

THE perfect CAMPERVAN RETREAT

There's tiny and then there's tiny, but no matter how big or small, campervans are a great escape

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY RACHEL BARKER



MADELINE LYNFIELD

Year and model	Plaggio Porter 2007
Owned since	September 2015
Drive	Right-hand
Engine	1.2 litres
Power	48bhp
Economy	Excellent!
Gearbox	Manual
Travel seats	Two
Berths	A cosy two
Leisure battery	Yes
Payload	560kg
Length x width x height	3.37m x 1.395m x 1.87m
Insurance	£240

Best trip so far

"Langrannog in Ceredigion, Wales – a beautiful village with an unspoilt beach"

COSTS SO FAR

Purchase price of van	£1,200
Price of the conversion	£3,360
Extras fitted	
2-burner hob	
Cold running water	
Central heating and thermostat	
Ceiling LED lights	
Storage cupboards	
New stereo	



The tiny Piaggio Porter makes for an interesting base vehicle



Doors open and the outside starts to come in, which was Madeline's name

When you've spent the last 14 years helping people escape the demands and stresses of modern life, being able to retreat to your own safe haven once in a while becomes something of a priority.

Madeline Lynfield runs Heartspring (heartspring.co.uk), a nurturing and supportive retreat in the Cotswolds where people from all walks of life can relax and reconnect in beautiful surroundings. It's rewarding but intense work, so escaping in her campervan

between bookings allows her to practise what she preaches.

"Being out in nature is how I replenish," Madeline explains. "I love to drive to the coast, park up in a beautiful, secluded spot and just enjoy that sea air."

Nippy Porter

And her campervan of choice? The perfectly compact Piaggio Porter. Previously known as the Innocenti Porter, the Piaggio is based on the seventh

THANKS TO
Thistledown Farm for providing the backdrop for photos
 Tinkley Lane, Nympsfield, Stroud GL10 3UH
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generation Daihatsu Hijet. With a small but nippy 1.2-litre engine and amazing fuel economy according to Madeline, it provides exactly what she needs – no more and no less.

Likewise, the rear cab is the most economical space I've ever seen in a campervan, fitting in a fold-out bed, kitchen, table and storage cupboards with every millimetre accounted for. And yet the living space doesn't feel cramped. On the contrary, it's cosy, homely and uniquely practical.

Madeline found the Piaggio for sale on Gumtree in September 2015, having scoured online sites for months for a suitable vehicle to convert.

"I've always had vans," Madeline recalls. "My first van was actually an old ambulance, which I painted with fruit and flowers – it was a real hippy van," she laughs.

Madeline followed this with two semi-converted Daihatsus, although she admits the term 'campervan' may be ambitious, being little more than MPVs

▲ **Tiny though it is, the simple layout makes this quite a spacious interior**

with seats in. Still, her commitment to pursuing the campervanning lifestyle never wavered, even while searching for a new vehicle.

"I just love the freedom of being in nature," she smiles. "It feeds my soul very deeply." Indeed, such has been Madeline's determination to seek overnight solace in natural surroundings, her most recent 'DIY campervan' used the most unlikely of base vehicles: a humble Hyundai i10 – a car not especially renowned for either its substantial space

or camping credentials, being only 3.6 metres long.

Madeline explains, "I made some stick-on curtains for the windows and rigged up a platform reaching the length of the car. When I lay down my toes touched the rear windscreen and my head hit the front window!" Perhaps not the most conventional camping arrangement but her dedication is admirable, and it was certainly a memorable stepping-stone on her journey to building the perfect van.



CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP
 The nippy 1.2 engine suits the Piaggio well
 Larger campers often don't give you this much kitchen space
 Don't travel anywhere without a brass lantern
 Madeline is pleased as punch with her 'Small Campervan'



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Not so small

In comparison with the Hyundai i10, the Piaggio Porter is positively palatial.

In explaining her choice of van, Madeline says, "I like that the Porter has a bit more headroom than other vans, and can also accommodate a six-foot long bed. I can finally stretch out! It has low fuel usage and is just very simple – it has everything I need and no added extras or fancy features that I won't use."

Seeking a local conversion company in the south west, Madeline contacted Tim Thornbury at Small Campervan to discuss a possible conversion. Based near Malmesbury in Wiltshire, the Small Campervan team focuses – as you might expect – on simple yet bespoke conversions to small vehicles.

This suited Madeline perfectly. "I wanted something very modest – just the basics that would enable me to get up and go away for a few days.

"Tim at Small Campervan was brilliant. We clicked immediately; he understood exactly what I was after and he and his team kept me updated with photos throughout the process. They hadn't converted this particular van before so had to build new templates and put so many hours in, it was extremely good value."

Small but cosy

Madeline and Tim worked together to finalise the layout, which included seating that converts into a fold-out bed stretching the length of the rear cab, a sink with cold running water, a two-ring gas hob, several storage cupboards underneath the seats, a detachable table, LED ceiling lights and, most importantly for Madeline, central heating with a thermostat. "The one thing I wouldn't compromise on was having a nice warm van," Madeline laughs. She also installed a new stereo in the front cab.

While Tim and his Small Campervan

▲ This seating folds to create a bed

team are planning to focus most of their attention on the Nissan NV200 in the coming months, he explains that the Porter would work well in a variety of vans. "We find most customers want to prioritise a comfortable bed and a small kitchen area with hob and sink, then they are set up and ready to go," he adds. "We love hearing individual ideas for smaller vans and have discussed all kinds of weird and wonderful options recently."

Designed for life

The décor was a key consideration in the design, particularly the colours of the cushions and flooring, with Madeline keen to ensure a cohesive flow. She transformed some old cushions for the seating by covering them with new fabric from a local warehouse, and made and lined the cream curtains herself. She has a stash of varying lengths of yoga mat to hand, which she uses in between the

cushions to tilt the bed straight if she has to park on sloped ground – a simple yet ingenious solution!

The final requirement in the conversion brief was to ensure the new campervan would satisfy the DVLA's conditions for registering the vehicle as a 'campervan or motorhome' in order to access cheaper insurance rates and most toll road charges. This included a stipulation to add a table and replace the planned single burner with a two-ring hob.

Small spaces

And the result? "It's absolutely perfect," smiles Madeline. "It suits me so well and is exactly what I was hoping for. It's quiet, it's peaceful – there's no television and although I have ceiling lights, I prefer using candles most of the time."

Her new campervan – now fondly known as Wanda – also accommodates her lifestyle and principles of sustainability. "I've been a vegan for

nearly 30 years and grow most of my own vegetables," Madeline explains. "I just pick a few veggies from the garden before setting off and I'm ready for the weekend. I feel extremely lucky to be able to do that. I park up away from built-up areas, far from the hustle and bustle of modern life, and just relax."

The beautiful campsite at Thistledown Farm near Stroud provided a fantastic backdrop for our photographs, and Madeline and Wanda were in their element surrounded by organic farmland, orchards and wind turbines. However, the campervan itself is not always as keen to blend in as its owner, and its compact and quirky design certainly captures people's attention. "People always come over and want to have a look around – particularly women!" Madeline says.

Their favourite place to explore is the Welsh coastline. "I often head to Pembrokeshire, Gower, Newport, Cardigan, St Davids, Caerfai Bay – there are so many places to choose from,"

CONTACTS
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Madeline says. "I love being by the beach and need a regular fix of sea air. Anywhere wild away from houses and commercial units would suit me!"

For the love of gas

So, is there anything she would change? "I think the conversion is perfect. My only slight bugbear is the lack of readily available spare parts. Being manufactured in Italy, import costs are high so I always keep an eye out on auction sites. Also I would have loved an LPG engine as sustainability is very important to me – that was a compromise I had to make. Maybe in the next van!"

Madeline's dedication to sourcing and converting a campervan that is so closely aligned to her lifestyle and her beliefs is inspiring. And, when you can jump in your van at the end of a busy week with a basket of home-grown veggies and look forward to a beautiful sea view and a warm, comfortable bed for the night, why would you want anything more?