



Extended-Use Report:
**VOLKSWAGEN
VANAGON
CAMPER**
AT 36,000 MILES

*The best thing on wheels
when the driving is done*

PHOTOS BY RICHARD M. BARON

THE TURTLE, we have discovered, has it made. For 36,000 miles we have had a turtle-like green Volkswagen Vanagon camper in our long-term fleet and it has demonstrated that when you can take it with you, you take it everywhere.

That 36,000 miles has been accumulated in only 16 months, testimony to the popularity of the Vanagon camper. Our staff has used the Volkswagen to camp in the mountains of the Sierra Nevadas, to camp by the temporary race track of Eloy, Arizona, and even once in the parking lot of a Volkswagen dealer where it was towed after the engine blew up. But that's getting ahead of our story.

Volkswagen's van has always been a charmer, with barn-like room, a suspension suitable for off-road exploring and economy like, well, like a Volkswagen. Tempering those qualities used to be deafening noise, tractor-like speed and handling that often made a person glad there was no more speed. A long history of improvements has resulted in the current Vanagon that has an acceptably powerful and quiet liquid-cooled engine pushing a well behaved and still charming warehouse of a car.

Those of you who keep your R&Ts (you're supposed to, you know) can find all the details of the Wasserboxer in the June 1983 issue. But our long-term Volkswagen is no ordinary Vanagon. Ours has the Westfalia camper conversion with its tilt-up top, sleeping accommodations for four, stove, refrigerator, pressurized water supply and kitchen sink, plus closets, drawers, bins and nooks.

As a camper, the Vanagon has come through our long-term evaluation with nothing but gold stars. The Westfalia conversion is thorough, well done and reflects a lot of careful development so that the campers inside the camper have nothing but a good time. Our pleasure with the camping equipment was described in the July 1984 R&T.

Our average fuel consumption has been 20.6 mpg, with the best mileage about 23 mpg and the worst running 17.5. Considering the enormous volume, the substantial weight and the generally pleasant driving characteristics, the fuel economy is more than acceptable.

Driving the Vanagon, however, is not like driving a car. For one thing, the heating and ventilation system is beyond comprehension. Even with the owner's manual no one was able to figure out how best to use the four levers and two fan controls. The steering is heavy, the cornering speeds are low, the shifting linkage is imprecise and the acceleration, while superior to any previous Volkswagen van, is still below par. This isn't all that bad in something like the Vanagon, because it changes your state of mind. This is a vehicle in which the getting there is less enjoyable than having gotten there. In the Vanagon you sit back, relax, enjoy the scenery and—oh, yes—you wonder about the temperature gauge.

This has been the Achilles' heel of our camper. Four months after it went into use (and with 16,400 miles on the odometer), the Vanagon developed a coolant leak. Then another four months later the temperature gauge and its warning light began to challenge our nerve. The temperature gauge needle would, on occasion, jump to the hot end of the scale. It would just as quickly return to its usual resting place in the normal zone, and there would be no more trouble. It showed no signs of distress, didn't need coolant, and rarely acted up. Then on a trip to Eloy, Arizona, the gauge pegged itself for most of the trip, all the while with the red warning light glowing brightly. The driver had checked the coolant level and noted that the engine didn't act hot or feel hot. Although the gauge was acting spotty, he continued the trip without problem but on return sent the Vanagon to the dealer to have the gauge checked.

The gauge, sender and wiring were checked, all worked perfectly and the dealer sent us on our way. The van worked fine for a week. Then the gauge began acting up again.

During the next several months this scenario was repeated several times. People would notice the gauge, check the engine compartment, then drive on and take the Volkswagen to the dealer when they returned. At the local dealer the service people tried everything they could think of.

After one of these episodes the dealer suspected a leaking head gasket so the mechanics retorqued the cylinder head bolts and said the problem was now solved. The next weekend the light and gauge again played their games, the coolant was checked and the driver thought nothing of it until first the heater went cold, then the engine lost power and almost immediately a banging began from back in the engine compartment. It was 1:00 a.m. on a cold night and the car was 75 miles from home.

That's when one editor camped in the parking lot of a Volkswagen dealer until he could be rescued the next morning. The post-mortem inspection at La Torre Volkswagen in Reseda revealed that the water pump had sprung a leak, the coolant was lost and the engine was damaged beyond repair. A new short block was installed, under warranty, and the Vanagon was returned to us with a note from the service manager that the temperature gauge was working perfectly.

And it continued to work perfectly until the next trip when the gauge and light returned to their antics. Another trip to the dealer and another gauge has been ordered.

At 36,000 miles the gauge and light still aren't reliable. This isn't something we've experienced with other Vanagons, and we can't call it a problem of design. It's just a gremlin that has become as frustrating to our local dealer as it is to us.

Otherwise the Vanagon has been a durable, troublefree machine. Regular maintenance has cost \$145, a reasonable figure


for the service performed. Repairs have added another \$130 to our bill. Certainly if many of the small problems and the one large problem had not been covered by the warranty, this figure would have been much, much higher. The repair work for the overheated engine totaled \$1504, all of it under warranty. Now that all Volkswagens are covered by a 2-year, unlimited-mileage warranty, this could be of enormous value for the driver who piles on the miles.

The overall condition of the Volkswagen is excellent considering the mileage. The camping equipment looks as good as new, the upholstery is not showing any wear. The most noticeable interior wear is to the paint on the front doors. When the shoulder harnesses are released, they recoil so fast that the fasteners hit the door and chip the paint.

For our final trip to the shop we went through the van with a fine-tooth comb and found that one speaker on the radio was out of commission, a door switch for the inside light was broken, the left front vent window latch was loose and the sliding door latch occasionally sticks. Not a bad tally for 36,000 miles, much of those over back roads into remote campsites.

Our total cost per mile worked out to 26.5¢. That's one of the higher figures we've noted during our years of extended-use reports, and, as always, it reflects a sizable amount of depreciation, as determined by the *Kelley Blue Book*. As imperfect as this method is for determining value of a used vehicle, our means are consistent.

That figure may be misleading when compared with other cars, because the camper is more than a car. And do you know any houses that get 20 mpg?

While our Vanagon has had one continuing problem, it has also served us in ways nothing else can match. And besides, if you have to be stranded, this is probably the best vehicle in the world for the job. 



The Westfalia camper conversion couldn't be more hospitable. The top pops up and down with little fuss and there's adequate storage room for all the necessities of travel.

Our camper's enduring problem was a temperature gauge that would occasionally dive to the hot end of the spectrum. A variety of fixes failed to eliminate the gremlin.



VOLKSWAGEN VANAGON CAMPER Overall Costs & Costs per Mile

Delivered price	\$17,190
Gasoline (unleaded)	2340
Routine maintenance, by the book	145
Repairs and replacements	130
Total expenditure	\$19,805
Resale value at end of test period (estimated wholesale)	\$10,275
Overall costs	9530
Cost per mile	26.5¢

Repairs & Replacements During 36,000 Miles

New Radiator Cap	New Interior Light Switch
Retorque Cylinder Head	Repair Radio
Repair Sliding Door	Check Temperature Gauge (five times)
Replace Mud Flap	New Engine Short Block
Replace Front Brake Pads	New Water Pump
Turn Front Brake Rotors	New Expansion Tank
Repair Coolant Leak	New Fan Switch
New Thermostat	Evacuate and Recharge
Reinstall Vent Wing Latch	Air Conditioning

Costs per Mile for Long-term Test Cars

Car	Mileage	Cost/Mile	Issue
1978 Audi 5000	48,000	14.8¢	January 1980
1978 Toyota Celica	24,000	13.9¢	February 1980
1979 Dodge Colt	30,000	9.0¢	June 1981
1980 Chevrolet Citation	24,000	13.9¢	May 1981
1981 Alfa Romeo GTV 6/2.5	24,000	31.0¢	October 1983
1981 AMC Eagle	24,000	21.2¢	August 1981
1982 Volkswagen Vanagon	24,000	20.3¢	December 1983
1979 Mazda RX-7	72,000	15.8¢	February 1984