dead away in your tempestuous flight.

Or so it seemed to an enthusiast driver. The swing axle suspension, rearward weight bias, skinny tires, and high, boxy body made the Bus a handful. Add an anemic engine that could barely move the sedan, let alone the Bus, and a shift mechanism made of loose joints and long, whippy rods, and what you had was not a short long on driving pleasure.

Put one hand on your copy of *We At Porsche* (available from Alamo Books, Box C, Reno, Nevada...), the other on your gas credit card, look up at the sky, and say



Bridging the gap: VW's much-improved van fills the hole between an economical small station wagon and the profligate waste of a big-engined domestic van.

Cory Farley Photos

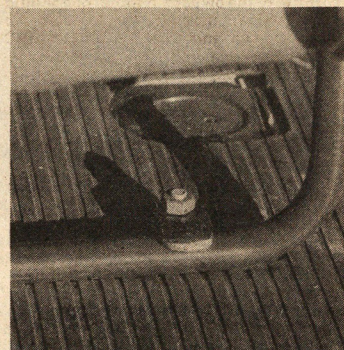
get on the clutch; one must lift one's foot about eight inches clear of the floor, move it over, and place it down on the desired pedal. Heel and toe downshifts (don't laugh; with 67 horsepower in a vehicle that weighs more than 3000 pounds, you must do some shifting) are possible, barely, but are complicated because the brake is so much higher than the gas. It all comes right after a few miles, but it's never as easy as it could be.

Otherwise the controls are reasonably well located and easy to operate. The wipers are on a column stalk as is the headlight dimmer, and the heater is to the right of the wheel in a panel within easy reach...not that it matters much. VWs have notoriously had bad heaters, and the van is no exception. Not only does it provide a bare tepid ooze of air, but it tends to vibrate off as you drive. The lever that controls the flow of warm air moves from top (off) to bottom (fan on), gradually increasing the flow of air as it goes. From the last stop before the fan goes on, it would vibrate to the cold air position in about 35 seconds. From full on (with the fan blowing) it took three to four minutes. This is a minor annoyance that soon becomes major on a snowy night after you reset the heater 20 times an hour. We finally looped a rubber band from the lever to the hazard light switch directly beneath it to hold it down, but that didn't solve the problem of its inability to warm the cavernous interior. An optional gas heater is available that, according to reports, could be used to bake enamel, but we haven't tried one.

Performance is surprisingly good considering the fuel economy. The drive from Los Angeles, whence come most of our test cars, to Reno involves several mountain passes over 7500 feet and some long, steep climbs. We know from experience that, say, a 350-powered American van with automatic transmission will climb the worst of the grades at 55-60mph and get 6-9mpg on that leg of the trip, while yielding perhaps 12-14mph on the flat closer to L.A. The VW climbed the same hills at 50-55mph, made a bit more noise since it required third gear, and got 14.8mpg in the hills with better than 20mpg on the flat. This 14mpg figure represents what we think would be the worst any owner would ever do in a VW van: the inside was loaded with about 500 pounds of gear, the wind was blowing force seven, and it was late at night with no *polizei* around. Foot to the floor, third

gear, climbing from 2000 feet over 8100 feet in less than 200 miles, we got nearly 15mpg. Overall average for the trip was 19.6 and we got a high of 21.1—this at speeds to an indicated 80mph.

80 miles per hour in a VW van? Yes, and it wasn't even frightening. The new van has the benefit of the same two-liter fuel

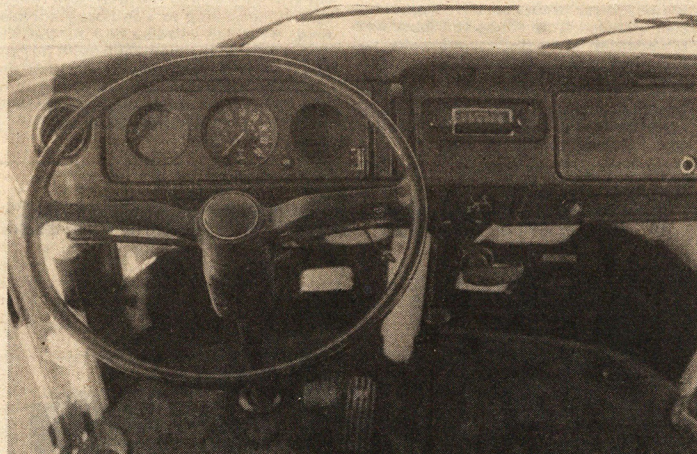


Middle seats are held in with six hex nuts and cast clamps. Wing nuts would be easier to deal with and require no tools.

injected four cylinder engine used in the Porsche 914. VW claims a top and cruising speed of 75mph, but we were able to exceed that in level flight with no trouble at all. The speedometer was surprisingly accurate, an indicated 60 being right around 59 actual, so we'd credit the van with a true top of at least 81 or 82.

If you've followed the older VW busses on a windy day, the thought of going 80 in one probably raises your hackles and fills you with dread. Well, we didn't do it a lot, but when we did it was amazingly pleasant and controllable. The suspension is of course independent at both ends, with torsion arms and a stabilizer bar in front, and it does a remarkable job of controlling that boxy, slab-sided body. Even American vans—maybe that should be especially American vans—have front suspension shortcomings, bobbing and weaving and floating around at speed, and VW seems to have a firmer grip on that aspect of performance than anyone around. The VW's steering is light and extremely precise for a van and it points better and more accurately than any truck we've driven. The front end doesn't float and steering inputs are reflected in

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No surprises and not much information on the dash, but the driving position is the best we've seen in a utility vehicle.

get in a passenger car can be had in a van, and the best the factories can provide is only the beginning as all the old Kal Kustom tricks heretofore reserved for Deuce Coupes and Fifty Fives have been adapted to vans. There's even a low rider van club in Southern California, with hydraulic lifts and all.

But where does this leave Volkswagen? With no V8, no long option list, where is the father of them all, the company that showed Detroit you don't have to be a tradesman to drive a van?

The same thing occurred to us. Even in Greater Downtown Reno you see the odd customized van—but never a VW. Wednesday night on Van Nuys Boulevard in Los Angeles is van night, with all manner of Kandy Striped, Tangerine Flake, Boxy Babies rolling back and forth, but nary a one has the characteristic VW air-cooled clatter. Had VW been forsaken, we wondered, its onetime adherents lured away by fourbarrel carburetors and automatic transmissions?

Or—and if you last drove a VW van in the mid-60s, this is a possibility that is so real it borders on certainty—was it such a sorry vehicle that even the kids wouldn't touch it? This at least is the feeling that swept the *Autoweek* editorial suite when the boss said "Go get a VW van." Everybody was busy, or sick, or had to go bail for his parents that weekend. Nobody wanted to drive the thing from Los

in as guttural a voice as you can manage, "Gott im Himmel—es ist ein Erfolg." Which means, roughly, "I'll be dogged—it works."

You notice the improvement over the older vehicle the minute you step inside. The seats feel like standard Beetle seats, no great distinction in a car but remarkable in a van, since vans generally have seats a decent man wouldn't put in a laundromat. These are rather flat in the cushion, but they're roomy and firm enough for long trips and the seatbacks recline several degrees; altogether they are the best stock seats we've ever seen in a utility vehicle.

The only problem with the seats stems not from them but from the steering wheel, which is large and nearly flat. When the seat is adjusted to provide easy access to the bottom of the wheel, the top is out of reach. When you can handle the top, the bottom rests firmly on your solar plexus. There's no easy solution, but the problem isn't so annoying as to be intolerable and, in fact, some drivers actually liked the feel of the flat steering wheel.

The only other complaint about the interior is the mounting of the pedals. They poke up from the floor like trees, almost vertical in their operation and, at least in the case of the clutch and brake, very long in their travel. One can't pivot from the heel to go from gas to brake or to

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vehicle reaction immediately, helping to avoid the sharp intakes of breath that characterize spirited driving in most vans and pickups.

Whether it's the small size, the good steering, the good-working suspension, the Metzeler radial tires, or a combination of them all, the VW is no longer a disagreeable car to drive. For a truck, it's even pleasant. Granted that it is a truck, and granting the limitations of the body style, it can be flung about with some abandon. No truck in recent memory has come equipped with the same feeling of security during ill-advised antics that the VW provided. Two members of the staff—both strangers to VWs though they've driven and owned a variety of other vans—were quite smitten, and considered it the most responsive and easiest to drive of all vans they've seen. It is agile, nimble and economical to a degree not seen in domestic offerings.

One of the major causes for hesitation on the part of those considering purchase of a VW van seems to be the power. If you've done any mountain driving at all, you've probably had the chance to follow a screaming Bus, flat out in second gear, as it crept up a hill at 35mph. Those days are over. With the addition of the 914 two liter Volkswagen has cured the van's engine ills all at once.

You can't lug up to the Eisenhower tunnel in fourth gear at 20mph. It's only got 1970cc, after all. But we found we could reach the indicated shift point (52mph) in third on any hill we tried, and most new cars can't go any faster than that. In town the deep first gear keeps it on top at the lights and second is good for traffic work while the high perch gives you visibility and lets you arrange to be in the moving lane far earlier than drivers of cars can manage.

There is no tach in the van, nor are the shift points marked on the speedo. According to the owners' manual one should shift not later than 15, 32, and 52mph in first, second, and third. We didn't read that, of course, until we were several hundred miles into the trip...several hundred miles of shifting as late as 20, 40-plus, and 65. Not to worry, we hope: there in the fine print (where they probably hope you won't see it) is the admission that "if you have a traffic situation where it is necessary to accelerate in 2nd and 3rd gear above the recommended speed ranges, you may do so...a governor is installed on the engine to prevent damage...."

That's the kind of talk we like to hear. Performance, especially on hills, is much improved by winding beyond the recommended points. We aren't sure about the 914 engine, but a half-dozen staff-owned Beetles over the last 10 years have thrived on routine shifts at 50% above the little dots on the speedo. *Carpe diem*, that's what we say, and longevity take the hindmost.

The only clear and present danger in late shifting is that you stand in constant peril of coming up with neutral when you finally do stir it around. The vaunted German precision is not much in evi-



One place the VW loses out is rear liftover height—it's about four feet.



The seven passenger model—others are available—is a good compromise for family use. Middle seat is removable.

dence in the van's shifter, which seems to have been fabricated of old steel re-bars and tin cans. Ever drive a car with an ailing column shifter, so it doesn't quite get out of one gear before it goes into the next and jams up solid? The VW's shifter feels almost like that; it requires deliberation and careful, accurate movements to drive it home. And no wonder, when you look at where the stick is in relation to where the gears live. Still, big bushings and stiff rods could probably tighten it up quite a bit.

The second bubble in VW's reputation has been handling in crosswinds. This is always a problem with the van body shape, and in this case is magnified by the center of gravity being further back than it would be in a front engine van. The VW is a bit more sensitive to wind than, say, a Dodge, but not enough that it should discourage purchase. With radial tires and the good steering, only the strongest and most unexpected gusts can cause undue travail.

There are in any vehicle a number of minor annoyances that bear mentioning in any report. None of these are causes for serious complaint—in fact, most owners

could drive the car for years and never be aware of the ones that didn't effect them personally—but the Volkswagen has its share.

Most annoying to us was the rear visibility. The ride height in front is three or four inches higher than that in back. The van goes down the road with its nose in the air. It looks funny, to us, and it makes the top of the rear window lower than the rear view mirror so you can't see very far back when you're driving. The grille of a car in normal freeway following position is just visible; anything further back or higher than that is out of sight, cut off in the mirror by the specter of the roof. You can use the side mirrors, but they vibrate so you can't tell a cop Dodge from a stripper Plymouth sedan. The tall front can't help the aerodynamics, either. If you're a law-abiding 55mph citizen, you would probably never be aware of this, but if you spend a lot of time searching your mirror for pursuers, it would bother you.

The engine, at speeds over 60 or so, is pretty noisy. There is a fix for this, we think: above the flat motor, inside the engine bay, there is plenty of room for

insulation. You could stuff in at least three or four inches of some kind of sound deadening material, assuming that it won't block the flow of cooling air, and get interior noise down to a near-domestic level.

That engine hump also uses up some of the cargo space. You don't have unobstructed access to the cargo area through the rear door the way you do in a more conventional van. The aft hatch is fairly small and chest-high, with storage preferably reserved for light articles that won't put your head through the windshield if you stop suddenly. The rearmost seat is not removable and doesn't quite fold flat, though it does fold down nearly so. There is no area long enough for a tall man, or even an average sized one, to stretch out and sleep. You could easily knock together a 2x4 and plywood box to extend the engine cover far enough forward for sleeping, maybe with a few drawers for storage, but you'll have to do that or sleep crunched up.

There are no concealed storage areas for small valuables. You could probably put a camera or small radio under the seat in the bare metal compartment where the brake fluid reservoir is located, but that's it. Buy a camera bag with a shoulder strap and carry it with you.

The locks all seem to be lubed with a particularly tenacious and singularly evil-smelling goo that oozes out and gets on the key, then is transferred to your hands and your pants pocket. This seems minor, no doubt, but it leaves stains on light clothing and is difficult to wash off your skin.

Finally, the radio is still not wired through the ignition switch. If you're an audiophile, you must remember to turn the radio off every time you get out of the truck. Twice we left it on, turned low, and both times the car started the next morning—but what if you walk away from WABC at the airport on your way to two weeks with Rainier and Grace?

But that stuff, as mentioned, is just VW's share of the ills that come with any vehicle. It has corresponding good points in addition to those already named: the ventilation is excellent, with vents up front and wing windows everywhere you look, even in back. It didn't rattle even one paltry rattle the whole time we had it, and it really is so nearly airtight that it helps to open a window before you slam the door. It should give you nearly twice the gas mileage of a domestic van in equal driving. The fuel injection makes it start instantly in all weather and run dead smooth from the first revolution, something you don't see very often these days.

We like it. Even if it was a bad vehicle, the majority of vans are so depressing from an enthusiast's view—which is to say our view—that the mileage alone would make it worth considering on the grounds that you don't have fun driving vans anyway and you might as well save gas while you're not having it.

But it's not a bad vehicle. It's even fun to drive, in a sort of bizarre way, and you can order up everything from a no-window, no-back seat stripper through the seven passenger we had to a nine-passenger high-roller.

No matter what all those effete Eastern intellectuals say, when you consider everything a car has to do, the VW van might be the real best all-around car in the world.

1977 Volkswagen Van Specifications

ENGINE

Type: Air cooled horizontally opposed four cylinder
Displacement: 1970cc, 120.2 cubic inches
Bore/Stroke: 94 x 71mm; 3.70 x 2.80 inches
Horsepower: 67 SAE at 4200rpm
Torque: 101 ft-lbs at 3000rpm
Compression ratio: 7.3:1
Fuel supply: AFC fuel injection

DRIVE TRAIN

Type: Rear engine and transmission, rear wheel drive

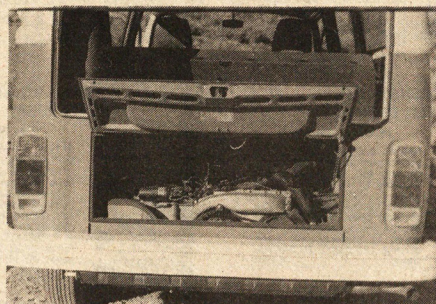
TRANSMISSION

Type: Rear mounted four speed transaxle (standard; three speed automatic optional)

SUSPENSION

Front: Independent torsion arms with ball joints, stabilizer, telescopic shock absorbers

Rear: Independent double jointed axle with trailing arms and diagonal links; torsion bar, telescopic shock absorbers



BRAKES

Front: Disc, power assist
Rear: Drum, power assist with pressure regulator

WHEELS & TIRES

Wheels: 5.5 x 14J steel disc
Tires: 185R14, six ply rating

MISCELLANEOUS

Length: 177.4 inches
Width: 67.7 inches
Height: 77.0 inches unladen
Ground clearance: 7.8 inches
Weight: 3042 pounds (manufacturer's figure)
Payload: 1918 pounds

Fuel economy: See text; mileage in test varied from 14.6 to 21.1mpg
Price: \$5599 not including shipping, dealer prep, etc.) for seven passenger version. Other versions with seating from two to nine passengers plus a Camptour are available.