

# Volkswagen Type 2 Buyers Guide

In the last few weeks I have been asked several times from different people what to look out for when buying a VW camper. It's difficult to tell people there and then what they should be looking for, so I decided it would be far easier to write a buyers guide.

There are many things to consider when buying a VW van, for example, do you want a split screen van (pre 1968) or a bay window model (1968 – onwards). Yes the split screen vans are certainly more desirable, but have a considerable price tag to match. Bay window vans are cheaper, though prices are rising all the time due to their popularity.

Then you have to consider whether you want a camper interior, or a microbus set-up (like a minibus), a panel van, a pickup, a pickup with crew cab, and so on. The number of various models available is staggering, and that's before you've even considered the thousands of weird and wonderful customisations and alterations that people have done to these vans of the years.

Once you have an ideal of the sort of van you want, you need to ask yourself a very serious and strict question and be realistic about the answer. How much work do you want to do? Are you looking for a van that is in concourse condition that you can buy and drive straight away, or are you looking to rescue a van from the scrap heap and restore it. Whatever your preference, the following information should server you well. In most cases people are looking for a solid van that is road legal, or needs little to get it road legal, so they have the room to put their own mark on the van and customise it to their particular tastes.

## Viewing a potential Vehicle

When viewing a potential vehicle, there are basic 'Must do' rules. Firstly always view a vehicle in daylight, preferably in the middle of the day. Night viewing or viewing as it's getting dark is a sure way of shooting yourself in the foot and letting your heart, and not your head make the decisions. Secondly do not view a vehicle in the rain. This can prove a problem in the great British climate, but makes good sense, as beads of water on the bodywork, can hide a multitude of sins that are blatantly obvious in dry conditions. Thirdly, ask the current owner about the van, it's history, any work they have carried out on it, how long they've owned it, etc. This should give you a little idea of what you are buying into, but take this as an indication and not as gospel.

## Bodywork and Rust

Rust is cancer to any classic vehicle and the VW camper is certainly no stranger to this particular illness. There are several places on a VW Type 2 that are prone to rust, and the first thing to look at is the roof gutters and the window surrounds. This can give you an immediate idea of what the vehicle is likely to be like. If the van has holes in the gutters and particularly around the bottom of the front windscreen rubbers, the chances are it has been left outside for a prolonged period and seen some neglect. This is usually an indication of the overall condition, because if it's rotten at the top, the bottom is sure to be (unless extensive work has been carried out) in need of repair.

**Doors:** Check the bottom of the cab doors. The window rubbers usually allow water to run down the inside of the door panels and sit in the bottom of the doors, rotting them out. Also check that the doors close correctly without gaps or bulges, that could indicate bad repairs in the past. A set of cab doors can cost you around £500, so it's worth noting the condition of them.

**Front panel:** Behind the front bumper is a notorious place for rot to set in, as it is hard to clean and so has to endure prolonged exposure to road salt and grime. It also has the issue of water gaining access through the bottom edge of the windscreen, running down the inside of the panel and collecting in the bottom of the van behind the front panel. This means the panel is attacked from both inside and outside and it's chances of survival are slim if left unchecked. If the van has a spare wheel mounted on the front panel, try to check the bracket where it attaches to the front panel. Over the years, the weight of the wheel on a weakened front end can cause cracking or splitting of the panel itself. This can be a tricky repair.

**Side Sills, Outriggers and Jacking Points:** The sills along the bottom edge of the side of the VW van are notorious for rotting out. The sill is the strip about an inch and a half tall that runs along under the sliding door (or side doors) from wheel arch to wheel arch. Beware of any van that has had a black (or other colour) strip painted along the bottom couple of inches, as this usually hides the rot. The outriggers can be seen under the back edge of the front wheel arch and the front edge of the rear wheel arch. They are the structure that runs from the main chassis out towards the sill, and have the jacking point on the end. This is the site of many a shoddy repair and should be inspected carefully. Bad repairs and holes are easily disguised here as the area becomes covered in mud and grime due

to the spray from the wheels. The jacking points need to be checked as well, as I have heard of many a person jacking up their new van to change a tire and having the jacking point collapse in on itself (Not fun while sitting on the side of the M25 in the rain).

**Rear Corners and Battery Tray:** The bottom rear corners of the VW van are often prone to rusting out for two reasons. Firstly the bumpers usually wrap around them and prevent proper cleaning, and secondly rain gets into the air vents above and runs down the inside of the panel, settling on the battery trays inside both rear corners. It sits here eating its way through the panel from inside the engine bay. This also means the battery trays suffer as well.

**Main Chassis Rails:** Underneath the van in the centre there are two chassis rails which run from front to back, going either side of the gear box. If you can see these chassis rails inspect them carefully. If the van has belly pans on it (belly panels are large panels that are either bolted or welded onto the bottom of the van) inspect it even closer as these can hide extensive rust on the chassis. Also check the cross members for rot or bad repairs. There is one running across the van underneath just behind the drivers seat and the other is at the back, just in front of the rear wheel arches.

**Front End:** Take a look at the diagonal cross members that go out to the front corners of the van. The right one (on a right hand drive vehicle) is particularly prone to rotting through, as water collects in the cab above and rots through the floor around the accelerator pedal (very common), next in line for the rot is the cross member below. While you're under there, take a look at the bottom inside edge of the front panel, a common rust spot as mentioned before.

**Rust Inside:** The first place to check and most common rust place is the front cab floor. Pull up the carpet and take a look at the state of the floor. Pay particular attention to the area around the accelerator pedal and the also where the floor meets the wheel arches. In the rear of the van, look all around the edges of the floor area, where it meets the sides of the van. Any water leaking into the van will find its way out by rotting holes (usually around the edge) in the floor. If the van has a spare wheel well on one side of the raised area over the engine bay, check in the bottom. Many a paddling pool can be found here, resulting in rot.

### **Mechanics:**

**Front Beam and Suspension:** Check the front beam for any signs of bad rust or holes. Pay particular attention to the welded parts of the front beam (the ends and centre). The front beam consists of two large tube type structures, one on top of the other running between the two front wheels. They can be completely replaced, but will cost around £300 for a new one (not including fitting). Check the rubbers around the ball joints (on 1968 and after models) for signs of splitting. There are two ball joints for each of the front wheels. An upper and a lower.

**Braking System:** While your under the front, take a look at the brake master cylinder which is located on the bottom of the van directly under the drivers seat. It looks like a small cylindrical thing, about six inches long with various brake pipes coming out of it from the sides and usually has small a plastic tub containing brake fluid on the top of it. Check for any signs of leaking brake fluid. Now follow the pipes from the master cylinder to each of the front wheel hubs and check the back of the wheel hubs for signs of leakage. You can tell this is only possible on a dry day. Now check the rear wheels for the same.

**Steering:** The steering box can wear over time and cause the van to sway or drift when driving. To test the play in the steering box, sit in the drivers seat and leave the drivers door open so you can see the front wheel. Turn the steering wheel slowly from side to side. You should turn the wheel about an inch in each direction before it begins to turn the wheels. If you can move the steering wheel several inches before you see the front wheels move, this is the sign of a badly worn steering box, which can be dangerous. The steering box may be able to be tightened up (depending on the model), but often have to be replaced. Reconditioned steering boxes are available but are not cheap. Be prepared to shell out around £400 - £500 on an exchange basis.

### **The Engine**

**Overall:** When buying a van, the engine is very tricky to assess, but there are a few things to look out for. First and foremost is the overall appearance of the engine. Is it clean? If the engine is covered in oil and dirt, this is a sure sign that servicing the engine and general maintenance has not been a priority of the previous owner. Yes it is true that the VW air cooled flat four engine will take an awful lot of punishment, but like any other engine, if neglected and not serviced it will die. Take a look at the rubber fuel lines. Are they looking old, cracked or brittle? Fuel lines rot from the inside out so it is not always easy to tell and should be the first thing replaced on any van you buy.

Take a look under the rear of the engine for signs of oil leaks. Yes these engines do leak oil, but check how much. If the oil on the bottom of the engine is dried sludge, this is not so bad, but if any

drips are present, then there is an active oil leak. If oil is leaking from the sump plate (the round plate bolted to the bottom of the engine), or the rocker covers (the rounded rectangular covers on either side of the engine), this is not too much of a problem and is easily rectified. However, if oil can be seen leaking from the push-rod tubes (the eight small one inch diameter tubes running from the centre engine block out to the heads on either side of the engine) then this is more of an issue. The same can be said of any oil towards the front of the engine, where the engine meets the gearbox, this could indicate a leaky main drive shaft oil seal, which would mean replacing the clutch as well, or a leaky oil cooler. All of which involve removing the engine from the van to fix.

### **Start the Van:**

In an ideal situation, you should start the van when the engine is stone cold. This gives you an idea of how the engine starts from cold. Once running let the engine tick over on for a few minutes to warm up. If the engine stalls after a minute or so, this is not necessarily a problem, as it is probably just carb icing, which is common (particularly in cold weather). When the engine has been running for a few minutes and is up to temperature, go round the back to the exhaust and put your hand or a bit of paper towel a couple of inches away from the exhaust pipe and hold it there for 10 seconds or so. If there are spots of oil present, this is the sign of a worn engine. Oil is getting by the piston rings, which will need to be replaced.

### **The Test Drive:**

It is a good idea to ask the current owner of the van to drive the vehicle round the block first, particularly if you have never driven a van of this kind before. It gives you an idea of how the van has been driven and treated by the previous owner and, if you're new to driving vans, gives you the chance to see where all the controls are.

The first thing you will notice about driving an old van, is the gear selection. It is famously akin to "stirring porridge", and can be quite worrying at first, but you will get used to it. You can also improve gear selection by replacing the gear selection bush, which is underneath the van just in front of the gearbox. This is cheap to replace and well worth doing.

The engine fitted in the van you are driving will greatly affect the speed and acceleration. Firstly it is worth noting that none of the stock engines fitted to these vans over the years are by any stretch of the imagination powerful. If you are testing a van with a 1200 engine, it will feel like you are driving a lawnmower compared to any modern car. Generally it is like driving around in a giant baked bean tin. Engine and road noise is ten times that of a modern vehicle and to say the controls are basic is an understatement. There is no power steering, so turning at slow speeds and manoeuvring in car parks is heavy work. There are no power-assisted brakes, so make sure you give yourself plenty of stopping distance, and stock vans up until 19\*2 run on drum brakes, which if not properly adjusted have the stopping power of a creased ice cube. Also these vans wallow. If the van is of stock height and has not been lowered, it will lean over quite a bit during cornering, so take it slow round the bends. The controls are much the same as any other car, except they are a lot more live. Unlike any modern car where you are separated from the driving experience by motors and electronics, here you can feel every bit of road. Every bump and pothole can be felt through the steering wheel. It's like driving a go-kart, and in that respect is a lot more fun, although can be tiring on long journeys.

### **Finally:**

Do not be ruled by your heart. It is easy to fall in love with a vehicle upon first site. We've all done it. But with the price of these vehicles rising all the time, make sure you buy something you are happy with. If this means buying a total shed as a long term project, then Great. But if you want an on the road, safe, solid van that is not going to cost you an arm and a leg in time and money, be very selective in your choice and do not be afraid to walk away.

Good luck in your search, and may you find the van of your dreams.