

'The Unicorn' VW Syncro 16 Westfalia

Sweet 16

At first glance you might think this is just a regular Syncro, but Paul Gillet's high-riding Type 25 is rarer than you think



'As new', 'mint' and 'factory fresh' are phrases we have all seen or heard used by sellers and overly enthusiastic owners alike when describing a vehicle they are either desperately trying to flog, or while boring the pants off some poor unsuspecting showgoer, but in the case of this Syncro, those phrases are perfectly apt, and is the reason current owner, Paul Gillet, added his name to the logbook.

Now, Syncro buffs consider the Syncro to be the best Transporter VW ever made [well they would wouldn't

they? JP], and in many ways they're right, as they are extremely capable off-roaders and are highly regarded within the 4x4 world. But adding to its exclusivity in the motoring world is the fact that not only is this one in perfect condition, it's also one of the scarce seen Syncro 16 models.

Now, if you're wondering what a Syncro 16 is, allow me to explain. A regular Syncro sits about 25cm higher off the ground than your regular Type 25, while the Syncro 16 (denoting 16-inch) is a whole 55cm taller than the standard Bus. The reason for the extra height of any Syncro, apart from the obvious improvement in ground

clearance, is to allow for the addition of a subfloor, within which lives the Bus' 4x4 mechanicals. Some other items had to be re-located to make way for the four-wheel drive system, such as the fuel tank, which moved to the rear over the gearbox, while the spare wheel had to vacate the space under the cab floor.

The special Syncro gearbox is a four-speed unit with a 'G' position for crawling. The G stands for *gelande* which is German for cross country or rough terrain. Syncros also benefitted from the option of front and rear differential locks, which work off vacuum-operated solenoids, and can be

turned on and off as required.

All this may sound very complicated, but it's not, as the basic premise was for a rugged off-roader that could easily be repaired at the side of the road, or half-way up a mountain pass or deep in the heart of Middle-earth. As such, the suspension is almost identical to that of your run-of-the-mill Type 25, but benefits from uprated springs and dampers. As you would expect with any off-road vehicle, the underside is protected by additional skid plates and the air cleaner is of a more industrial design.

On top of all this, the Syncro 16 (option code M855) came with

16-inch wheels, which accounted for at least part of the extra height. What makes these particularly rare is the fact that VW didn't really push the vehicles on the private market, instead focussing on the more closed government markets. Of the 2,138 Syncro 16s produced, most ended up as ambulances, border patrol and military vehicles in Germany. Only a very small number of dealers submitted orders for civilian versions, even fewer still for Camper versions. No exact number is known, but the figure for the latter sub-sub-group is believed to be less than 10 in total. The main reason for this being cost.

All Syncros were expensive to produce, as finished bodysells were sent from Hanover to Steyer-Daimler-Puch in Austria to have the 4x4 system installed, before heading back to Hanover for final finishing. Camper versions, however, then had to be sent out again, this time to Westfalia in Wiedenbrück, for the final part of the transformation. So is this Syncro 16 Westfalia rare? With the whereabouts of only six of the vehicles ever built known, this Camper is a member of an elite, and very specialist, group.

This particular example was ordered by a retired couple in Germany in 1989. The couple were »

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Pic: Andrew Pollock

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Diff lights and the corresponding switches to pull when you want locked or unlocked diffs



Night heater and snow shovel / toilet trowel...



Just 68,000 miles from new. Mint



Westfalia interior is as new because it was hardly ever used



Most ended up as ambulances, border patrol and military vehicles in Germany

Standard Syncros had 14in wheels, not 16s like these monsters

clearly quite astute in their decision making, as they thought long and hard about what extras they would order from the options list, and what they would leave off, so as not to blow their budget. For example, instead of ordering power steering, they chose diff locks, which they considered would be more help if they ever got into trouble. They also specified custom seat covers front and rear

and ISRI swivel front seats, and had some carpets made up, which covered the original VW mats from the cabin, through the walkway and into the rear. They clearly spent their money well to ensure that on their first trip they got there and back safely, and the 'there' I'm referring to was Nepal, which was undertaken after logging a few practice kilometres in the Syncro.

When you learn a little more about

the couple, you can see why the options list was more purposeful than random. For as well as having their main home in Germany, the couple also had holiday homes in Greece and Ireland, the latter of which being where the Syncro ended up following its last German tour of service in 1996. The couple then decided that rather than drive back to Germany, only to bring it back to Ireland again

later, it would be easier to leave the 16 at their Irish home. In very Germanic fashion, every precaution was taken to ensure the hibernation period would not harm the Syncro in any way. Following a thorough cleaning of the interior, exterior and underside, the Camper was stored in a dry garage with a humidifier for company. This is how it stayed for the next few years, until the decision was taken to sell it,

as expeditions were no longer part of the couple's plans.

A neighbour who knew how well the Bus had been maintained decided that he'd like to be the next custodian, which he was for a spell, before deciding to sell it on. Enter Paul Gillet, a dedicated Syncro fan, who had previously converted his own 2WD Type 25 Pick-up into a Syncro, and also owns a High-top Syncro

Panel Van. It was while he was out driving in his High-top one day that a gentleman stopped him and said he had seen another one like his for sale on a local website. Paul being Paul thought it would do no harm to have a look, but as soon as he saw the black wheels and wheelarch extensions, as well as what appeared to be a dent and rust-free body, he knew he had to view it. In speaking with the owner, »

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