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BUYING INTO
THE BONGO



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Specialists in Japanese Mazda & Toyota, automatic and 4 wheel-drive campers



Bernard Bickerdike knew exactly what he wanted and Wellhouse delivered his ideal camper.

You can't beat a Bongo

There is a quiet revolution underway in the market for weekend camper vans. As an alternative to the more common British and European base vehicles, a few enterprising converters have broken with tradition and turned to the Far East for inspiration. **Peter Sharpe** checks out one of the most recent conversions by Wellhouse Leisure in Yorkshire.

You can only wonder at the moment when the first traveller from these isles set their eyes upon a Mazda Bongo in its Japanese environment and decided to import one for a full UK conversion. Was it a monumental leap of faith and imagination, not to mention lateral thinking, or was it just a reckless moment of madness, fuelled by over-indulgence in the local saki?

I think most people would agree that the British motorhome buying public are quite a conservative lot: Fiat, Volkswagen, Peugeot and Mercedes rule the roost, with anything else regarded as either avant-garde, subversive or just plain weird. Now imagine the obstacles in getting them to open their wallets for an obscure, second-hand, Japanese import with a silly name.

BONGOS ARE BOOMING

Mazda Bongo, Bongo Friendee and even Ford Freda: these are all names used to describe what is essentially the Mazda SGL3 - or SGL5 if in its four wheel drive incarnation. Ford are not popular in Japan, so one way for them to create a market

presence was to buy a stake in Mazda, enabling re-badged SGLs to re-emerge as Fredas. Why the name? Who knows? Expect future launches of the Mercedes Myrtle, the Peugeot Pansy and the Vauxhall Vera.

Managing Director David Elliott makes regular trips to Japan to source batches from the pick of the second-hand market. Not all are Mazdas though. Toyota Hiaces are also imported to meet the needs of those requiring a greater living area and even an occasional Honda, Nissan or Mitsubishi might find its way onto the forecourt.

The original members of staff had been founder members of Deepcar Motorhomes International, but sold their share to the German half of the partnership about eighteen months ago. With the resulting increase in business the original three full-time staff members have now grown to seven. The new business began with just seven vans, but has now expanded to the extent that there are thirty on site, with forty-six more on order and awaiting delivery. There is even an overflow storage facility on a nearby farm, where a further fifteen vehicles are held at present.

The SGLs are rapidly acquiring cult status and now have an enigmatically named owners' club, the presumably Frank Zappa inspired Bongo Fury. It could have been worse: if founder member Ian Maynard had been a Cliff Richard fan, he might have named it Expresso Bongo.

SO WHY BUY SECOND-HAND?

Well the new SGLs are a bit of a hybrid and have never been officially imported into the UK. Prices are low and depreciation is high in Japan, so new cars are purchased more regularly and there is an abundance of used, low mileage models. Motorhome camping as it exists in this country is almost entirely unknown in Japan, with long-stay or touring holidays simply not part of the Japanese culture. What they are very fond of though, is to drive out for overnight stays at popular resorts or to attend weekend sporting events. With this in mind, Mazda built the SGLs as recreational vehicles, complete with factory built, electrically operated rising roofs. Some arrive with a very solid looking Japanese utility unit, comprising

leisure batteries, water tank, sink and cooker, although the position and layout may not be ideal for UK customers, so all rear seats and fittings are usually stripped out on arrival. Most are automatics and all are right hand drive, as the Japanese also drive on the left side of the road.

BERNARD'S BONGO

The Wellhouse conversion that I had come to see was one that had been brought in specially by its proud owner, Bernard Bickerdike, from Ramsbottom in Lancashire. Bernard's Bongo is actually a Freda, but let's not get back into that. Bernard's requirement was for a vehicle that could be used for weekends away, but which didn't actually look like a motorhome. It had to be capable of being used as a second car and wouldn't cause disapproving frowns in the golf club car park. He originally went to a dealer in Halifax with the intention of buying a Romahome, but this was soon forgotten when he saw a gleaming Mazda standing nearby. That particular one was sold, but he knew right away that he had to have one. An internet search soon brought up a list of suppliers, but after travelling to several establishments he preferred the quality of the Wellhouse conversions and the price was very favourable. He was also impressed by the way that Carl, the Wellhouse fitter, discussed how they could build one to his specific requirements.

Bernard chose an unostentatious dark green model and was very keen to have his vehicle stripped of all superfluous adornments. Most customers prefer to have the commonly fitted bull-bars removed, but Bernard also wanted it stripped of the factory decals on the lower body, which also involved some re-spray



Another Mazda is stripped down in the workshops to receive the full Wellhouse conversion.

work. Tinted windows were also fitted on request - worthwhile extras that add so much to the appearance of these campers.

SPEC SAVERS

Although the 1996 Freda had already covered 50,000 miles, the appearance is that of a brand new vehicle. The specification is very high. It is the 4-wheel-drive version, with an automatic gearbox, a factory fitted, electrically operated, rising roof, climate control, power steering, electric windows, electric folding mirrors, remote locking,

radio/cd player, electric window blinds, twin airbags, ABS and alloy wheels. In fact it would appear that virtually everything capable of being operated electrically has been wired up to do so. Some of the Japanese stereos are quite exotic looking to British eyes and all radios have to be fitted with waveband expanders to cover the UK frequencies. Wellhouse always fit these as part of the standard conversion.

To sit in the front is like being in a cockpit. Everything is ergonomically designed and feels moulded around you. The automatic gearbox is



The interior of Bernard's Ford Freda, showing the well designed layout with its easy-clean surfaces.



Underneath the arches



The double bed can be made up in an instant and provides generous accommodation.

smooth in operation and the 2.5-litre diesel engine is effectively sound-proofed. The central console restricts movement somewhat, but is provided with all kinds of compartments for storing the various accoutrements required for long journeys.

There are unavoidable compromises with all compact camper vans as interior space is at a premium. In the Mazda, when the full-sized, 6' 2" double bed is in made up, it restricts access to the locker containing the Porta-potti. In this case, Bernard and his wife could manage without the full length of the standard bed, so Wellhouse were able to shorten it just sufficiently to overcome the problem.

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

As is usual with many of the smaller van conversions, the units are all situated along the off-side of the van. The double rear seat can be folded down in seconds to make up the double bed, and can be provided either with lap belts or three-point seatbelts. Bernard's conversion includes a Smev two ring, stainless steel hob, a matching sink with electric water pump, fresh

and waste water tanks, a Waeco 40-litre compressor refrigerator with energy accumulator, 240 volt mains hook up, a consumer unit, leisure battery and split charger. A sturdy matching table slots into the floor via its central pillar and the light-reflecting surfaces all help to add a sense of light and space to the interior. The overall effect is bright, clean and functional, with the front and rear seats all re-upholstered in a grey material to match the silver-grey, easy clean surfaces of the cupboards and worktops.

The elevating roof opens completely automatically at the touch of a button and gives you a choice of functions. The roof panel can be pushed upwards, allowing maximum headroom, or left in place, providing a useful temporary storage area for sports equipment, or other bulky items that had been stored in the rear during the journey. With the roof panel in place, the roof space also contains a makeshift bed. It is theoretically designed to accommodate two adults, although those less agile, or plump or with any degree of incontinence would be wise to restrict themselves to the lower deck. Young children would probably love it though.

WHAT ABOUT SPARES?

The question of spares often crops up when discussing the merits of imported, second-hand vehicles. Wellhouse and Kent converter AVA keep a number of vehicles for breaking and have an agreement to exchange parts if and when required. Many SGL spares are common to the Mazda B2500 pick-up truck. Your local Mazda dealer might not be aware of this, so Wellhouse have gone to the trouble of having a Japanese parts manual translated for the aid of customers. For harder to locate parts, Wellhouse can import genuine Mazda spares, sometimes in a week or less, but with a maximum waiting time of only two weeks. As an additional backup, the owners' club is also able to help out in many cases.

Such is the demand for these high tech, high spec conversions that Wellhouse will be opening a new site in twelve to eighteen months time. It is almost exactly opposite the present site and will have an indoor showroom, room to display sixty vehicles and a designated customer parking area.



The wind turbines form an elegant backdrop in the beautiful countryside around Shepley.

MART SAYS

This is surely the most affordable way to own a guaranteed, ultra reliable, high-spec, versatile automatic camper.

The finished conversions look virtually brand new, drive beautifully and will fit into standard parking bays. Typical SGLs sell for anything from £7,500 to £10,000 depending on age and condition. The standard conversion will cost another £4,000. Toyota Hiace conversions are also available for those requiring a little extra space.

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