

The Ultimate **Motorhome** Conversion



BY MIKE LESTER-OLIVIER

What else but the best would South Africa's champion rally driver choose?

Take a high quality 4x4 station wagon and marry it to a fine example of painstaking coachbuilding craftsmanship and what do you get? The AC Motorhomes' Land Cruiser Conversion.

A while back, our own champion rally driver, Serge Damseaux took his 1991 Model 80 Land Cruiser to Carey Warehan of AC Motorhomes and asked him to turn it into a top-class motor-home. A man like Serge knows exactly what he wants in a motorcar; when he relaxes and goes on holiday, he expects the same quality of handling and control from his recreation vehicle as he is used to on the rally circuit.

That's a tall order for a Motorhome! Carey felt he

was up to the challenge, so the job was on!

He and his team went to work, they cut the entire rear section off the vehicle and replaced it with a unit of their own design, built to exacting tolerances and with the finest materials.

The entire added structure is made of fibreglass with no aluminium extrusions used at all, providing a solid, leak-proof unit of great strength and weather resistance. The unit is built as an integral part of the Land Cruiser's body and is not a bolt-on addition. Great care has been taken to ensure that the lines of the motorhome match those of the car; even the curves of the streamlining on the top of the unit echo those of the car bonnet. The width of the finished conversion is exactly the same as that



The liquor cabinet is in the doorway for easy exterior access while enjoying sundowners



AC Motorhomes Carey Warehan (left) and Toyota Works rally ace Serge Damseaux stand proudly in front of the converted 1981 series 80 Toyota Land Cruiser which formed the base vehicle for this motorhome. 'We can convert a wide range of used vehicles' says Carey



View to the rear, showing picture windows, dinette / bed combination and the Engel deepfreeze. The galley includes a three-way fridge, microwave oven, stainless steel sink and two-burner gas stove



These views of the bathroom show the shower attachment and upmarket Thetford cassette toilet. The curtain keeps the interior dry when the shower is in use

of the original station wagon, with no additional overhang at all. The original colour scheme, wheel arch mouldings, rear bumper and even name badges have been retained and incorporated into the final design. The suspension has been only slightly modified. Old Man Emu shocks and springs have been fitted all round and Firestone Airbags have been installed in the rear to prevent sway. A long-range fuel tank provides 160 litres of fuel and a water tank, holding 120 litres, has been added.

We took a trip out to see the final results

All finishes from top to bottom and stern to stern are faultless.

Outside

The basic solid lines of the Land Cruiser are carried through to the conversion giving a clean, elegant and streamlined look to the rig. This is a substantial hunk of motorhome, but it is at all times completely stable and easy to control. The taillight clusters are neat and uncluttered, and the large rear window gives the driver a clear, unobstructed view, straight through the interior, of the road behind. The entrance to the van is on the kerb side of the unit and access hatches are situated on either side, at the rear. Neatly installed behind the roadside hatch is the 1000W silent running Honda generator, which provides power to the hot water geyser and the microwave when no external power is available. The kerb side storage compartment houses gas cylinders, the removable corner steadies and has space for tools etc.

Inside

As you step inside, the first impression is one of space, immediately followed by the realisation that you are surrounded by fine workmanship and attention to detail. The galley area, on your right as you enter, has a two-



Wash-up sink has a unique mixer tap for hot and cold water



Many components such as the stove are exclusively imported and selected for durability

burner gas stove, a microwave oven at eye-level and a stainless steel sink unit. Hinged sheets of toughened glass, which increase the work surface area, cover both the cooker and sink. Below the cooker is the Engel refrigerator, which is the normal small caravan unit. These have a very limited freezer section, so the addition of a separate Engel freezer on the other side of the galley is a welcome sight.

Cupboards, drawers and packing spaces are plentiful so there is no need to leave your favourite pot at home. Hinges and door catches are solid brass units with a firm positive locking action.

Lighting is good, with extensive use of downlights and a couple of strategically located mini-spots, so that reading in bed should present no problems.

The dinette area is light, airy and spacious with a large rear window and two side windows, which give a great panoramic view from the comfortable seats. Just imagine sitting at ease at a waterhole, watching the game coming and going. Need a drink? No problem with the fridge right at hand. A snack perhaps? Sure!

Let's also not underestimate the value of a cassette type Thetford toilet in the full bathroom! This is a completely enclosed room, which is great for privacy. A

skylight vent provides additional illumination and ventilation, preventing humidity from the shower from getting into the rest of the living area. The onboard electric geyser provides hot water while all the fittings in the bathroom are of an extremely high quality. There is sufficient space to wash without feeling as though you are bathing in an upright coffin!

Moving on to the sleeping arrangements; the dinette converts quickly and easily into a double bed, with the table forming part of the bed base.

The Luton above the driver's seat is reached via a detachable ladder and is very generously proportioned, the headroom, although necessarily limited, is better than that generally found. In daytime usage, a portion of the Luton may be removed to allow full and easy access to the rear from the front seats of the car. A nice touch is that the passenger seat can still be fully reclined.

Naturally, a well made drinks cabinet is provided in the stairwell.

The extra battery and control systems are neatly stowed in an inside locker.

The drive and handling

The combo certainly has a great interior and exterior, but how does it handle? In our opinion, just like the thoroughbred that it is. The 4.5 litre petrol engine pulled the rig as if there was nothing on the back! As expected, there was a certain amount of lean in tight corners, but not enough to prevent us from zooming up and around the bends of Sir Lowry's pass at speeds that would be neither wise nor possible with a caravan in tow. The loaded conversion is some 900kg heavier than the standard vehicle but the power and torque just laughed at the load. The airbag suspension magically smoothed out the bumps in the road and provided excellent stability. Braking performance was also excellent. All round visibility, with a view through the rear of the vehicle, was very good and the standard width means that clip-on rear view mirrors are unnecessary.

Summing it up...

The very high quality of material and workmanship is evident throughout; even the skylight hatches are high-spec marine units. As the conversion is based on a competent off-road vehicle, it is expected that the rig will not be confined to major highways. The construction is of such a high standard that the unit should be able to stand up to considerable rough usage. In fact Serge has already put his new acquisition thoroughly through its paces and he is delighted its performance.

We couldn't fault it and if a rally driver of Serge's calibre and experience is satisfied, that must be the best endorsement anyone could ask for.

A.C. Motorhomes' Carey Wareham may be contacted at 021 552 5648. Prices depend on the vehicle being converted and the owner's specifications regarding fittings and equipment required.



Above: The roof is strong enough to walk on making this motorhome ideal for use as a viewing platform



Above: Lots of interior space - view from the rear looking toward the cab. The front passenger seat can fold flat for easy access to the drivers seat