

LEISUREDRIIVE VW CRUSADER



WELLHOUSE TOYOTA GRANVIA



# JUST THE TICKET

Best of both worlds – used base vehicles with new rising roof conversions spell motorhoming value for money

Words and pictures by Mark Brownrigg



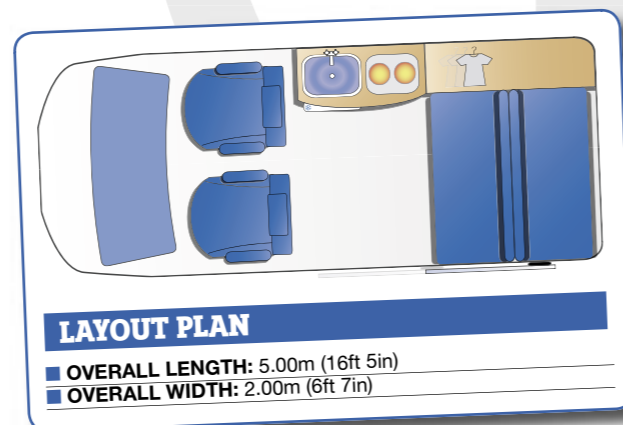
Not everybody has £50k to splash-out on a new motorhome. However, you can still take to the road in what looks like a new camper for less than half of that, and without

waving a magic wand. Simply find a trustworthy converter who'll build a new conversion for you inside a cherry-picked used commercial van.

However, isn't it a bit dangerous, grafting new onto old?

To get it right you face two crucial choices: first, select a converter who has an established reputation for good quality work; then make sure that the firm uses low mileage vehicles, which are renowned for both longevity and reliability.

This month's head-to-head looks at two diverse products from this specialist market. Wellhouse Leisure uses seemingly indestructible Toyota Granvias as a base



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vehicle. Leisuredrive uses the bulletproof VW T5. In both cases, the converters' bodyshops go over – and under – the base vehicle with a magnifying glass to fix any blemish and then re-spray. The finished article, complete with its new conversion, looks for all the world like a

brand-new camper, but costing around £20k, rather than the £40k-plus you would need to shell out for the real thing.

Our two converters target first-time buyers, but have other clients who are either downsizing or are active climbers, cyclists, windsurfers: outdoor people who want to use their camper as a car, bedroom and changing room.

Both the test 'vans offer the classic camper layout: a swivelling cab passenger seat turns to face a bench seat in the rear, and an offside longitudinal kitchen unit. The height for standing comfortably erect is provided by a rising roof (rising lengthways in the Toyota Granvia, sideways in the VW Crusader).

Because of their relatively small size, the facilities in both are pretty basic compared to a larger motorhome. But most small panel van

conversions retain strong links to camping principles, where you are deliberately setting out to rough it a bit, rather than putting your home 'on a trolley' and taking it with you.

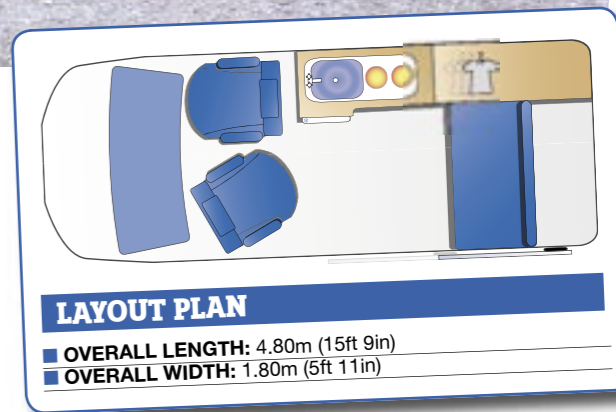
In this context, either 'van provides a durable conversion, which should give many years of good holidays to its owners. Also, both are designed to be used as your car for weekly commuting – a major buying consideration in this financially challenging era.

**MOTIVE POWER**

Here, there's a fascinating comparison. The Toyota Granvia is powered by a 2.7-litre petrol engine, which is converted to run on LPG, and generates 140bhp of enthusiastic grunt through an easy-to-use automatic transmission. Although doing only 23-24mpg equivalent on the LPG (to which the engine automatically switches, about 20 seconds after start-up), the much lower cost of LPG gives the fuel cost equivalent of around 40mpg.

In contrast, the VW Crusader has a 1.9-litre turbo diesel engine, which generates 85bhp and achieves around 40mpg. Here, there's a five-speed manual gearbox with dash-mounted gearchange.

If your initial reaction is to shy away from petrol engines, think again – especially if you



live in London's Low Emission Zone. LEZ controls are driving owners of old diesels into getting rid of their motorhomes and switching to petrol. Wellhouse Leisure finds itself doing a brisk trade with the LEZ-compliant Granvia, which jumps through the emissions hoop and offers cheaper running on its LPG.

The second difference lies in the ages of the two test vehicles: the Granvia was 16-years-old, and the Crusader just six years. Don't jump to the 'no-brainer' conclusion, because it's probably wrong. Both vehicles are engineered to drive 250,000 to 300,000 miles with sensible maintenance, so these two superb engines could give another 20 years of service.



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- 1 The VW cab is a simple, functional affair
- 2 The Granvia has a small but luxurious cab

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3 Looking forward, a plainer interior, but more space and headroom  
4 View to kitchen and rear bench seat displays excellent build quality  
5 The larger table holds two place settings comfortably

Think of the wilderness areas on our planet: Toyota commercials are generally the first choice for these, simply because a breakdown could leave you to fry, freeze or starve. Reliability is a prerequisite. The Granvia comes with a no-quibble three-year guarantee and a RAC inspection certificate. Should you later trade it in, after a few years use, for another Granvia then the original 'van will - after a thorough service check - usually be sold-on with another three-year guarantee.

Meanwhile, nobody needs to bang drums about the reliability of VW commercial vans, just sing along with, 'God only knows where I'd be without you' - the music in the current T5 TV advert.

Both base vehicles should be a sound investment, and will be finished to look every bit as new as the conversions inside.

**ON THE ROAD**

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the 55,000-mile Granvia drove as neatly and responsively as any car in its prime of life, providing excellent acceleration and light-touch driving. And you don't use a gearchange, the automatic makes sure you'll never be in the wrong gear again, or roll back on any hill start for that matter.

The 30,000-mile VW Crusader handled with equal ease - and with a lot more familiarity for those of us who like to use our left foot when driving. The smaller engine was lion-hearted and nippy in heavy traffic and on hilly roads, and purred happily along the dual carriageway section of the test. This is another vehicle that should carry on tirelessly and take you almost anywhere, with its simple, unfussy gearchange, quick response, and easy steering and braking.

Both 'vans were a joy to handle. The greatest surprise lies in the kit which defines these modern cabs.

The VW was simple and functional, containing everything that really mattered such as ABS, ASR, twin airbags, radio/CD player and reversing sensors. The Granvia had ABS, air-conditioning, twin airbags, radio/CD player with MP3 plug-in, electric folding mirrors, rear parking sensors - and all in its original spec! It seems that 16 years ago Toyota was building these vans up to the cutting edge of development in private cars. And it drove like one too.

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**I LIKED**

- Easy-to-drive Volkswagen T5
- Neat high-quality conversion work
- Extra internal space and width
- Sliding side windows for ventilation
- Useful oven/grill
- Large comfortable bed
- No killer overhead lockers above kitchen sink/hob
- Colour scheme, with matching leather trim and curtains

**I WOULD HAVE LIKED**

- Electric mirrors (we're all spoiled nowadays)
- Rear speakers

**I DISLIKED**

- No leisure battery as standard

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**I LIKED**

- Pre-sales information pack supplied
- Compact, car-like feel when driving
- Petrol/LPG engine combination and its performance
- Quality and condition of Toyota base vehicle
- Thoughtful conversion design
- Ambience and high quality of conversion
- Removable and portable fresh water tank
- Aftersales support and parts department

**I WOULD HAVE LIKED**

- A little more internal space
- Two rear speakers for better stereo effect

**I DISLIKED**

- Claustrophobic upper bed
- Cab roof intrudes into space above kitchen sink

**LOUNGE AND DINE**

You must bear in mind that all small campervans are designed for basic camping. Therefore lounging space is limited for big guys, and dining involves juggling with small tables. You're really meant to live outside, lounge on proper chairs and eat *al fresco* whenever possible.

The Granvia underscores this principal with its awning. Get the most comfortable folding chairs that you can squeeze into the rear storage area, and sprawl out in the open air, but with some shelter from Fiamma's finest.

Come inside and you'll find that the seats are soft and supportive, in durable-feeling material. A small table swings behind the passenger seat to hold coffee cups or a single place setting, while a larger, folding one-legged table lives behind the driver's seat, and clips onto a rail running along the kitchen - seating two for eating.

With the sliding door closed, there's a snug lounge for three, or four at a pinch. With the roof raised, headroom is not an issue; when it's down, it's hands-and-knees stuff, but this is normal for campers of this type. Internal ambience is light, functional and comfortable, and well lit, both in daytime and at night, by two LED lamps and an LED strip underneath the kitchen overhead lockers.

The VW Crusader is only a little bit bigger than its rival, but somehow feels significantly more spacious inside. Once again, it's designed to be used with its side door open as a base for sitting and eating outside.

With said door closed, it works as a snug lounge for four. The leather-trimmed seats are comfortable and supportive for sitting and reading, while the rear bench is set at a height where the vertically challenged can sit without legs dangling.

Here, a fair-sized (810mm x 480mm) folding table stows between the rear seat and the kitchen unit. This can be positioned to act as a dining table for rear passengers, or for the cab seat occupant.

The wide central space of this layout means it's difficult to serve both front and rear seats: diners would need very long arms indeed. A solution is to sit on the doorstep with the plate on your lap, facing out. Some of my best dinners were shared with seagulls

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6 Up front, the swivelled cab seat gets a small table. Again, the conversion exhibits a high quality finish  
7 Looking back to the comfortable rear bench. This interior feels less spacious  
8 Dinner time. The rear table is smaller than its rival's

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– unless I'd cooked, then the birds generally flew somewhere else!  
Lighting in the Crusader is excellent: three fluorescents, plus two LED spotlights let you read every line on the page, and without tilting your book. With the roof up, there is ample headroom, and the edges of the original roof are better padded than they are in the Granvia...ouch!

COOK'S QUARTERS

Both 'vans offer neat but limited kitchens, with stainless steel rectangular sinks, sturdy chromed mixer taps and two-burner hobs. The Granvia has two shallow lockers over the sink/cooker area, and there's a neat pull-out extension (from under the sink) that can be used either as a much-needed work surface or an extra table.

A 50-litre Waeco compressor-type fridge is below, with a group of three tambour-doored cupboards ideal for storing foodstuffs or pots and pans. A cutlery drawer sits between the sink and the fridge.

The Crusader has two distinctive variations. Firstly, the over-kitchen lockers are missing, but can be provided if requested. The reasoning is that they sit at a lethal height and can give a nasty head-crack to a careless cook, or dish-washer as they bend forward. In the Crusader, you can wash or cook with impunity.

Secondly, the Crusader has – below its hob – a wonderful Smev grill/oven, which can save the barbecue chef, who might otherwise be eaten alive by midges or frozen to death. But it comes as a trade-off: if you allocate a space for an oven, it isn't available for other uses, such as drawers or cupboards.

As for the fridge, it's the lovely old-style three-way job, complete with controls which glow at night to save you tripping up in the dark. The floor-level cupboard, for pots and pans (or Porta Potti-type loo), is retained and a shallow cupboard is set into the front side of the wardrobe for herbs, spices and other small goodies.

BATHING SPACE

No washrooms in these two – you use either the campsite's facilities, or find yourself a nice friendly stream. Of course, there is the kitchen sink, but in the Granvia this comes at a risk if you are average-to-tall. You have to wash and spit toothpaste at arm's length, or crack your head on the lockers as you dip down. In the Crusader, with the overhead lockers missing, washing and brushing teeth are a genuinely good option.

For a loo, both 'vans offer a Dometic Porta Potti-style portable toilet – normal in this size of 'van. It functions simply and effectively, but is intimidating to use unless you are on your own, and with all the curtains drawn. I'd leave this potentially embarrassing beastie at home and use its cupboard for storing clothes or equipment. Most of us use campsites anyway and hardened wild campers will be well-used to the early morning trek into the woods with a spade across their shoulder.

BEDTIME

The Granvia was designed to sleep two adults and two children, while the Crusader is intended as a two-person 'van with a child bed option.

In both, the main bed is of the rock-n-roll type. In the Granvia, there's a simple lever under the cushion of the rear bench seat: nudge this and the assembly slides out – with the seat back falling neatly into place – creating a (6ft 11in x 3ft 8in) double bed: tight, but very comfortable.

A separate slim folding mattress is provided to cover all cushion joins, and

9 The neatly finished kitchen includes a three-way fridge and oven/grill

10 With no overhead lockers, you can comfortably use the sink for ablutions

11 The Granvia galley has no oven, but a handy pull-out surface

12 The kitchen sink can be used for ablutions, but you have to mind the overhead lockers

WELLHOUSE TOYOTA GRANVIA



HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

PRICE

- From: £20,990
- As tested: £20,990

BASICS

- Berths: 2
- Three-point belted seats: 4 (incl driver)
- Warranty: 1 year base vehicle, 3 years conversion
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: Yes
- Construction: All steel window van with GRP rising roof
- Length: 5.00m (16ft 5in)
- Width: 2.00m (6ft 7in)
- Height: 1.95m (6ft 5in)
- Wheelbase: 3.08m (10ft 1.5in)
- Rear overhang: 1.00m (3ft 3.5in)
- Gross vehicle weight: 2,800kg
- Payload: 600kg (after allowance for weight of driver, 100 per cent fresh water, fuel, 1 gas cylinder)
- Insulation: 25mm in walls
- Interior height: 1.83m – 2.59m (6ft 0in – 8ft 6in) roof raised, 1.40m (4ft 7in) roof lowered

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Volkswagen T5
- Engine: 1.9-ltr turbo diesel producing 85bhp

- Transmission: 5-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Front: discs. Rear: drums
- Suspension: Independent all round
- Features: Driver and passenger airbags, remote central locking, radio/CD player, rear parking sensors, alloy wheels

KITCHEN

- Sink: Rectangular stainless steel bowl with chromed mixer tap
- Cooker: Two-burner hob, oven/grill
- Fridge: Three-way with manual energy selection. Capacity 60 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Porta Potti-type in dedicated locker
- Basin: None fitted
- Shower: None fitted

BED

- Lounge double
- Length: 1.85m (6ft 1in)
- Width: 1.18m (3ft 10.5in)

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water tank: Inboard, capacity 50 litres (11 gallons)

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- Waste water tank: None fitted
- Water heater: None fitted
- Space heater: Blown-air, mains-only operation
- Leisure battery: None fitted
- Gas: 1 x 4.5kg cylinder
- Lighting: Three fluorescent strips, to offside, nearside, rear
- Sockets: 230V: 2 (in kitchen). 12V: 1 (adjacent to control panel)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Fitted to test vehicle: None
- Other options available: Twin battery charging system with leisure battery (£340), privacy tinted glass (£410), Fiamma wind-out awning (£600), Webasto diesel-fired space heating (£1,190), roof bed (£340), overcab locker (£190), Propex gas-fired space heating (£760)

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

PRICE

- From: £16,250
- As tested: £19,500

BASICS

- Berths: 4
- Three-point belted seats: 4
- Warranty: 3yrs base vehicle & conversion
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: No
- Construction: All steel window van with GRP rising roof
- Length: 4.80m (15ft 9in)
- Width: 1.80m (5ft 11in)
- Height: 2.10m (6ft 10.5in)
- Wheelbase: 3.03m (9ft 11.5in)
- Rear overhang: 950mm (3ft 1.5in)
- Gross vehicle weight: 2,700kg
- Payload: 500kg (with the vehicle in running order, including fuel)
- Insulation: 18mm Styrofoam in floor
- Interior height: Max 2.06m (6ft 9in) roof up, 1.37m (4ft 6in) roof down

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Toyota Granvia
- Engine: 2.7-litre petrol/LPG producing 141bhp
- Transmission: Auto, rear-wheel drive

- Brakes: Discs all round with ABS
- Suspension: Independent all round
- Features: Driver and passenger airbags, remote central locking, electric windows, electric folding mirrors, radio/CD player with MP3 plug-in, air-conditioning, tow bar, reversing mirror, rear parking sensors, new tyres

KITCHEN

- Sink: Rectangular stainless steel bowl with chromed mixer tap
- Cooker: Two-burner hob
- Fridge: 12V compressor-type. Capacity 50 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Porta Potti-type in dedicated locker
- Basin: None fitted
- Shower: None fitted

BEDS

- Lounge double
- Length: 1.82m (5ft 11.5in)
- Width: 1.13m (3ft 8.5in)
- Roof double
- Length: 1.82m (5ft 11.5in)
- Width: 920mm (3ft 0in)

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EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water tank: Inboard, 40 litres (8.8 gallons)
- Waste water tank: Underslung, 40 litres (8.8 gallons)
- Water heater: None fitted
- Space heater: Webasto diesel-fired with blown-air
- Leisure battery: 90 amp hr
- Gas: 1 x 4.5kg cylinder
- Lighting: LED throughout. Two downlights on nearside, strip under kitchen lockers, flexible reading lamp in rear
- Sockets: 230V: 1 (at work surface in kitchen). 12V: 1 (adjacent to control panel)

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Fitted to test vehicle: LPG conversion (£1,450), Webasto heater (£900), safe (£75), towbar (£250), awning (£575)
- Other options available: Alternative three-way fridge (FOC), leather upholstery (£500), CAT 1 alarm/immobiliser (£375), Fiamma awning (£475–£500, add £125 for colour coding), bike rack (£275–£305), window tints (£250), solar panels (from £375), storage bags (£100), radio/CD player upgrades (£125–£175)

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13 The Crusader double bed is spacious and comfortable

14 A Dometic portable loo stows in a floor cupboard

15 Storage space in the rear also houses the removable fresh water container

16 Doors at the front of the bench give access to full-length storage



there's ample headroom (5ft 1in at the bed's mid point). Neat pleated blinds screen the side and rear windows, and there is a choice between an internal insulated windscreen cover or pull-across curtains, to block off the cab windows. Two nice LED reading lights complete a snug nest.

The upper bed consists of covered bed boards, which slot across the original roof of the van, and which have a thin folding mattress that helps make up the (5ft 11in x 3ft 0in) sleeping space. It's usable, but... First, it's difficult to climb into (via seatbacks), let alone descend for a midnight tinkle. Second, it's tight for headroom (2ft 4in max). Third, it reduces both sitting and sleeping headroom below (to 2ft 9in at mid bed). If you're camping, why not banish the little dears into a tent? They'll love it!

The Crusader offers only a downstairs bed. To make this you first remove the headrests from the rear seat, then the backrest and seat cushions. Pull upwards on the strap provided and gently lift the platform base over the edge of its locking point; the whole unit slides out and clicks into place. Replace the cushions, roll out the bedding and zzzzz...

To close, simply reverse the process, remembering to gently anchor the front edge of the platform over its locking rail. Dimensions translate into a slightly larger (6ft 0in x 3ft 10in) double – decent by any standards and extremely comfortable. There are thick dark blue curtains to draw round all windows, making as comfortable a bedroom as any camper owner could ask for.

**STORE ROOM**

In smaller camper vans, stowage space always tests ingenuity. First, for the converter to identify every nook and cranny, then turn this into usable space. And secondly, for the owner, to discover the natural places where the essentials can be stored. Yes, essentials: in camper vans, forget three changes of clothing per day – roughing it makes the holiday!

In the Granvia, the main storage areas are beneath the rear seats, in a side locker above the rear seatback and the 'boot' area inside the tailgate. This holds the spare wheel, but still leaves room for other gear, while a ceiling-to-floor offside unit offers lockers for both gas and cables. It's a neat bit of design – enhanced by the inclusion of an inboard fresh water tank, which can be disconnected from the pump and lifted out for winter storage.

The Crusader is equally ingenious. The rear wall cupboard has been extended to provide a genuine wardrobe, while the underseat area stretches from locker door to tailgate, allowing contents to be accessed from inside or out. As with the Granvia, the gas cylinder sits in its locker on the offside rear corner and similarly, the water tank is designed to be detachable – capable of being lifted out, to fill at the campsite taps, or store over the winter. Top marks for both converters.

**LEISUREDRIVE VW CRUSADER**

**LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:**

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Web: www.leisuredrive.co.uk

**LIFE SUPPORT**

Both 'vans have inboard freshwater. In the Granvia, the wastewater tank is underslung, and there is a clever additional drain (just forward of the offside rear wheel), which lets you dump any water left in taps and pipes – taking away the biggest single risk of frost damage.

The leisure battery sits under the bonnet, out of the living space (a safe is installed instead), while blown-air heating is provided by a diesel-fired Webasto system. The control panel sits between a rear speaker and two 230V sockets, located at the end of the kitchen unit.

The Crusader has no waste tank fitted: grey water drains directly – provide your own container. There's no leisure battery either (this is part of a twin battery option), so if you're not on mains hook-up, power for the living area is drawn from the vehicle battery, for which there's a status gauge. This is okay short-term, but could pose problems for longer periods camping when a flat battery will cause a non-start situation. The leisure battery/charging system option seems like a very good idea.

There's good wall insulation which, with the mains-powered blown-air heater provided, should make this 'van snug in almost any weather. The easy-to-read-and-handle control panel is set on the offside above the rear seat.

Both 'vans are designed for all-season use, but remember, rising roofs and single-glazed windows let heat leak out – the heaters will work hard, but it'll be warmer than any tent!

**CONCLUSION**

Motorcaravanning offers so much freedom and fun that it would be sad if newcomers were excluded by the high price of new 'vans. Here, the fun can be accessed at half the normal cost.

Faced with a choice between what £20k would buy in a used motorhome, and what the same money can get you in a used vehicle with a new conversion, I'd choose the latter. In both test 'vans, you get a camper which looks – and drives – as new, matching the well-constructed and thoughtful conversion which is spanking new. In short, you're getting a lot of motorcaravan for your money.

Choice between the test 'vans is difficult. If you can climb the perception wall, where the thought of a 16-year-old vehicle is scary, then you'll find an excellent Toyota Granvia-based camper waiting on the other side, and with all sorts of must-have features as standard. If you prefer the sturdy, but more basic VW-based Crusader, then here is a little cracker of a camper, which offers a few more inches in width and length, and which creates the feel of substantially more space inside.

Either conversion should provide years of happy use and holidays. You pay your money and take your choice, but with these two you can buy your own ticket to camping freedom without breaking the bank. ■

**WELLHOUSE LEISURE TOYOTA GRANVIA**

**LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:**

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**WELLHOUSE TOYOTA GRANVIA**



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17 The Granvia bed is narrower, but very comfortable

18 Another portable loo, and the same as its rival

19 Spare wheel and removable fresh water tank live in the rear

20 There's a surprising amount of space for all manner of junk under the rear seat



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