



TO BUY, OR NOT TO BUY?

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Owning a vintage van is a love affair that isn't based on any form of practicality. You know your van inside and out, have seen it from every angle, deconstructed it almost to its component part and wondered how to put it all back together again.

You know its noises, its idiosyncrasies, and you love it still. But sometimes, after too many days spent gently coaxing it into just keeping going, after one too many hills in second gear, after one too many rust spots just poking through the new paint job, the time comes to move on.

We own a 1973 Bay Window Kombi pop-top camper, but we are also the possessors of restless souls in this vast continent of Australia. We want exploration and off-road adventure, we want wilderness and isolation, we want what a 1600cc engine and 2 wheel drive just can't seem to provide. And so, we decided the only worthy successor would have to be a T3 syncro, possibly the only 4WD van there is that is worth having.

Soon, Ebay delivers... someone with zero ratings, a thousand kilometres distant. Ouch. But we want that Syncro. We ring the vendor and say we will buy it the next afternoon if it's in good nick! So we pack up the bay window and head north. Our old '73 bay was bought eight

years ago when my partner Nick emigrated to Australia. He loves the van, loves it as you only can once you have spent hours working on something, gently keeping the old girl up and running but occasionally hitting various seized and rusted parts with an old crow bar to get them moving again.

Over 10hrs driving later, and we have travelled from the Southern Ocean to the Indian Ocean. Nick checks out the Syncro, which is a Trakka camping conversion, we um and ah and bargain until we have a deal, and we depart in convoy towards the setting Australian sun. Later, as we stand between our two vans, we question our sanity - here is our adorable bay window, with the vacant expression of an innocent puppy, and over there is what can only be described as one of the ugliest vehicles on the planet; The Wedge. The Brick. A Brute. The bay window is reminiscent of summer holidays with flares, long hair and beards, but the T3 brings to mind power dressing, large mobile phones and money, money, money. I like their boxiness, their



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robustness; you could slice a leg of ham on some of the sharp edges. But I am a teenager of the 90's, my formative years were spent being impressionable around vehicles like the Wedge. Nick prefers the luxurious curve of the bay window - you want to run your hands along the flank of the kombi, around its beautiful rounded, welcoming curves.

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We decide to take the two vans home via the scenic route (over 1600 kms), and this is our chance to do a real comparison. First the Blue Mountains. As I follow the »



Bay Window up hills in the Trakka, my foot twitches on the accelerator pedal to just see what it can do, but out of respect for the old girl in front I follow at a respectable distance. I constantly think I've stalled the T3, as all I can hear is the din of the Bay window's engine singing at full strength ahead.

But we fight over who gets to drive the older van, for every mile is an adventure, every hill a victory (there were celebratory air punches at the top of particularly challenging ones) and every time you actually reach the speed limit is something to be remembered. Driving a Bay Window is like being in a world where everything is good and bright and lovely. Driving the T3 is like, well, driving. So to connect ourselves with our new purchase, we leave the Bay in a dusty one horse town and head into the outback. We speed along dusty, red-dirt tracks, wending our way to Willandra National Park. This is more like it - classic Australian bush. We have to be alert to avoid the snakes and lizards basking on the straight, deserted roads and were constantly greeted by the sight of kangaroos which stand straight up to attention, as if impressed by the sheer power and versatility of the Syncro. and emus whose escape tactic is to take a direct run at the van in an odd game of emu-van chicken. At one point Nick steers off the road into some soft sand with a coy "oops it's time for the locking diffs". With the pull of a couple of knobs, little green lights tell us we're locked front and rear, the steering goes stiff, and the van just ambles back onto the track as if it was fed up with such a pathetic challenge. Nick gives a weird satisfied smirk like he'd just outsmarted Kasparov.

We spend the evening camped up by the enticingly entitled 'Ephemeral Swamp', which is when the van interior absolutely comes into it's own. The T3 has mozzie netting on all the rear windows, a solar-assisted fridge, and Jamie Oliver would just love the swing-out stove for indoor/outdoor camp cookery. The larger living space inside the T3 means tall Nick doesn't have to sleep diagonally on the bed, which means I don't have to sleep in a ball in one corner.

Next morning, we chew up 100 kms of corrugations and ruts before reuniting with the old '73 and continuing homeward. So far, both vans have behaved perfectly, but what if something goes wrong? Everything in the 'air-cooled' seems fixable with minimal tools, not much knowledge and a couple of hours. You can lie underneath



it, follow a rattle to its source, and usually sort it out. The water-boxer Wedge is a different matter, you need to be hardwired to the internet for solutions to bizarre electrical problems. It has powered everything, 8 CV joints, 2 diffs, cooling hoses, electronics, catalytic converters and on and on. Working on the different vans feels like moving from dissecting an earthworm to brain surgery. Accessing parts for the Syncro is hard too; although we bought the van in good condition it needs work - new shocks and springs, various bushes are worn and the windscreen washers just refuse to work for no particular reason. Thank heavens for the Australian Syncro Register (or "The Forum", as they have become known), a group of syncro ninjas who have a solution for everything. We remain eternally grateful to them! Conversely if we need anything for the Bay, there are a number of companies here that sell everything. It's just nice and cheap and simple.

And what about that high roof?

In my opinion, high-tops are inherently ugly. But despite the very slight loss in fuel-economy, it's practical. We can sit as the wind howls and laugh at the elements. In the Bay's pop-top, wind and rain mean keeping the roof locked firmly down. The Trakka's fixed high top also gives heaps of storage space, negating the necessity of a selection of storage boxes that always end up wallowing around in your living space.



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And 4WD vs 2WD?

Power aside, it's about design. The Syncro has been designed to go offroad, with protective rails underneath, tough suspension and its clever viscous coupling and (in this case) locking differentials. A Bay Window could never go everywhere a Syncro goes. BUT, a 4WD drivetrain means a lot more to go wrong.

The bay window has been trialed in areas that may be considered more suitable for 4WD vehicles and has performed like a trooper, but there's no opportunity to drive yourself out of the hole you have slipped into, no grovel gear, no locking front and rear diffs, just a red face and a call to be rescued... by a syncro. So the Syncro is the ultimate adVentureWagen, with everything you need for coping with the extreme environments of the Australian continent- in this T3 we are dangerously invincible.

But what about character?

People constantly come to talk to you in a Bay window, you get invited in for coffee and Volks tales, you get respect for just being on the road however slow you may be, tourists at the beach try and sneak the Bay into their 'scenic' photos. An old Kombi is loved like a national treasure. And the T3? Well... an occasional second glance from a T3 buff, and if we pootled along at 50mph we'd be honked and flashed and run off the road (not that that would be a problem!) For sheer beauty, charm, and goddam loveability it has to be the bay window! Which is why a month after we bought the T3, we are still a two-van family, the bay window sitting quietly in the garage awaiting its fate and holding our hearts.

Maybe somewhere out there is a crazed VW fetishist who is designing Bay or Splitly body panels that fit perfectly onto a T25 Syncro. Elegance with indestructibility. Just imagine... ☺