

Not the first, but the best-known





Peter Vaughan...

Just as Christopher Columbus was not the first European to reach the Americas, this Westfalia is not the first fixed bed camper to land here. But, like its namesake, this 'van is sure to soon become the most famous of its ilk

WESTFALIA COLUMBUS 600D

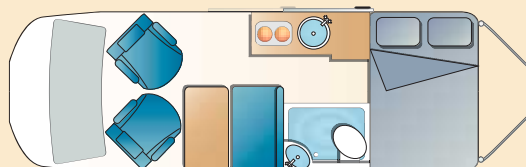
Price from: £46,150

Berths: 3/4 **Travel seats:** 4

Base vehicle: Fiat Ducato
LWB panel van

Length: 6.00m

Gross weight: 3,500kg



I'll admit that I was more than usually excited by the prospect of this road test. I've admired Westfalia products since testing a late-model, rear-engined VW Vanagon (a US-spec T3) over 20 years ago. That campervan exhibited a thoroughness to its design and build that remains rare to this day. No wonder that classic VW camper fans rate the Westfalia badge so highly.

But here we have not a VW, but a Fiat, and not a pop-top camper, but a fully-fledged motorhome with shower compartment and fixed bed. Of the three models Westfalia sells here, two are based on the Ducato and all are high-tops, reflecting today's market.

And times have changed at Westfalia, too, as the company is now owned by Rapido, a manufacturer better known for its luxury A-classes. The French firm has restructured the business and developed new models like the latest Ford Nugget (not sold in Britain), while also renewing its export efforts. A stand at last October's NEC show was specifically baiting retailers to join the brand; first to sign up was Lowdham's of Nottingham who supplied the Columbus tested here.

On the face of it, the Columbus

looks a fairly conventional continental design, offered in LWB transverse fixed double bed format or an extra-long version with single beds, each retaining the sliding door on our offside in right-hand drive form. As ever with a Westfalia conversion, though, there are intriguing details, as well as class-leading build quality.

For several years the Columbus has also been a personal favourite when perusing the hundreds of models on display at the Düsseldorf Caravan Salon so, like meeting one of your heroes, this test could quite easily result in disappointment...

GOING GREY

No not me, but the choice of Alumino Grey for the exterior. Not an exciting selection when there's Profondo Red on offer, or Carioca Yellow for the really brave. The alloy wheels are a £590 option, but they look a bit bland. The only excitement on the outside of this motorhome is reserved for the Van Design Package; £1,100-worth of black glass, mirror-finish surrounds to the side windows. This is no Adria Twin GT or lime green IH, instead the German 'van boasts subtlety and simplicity of form. ►





With the rear bed stowed there's room for bikes to stand upright



Table clips on for *al fresco* dining. See also fridge slid out across doorway



It looks like a radio but it controls the fridge, heating and hot water

On the road, the only issue of note was the lack of rattles – that famous Westfalia build quality shining through within a mile or two of leaving Lowdham. Or at least the Columbus was commendably quiet once I'd removed the larger of the two burners on the Can hob (strangely, the smaller burner was well fixed down, while the larger one was not only loose but not functioning properly).

In the cab, the black Fiat fascia is matched by grey/black Roseland fabric (leather is the only other option). The standard trim is very automotive, definitely more car than caravan. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there's no tacky fake wood to be seen anywhere here.

What you do get is ESP (which could save your life) and Traction+ (which might get you off a wet pitch). For a full set of base vehicle toys you need to order the Chassis Plus Package (£2,585 for £3,920-worth of gear, says Westfalia), adding height adjustment for both front seats, a second airbag, electric mirrors, cruise control, daytime running lights and cab blinds. Also included in the pack is a 120-litre fuel tank, which could give you 800 miles between fill-ups, or more than enough to drive from Calais to St Tropez! That's as long as you're not hammering down the autoroute; careful touring should see 30mpg-plus possible once the engine has loosened up.

This one had just a couple of hundred miles recorded but it still seemed a bit more perky than the standard 130 Multijet.

Sure enough, it wears a '150' logo on the front wing, indicating the fitment of a 148bhp motor with variable geometry turbo, which seems the best all-round power unit for all but the largest of motorhomes.

Around town there's good visibility from the twin-lens door mirrors and side windows aft of the cab, but the limited vision afforded by the small windows in the rear doors is reflected in the lack of an interior mirror; reversing sensors would seem an advisable addition. When driving off you'll hear a high-pitched whistle if you haven't retracted the electric step; it doesn't auto-retract but its switch is easily reached from the driver's seat, even when belted-up.

“Brilliant. There is just no other word for the way the double travel seat makes into a bed.”

PERFECT FOR PASSENGERS

The first of the Westfalia USPs strikes you as soon as you slide open the big side door. Whilst on our layout diagram, the seating format looks predictable enough, in reality this is one of the Columbus' best features.

In place of the typical half-dinette, Westfalia fits a truly automotive double rear passenger seat. Not only is the seat ergonomically shaped but it is wider than average and comes with height-adjustable head restraints that can also be angled forward for added comfort and safety.

The three-point seatbelts are, of course, fully integrated in what appears to be a massively engineered structure, while more impressive still is the inclusion of Isofix fittings for child seats – still almost unheard of in

motorhomes but an expected feature of modern cars.

The rear seat offers vastly superior comfort both on the road and on site, while the automotive look is continued with the plastic trim on the wall alongside the seat. And the passenger safety theme is reiterated by the table, which stores in the overcab (retained in place by a strap and still leaving room for a little more storage). Could it be better? Only if the side window was a slider, so that it could be opened en route.

In the standard Columbus, the rear seat also tips forward to reveal a small area for hanging clothes between its backrest and the washroom wall. Our test vehicle, however, had the £735 extra front bed. Now, usually, this type of layout in a van conversion offers a rather makeshift front bed using the cab seat squab for feet and only offering enough room for one child of sub-teenage height. Westfalia's solution, though, not only encompasses a better seat but a better bed, too.

Quite simply, the whole seat tips forward and an extra mattress section (attached to the back of the backrest) unfolds as it does so. The result, in seconds, is a flat bed with a two-piece cold foam mattress that's big enough for a small-to-medium-sized adult or two little kids. Brilliant. There is no other word for it.

IN BLACK AND WHITE

Along with the grey seat fabric and a lack of carpet or curtains, the interior design has a modern, rather Scandinavian simplicity to it. There is some wood, but not too much – just on each end of the galley and discreetly on the underside of the top lockers. The cupboard doors ►

Like other European van conversions but with a look of its own and superior quality, too



Two loos? One on the left is reflected in mirrored door





Transverse rear bed is supremely comfy thanks to Froli springs



Front bed is oh-so-clever and big enough for an adult



Fabrics are automotive in style, table stores above the cab for travel

are scratch-proof white gloss and the brushed aluminium edging (echoed on the upper lockers) creates a lip around the galley's striking black mineral glass worktop. Not only does that countertop look stunning, it stayed looking that way with a quick wipe down after cooking.

Not that you'll be preparing anything much more extravagant than pasta and sauce on just two burners (with spark ignition), but the stainless-steel sink is an adequate size for washing up and the lip around the galley is sufficient to retain Fairy Liquid suds from escaping to the mottled (to hide the dirt!) vinyl floor, despite the lack of a draining board.

WHAT, NO WARDROBE?

Keeping the stylish furniture unit low from its forward end, where it partially blocks the sliding door, right back to where it meets the bed is also unusual as others often place a high-set fridge or a wardrobe towards the rear of the galley.

That makes the Columbus feel more spacious, and gives it more kitchen worktop – which also acts as a convenient bedside table – but if you can't live without a wardrobe one can be added here as an optional extra.

I'd go without; there's a drying rack in the washroom if you come back from a walk dripping wet and Westfalia offers a hanging suit bag to go under the bed if you want to travel with a 'Sunday best' outfit. Pity there are no coat hooks, though.

Kitchen storage is otherwise mostly contained within five deep drawers, plus those upper cupboards stretching back over the rear bed (on both sides). All have positive locking catches, as well as a feeling that they'll still open and close as precisely after a decade or more of use.

SECOND OPINION

"Even the owner's handbook exhibits a rare attention to detail that's more akin to a major motor manufacturer"

ANDREW BAXTER NEWS & ONLINE EDITOR

THOUGHT FOR FOOD

But where is the fridge? In a characteristically clever move, Westfalia has commissioned a special 40-litre compressor unit from Dometic and sited it in the end of the galley, where it slides out, drawer-style across the entrance. Its top-loading design means no more kneeling on the floor to find the margarine, but better still, when parked in the summer sun and using the table outside (clipped to the back of the galley) you don't have to clamber back inside to reach another cold beer.

It's just a pity that the optional flyscreen for the sliding door conflicts with use of the exterior table rail. It's not the neat sliding cassette flyscreen we've seen on rivals from Globecar but a simple device attached with (unevenly fitted) Velcro and press studs – it doesn't look like £345-worth, more like a DIY addition.

Much more impressive is the control panel, which looks more like a car radio recessed into the moulded panel behind the kitchen. In typical Westfalia style, this controls the fridge, the heating and the hot water, as well as including an alarm clock and exterior temperature gauge. You can even set the heating to come on and off at set times, just like at home. And, like in your bricks and mortar, this 4.8kW diesel-powered system from Alde has convectors throughout the living area (even in the cab with the optional Winter Package). It's extremely quiet, except when building

up to temperature from cold, and you just dial in the temperature you want on the control panel's LCD screen – up to 40 degrees! You can even set a separate temperature for the washroom. Better still, with the Winter Package you get a separately controlled heated floor. Now that really is a luxury (much better than carpet), especially as it includes heating beneath the shower tray.

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE DOOR

One Westfalia option (£275 to you, sir) that's sure to divide opinion amongst the more Victorian amongst us is the mirrored door to the washroom – that's a door that's all mirror, on both sides. It certainly looks good, but whether you think you look so good, reflected in it, naked, first thing in the morning, is up to you...

Other than that, the Columbus washroom exhibits more hewn-from-granite build quality, plus practical touches like the two large drain holes from the shower tray. The fixed corner basin is a decent size, the clothes drying rack is useful, the mirrored cupboard has adequate space for your toiletries and there's just enough room to take a shower. Simply pull out the basin's tap (its wall bracket sticks wherever you want via a suction cap) and cover the door with a high-quality, non-sticky shower curtain. It's worth noting too that the fresh water tank is onboard and ►



the waste tank is heated as part of the Winter Package, so combined with the class-leading heating, the Columbus is a van conversion to use all year round.

ON YOUR BIKE

The fresh water lives under the bed on the nearside, while the equivalent space opposite is occupied by the twin leisure batteries (the second 85Ah unit being another option, but a useful one for those who like to use aires, rally fields or CLs). Above each is a cupboard of generous capacity that's most easily reached when the bed above is slid back.

Most of these rear fixed bed van conversions offer extra load carrying by folding the bed away, but the system used in here is different from the norm. The bed in the Columbus is split down the middle and the rear half can be tipped to vertical, where the base is held in position with a strap. This leaves enough space to load bikes, or other tall, bulky items, just inside the rear doors, although Westfalia says that with the front wheels removed bikes can be carried below the bed even when it is down. Tie down hooks are fitted and there is a low net to stop smaller items sliding forward when braking. I would, however, have liked to see a security net fitted to cater for larger items and the whole of the under-bed area.

Once the back section of bed base has been raised, it can also be slid rearwards to create more floor space on site. Certainly, this gives the cook more room to move, as well as making the cupboards under the bed more accessible from inside the 'van.

AT THE DOUBLE

As for the double bed itself, it's hard to see how it could be improved, apart from by providing a fold-away step to get in – it's a pole-vaulting three feet from floor to mattress. Once you're in, of course, there's the usual proviso that only one of you can easily get to the loo in the night (without climbing over the other).

LIKES



- Ergonomic rear seat with Isofix
- Alde heating system with heated floor

DISLIKED



- Poorly fitted flyscreen for side door
- Reduced payload with options fitted

WANTED

- Sliding window alongside rear seat
- Coat hooks in absence of wardrobe

THE MAMM VERDICT

Here's a motorhome that takes a popular format and improves it. The rear seat is vastly superior and it makes a better bed, too. The quality of finish beats the opposition and the heating system is the best we've ever seen in a van conversion. A winner!



If that's not a major concern, you'll sleep well on a mattress supported by the luxury of Froli springs – if the access is a deal-breaker there's always the longer Columbus 640E with its lengthways single beds.

The 600D's bed is a good size too, and one that has a sunroof above, two opening windows in the back doors, radio speakers (optional) and neat little storage recesses in the corners

FACTS AND FIGURES



PRICE

From: £48,150
As tested: £60,260



BASICS

Berths: 3/4
Travel seats: 4 (inc driver)

Warranty: Two years on base vehicle and conversion

Type approval: European Whole Vehicle

Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No



BODYWORK

Steel-bodied panel van with integral high roof

Insulation: Floor thickness 20mm, with a 10mm gap for the heated floor option. Walls and roof 10mm foam insulation



DIMENSIONS

Length: 6.00m (19ft 8in)
Width: 2.05m (6ft 8¾in)

Height: 2.60m (8ft 6½in)

Wheelbase: 4.04m (13ft 3in)

Rear overhang: 1.02m (3ft 4in)

Gross vehicle weight: 3,500kg

Optional gross weight: N/a

Payload: 504kg standard model, 280kg with options as tested

Interior height: 1.89m (6ft 2½in)



BASE VEHICLE

Type: Fiat Ducato LWB panel van
Engine: 2.3-litre Multijet Euro V

Power: 130bhp (standard)

Engine options: 148bhp (as tested), 177bhp 3-litre

Gearbox: Six-speed manual

Gearbox options: Comfort-Matic semi-automatic

MPG on test: 29.0

Standard features: Remote central locking, electric windows, driver's airbag,

and over the windows. There's even a mains socket back here (perfect for watching a bedtime film on your laptop) and the rear door handle has been relocated so you can get out this way in an emergency.

I wasn't planning to run away from the Columbus, though. On this test I met a 'hero' for a few days, and not only did it live up to my high expectations, it exceeded them. **MAMM**



REVIEWS

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Out&AboutLive
outandaboutlive.co.uk/motorhomes

cab seats with twin armrests and height adjustment for driver, ESP and Traction+



KITCHEN

Cooker: Can two-burner hob

Sink: Circular stainless-steel bowl, swivelling chromed mixer tap

Fridge: Slide-out 40-litre compressor-type

Microwave: None



LOUNGING AND DINING

Automotive-type rear double passenger seat, twin swivel cab seats, wall-mounted table (stores clipped into overcab shelf)



BEDS

Rear transverse double: 1.94m x 1.38m (6ft 4½in x 4ft 6½in)

Optional front bed: 1.77m x 0.87m to 1.09m (5ft 9¾in x 2ft 10¼in to 3ft 7in)



WASHROOM

Toilet: Thetford swivel-bowl electric flush taking water from main tank

Shower: Washbasin tap pulls out to act as showerhead, shower curtain fits with press studs to protect door, twin-drain shower tray, optional underfloor heating, separate temperature setting for washroom heating



ESSENTIALS

Fresh water: 90 litres (inboard)

Waste water: 100 litres (underslung, heated with Winter Package)

Space heating: Alde boiler feeds four wet radiators, diesel operation, 4.8kW. Winter Package adds extra radiator in cab and underfloor heating (including shower tray)

Water heating: Alde boiler, diesel operation

Leisure battery: 85Ah (optional second leisure battery fitted to test 'van)

Gas: 1 x 2.75kg Campingaz

Lighting: Two spotlamps over each side of rear bed, two over kitchen and a further two over table. LED strip light over side door, LED light in washroom. LED Light Package (part of Westfalia Chassis Plus Package) adds LED strips under all top lockers and in decorative corner panel on washroom wall

Mains sockets: 3 (kitchen, bedroom, lounge)

12V sockets: 3 (kitchen, bedroom, lounge)

Blinds/curtains: Seitz S4 flat blinds/flyscreens to all habitation area windows, Remis blinds to cab (part of Westfalia Chassis Plus Package), optional flyscreen to sliding door fitted with press studs and Velcro, Winter Package adds Silver Screen for cab

Ventilation: Two 500mm x 700mm wind-up sunroofs (lounge and bedroom) fitted in place of standard equipment 400mm x 600mm tilt and slide sunroofs, small wind-up roof vent in bathroom, top-hinged windows throughout



OPTIONS

Fitted to test vehicle: 148bhp engine (£1,040), Westfalia Chassis Plus Package (£2,585), alloy wheels (£590), mudflaps (£130), steering wheel-

mounted radio controls (£105), radio/CD/MP3 (£460), speakers in bedroom (£155), front bed (£735), metallic paint (£510), colour-coded bumper (£180), Winter Package (£1,640), Van Design Package (£1,100), additional battery (£260), large sunroofs (£345 x 2), mirror door for washroom (£275), external shower (£225), awning (£1,085), flyscreen for door (£345)

THE ALTERNATIVES

AUTO-TRAIL V-LINE 620

Useful boot replaces Fiat 'barn doors' on this stylish newcomer



GLOBECAR GLOBESCOUT-STYLE

Well made, well priced, and it comes with a clever expanding washroom

