

# Sterling

## EFFORT



If you're looking for a camper with car-like drive you'll struggle to do better

INSET: At *Campervan* we use some of the harshest testers in the world: toddlers!

Few conversions are as practical on a daily basis as Sterling Autos Caddy Maxi Life conversion. Rachel Barker tries it for size...

**WORDS AND PHOTOS RACHEL BARKER**

**I**t was the coldest day of the year with the temperature barely nudging freezing. Yet I was sitting in the cosiest campervan in rural Hampshire cradling a steaming mug of hot chocolate, with fairy lights and an oversized patchwork blanket adding to the seasonal ambience. I was also mentally rewriting my Christmas list. 'Dear Santa, I would really, really like a VW Caddy Maxi Life campervan this year. Please.'

An hour earlier, I'd been walking across the frosty field to greet this month's test drive campervan – quite unsure of what to expect. Camper cars can be hit and miss. I'm always a bit sceptical of any vehicle that claims to combine a campervan with a daily driver. If a car is compact enough to effortlessly navigate your

commute, then surely the 'camping' feature is likely to be little more than a mattress and cool box thrown in the back? Equally, if a campervan is spacious enough for you to happily enjoy a weekend away in it, would it not be too cumbersome to cope with the demands of a daily commute? Well, not necessarily.

At first glance, the Maxi Life certainly looks like a car you'd be happy to use every day. At 4.88m it's not much longer than a typical family car, so it's practical to drive and park in urban and rural areas. But slide open the door at the rear and you'll see that this is not a car with a mattress thrown in the back. There are no half-hearted measures here; it is a proper campervan with a full-length bed and kitchen facilities. So what's it like to drive?

### The drive

I class myself as a small car driver; that is, I like to drive small cars. Especially those with an automatic gearbox. So, admittedly, most campervans start off on the wrong foot before I even turn the key in the ignition.

But the Maxi Camper was truly a dream to drive. It had a comfortable driving position with a roomy footwell. The visibility was excellent and allowed an unrestricted view out of the rear window – something most campervans struggle with as they aim to squeeze in an extra storage cupboard at the back or some other clever storage idea.

The gears were light and forgiving. I could pull away in second gear (ahem) without stalling (you can get a DSG auto option, too).

It really felt like I was driving a car. And not just a car, it was as manoeuvrable as a Golf – as demonstrated by a number of three-point turns on narrow country lanes while looking for a photo location. I would not attempt that in many campervans without a lot of associated stress. If you have any concerns about a campervan being unwieldy or cumbersome to drive, the Caddy would suit you perfectly.

The dashboard comes fitted with an integrated sat-nav and while I did miss having audio controls on the steering wheel, the sound from the speakers was smooth and clear.

This was helped enormously by the complete absence of any squeak, creak or rattle from the conversion behind me. It was impressively quiet; not even the cutlery drawer quivered. Certainly the quietest campervan conversion I've experienced.

**A quality finish**

The solid build is testament to the expertise and commitment of the team at Sterling Auto. They apply an engineering background to build every aspect of the conversion by hand, thus ensuring a really high-quality finish.

They also retain as much of the original Caddy interior as they can, creating the appearance of a smooth, cohesive conversion rather than a patched-up job.

While there are only so many layout configurations possible in a small campervan, Sterling Auto will help you design a bespoke van that will suit how you plan to use it. I thought the neutral tones in the test van were ideal for a small space but you can choose a range of furnishings and finishes for your own conversion (or add a few colourful scatter cushions).

**Who would love this van?**

The test van could seat six passengers, across three rows of seats. There were Isofix connectors if required and, theoretically, enough space to ferry around most of the von Trapp family. Having said that, there is clearly not enough space to sleep all the von Trapps. (And to be frank, once Fraulin Maria got settled down with her guitar, it's doubtful even the Captain would fit in).

The bed is around 80 centimetres wide – perfect for one and possible for two – but a definite squeeze. So if you have a bigger travelling contingent, your options are to (a) order the optional elevating roof with roof bed, (b) take along a tent, or (c) simply use the Maxi Life as a day van. Whether you're heading to the beach, a country park, or a festival, it's always a great treat to travel with your own facilities letting you cook, wash or sleep whenever you want.

Another appealing option in the long winter months may be to leave the family at home for

a weekend and take yourself off to recharge on a solo campervan mini-break (that would be my top plan).

**From car to camper**

However many passengers you're accommodating, the rear of the vehicle transforms into a campervan remarkably quickly. When you slide open the campervan door, the entrance is blocked by the second row of seats. But

drop the backrest forward, and this row turns into a comfortable bench seat to form part of a lounge that would seat four. This does still block the

entrance door, though, and also restricts access to the fridge.

To solve this, the whole second row folds up – opening the route through the door and allowing access to the kitchen, including the fridge and the campervan control panel. You now just have seating for two people on the back row of seats and more space to move around the cabin. From this angle, the underside of the second row seat is visible as it folds back on itself. Aesthetically it's not the best view but you could always throw an oversized patchwork blanket over it if it really bothered you.

**Making the most of the space**

Once you've decided where you're sitting and you've availed yourself of the necessary snacks and drinks, it's time to relax. The upholstery is thick and comfortable and lends itself to lounging around much more than you'd think.

The table is stored neatly and rattle-free, clipped in position behind the driver's seat. It can then slide along a rail and fix in one of two positions either above the fridge to serve the wide padded bench seat, or towards the back next to the rear seat. I liked the flexibility and the sturdiness of the table, and it fixed nicely in position exactly where it was useful. The work surface is totally adequate for the size of van, especially when you include the cover of the sink and hob. The table also provides useful surface area.

There are a couple of USB points in the living area, LED lights on the ceilings, curtains to separate off the cab and blackout curtains around the windows.

**Sleep well**

At nightfall, the rock 'n' roll bed comprises the two rear seats, which fold down flat. It's very simple to construct, and, when joined to the middle seat, creates an impressively long bed. If



It's not just a side kitchen layout as it also boasts an extra pair of travel seats



Chemical loo lives in this deep locker

Conversion quality is evidenced by the absence of rattles (INSET: You can't test anything without a cuppa!)

**SPECIFICATION**

Sterling Auto Caddy
Base vehicle Volkswagen Caddy Maxi Life TD
Drive Front-wheel drive
Engine 1.6-litre
Power 101bhp
Economy 40mpg (estimated)
Gearbox 5-speed manual
Number of travel seats 6
Berths 1-2
Leisure battery capacity 105Ah
Payload 577-665kg
Length x width x height 4.88m x 1.79 x 1.87m
Standard equipment Bed measuring 1.93m x 0.80m (6ft 4in x 2ft 7.5in), Dometic 9222 twin-burner hob/ sink with cold-running water, Wabco GRX50 fridge, 4-inch thick upholstery panels, Webasto AirTop diesel heater, LED interior lighting, 12V USB points, and 240V power sockets. Manufacturer supplied alloys with tailgate, roof bars and sat-nav
Optional equipment Elevating roof £4,000, Child's roof bed £500
Warranty 2 years manufacturer's warranty
Price from £10,000
Price as tested £25,995

**CONTACT**

Sterling Auto Technic, Unit 1a, Red Shire Industrial Estate, Red Shire Hill, Hemmage, Berkshire RG18 9QJ  
 ☎ sterlingauto.co.uk  
 ☎ 01635 600140



It's certainly a discreet conversion - you'd never know it wasn't just a people carrier



The extra seats do impede access



Bed is only 0.80m wide but Sterling offer an optional padded extension section

**STERLING AUTO CADDY**

**PROS**

- ✓ Excellent drive
- ✓ High-quality finish
- ✓ No rattles at all
- ✓ Comfortable interior
- ✓ Straightforward mechanisms
- ✓ Option to seat up to six passengers

**CONS**

- ✗ Second-row seats limit living space and restrict access
- ✗ Bed narrow for more than one person
- ✗ Kitchen mostly inaccessible in night-time mode

there are two of you planning to sleep in the van, Sterling Auto can replace the original VW side panel with extra padding, which extends the width of the bed by a few crucial inches.

**A sensible amount of storage**

As is often the case, it's worth seeking out any items you might need through the night before pulling the bed out, because much of the storage will then be less accessible. In the Caddy Maxi Life, this includes two good-sized cupboards at floor level, one of which will fit a Porta Potti. The other contains the gas bottle but has plenty of space for other items and, usefully, is accessible from the outside, too.

You can fit bedding or folded clothing in a shelf above the cab and there's space for a couple of larger items behind the driver's seat next to the table. While there's no boot space in this seating configuration, there's an upper wardrobe to house the rest of your things, which can be accessed when the bed is up. There's even an integrated cutlery drawer and

mini storage nets dotted around the sides – every spare inch of storage counts in a small van!

**Any drawbacks?**

You cannot squeeze a full-sized camper fit-out into what is essentially a family car without compromise. For me, the main drawback with this Maxi Life was the decision to retain six travelling seats. Even in its least obstructive, upright position, the second row

of seats restricts full access through the door. Likewise, the third row of seats limits the storage space at the back of the van.

If you don't need to transport six people – and I imagine this would apply to much of the target market – there is a very simple solution: remove one of these seats altogether. I would personally remove the middle row to create more living space, but you could also remove the back row to create a boot for storing bigger items. Aside from a bit of patching up on the floor, this would be straightforward and the Sterling Auto team are more than happy accommodate such requests.

It's also worth noting that if you did remove

the second row of seating, you could still create a bed of a similar length with just a couple of small modifications.

Another drawback for some might be the inability to stand up to full height, but adding the elevated roof option would give you even more headroom.

As a self-confessed camper car sceptic, I didn't expect to love a van this size as much as I did. I could happily use it every day; it was so easy and comfortable to drive and I thought the conversion was seamless.

If there is more than one of you using the campervan and you plan to stay in it for an extended period, I'd be tempted to have a second sleeping option up my sleeve. Otherwise, one person and a guitar would fit very nicely.

***campervan* VERDICT**

**A superb little van, ideal to use as a daily drive and a base for overnights or short stays. The conversion is very high quality and the size is perfect for people who don't want to drive a bulky and unwieldy campervan. You couldn't ask for much more out of the Caddy Maxi Life.**