

How a passion for 'alternative' transport led to a novel safari company

IT'S THE KOMBINATION THAT COUNTS...

By John Tavner

As an icon of 'free spirit' travel, the Volkswagen Camper – aka Bulli, Kombi, Microbus or Transporter – is absolutely where it's at in terms of automotive chic. No other vehicle on the planet has been revived with so much passion. So how clever of Kombi Nation Tours in Uganda to offer its clients a chance to hit the hippie trail once more.

What is it about the VW Camper that makes adventure-seekers want to hop aboard and head for the nearest desert highway or safari trail?

Almost from the moment the first Volkswagen 'Type 2' van rolled off the production line in Wolfsburg in 1949 – in response to market demand and some inspired sketches by a Dutch importer – the vehicle has found a place in the hearts of dedicated travellers around the world.

What other choice of transport could there be for Kombi Nation Tours, the adventure travel company set up in 2011 by two young British men, Steven Cresswell and William Boase. It was after a memorable tour

of Uganda they made on a 100 cc motorcycle in 2009 that Steve and Will were inspired to

share their adventure with others. The obvious way to do this was to start their own travel company – but how to transport their clients in numbers without losing that ‘stand out from the crowd’ factor that is such a key part of the appeal of motorcycling?

Both men had a fondness for the Kombi – as the Camper is known in many parts of the world – and its quirky yet practical design seemed to fit the image they were trying to put across of an ‘alternative’ safari holiday in which novelty has precedence over luxury and the lively surroundings of a vintage Volkswagen are more fun than the anonymity of a modern SUV.

Today, Kombi Nation Tours – with its head office in Kisimenti, Kampala – operates safaris and tours all over Uganda using a fleet of three beautifully restored Kombis. There are opportunities to track the Big Five

on the savannah as well as trekking ancient rainforests to seek out chimpanzees and mountain gorillas.

“The company aims to fit in as much of the country and as many experiences as it possibly can into each trip, while keeping the price at an affordable level,” said Rachel Landman, who joined Steve and Will on the board of directors in 2013.

Ideal

Her colleague Will said: “We decided to use Kombis because they seemed the ideal choice for taking things slow and enjoying the journey as much as the destination – and they’re gorgeous,” he added.

There is a limit to what even the tough little Volkswagens can cope with, however. Destinations such as Kidepo Valley National Park, for example, are too wild and remote for Kombis, so the company now uses more modern 4x4 vehicles to



Adventure
Take to the road in an iconic Kombi

negotiate this kind of terrain. These newer vehicles – which have the added benefit of air conditioning – are also used alongside the Kombis on less challenging trips.

So who chooses to go on these ‘alternative’ safaris? “We have a mixture,” said Rachel. “In terms of nationality we mostly host Americans, British, German, Dutch, Irish, Australian and Canadian. In terms of profiling, it’s mostly backpackers and volunteers who are already residents of East Africa from the above-mentioned countries. And then we have a few nostalgic types



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THE VAN MAN

Fred Seruwo, the company's mechanic and chief driver-guide, has been working on Camper vans since he was a boy, having learned his trade from his father, Gerrard Mukasa, who was himself a Volkswagen mechanic.

With his deep knowledge of the vehicle and its moving parts, Fred was able to bring all three of the company's vehicles – Piglet, Betty and The Dude – back to life.

Many of the old Kombis in Uganda were formerly used as matatus or taxis until their owners could no longer keep them going. Intriguingly, Piglet had originally been used as an ambulance by St Luke's Hospital in Pakwach, north-west Uganda, before later becoming a matatu and, finally, a source of spare parts.

Fred clearly loves the challenge of taking an ugly duckling of an old VW and turning it into a swan. In a 'CNN Travel' interview, he said:

"I hear about a place where a Kombi can be found, get money, buy that Kombi in any condition. I tow that Kombi to my working place. The next morning I start my task of finding out why that Kombi was abandoned. I always check the engine first. Now that I know what I have to fix on the engine, I set out to look for spare parts. It's always hard to find parts, but I know where to go and who to ask for any part that I might need. After fixing the engine, I check the brakes, sometimes replacing rubbers, cylinders and others. I now have a braking Kombi with a fine engine.

"The next step is working on the body of the Kombi. I'm not good at body works, but I know good guys out there that can help me. After choosing the colour, spraying works begin. That normally takes two weeks. The Kombi is now looking very nice. My next step is to fix the inside part of it. This includes chairs, panels, music, you name it.

"The Kombi is now ready for road testing. This means that I have to drive it for over 700 km. When I get back then we have a nice Kombi."



Kombi Nation
An unusual but fun
choice for exploring
Uganda

reliving their days in the 1970s, which is a lot of fun. We'd like more of these types."

Unusual

The company would like to attract Ugandan customers, too, but it seems that those with the disposable income prefer to go trekking in their own vehicles. "And, to be honest, they find the Kombis an unusual choice," said Rachel.

Ugandans, on the other hand, are very much involved in the operational side of the venture. The company has four Ugandan

members of staff – a tour consultant and three driver-guides – and it employs many others indirectly, for example by always hiring local guides in the parks and reserves. One of the key members of the Kombi Nation Tours team is 'wonder mechanic' Fred Seruwo, who joined the team in 2011. He originally tracked down and restored each of the company's Kombis and now keeps them serviced and ready for the trail, as well as driving them in his role as chief driver-guide.

