

GET THE PERFECT BUILD

Gym bunnies will know the secret of building perfect pecs, but achieving the perfect Camper build takes a little more nous. That's why we dropped in on Kenny Green at Ecowagon to talk us through the thought process involved in creating the dream conversion

Words Ian Cushway Photos Andy Saunders



“**D**eep down, everyone wants a Camper,” exclaims Kenny Green. It’s a bold statement, but he’s right. After all, who doesn’t secretly or otherwise covet the idea of hitting the road on a Bus adventure? And Covid-19 has fuelled that desire.

Kenny is the boss at Ecowagon and he and his team of eight are flat out right now carrying out campervan conversions from his state-of-the-art Redruth workshop, so he should know.

“They’re practical things, the perfect tool,” says Kenny. “And they’re so versatile, you can do just about anything in them. And not just for camping; lots of our customers use them as day vans – they are the ideal lifestyle vehicle. You can pitch up anywhere in one, even on a driveway if you want to stay overnight at a friend’s house.”

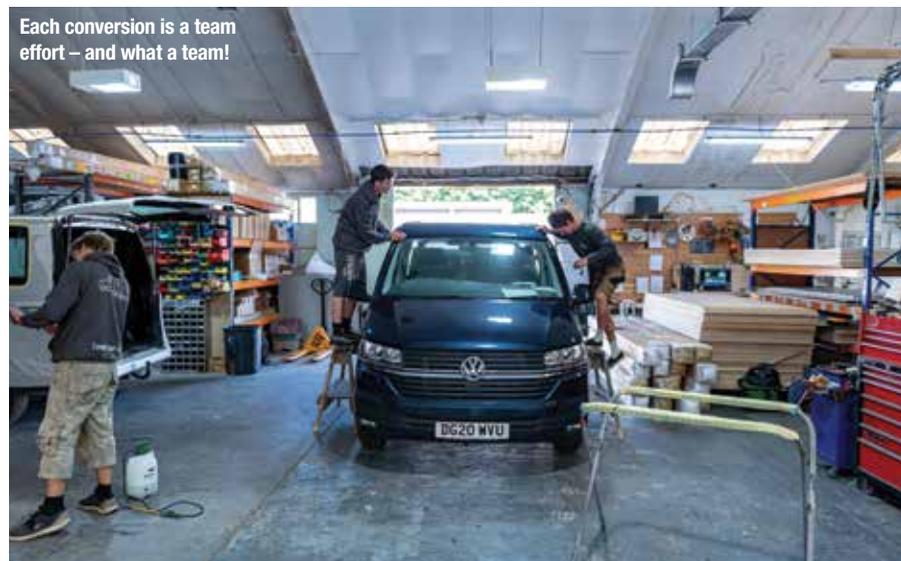
But getting the right Camper, with the right spec, the right configuration and in the finish you want takes some doing. And Kenny is all too aware that commissioning a firm to carry out a Van conversion is a big decision and one that usually requires a fair bit of hand-holding.

“I’ve had customers who have spent five years researching the subject before finally hitting the button, while others are complete novices who want to be talked through the entire process from start to finish,” he says.

To this end, the Ecowagon website (www.ecowagon.co.uk) is a good place to start. In fact, there’s a section listing the seven steps to getting your perfect VW camper van conversion which includes everything



Ecowagon in Redruth has been flat out since people have been told to holiday closer to home



Each conversion is a team effort – and what a team!

from picking the right base vehicle to the configuration of the interior, covering basically everything in between.

Which Van?

“While the majority of people love the classic Vans, they’re not really practical enough,” says Kenny. “That said, lots of our customers have both – although more often than not it’s the old one that gets left in the garage when they go on a longer trip.”

So here Kenny’s advice is to go for the newest Van you can, preferably a T6 with the 150bhp turbodiesel and DSG gearbox which works really well. That said, while Ecowagon stopped converting T4s a while back, they still convert T5s. Indeed, they’ve just done a £35k conversion on a 2013 example which held sentimental value for its owner. Otherwise, “spending £50,000-£60,000 on a conversion in an older Van just isn’t worth it,” says Kenny. “We get a good deal on new Vans, but supply is short so you need to plan ahead. We’re already talking Jan/Feb 2022,” he adds.

This is obviously where the often thorny subject of money comes in. “It’s important to broach the subject of budget early on to

see if you and the conversion company are on the same page. Yes, you can end up spending a lot of money, and we’re certainly not the cheapest conversion company out there. In fact, we got a lot of stick when we advertised one of our Vans for £85,000, with comments on the internet basically saying, ‘anyone who buys that Van must be an idiot.’ However, we sold 5-6 Van’s on that back of that one. And crucially, because they retain their value in five years’ time the owners will get most of that money back.”

At this point, Kenny recalls the conversation he had with a customer about their annual holiday to the Maldives. “They told me they spend £15,000 on their family holidays each year when they go, so I told them that after a few years they would have saved themselves enough money to cover the cost of a conversion.”

Go configure

Then we get down to the nitty-gritty, like whether to opt for a long- or short-wheelbase Van. “If it’s something you might want to use every day, then a SWB is best because it’s easier to park and more car-like to drive. Though if you need the extra space, then the

Living the high life?

A pop-top roof is an absolute must, says Kenny. And even if you think you don’t need one, you will. An elevating roof will provide essential head room to pull your jeans on in the morning and cook your bacon, as well as extra sleeping capacity.

Gadget show

The more accessories, the better. Thule bike racks, wind-out awnings, solar panels, window blinds, fly screens, folding tables and external BBQ hookups are the most popular additions.

Body moves

A short wheelbase Van will be more car-like to drive and easier to park, but a LWB will offer more room inside. Vans with a tailgate look nicer and provide shelter in the rain, though twin barn doors make it easier to load ad-hoc items.

Best engine

The 150PS 2.0-litre diesel mated to the DSG gearbox is probably the best combo, reveals Kenny. The 204PS is more poky, but he’s had a few EGR issues with these. While the 2.6 in the T4 was undoubtedly one of the best engines VW ever made, it’s best avoided in the T5.



WHEEL CHOICE

While factory wheels look smart, a set of carefully chosen aftermarket rims will instantly make your Van stand out from the crowd. Be careful not to go too big though, otherwise you will compromise ride quality. Generally speaking, 18in rims with a fair chunk of rubber, work best.

Mild lowering/uprated suspension components will also spruce up the appearance and handling of what is, let’s face it, a commercial vehicle. Again, don’t go too radical, otherwise you’ll struggle to negotiate anything other than putting-green length grass, let alone a muddy campsite.

STICK WITH TRADITION

The traditional three-quarter width setup still makes sense when it comes to the best use of space. For larger families where seating and sleeping space is important, though, a ‘slim’ setup with wider bed might be better.

Lightweight ply is the way to go when it comes to kitchen cabinets, though don’t rule out the option of having a solid wood work surface.

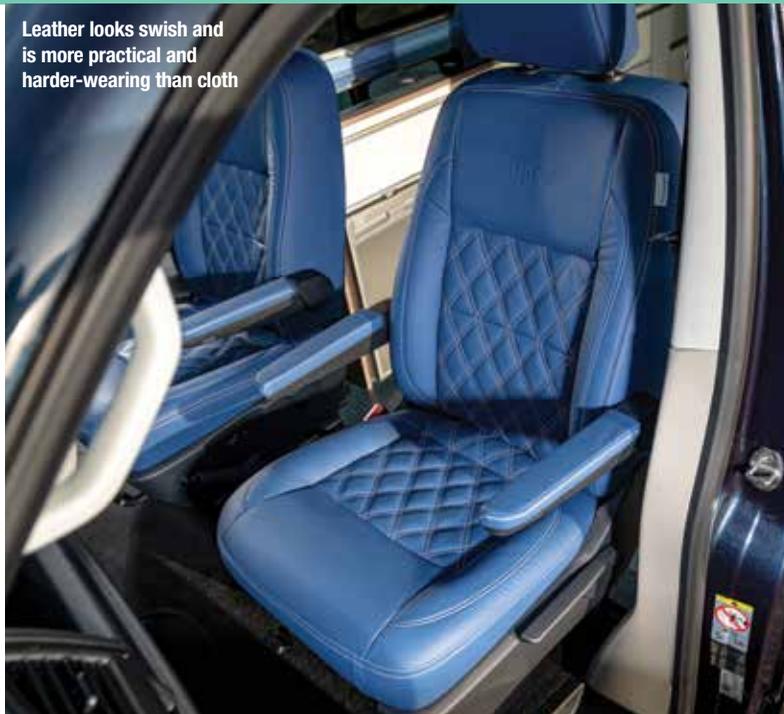
Gadget show

Minimal requirements inside are a compressor fridge, a hob and sink combo, a stationary heater to take the chill off and as many USB sockets dotted around as possible.

“I’ve had customers who have spent five years researching the subject before finally hitting the button”



Bike rack, roof bars and wind-out awning are must-have accessories



Leather looks swish and is more practical and harder-wearing than cloth



Off-grid ability is helped by solar panels and power inverters



“Regarding kit, being self-sufficient is the way to go”



Slim configuration inside gives more seating and wider bed width



A bespoke conversion won't be cheap, but you'll get most of your money back come resale

LWB is best,” confirms Kenny.

“Vans with tailgates are a better bet,” says Kenny, “because they look better and offer shelter when open. That said, barn rear doors work well if you want to open up just one door and load something in,” he adds.

As for internal layouts, Kenny is convinced the traditional three-quarter setup is still the one that works best inside. “It’s undoubtedly the most practical layout and provides the best use of space. Sure, a full-width bed with pods will work well for a weekend, but not if you’ve got kids. I always say travel as light as you can, but you still need storage. Having everything in bags just doesn’t work.”

Kit and caboodle

When it comes to roofs, Kenny is equally emphatic. “I advise everyone to have a pop-top fitted. Even if they say they don’t need it. In fact I’ve had customers who’ve had a full conversion without going for the roof, only to come back a year later and ask for one to be fitted. Moreover, it will give you a 7ft long bed.

“Regarding kit, being self-sufficient is the way to go,” says Kenny. “A 12v fridge, electronics, solar panels, lithium battery inverter, gas. Not ovens, though, you can cook everything on a hob.”

One thing Kenny goes crazy on is sockets: “Usually we include two 240v sockets, plus as many as a dozen USB sockets all over the place, even in the roof.”

Matter of taste

When it comes to colour schemes, the options are endless – and everyone has their own individual tastes. Here, Kenny recommends getting ideas from other people and from the gallery on his site, although says he isn’t afraid of suggestions that seem way outside the box. “We did a conversion that was green, turquoise and pink and it worked really well. Dare I say it, it’s the women that tend to get involved in choosing the interior and the men have more of a say with the outside.

“Leather is still the most popular option,



Travelling light and having lots of useful cupboard space is key in a camper



“In my mind, the more stuff you build on to your Van, the better it looks”

Popular accessories

According to Kenny, bike racks (usually the tailgate type), wind-out awnings, solar panels and roof racks top the popularity charts when it comes to Transporter accessories. “In my mind, the more stuff you build on to your Van, the better it looks.” As for drive-away awnings, Kenny isn’t keen. “I try to convince customers they can live without one; not least because they take up so much space. It goes back to travelling as light as possible – take too much stuff, and you’ll end up throwing it all out the next time you go away. The more you get out of the Van, the more space you’ll have available. Oh, and BBQ points on the exterior are popular because it means you can easily cook on your Cadac outside.”

Verdict

As always, there’s never a single solution for every Camper conversion – so there’s always scope for customising. It’s a case of seeing other Vans, getting ideas – and talking through what you’re likely to need most with an expert like Kenny. Yes, you’ll be restrained by how much you’ve got to spend. But sometimes being scrooge by skimping on the essentials will cost you more in the long run.



giving a real high-end look. It’s also practical and very durable,” adds Kenny.

Kenny reports that 100% lightweight ply and modern Formica is the way to go when it comes to furniture, although again, there’s scope for variation. “Solid wood work surfaces can work well, and we’ve used Bamboo recently which is a nice change.”

Mod or not?

Inevitably, wheel choice is something that can instantly spruce up the appearance of a Van – but Kenny advises not to go any bigger than 19in. “In my opinion, 18in rims are best so you can have a decent amount of rubber for comfort.” Mild lowering via lowering springs is a good idea, although Kenny is a big fan of the VW approved VB FullAir air suspension setup which replaces the original springs. “It’s not cheap (a £5800 option on the T6), but it’s amazing because it offers sport and off-road settings, and even self-levelling so you’ll never need chocks.”

Who are Ecowagon?

Kenny Green took a trip to Cornwall 20 years ago for a weekend away and never went home. He started off doing bodywork and his first Camper was a Bay Window with a rare Palomino high-top conversion. He took the roof off that and fitted a Devon instead before selling it to buy a T4. He carried out his first campervan conversion in 2010, and as demand grew he expanded premises, moving to his current Redruth workshop in 2017. Find out more by calling 01209 702990, or visit www.ecowagon.co.uk.