

# Mind The Gap

Jon Spalding

## Zimbabwe in a bus

Flicking through the latest VW Bus magazine makes me want to apologise for not bothering with any mods to our '99 'velle, but honestly we've never seen the need



Occasionally, guilt drives me to check things under the bonnet, but it's rare anything needs topping up...

We bought our T4 LWB Caravelle as a three-year-old ex-hire vehicle, that had its first 100,000 miles on the clock, for £12,000 in November 2002. Ten years on and another 100,000 miles later it's still the family car and still in daily use. The more time goes on, the more I am impressed with its all-round durability.

My wife, Petra (who is German), and I had always had an interest in fostering and adoption, so for us this has meant having vehicles with plenty of seats. When the old seven-seat Austin Montego began to disintegrate at 186,000 miles, we began to look for a replacement. In fairness, its Perkins diesel engine and Honda gearbox would have been happy to do another 100,000 miles, but the bodywork just fell apart around it. Also, the seven seats of the Montego often didn't

seem enough at the time, as we often had friends and family over to visit from Germany. So we eventually decided on the nine-seat Caravelle.

In January 2010, our interest in orphans led us to visit Zimbabwe for a month to explore the possibility of later returning to work with one of the Christian orphan charities. We finally made it back to Bulawayo in Zimbabwe in November last year to work with Mind The Gap Africa, and The Sandra Jones Centre. Our church paid the airfares for Petra, myself, and our three children, as well as a

smaller sum of money towards a car to use for our six-month visit. Imagine my surprise when Jenny Hensman, CEO of Mind The Gap, took me to Steve's Motors, a dealer in Bulawayo and hesitantly showed me a 2001 T4 automatic LWB Transporter ten-seat minibus she had had her eye on anyway—"You probably won't want to drive round in something as big as this!"

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### I was astounded. In Zimbabwe it's all Toyotas, Mazdas and Nissans, especially in the area of small commercials. There can't be more than three or four T4s in the whole city



Image Caption 1



Image Caption 2



Image Caption 4



Image Caption 3



Image Caption 5

can't be more than three or four T4s in the whole city—this one had been imported at some point from Singapore where it had been in use as a private taxi.

After a test drive and thinking time, we came to an agreement for us to share the purchase cost and leave the car for the Mind The Gap charity to use on our departure.

It is an exciting time for Mind The Gap as they prepare for moving their 18 children to a new home called Harvest Family Village. The vision is for Harvest Family Village to gradually evolve into a community of people based on family units of 'forever homes', where up to ten children will grow up with their own house parents.

#### Charity info

We work in partnership with several charities working with abandoned, abused or orphaned children and babies.

I have listed the main websites on the following page for those wanting to know more. There are an estimated 1.4 million orphans in Zimbabwe out of a population of around 12 million.

Donations, and or sponsorship are an important way of helping these charities with the day to day running costs.

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This is how the existing homes have been run, but because the new place is a 30-acre farm, there is so much more scope to expand at a more affordable cost. And basing the operation on a farm means that they will be able to grow their own food and provide employment and livelihood skills for the children in the future.

My involvement was to assist the team with renovating the farmhouse and transporting eight of the children to-and-from school every day. I also got involved with food aid to desperately poor communities at various locations in the area.

But the task which probably tested the van to its limits was transporting teams of ladies from the church to the farm to help with plucking chickens. In Zimbabwe the number of people a vehicle

can carry bears no relation to the number of seats. So a vehicle is only deemed to be full when there is no free space... anywhere! The limit, we found, would be reached at around 22 people!

There is something about being in Africa that makes you do things you wouldn't dream of doing at home, and for me, one of those things was taking the van round the Matopos National Park. The Matopos is a 3,100sqkm park which boasts a spectacular mountainous rocky landscape. It has some paved roads and a network of rocky dirt tracks, making it an excellent testing ground for the four-wheel-drive pick-ups that normally use them!

We made two trips to the Matopos, the first one ending in disaster with a cracked sump. It had started fine, we travelled round the park for about an hour, stopped



Image Caption 6

for lunch, then decided to carry on to the game park section. This involved using one of the barely passable rough stony tracks and a high sharp rock caught us out, cracking the sump. I had heard an unpleasant thump but hadn't stopped to investigate, thankfully the man at the gate of the game park spotted the telltale stream of oil trickling from underneath. This brought our daytrip to an untimely end. I decided the best thing would be to get as far as I could before we lost too much oil, and phone a friend to meet me on the main road with a fresh can of oil. This plan got me home and back to Steves's motors for repairs; thankfully he was able to take the sump off, have the crack welded up and the sump put back on again.

After this experience I was determined to have a sump guard made up and fitted in order to



Image Caption 7

through my needs with them and they agreed to make up a 3mm steel plate to protect the vulnerable alloy underbelly.

The minute I drove off after it was fitted, I realised the idea was going to need a bit more refining! We had made the foolish mistake of bolting the front onto some brackets at the front of the engine and the back onto the chassis, thus transmitting engine noise and vibration into the cabin, and no doubt causing all sorts of other problems. Eventually, I redesigned the mounting on to the chassis using pipes welded on to the front sub frame, and the sump guard itself inserting into these pipes with a steel rod encased in PVC hose. This set-up worked well, allowing the engine to move and eliminating the vibration problem. The cost? \$55 US and another \$30 for the modifications.

Enthused with the success

prevent this happening again. I decided to take this task to The Bulawayo Project Centre, a place where unemployed people can go to receive training and help to set up small businesses. I approached the steel fabricating unit, talked



Image Caption 8



Image Caption 9



Image Caption 10



Image Caption 11



Image Caption 12

of this invention, what better than to test it out with another trip round the Matopos?!

This second visit ended much more happily, with me testing the van to its limits on steep stony inclines, and rough, barely passable tracks. I had to reluctantly come to the conclusion too, that for this type of task, the automatic transmission was actually an advantage; it was possible to drive at a walking pace up steep stony inclines with enough revs to power us up, which I am sure had I attempted with a manual, would have resulted in

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wheel spin and loss of traction. My general conclusion is, although a T4 is probably at its best on long hauls down a dual carriageway, this six-month, 10,000km trip demonstrated its all-round capability, even on Africa's rough potholed roads. 🚗

Image Caption 13



Image Caption 14



Image Caption 15

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