

The Campervan Converts

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Whether you're kicking back on a balmy summer's evening with barbeque aromas drifting through the air, or huddled up watching a storm roll in with a cup of tea and a Jaffa Cake, there is something special about life in a campervan.

With fond memories of spending long summer holidays in our grandparents' caravans in the south of England, we wanted to recreate that magic in a modern day campervan. Our aim was to build a stylish, comfortable 'glampervan' that would allow us to escape the city at a moment's notice to relax and recharge. No preparation, no unpacking, no hassle. And now living in Queensland, Australia, whose warm climate and amazing coastline lend themselves to al fresco mini-breaks all year round, we couldn't wait to get started.

The perfect van

Late in 2010 we began the search for a Toyota Hiace Commuter van and were lucky to stumble upon a grand specimen from 2006. In a previous life it had been used as a childcare minibus in Western Australia and with only 40,000km on the clock, was in great condition.

The owner removed the 12 rear seats and registered the vehicle as a two-seater van, and we were away. The sides of the Commuter van are mostly glass so our first job was to arrange window tinting: a must to protect from the blazing Queensland sun, but also handy for those early mornings when you peer through the curtains and forget how close you are to the neighbouring pitch!

Layout

Most small campervans are laid out with the seating area at the back and kitchen at the front. Always eager to frequent as few campsite washrooms as possible, we wanted to install our own bathroom. The logical place for that was the back, so we moved the seating to the front and planned a galley kitchen in the middle. With a bit of creativity and guidance from a 3D model and simple timber frame, it all fit.

Ceiling height

The Hiace's low ceiling height prompted many discussions about whether to install a pop-up roof; after all, the van was originally intended for commuters rather than campers. But cutting into the roof is a major job. It would reduce fuel efficiency, decrease the van's rigidity and rule out a bathroom partition (particularly with a soft-top roof). Needless to say, we decided against it, resolving to spend more time tending to a barbeque under our awning than slaving over the inside stove.

As it turned out, we did unearth a handy ten extra centimetres in the kitchen when we removed the ceiling to install the wiring. By creating a new ceiling out of flexible hardboard and closing up the void, we can now almost stand up fully.

Flooring

Our first task was to lay the flooring. We used a pale wooden laminate on top of two layers of insulation and a sheet of hardboard to reduce the noise. The main challenge was cutting around the wheel arches and gear box, which resulted in an impressive pile of blunt jigsaw blades, but the finished result is very successful.

Joinery

We managed to find prebuilt cabinets almost the perfect size to use throughout the van. Only needing a few centimetres sawing off the bottom and a bit more creative topiary around the wheel arches, they form the base of the seating area and also house both basins, the gas stove and the fridge. The kitchen area was completed with a wooden worktop from Ikea, which was sealed with a generous coating of Danish wood oil.

We created the bathroom partition and doors out of a gloss white MDF. The original plan was to install a sliding door to maximise space, but we were once again thwarted by the wheel arches, so we hinged the doors opening into the bathroom instead. Luckily they're narrow enough to not affect any ablutions!

Working out how to create the bed was the cause of much pencil chewing. The simple part was adding a second panel to the long edge of the L-shaped seating area, which would fold out to form a mattress area. The challenge was how to attach a supporting leg. We finally cracked it by adding a third hinged panel, which acts as a backrest in the seating position and supporting leg when folded out. This creates a 1.2m wide bed, and the two backrest cushions help form a mattress just wide enough to not have to roll over in unison!

Plumbing

The plumbing system incorporates freshwater and wastewater tanks, one stored in the kitchen and one in the bathroom, a water pump and a 14-litre electric boiler. The logistics were made slightly easier by installing both basins side by side, separated only by the bathroom partition. A water level gauge on the freshwater tank leads to a level indicator by the door.

With the gas cylinder on the opposite side of the campervan, it wasn't practical to heat the water with gas, so the electric boiler connects into the 240-volt circuit. Once the water has reached 70 degrees, it loses just one degree per hour, so we can enjoy warm water even having been disconnected for a while.

The toilet backs on to the campervan's back door to make it easy to empty the cassette, and the seat swivels round so we don't have to sit facing the wall.

People often ask if we considered installing a handheld shower, but our little water tank is not really conducive to a full lather-rinse-repeat routine, so we stuck with a toilet and basin. We have, however, found ourselves with the crème de la crème of campervan basins, bigger than in our bathroom at home! We used glass mosaic tiles to surround the basin and add a splash of colour.

Electrics

Our electrical system is stored under the seating. One circuit can plug into a 240-volt power source and the other connects to a 12-volt battery. From the battery, one circuit solely powers the fridge when we're not connected to external power (the fridge detects when we disconnect and switches automatically to the battery), and the other circuit powers the water pump, extractor fan and ceiling lights, which are wired into the main control panel next to the door.

We love the ceiling lights; each one can be operated and dimmed individually with a single tap meaning we can create mini mood zones – if required!

Ventilation

Living in Queensland, keeping the campervan ventilated was a key consideration. The front of the van already had air conditioning, and we've added a ceiling fan above the kitchen which provides a surprisingly strong breeze. There is an air vent in the sliding door (as well as safety vents behind the fridge, battery and gas bottle), so even in the height of summer, nights have been cool and comfortable.

Interior design

When you open the door to your campervan, it should instantly put a smile on your face. We wanted the interior to reflect the essence of life in a campervan. Fun. Escapism. Relaxation.

So we steered away from the ubiquitous beige-pine combination in favour of a more exuberant colour scheme. A simple cardboard model and Google's SketchUp helped us experiment with a number of styles and led us to a gloss red laminate for the cupboards and drawers, complemented by a stripy fabric for the cushions. These are offset by comparatively neutral navy curtains and a touch of patriotism with our hand-painted union flag back door.

Producing the cushions and curtains was a labour of love (sweat and tears) and a task that took almost as long as the entire campervan conversion. Thankfully it all worked out in the end and three years later, the upholstery is still intact.

Storage

When the van was still an empty shell, it was hard to imagine we'd be able to squeeze in a kitchen, bathroom and living room without it feeling cramped. Yet somehow, everything just fits. It's as if our little minibus was always destined to be a cosy campervan. We like to think it is compact and bijou!

It accommodates a surprising amount of storage. We have two deep drawers under the seating area, one for clothes and one for bedding. There is also a narrow cupboard in this area suitable for storing shoes (or a couple of bottles of Sauvignon Blanc) and a snack cupboard with room for six varieties of tea. You never know who might pop in!

One side of the kitchen is taken up with the water tank, but on the other side is a large double cupboard which stores cutlery, crockery and enough pantry ingredients for a few days away. As well as every campervan owner's most essential item: a whistling kettle!

Behind the driver's cab there's room for our outside camping furniture: a table and chair, a sun umbrella, a picnic rug. There's also plenty of space in the bathroom where we store our inflatable kayaks, lifejackets and other bits and pieces.

It took around a year of weekends to convert our Hiace Commuter into a campervan, and we love it. The layout is uncommon but it makes complete sense. We can pack so much into a compact space and with hot running water, a gas cooker and little bathroom, are very self sufficient.

Most of all though, we love the way the campervan really does makes us smile when we open the door. We've had some amazing trips: a week exploring Queensland's wineries, long weekends up and down the coast and

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spontaneous day trips. We've set off without a map and discovered beautiful sites we didn't know existed. We've camped overlooking the beach, waking up to watch the sun rise over the ocean, and we have eaten many Jaffa Cakes while tropical storms roll in. And whether we've been away a day or a week, each time we set off home we feel like we've had a proper break. Magic.

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More details can be found at www.campervanconverts.com