

NEED TO KNOW

WHERE WE STAYED

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■ Campingplatz Blauer See, Erholungsgebiet Blauer See
Ansprechpartner: Werner Öchsner Am Blauen See 119 30823 Garbsen Tel: +49 (0) 5137 89 96 0 www.camping-blauer-see.de

HOW MUCH?

- Fuel: £300
- Ferry: Contact DFDS
- Campsites: £85
- Tolls: £0

MUST SEE / DO:

- Anything VW-related
- Hanover's main square
- Hanover old town
- The Maschsee, a lake close to the new town hall
- The AWD Arena, home ground of Bundesliga football club, Hannover 96
- The Eilenriede in the heart of Hanover (the largest city forest in Europe)
- The Royal Gardens of Herrenhausen (the Adventure Zoo is said to be one of the finest in Europe)

RECOMMENDED READING:

- Cool Camping – Deutschland ISBN: 978-3942048446



No place like home

1,100 miles in four days with a bunch of California Owners Club members, converging upon a lake just 10 minutes from where their Vans were built. Good times

Words and photos James Wallace and Volkswagen CV press office

I'd only met Steve, Heather and Paul a few minutes prior to setting off for Hanover from Forest Hill in south east London on a sunny Wednesday afternoon. As introductions go, they don't get much better than, "Hi, I'm James, now let's jump into your brand new Van and go to Germany, shall we?" In the build up to this trip Steve, head honcho of Campervantastic, had been feverishly locked in email correspondence with VW Commercial Vehicles UK to try and sort access to the main production plant, followed by the smaller scale factory where the Calis are readied for the road. Steve had agreed that we could jump on board with him for the 1,100-mile return journey to the factory, with a night chilling out on the Rhine, near Dusseldorf, and then three nights at a campsite just a short hop from the *Nutzfahrzeuge* (Commercial vehicle factory) itself.

It all began with loading up our trusty steeds for the journey just off the A205 in south London. Our duo of 2.0-litre, 180bhp, bi-turbo, TDi Californias are part of the Campervantastic hire fleet. So, with 'Toffee Brown' and 'Shadow Blue' (all their Vans are known simply by

their VW colours) loaded with guitars, beers, pasta sauces, Haribo, our passports and ourselves, it was time to hot foot it down to the white cliffs and jump onboard a trusty DFDS ferry bound for Dunkerque. As is always the way, negotiating the South Circular at any time of day can often be a bit of a swine but, despite a little hold up, we made it with plenty of time to spare

“Luckily, the kind folk from DFDS decided to upgrade us to first class”

ready for boarding. Luckily, the kind folk from DFDS (www.dfdsseaways.co.uk) decided to upgrade us, so we ended up kicking back in the first class lounge (you must have looked classy?-Ed), which was incredibly civilised, thanks to complimentary coffee and cakes. A spot of pie and chips on top hit the spot and fuelled us for the first leg of our trip. An incredibly peaceful one-and-a-half-hour crossing later, we docked in France, ready for the first bit of autoroute heading east across Europe

towards Antwerp, via Ghent.

To be honest, there's not much of interest along this section of motorway, and we were determined to make Dusseldorf by night fall as Steve had reserved us a spot at a campsite recommended in the Cool Camping guide to Deutschland, so a straight four-hour blast across Belgium and Holland saw us arrive some time around 8.30pm. But, as the gates had already come down on the site and the sun was about to disappear from the horizon, it looked like a night on the river bank was in order. However, whilst wandering around to see what we were missing out on, we

met a very forthright and official security guard, who Steve somehow convinced we weren't loitering with intent and were indeed booked in. He gave us the passcode for the facilities and the gate and we were in! It's worth noting at this point that German campsites are well known for not letting you in after dark, so plan your route and timings carefully if you want full use of the showers and facilities on your chosen site. Ours was a friendly, fairly busy campsite just on the banks of the busy Rhine. What with



DFDS sorted us with an absolutely faultless first class crossing



Ahhh, you've got to love a bit of autobahn action. Try doing this for four hours in a Bay Window!



Clockwise from top left: Steve does a blinding Lloyd Grossman; nothing like a balanced diet, eh?; Various Vans on route; waterskiing lake at Blauer-see



▲ That's our Jimbo (yeah, right-Ed) on the lake having his first go at waterskiing on the track system that ran around the lake. He was a natural! And below is a helicopter held up by angels...



the slew of barges and industrial boats that patrol 24/7, and our proximity to Dusseldorf airport, I'm told it wasn't the quietest of nights! None of that bothered me though, I slept like a log in the well appointed and nicely-insulated pop-top and awoke to the aroma of fresh coffee wafting through the Van as Steve busied himself prepping breakfast for Heather, Paul and I. Following the slap up chorizo pasta we'd had the night before, washed down with a few beers, I knew by this point I wasn't about to go hungry or thirsty. Evidently Steve's no stranger to prepping a nice bit of grub onboard and his fresh fruit, muesli, yogurt and homemade bread and jam breakfast saw us take it easy by the riverside as the sun shone bright. We didn't really want to leave, and would have liked to stay for a day or so and soak up all that the local districts of Langst-Kirst and Kaiserwerth have to offer, particularly as they are some of the oldest parts of northern Dusseldorf. Alas, our true destination was calling.

Eager beavers

By 10am we were back on the road, after settling the €25 bill for the night, ready to make the three-hour hop north east towards Hanover, via Dortmund, on the E34. Our eagerness to reach our next destination backfired though, as this time we arrived too early to get in! Seems campsite etiquette in Germany is all about mid-morning to late afternoon siestas, so we skulked off to the local town of Sleeze for a spot of lunch, returning later in the afternoon to find that a few other members of our Cali Owners Club entourage had arrived and found a spot at our Campingplatz Blauer See base for the next few days. With nibbles, wine and a few local brews set out in the gorgeous afternoon sunshine, the tables and chairs were assembled, pleasantries exchanged,

▲ We really didn't want to leave the banks of the Rhine during our first morning in Germany, but Hanover, the home of VW's Commercial vehicles, beckoned

and the collection of Calis continued to grow. When the rest of the gang were all pitched up, we readied ourselves for dinner in the on-site restaurant. *Schnitzel* and *steins* all round? It would have been rude not to. By dinner time, the collection of Vans was nine strong, and everyone had met everyone else. Some people might not understand the appeal of the slightly nomadic Campervan existence, but it's moments like this that make it all worthwhile. Everyone exchanged stories of where they'd been and where they were heading, which, thanks to the luxury and convenience a California offers, is just made all the more enjoyable. There was also talk of what's been done to people's vehicles, and it sounded as if Wayne in particular had enjoyed the de-restricted sections of Autobahn to the maximum, his re-mapped California proving itself capable of nudging well into three figures (with Smart 'phone evidence to prove it). Thanks to a beautiful waterskiing lake, mini beach, cracking restaurant that dished up great value local fare and fantastic on-site facilities, this is definitely a campsite we'll return to.



tirelessly to grant us access inside the hallowed grounds of the Transporter factory. Unfortunately, we weren't allowed to get really up close and personal with our cameras (we'd imagine to prevent us showing any rivals how and why the T5s are so well screwed together), but it was still a unique opportunity to witness the magic that happens within the walls where the T5, Caddy, Amarok and Porsche Panamera are slotted together. Upon meeting Pietro, just outside the factory gate, we were ushered inside and given radio headsets, told the ground rules (any sneaky photos and your camera will end up as part of a

A beautiful waterskiing lake, mini beach and a cracking restaurant

After only two days away from home, everyone was busy planning their route down to Sicily but, alas, real life often gets in the way of such lofty ambition, so we focussed on the job in hand. The next day was the big one, and an early rise saw everyone poised and ready for the main event – the VW factory tour. Pietro from VW CV UK had been in collaboration with the Hanover press office for months, and had worked

T5 in the parts press!) and introduced to our guide for the visit – long-term VW employee, Hanover resident and former Yorkshireman, Terry Forgarty. He explained how, in 1956, Transporter production was moved from Wolfsburg to Hanover, following the unprecedented success of Ben Pon's initial sketches for a Beetle-based Van. Since then, the Transporter range has gone from strength to strength, and the latest



It was a spellbinding place to visit

iteration is selling like the proverbial hot cakes, some 13,000+ last year alone. After witnessing the awesome power of the Schuler press, which stamps sheet metal into precise chassis sections and feels like an earthquake when you're stood next to it, we watched the transformation of sheet steel into a complete T5 monocoque chassis, along the way seeing the computer-controlled welding, laser alignment and good ol' manpower that ensures all body panels are fit together correctly before heading to the spray booth. It's not until the body is 'married' to the engine, transmission, wheels, brakes and suspension that Vans destined to be Californias are removed from the production line and taken to another warehouse across town.

California magic

It's here that the California magic really happens, where all the bespoke Cali fixtures and fittings are applied by a team of dedicated master techs, all fully trained to alternate roles at a moment's notice. From attaching the complex electro-pneumatic roof structures to fitting the kitchens, wiring and installing gas and electric supplies and fitting the sliding bed rail system, every job is carried out at a specific station, and the end result is a coachbuilt product that's testament to manpower rather than robots. Due to the intricate nature of the California and Beach conversions, there's at least two days of additional labour invested once the roof-less T5 arrives from the main factory, and it was a spellbinding place to visit. If we are ever offered the opportunity to return, we'll welcome it with open arms. Thanks VWCV.

Settling down to a traditional VW-made bratwurst for lunch (it's got an official VW part number and is produced at the butchery inside Wolfsburg!) we weren't expecting the next element of

▲ All nine of our UK Calis lined up outside the VW Oldtimer warehouse, just down the road from the dedicated California factory where each one of them had been finished by hand

the trip at all. As we'd been so well behaved inside the main factory and the California plant, we were then shown around one of the amazing VW Oldtimer warehouses where they keep a back catalogue of the Commercial vehicles that have made VW's box on wheels so successful. "VW realise how important their past is to brand identity," Paul Schleck told us, "so a few years back they started buying back specific and sought-after vehicles," he told us.

It's from here that they also offer the VW Oldtimer restoration service, where customers can bring in their own Split Screen or Bay Window Buses for in-house restoration, using genuine VW parts where possible. We didn't dare ask how much a full bare metal resto might come to, but we'd imagine having that authentic VW stamp on your receipt would add some inherent value. Alas, taking pictures of the work being done was prohibited but, let me tell you, it was

quite the honour to have a gander.

Everyone in our group was on a high following the factory tour, so we all returned to the campsite for another fantastic on-site meal together, then said our farewells in preparation for an early start the following morning. Of course, being in a duo of Californias with Steve, Heather and Paul for company, the four days flew by and we could have done with more time to take in the local attractions, but the Vans were faultless, they cruised effortlessly at pace and also sported great stereo systems to make the most of ear-piercing *Foo Fighters* and *Green Day* to see us all the way through Germany and Holland. We made it back to Dunkerque in record time, boarded the ferry and waited for the familiar white cliffs of England to hove into view.

Four days, four mates, £300 in diesel and a visit to an institution that I'll never forget. That's what I call a road trip.

