

Devon Cream



As an alternative to the omnipresent VW Transporter, Ford's mid-sized Tranny really is a contender, and this Devon Firefly is a great camper and daily driver

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It's true, the Ford Transit Custom is busy stealing quite a chunk of the VW's thunder these days and for good reasons. Where the iconic and undeniably desirable Vee-dub has evolved over the many decades it's been in production, the Ford is a very recent ground-up design, so its looks are far more rakish and modern – more 'car'. The Transporter, in spite of top quality and recent restyling to become the current T6, still retains just a whiff of old-world builder's van about it. Meanwhile, the Tranny's equipment levels are very good in standard form and then there's the money – your wallet will look far less anorexic after the Ford deal is done than it might if you go Volkswagen.

Devon helps with the numbers, too, as its products are aimed squarely at the value-for-money end of the campervan market.

The firm originally came into being as far back as 1956, converting – you guessed it – VW Transporters and based in... right again,

Devon. Sidmouth, in fact. It was 35 years later that the current owners took the business over and these days it's very different from the Devon of old. From balmy Sidmouth, a six-hour drive and 355 miles will see you arriving in the 'frozen' north and Devon's current home, Ferryhill in County Durham. VWs are still on

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offer, but Fiat, Renault and Mercedes are on the menu, too – all converted in solid, workmanlike fashion, with the latest Transit range a more recent arrival.

The Firefly is available with a high roof or, as here, in pop-top form and based on the short-wheelbase version of the mid-sized Transit. This one is on a used vehicle – a 2016, 66-plate with just 12,000 miles under its

wheels. Nicely run in then, and nice for your bank account, too, as it's over seven grand cheaper than an all-new Firefly – albeit with a reduced vehicle specification. And there's more good news as Devon has a plentiful supply of these vans for conversion.

If you do decide to opt for the full-fat new version, the extra money will buy such niceties as a heated windscreen, air-conditioning, cruise control and more powerful engine. And with both automatic transmission and all-wheel drive launched and hopefully arriving soon, your Firefly could become a rather capable, go-anywhere camper.

Fire-flying

In spite of being near identical in dimensions to the benchmark T6, the Transit felt, to me, much more compact and car-like to navigate. And this is recognisably a Ford as the good stuff is all here. Slick gearchange, good ride quality, excellent brakes and a nicely small steering wheel all contribute to a very pleasant drive.

And I gave it a very good go – through the hills of County Durham and high-speed blasts up and down the A1 to and from our photoshoot. Gearing is noticeably very high with top gear seeing only around 1,800rpm. Great, but I did find myself doing a bit more cog-swapping than is usual in a van like this. But, considering there's just 100 horsepower on tap, this is easily forgiven and it's better to be higher geared than too low – you don't want the motor revving high at motorway speeds.

Twin-belted seats in the rear and real potential to beat many car park height barriers help make this Firefly a viable daily driver and it could easily be your only mode of motorised transport. And this is especially so as, at under five metres long, it'll fit snugly into the parking bays at your local supermarket.

So, Ford's Transit DNA is here in spades and mostly excellent, but sadly found wanting in one section of the cab. And it's shame as like its

DEVON FIREFLY

PROS

- ✓ Excellent value
- ✓ Strongly made conversion
- ✓ Car-like drive
- ✓ 'Virtual' washroom with fixed cassette toilet

CONS

- ✗ Only single beds possible
- ✗ No heating as standard
- ✗ Lack of lighting in lounge

ensconced deep in bowels of Ford Europe, the heater designer didn't get the emails, so the controls have never been improved. Finally, a bit of an off-piste moment as Renault's excellent new Trafic is also a very viable and good-value alternative to the T6 and Transit Custom. And Devon's Sunrise uses this base with a near-identical layout to the Firefly. If you think the Firefly might well float your campervan boat, try the Renault, too.

A recent trip of ours saw the VW T6, Transit Custom and the Trafic do battle in Wales (issue three *Campervan*). Given the T6 was on the trip, it was a surprise for all when the Trafic came out on top for verve, comfort and drivability.

siblings and some ancestors, the heater controls are a bad joke. Mounted on the wrong side of the gearlever from the driver's point of view angled downwards and with small controls and legends they're very successful at being awful to use. I found myself thinking up a story where,

Living

Campervan pop-tops can literally be a pain to raise and lower. The fiddly internal straps and fingernail-breaking latches all have to be operated as you peer up into the darkness, gaining a stiff neck in the process. The Devon pop-top is the firm's own design and proved a joy to use as two external catches are easily operated to allow the roof to rise. Cleverly, they can only be released with the rear doors open, making for good security. Okay, if it's bad weather you're gonna get wet, but I'll pay that price any day and keep my fingernails and temper intact.

Like the traditional furniture and upholstery, Internals are set out traditionally, too – the same as many of the type, with twin seats ahead of kitchen, storage and toilet. This two-berth layout provides only single beds so little chance of a cheeky snuggle, but it brings many advantages including being able to get in and out of bed – even leave the van through the rear doors – without disturbing your partner. Good for camping friends, too, and who don't really want to have to kip together, a

Dave always grips the steering wheel firmly when he's about to drive into a tree...

double bed. Then there's the kitchen and toilet area, both with full-standing headroom and far more akin to a larger motorhome. Park, pop the top, swivel the cab seats and you're pitched and ready for some camping action.

Eat, seat, sleep

Stashed right next to where it's stowed, the lightweight, wall-mounted table is easy to set up, providing eating space for two on the driver's side. And it's out of the way, too, so you can easily move in, out and through the interior with the table left set up.

With four relatively upright single seats on offer, you might think that feet-up lounging is never gonna happen, but there is a solution and it involves the beds. Make-up is easy as both rear seat bases slide to meet cab seats, backrests flatten to join in and a couple of infill sections are added. Heads to the rear and feet on the cab seat base is the sleeping position, but turn around and the cab seat backrests are waiting. Day beds, feet-up relaxing? Yes, a bit of both and if you manage to fit a bracket to

one of the rear seat headrest panels, there's a chance that you could mount a telly in the perfect place for viewing, feet up, drink in hand, back nicely supported. And there's more, some cushions placed along the walls and you might get six people seated in here sofa-style for a noggin-and-natter evening when the weather's rubbish which, let's face it, often is on our side of the Channel.

Back to kipping and these beds are firm, long enough, but rather narrow, so sleeping bags are the best solution for a comfy night. Stowing y'r bedding is easy, too, as both rear seat bases offer plenty of space for sleeping bag and pillow. And it's when you peer in here that you get an insight into Devon's construction principles as the frames and bed slides are very strongly constructed in metal. Devon's products may lean towards entry-level and value for money, but a long time in the campervan building business has taught which bits will fail if not engineered correctly.

Absolutely no complaints here.

At the bed heads there's a pair of reading lamps that – touch-switched – give a night light, then full power. A pair of downlighters in the cab, too, so great if you're parked there and wanting to get into a good book. And as is almost always the case with this layout, the cab seats are the best 'armchairs' in the house. Great task lighting, but general illumination could be a bit better. There's a strip LED lamp on the ceiling to the rear but another one, further forwards, would make things brighter.

Fire-frying

Well, a bit more than just frying as the galley kitchen has an oven/grill as well as its two-burner hob. In many campers, fitting an – often optional – oven robs so much storage that it's really not a good idea. Go out for pizza or Sunday lunch and you won't be tripping over your un-stowed stuff in the van. Here, though, that's not a

problem as there are plenty of lockers and cupboards on both sides – a drawer, too. The oven is Smev's smallest, but useful all the same, the grill as ineffective as most, the oven burner is controlled and good. The combo sink and hob is decent and above it a set of camping crockery are neatly stowed in niches in the wall.

The fridge is a standard Dometic item, three-way, manually operated and perfectly adequate. Below, a locker houses the leisure battery, fed by a mains/12V control unit that's a bit old-fashioned, but simple to use. Culinary operations will discover the lack of working surface, but with a divided glass lid fitted to the hob/sink, things are never going to be that bad.

A proper toilet!

Plenty of other campers make do with a portable toilet that slides out of a locker, but here you get the real deal – a fixed, swivel-bowl, electric flush loo that's the same as seen in those big gin-palace motorhomes. Come



Single bed layout keeps the central walkway clear

Do you have one of these?
Write in with your stories and the modifications you've made



Proper cassette loo is rare in a SWB pop-top camper



The kitchen even boasts built-in crockery storage

SPECIFICATION

- Devon Firefly**
- Base vehicle** Ford Transit Custom SWB
- Drive** Front wheels
- Engine** 2.0-litre TDCI (Euro 6)
- Power** 100bhp
- Economy** 33mpg
- Gearbox** 5-speed
- Number of travel seats** 4
- Berths** 2
- Leisure battery capacity** 110Ah
- Payload** 600kg
- Length x with x height** 4.97m x 1.98m x 2.05m
- Standard equipment** Nearside bed bed measures 1.83m (6ft 0in) x 0.60m (2ft 0in), offside bed measures 1.88m (6ft 2in) x 0.60m (2ft 0in). Kitchen with two-burner hob/sink combo, mini oven/grill, 60-litre three-way fridge, two shelved cupboards, one deep locker, cutlery/utensils drawer, dedicated crockery storage includes eight plates and four mugs. Fixed Thetford cassette toilet. Two mains sockets, two 12V sockets. LED lighting – two downlighters in cab, two touch-switch reading lamps in lounge, strip-lamp in kitchen / toilet area. Dining from wall-mount, single-leg table. Single-glazed windows with lined curtains. Fresh water tank 32 litres, waste water tank 27 litres.
- Optional equipment** None
- Warranty** 2 years for base vehicle and 1 year for conversion
- Price from** £29,995
- Price as tested** £29,995

Spacious and airy lounge layout works really well



Is it just us, or is Dave the twin of the Supervisor from the cult TV show The Prisoner?! 'Orange Alert, Orange Alert...'



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emptying time it's supremely easy to slide out the waste cassette as the service door is easily accessed with the nearside rear door open. Okay, so you have to draw the rear door curtains to get privacy, but screening from the front is taken care of by a swing-out screen that blocks the aisle nicely. It does more as, rather than being a flat door, it's a bi-fold that creates a dog-leg screen that encloses a much bigger chunk of the floor towards the front. Clever, now there's room not just to use the toilet in comfort, but maybe use the space as a changing area too. Washing comes courtesy of the kitchen sink in this 'virtual washroom'.

Kit or miss?

With decent capacity fresh and waste water tanks you might ask why the Firefly has no water heater. The truth is, without a full-blown washroom it's not really needed. It's far quicker and economical to simply boil a mains or gas kettle for hot water. A water heater would take up valuable stowage space. Space heating tells a different story, however.

If you plan to always stay on sites with mains hook-up then a fan heater might do, but then you've got to site it somewhere and stow it, too. And if you camp away from the mains it's gonna get mighty chilly at times – especially with the pop-top popped. The solution is a blown-air heater, running on diesel from the van's tank. Compact and economical, they can keep you warm while camping and they're safe to use while driving, something rear seat passengers will appreciate. Budget around a grand to get a unit fitted.

campervan VERDICT

Devon has long offered value conversions that work well and the Firefly is one of them. The used Transit Custom base is an affordable breath of fresh air in these days of £50K-plus campervans. The full standing-height kitchen and fixed toilet are big pluses, but do bear in mind that this layout is only really suitable for people wanting single beds.