

hotel California

Are you tired of expensive guesthouses and restaurants while travelling? Buying your own home on wheels makes a lot of cents. The new T5 California is the most comfortable Volksie bus ever in the vehicle's 60-year-history. Dieter Losskarn had a drive and a nap in it.



To be brutally honest, despite David Kramer's cute song about the Volksie bus and its huge fan club, I never really liked the VW bus. Make no mistake, I had some great times in them, but for a car-mad guy, they were dogs to drive.

My fondest memories of it go back to the 1970s, before I had a driving licence and was a passenger in one of the very early ones on a trip to Denmark. I still remember the baby-blue and white colours and an enormous

fish crawling out of the sea after having inhaled my first pipe of pot.

Years later, while studying geography, I went with a few fellow students and our professor on a field trip into the Sahara Desert in two Volksie buses, one red, the other blue. In the busy Algerian town of Ghardaia, we finally managed to shake off the bus in which the professor and some of the more eager students were travelling and headed off for a hard-earned break



"I still remember the baby-blue and white colours and an enormous fish crawling out of the sea after having inhaled my first pipe of pot"

with all the alcoholic beverages which had been stored in our vehicle. Those were glorious, cellphone-free times and we were unreachable. After much rough off-roading, we caught up with the others again a couple of days later, somewhere in the Hoggar Mountains. Instead of the expected fit of rage, our professor was extremely pleased to have us all back safe and sound.

Since then, times have changed dramatically. Not only have my smoking habits changed (well okay, maybe at Rastafarian weddings), but I have managed to overcome my minibus aversion. I boarded Volkswagen's newest offering to the South African market, the T5 California, which is based on the well-known multi-van. I must admit, I was very pleasantly surprised. Absolutely nothing reminded me of previous Volksie bus generations. The feel and rather small size of the sporty leather steering wheel is great and the irritating, metre-long, unpleasantly inaccurate gear shift has been replaced by a precise joystick, which is fun to use.

The elevated roof is made of aluminium – 25 per cent lighter than the glass-fibre reinforced plastic – which also allegedly improves lightning protection (there was no lightning storm to test that statement). You no longer have to struggle to open and close the roof as it's now lifted hydraulically,

making for great entertainment wherever the vehicle is parked.

There's a lot more room to move in the new California. A wider roof allows for comfortable sleeping, making the upper bed 100 mm longer and 110 mm wider. The twin bench seat provides two additional sleeping spaces which, when required, can be folded back.

The California is known for its smart use of space. A picnic table is hidden in the interior cladding of the sliding door, to be used either inside or outside the vehicle. Two folding seats stored in the rear door are standard. On one side, there is a wardrobe and kitchen area, with a two-burner gas cooker and a 42-litre compressor fridge.

Unlike the earlier buses, the interior oozes luxury at first glance. There are frosted glass covers for the sink and gas stove. But a closer look reveals the cost-cutting use of cheap materials for the water-tap. What first appears to be aluminium or brushed stainless steel is, in fact, foil-covered plastic, which was already peeling. The interior fabric seemed a bit too bright and delicate. It'll look (and probably smell) horrible after frying a couple of steaks in the bus.

The furniture is made of aluminium boards with a corrugated core, offering extra stability, but losing none of the California cosiness, as the new material

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has been given an attractive timber-finish covering.

Despite its outdoor qualities, the T5 is a European vehicle, made for that market. It's perfect for their weekend travellers escaping the city and easy to handle in traffic, with a powerful but economical engine.

In most European cities and close to many major tourist attractions, you'll find parking spaces designated for mobile homes, with electricity and waste-water dumps. Some are free of



The low-down

Price: Starting from R449 000 for the manual version and R479 000 for the 4Motion (diff-lock R6 900); available only by order
Engine: 2,5 litre 5 cyl. TDI; 128 kw @ 3500 r/min; manual or 4Motion
0 – 100 km/h: 13/13,3 sec
Top speed: 185/181 km/h
Consumption: 8,3/9,4 litres/100 km
Fuel tank: 80 litres
Tank range: 964/850 km
Ground Clearance: 180 mm
Towing capacity: 2500 kg
Length: 4890 mm
Towing capacity: 2500 kg
For more information: www.vw.co.za

To see:

Watch this and you'll want to try the T5:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=eW2n2LtgPww
Don't try this with your Volksie bus:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=loPHIH2m3lo

For the same amount of money (R479 000), you could buy:

Land Rover Discovery 2.7 TD16 S Diesel R450 000 and have money left for a roof-rack, tent and camping gear
Mitsubishi Pajero 3.2 DI-D GLX LWB R393 000 and spend the rest on a fully-equipped off-road trailer

Boys' outdoor toys

charge, others will cost a couple of euros. There, you can park safely on flat ground, which is exactly what the California has been built for. Thanks to the powerful, independent vehicle heater, even winter trips can be rather cosy and, with all-wheel drive (called 4Motion or Syncro in earlier VW models), snow-covered roads are no problem at all. No wonder the 'Cali', as it's affectionately known in Europe, has a cult following there, with regular club meetings at weekends.

In South Africa, the situation is different. Nobody in their right mind would park overnight at Signal Hill, Table Mountain, or any other public place for that matter. The California has a sophisticated, urban quality to it – roughing it in the bush is better done in a 4x4 with roof tent or an SUV with an off-road trailer. But this is an ideal everyday family vehicle that will do double duty in the holidays. And it's elegant enough to park in front of a five-star hotel – if you ever feel the need.

The on-road behaviour is great; there's no top-heavy bus-feeling at all, thanks to the improved bodywork stiffness and the development of a new chassis type. Along with this, generously dimensioned stabilisers suppress lateral tendencies of the vehicle in curves, while load-dependent dampers improve the comfort of the suspension. Standard driving safety features include ABS and ESP with brake assist.

The Volkswagen California is multi-talented: it's as agile and fast as a sedan, yet offers storage and living space for leisure activities. Which means that, after having taken the kids to school, with your home comforts in the back, you will be tempted to leave the urban environment immediately. Welcome to Hotel California. Maybe, as the Eagles' song goes, you can checkout anytime, but you can never leave....

Next month in Wheels: We go totally ballistic in a 500hp Porsche Cayenne Turbo.



The air under there

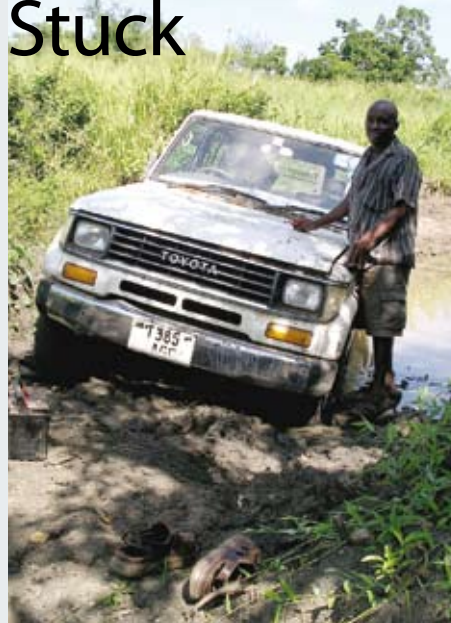
We've said it before: even the best 4x4ers are going to get stuck at some point. The test of class lies in the way you get yourself out of that fix.... For flat tyres and certain 'stuck' situations, there's no doubt that the hi-lifting jack is a 4x4er's best friend – but in some situations, it can be more of a danger than a saviour. Enter the air jack. Essentially a large PVC balloon, the jack is placed under the vehicle un-inflated and then connected to the exhaust with a hose. The bag inflates with the exhaust gas, lifting the vehicle. Air jacks have numerous advantages: they're lightweight, compact, easy to use and come into their own on soft surfaces where hi-lifts are problematic. The power jack from Takla features heat- and abrasion-resistant jacking surfaces, a heavy-duty industrial hose adapter as well as a pressure release valve that makes the jack diffi-

Pimp my golf cart

It looks like a golf cart custom-made for a gangsta rapper, a cross between a quad-bike and a dune buggy. The Polaris Ranger RZR Razor 800 (two cylinder, fuel-injection) is designed for the sport market, is small, agile and lots of fun to drive. In the United States, they are popular on trails in nature areas where the maximum width for ATVs is 102 centimetres, leaving the Yamaha Rhinos parked outside the two poles at trail entrances. In South Africa, you can enjoy ATVs with the whole family on existing tracks, without destroying the environment. Despite the price tag of R125 000, RZR's are selling fast. Find out more on www.purepolaris.co.za.



Stuck



We got stuck in black clay crossing a stream in Tanzania. We worked into the night trying to dig ourselves out, until the battery was flat. We slept in the truck, but were devoured by mosquitos all night. Next morning we hired some bicycles from a local village and cycled 23 kilometres to get cellphone reception. We were eventually towed out by a Land Rover.

Gavin Schafer, Krakeel

If you have photographs of a 4x4 getting stuck, e-mail them to wheels@getaway.co.za or post them to Getaway Wheels, PO Box 180, Howard Place, 7450 Cape Town. You could win a Nissan Secure Tech Survival Kit worth R1 000, comprising an Off-Road Tactix manual and DVD, as well as a recovery bag with pull strap, shackles and a pair of gloves.



