

From white panel van to super Sprogget!

Mark and Paul create a unique campervan that's practical, stylish and dog-friendly...

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I am always excited when friends see the light and get a campervan as this opens up opportunities for year-round merrymaking on shared camping trips. Mark and Paul, long-standing friends of mine, have more than made the grade by recently completing a self-build project, creating a unique and delightful campervan.

Although not quite in the DIY Disasters category, my partner, Anthony, and I know our limitations and have never flirted with self-conversion, so I am impressed by my friends' one-of-a-kind campervan. I talked to them about their journey into the campervan community and wonder if anyone else has a built-in bed for their dog that sits over a composting toilet?

First steps into vanlife

'We both love getting out into the countryside, whether holidaying or for weekend hill walks, so the freedom of having

a campervan has always appealed,' the two of them told me enthusiastically. Their first campervan experience had been with a rusty T2 borrowed from a friend; this had been fun but confining. Having use of another friend's funky vintage Hymer motorhome revolutionised their festival experiences but it was a big beast to drive.

Like many of us, they realised what they wanted was a Tardis; the spacious feel of a large 'van, with somewhere comfy to cook, eat and sleep, and their own toilet and shower, all fitting into a small space they could park at home and drive down a country lane.

Mark and Paul quickly grasped that even a newish basic campervan would set them back a pretty penny. Older 'vans were cheaper but they weren't keen to put in the hours keeping a vintage vehicle on the road. Anyone who knows Paul will tell you he is one of



Every 'van needs a bit of artificial turf! It's certainly one step beyond...



Best
trip

Of course, Mark and Paul said that anywhere with me and Anthony has to be their favourite trip! We had a summer jaunt to rural Shropshire that was perfect with good weather, excellent walking and a local pub

those people who always has a project on the go. Fitting a new kitchen or bathroom are jobs he takes on eagerly, learning new skills on the way (he is a handy friend to have!) so it wasn't surprising when the idea for a self-build emerged.

I first heard that they had purchased their van as we were trundling along an open road in northern Spain in the autumn of 2017 and Mark rang to pick my brains about windows, ovens and fridges. Having spent months sketching out ideas for a layout and, after considering several models of van, they had taken the plunge. They had been tempted by the ease of fitting out a box-shaped van but it was the road test that



Mark, Paul & Murphy

Base vehicle 2014 MWB 313 Cdi high-top Mercedes Sprinter

Owned since 2017

Drive Rear-wheel drive

Engine 2.1-litre turbo-diesel

Power 130bhp

Economy 30mpg

Gearbox 6-speed manual

Travel seats 3

Berths 2

Leisure battery 2 x 110Ah

Length x width x height 5.9m x 1.99m x 2.9m

Equipment Reversing camera, underslung LPG tank, 92-litre underslung water tank with frost element, insulation and water gauge, 300W solar panel, 12V fridge, Truma Combi boiler

Insurance £412 (includes European breakdown)

COSTS SO FAR

The van£12,900

The conversion – estimated (Mark and Paul started out by keeping a record of costs but lapsed over the 14 months of the conversion!)£6,000

Total costs to date (approx).....£19,000



swung it; the car-like handling of the Mercedes Sprinter was too good to turn down. They also hoped that a three-year-old van with less than 50,000 miles on the clock and reliable German engineering would mean they wouldn't have to do another self-build for many years!

Kicking off the conversion

The first step was to strip out the old plywood lining from the walls and remove the floor. Paul acknowledged this was a bit disheartening, 'It was like seeing your new house for the first time, without the pictures on the wall and the previous owner's furniture. The van looked worse than it had in the showroom with more dents and rust and lots of dirt under the floor from its days as a utility vehicle.'

They cleaned up the rust and grime and began the transformation. An early decision was to keep the front bench seat and a bulkhead behind the cab. Mark and Paul opted to replace the metal bulkhead with a strong birch ply wall (all the better to protect the cab occupants from flying debris in the event of a crash) and create a cosy living

area separated from the cab.

Although some aspects of their campervan design were organic, being able to make use of the van off-grid rather than being reliant on campsites and hook-up had always been a priority. It is valuable to know this from the start so that the initial installation of wiring and piping do the job for your chosen layout. Paul took a belt-and-braces approach, putting in cables for everything they could think of, with a couple more in strategic locations just in case something else came to mind during the build. Pipes were laid for the sink and across the van for the shower. The guys used a two-inch layer of Thermafleece on the walls and roof for insulation. Paul explained, 'As a natural material, wool can handle moisture much better than glass-fibre or rockwool, taking in and releasing moisture depending on the conditions and preventing condensation, and hopefully any rust, forming in those hidden places.' For extra warmth, Paul used a piece of multi-layer foil insulation that was left over from another project. The piece was only large enough for one side of the van but, by cleverly

separating the nine layers into threes, he found there was enough to cover the walls and ceiling, creating a well-insulated van without adding much bulk. On the floor, Kingspan rigid insulation board gives warmth without weight.

The practical stuff

Mark had a dream of a campervan where the two of them could lounge and have space to entertain a couple of friends. He had his heart set on an L-shaped seating area and it was up to Paul to come up with a design that would extend from a four-person sofa to an almost king-size bed. He came up with a practical plywood design, using sliding interlocking slats, heavy-duty drawer runners and a hinged section that folds out onto supports to easily create a sturdy bed. With upholstered foam cushions this is a deluxe sofa/bed.

Whatever he works on, Paul is always thorough – some might say obsessive! He spent hours online over the winter researching equipment for their campervan. Having decided to opt for a 12V fridge, rather than cut holes in the side of the van for three-way fridge vents, two 'big' purchases were a 300W solar panel and two 110Ah leisure batteries to be able to run this off-grid. Buying a Truma Combi boiler was an easy decision; only one hole to cut in the van, one heater to install and one control unit to set up.

Ebay is a treasure trove for self-converters and most of the kit came from here, at one point deliveries were arriving almost daily. Adding up the cost of kit made them realise that, whilst they were definitely going to save a lot of money building a campervan themselves, it was also clear why converted 'vans are so expensive.

I was as apprehensive as Mark when it came to Paul cutting out the holes in the van's metal body for the windows. A worried audience can be distracting so Paul waited until Mark was away on a work trip for a few days and got the jigsaw out!

Liking the look of the bonded windows you see on factory-fitted vehicles, they had chosen stylish bonded single-glazed windows on the sliding and rear doors and two Dometic double-glazed acrylic windows on the offside. Paul told me, 'The windows are probably the main thing I wish I'd done differently, as Dometic ones all round would have given more options for ventilation and better insulation.' To keep the 'van toasty they cut panels to fit the bonded windows from some spare insulated underlay. On winter nights these press into place behind the curtains.



The sofa folds out revealing the interlocking slats, which are very comfortable



The composting toilet is practical and easily slides out from under the dog bed

Paul had lots of fun creating the kitchen and I am more than a little jealous of how this looks, in particular the full-size tap is sturdy and looks pretty cool. Next to the sink there is a worktop for food preparation, the under-sink cupboard holds a bin, cutlery drawer and spice rack and, with a marine two-ring hob and oven and a sleek black fridge, they have a great kitchen.

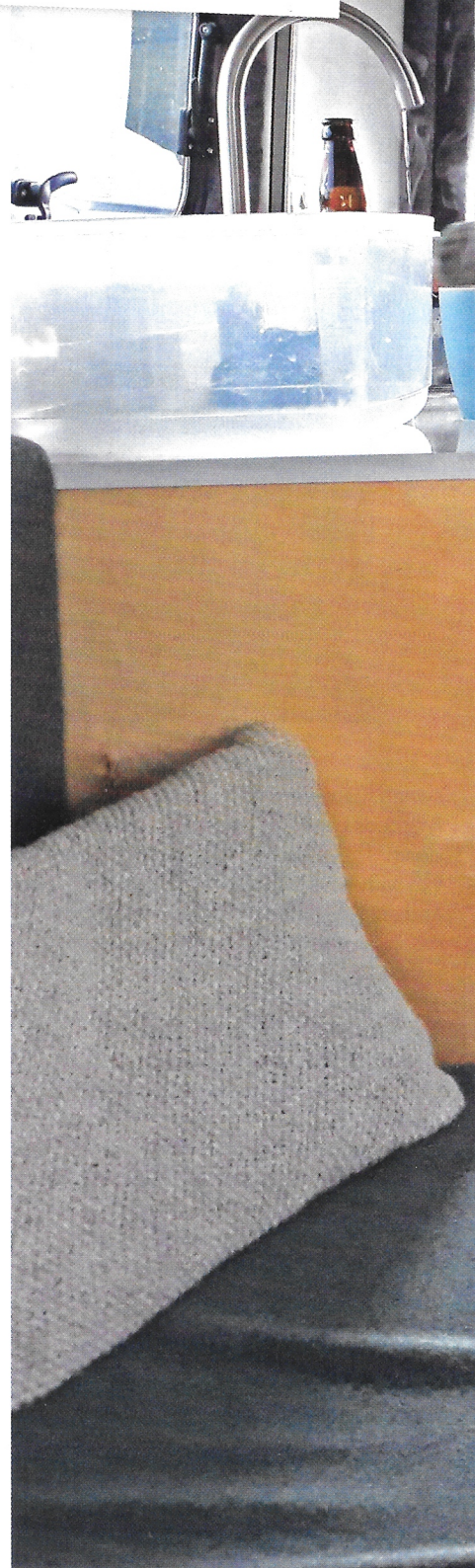
A Big Blue water filter with two chambers and cartridges seemed like a good idea until they realised they would have to take it apart every time they needed to drain it down to prevent frost damage. With a year-round campervan this is a chore they could do without so it quickly got replaced by something simpler that didn't require separate draining.

Testing times

Mark, Paul and Murphy, their rescue greyhound, joined us in the Lake District for a test-run weekend. It was great to see their half-finished conversion with just a bed, kitchen and lighting fitted. It soon became clear that they needed either a smaller dog or a place for Murphy to sleep that wasn't squarely in the middle of the 'van!

At this point the plan was still to build a shower room and they toyed with having Murphy sleeping in the shower tray. Using the 'van and talking over ideas helped and two important things became apparent; firstly, they really liked the spacious interior of the 'van without the floor-to-ceiling walls of a shower room closing in on them, and there wasn't room for a washroom and a greyhound sleeping area. Something had to go and it wasn't going to be Murphy!

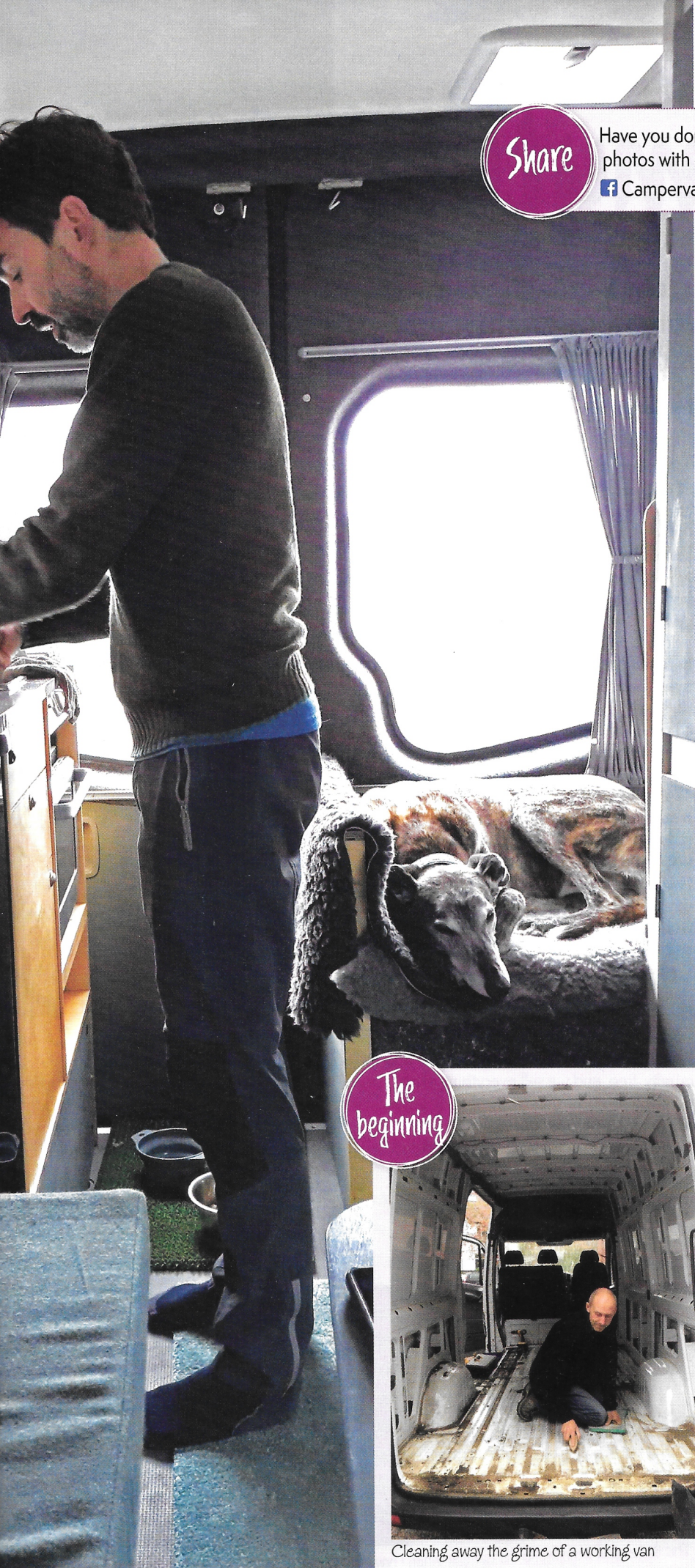
The compromise has become what is possibly the world's first dog bed with built-in composting toilet (for human use, Murphy isn't that civilised, unfortunately). This innovative and individual design has a loo underneath Murphy's bed that slides out on rails when needed. Paul had earmarked a composting loo as part of the design from the start, figuring this meant no water or chemicals. Liquid and solid waste is separated and the liquid is emptied daily. The solids are covered in sawdust, left to dry



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in a biodegradable bag and the odourless waste removed when necessary. The toilet is only separated from the rest of the 'van by a curtain and, in practice, when someone is using it the other usually takes the dog for a walk, as having Murphy at your shoulder at times like that can be off-putting!

The shower didn't completely disappear from their plans. Open the two rear barn doors and there is a showerhead for outdoor use, glorious in warm weather and, when Paul has made an awning to fit over the doors, this will even be private.

The classy look Mark and Paul have achieved is subdued greys and neat birch plywood punctuated with flashes of colour; turquoise carpets, an imitation plant trailing down the shelves and a colour-changing strip light above the high cupboard that is perfect for campervan discos.

Under-cupboard LED spots, LED ceiling lights and reading lights each side of the bed give plenty of flexibility for mood lighting. The conversion also has stacks of cupboards; wall cupboards opposite the kitchen hold big and bulky items while high cupboards take books and doggie items.

They call their new baby Sproget, a campervan that they have worked on from conception to completion. It is uniquely their own, looks good and, most importantly, works for their lifestyle. With festivals booked, a few weeks on the Wild Atlantic Way in Ireland coming up and, of course, weekends away with us, Mark and Paul are all set to become veteran campervanners.

The beginning



Cleaning away the grime of a working van



Thermafleece insulation keeps the 'van warm and is a natural material



Ready to put the rear windows in

