

A Starr is Born

Some things in life are meant to test us and what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, reckons Lorraine Starr...

WORDS & PHOTOS Mike Trippitt

Things happen for a reason," says Lorraine Starr. She sips a cool, long drink in the garden of a riverside pub, with the events of New Year's Eve three years ago fresh in her mind: "I thought we were going to die. If that dog had not found me, I wouldn't be here."

The 51-year-old primary school teacher had become stuck on her back in mud slurry halfway down a remote Norfolk cliff trying to retrieve her dog, Olive. Huddling the Westie/Yorkie cross on her stomach, growing increasingly cold, and too tired to shout any longer, she lay undetected for two hours. By chance, another dog found her, and its owner raised the alarm. It would take another three hours before she was airlifted to safety.

That experience left her with a determination to live life in the moment. Twenty metres from where she sits, her new VW T5 campervan named Roy is testament to her positive *Carpe Diem* outlook.

"I've camped for many years," she says. "When I was 19 I went inter-railing. It was in the 80s. I had a tiny tent and can't remember what we slept on. It was crazy!" Lorraine continues: "Due to circumstances, I decided I wanted to be away all summer and I would get a campervan. I made that decision without ever having been in a campervan, but knew it was right."

Love at first sight

Lorraine's doubts over whether she had enough money for a campervan were brought to an abrupt end by a moment of

serendipity in Norfolk. She happened to see a VW T5 day van for sale on Facebook. It was only five minutes away. Spontaneously, she went to look.

"When I pulled up, I loved him straight away. He just looked cool. It was a cold, horrible winter's day and I didn't know what I was looking for. So I went for a little drive, and then agreed a price!"

Although she bought the van without giving it great thought, she took time to find a converter. After investigating various conversion companies on the internet, she chose Blue Sky Conversions in Burwell, Cambridgeshire, following a recommendation. Lorraine met owner, Martin Styles, and instructed him to remove the day van features and convert it into a full camper. She was impressed with the advice she received and the various suggestions that Martin offered: "He was very genuine. He never pushed anything on me and I liked that. I never felt pressured and he always went with what I wanted, but the suggestions that he made were very practical."

Emotional roller coaster

Although Lorraine is thrilled to have her camper and looks forward to years of vee-dub adventures, the journey so far is tinged with sadness. Her marriage broke down in 2017 and she lost her father, Roy, in the same year, having cared for him with her sister for two years.

She says: "The money Dad left me went into Roy, the campervan. The other thing



Lorraine at the wheel with Olive the 'co-pilot'... Definitely going places



The voluminous top-loading fridge is perfect for summer camping

was the freedom, as I didn't have to be there for Dad anymore. So those two things are equally important. I could never have left dad, but I couldn't have got the camper without his help."

Holding back a tear – the strong connection between her father and her camper is obvious – she says her dad was such a quiet, understated man that he would be incredibly embarrassed that she'd named the camper after him! She recalls the day Roy went to Blue Sky for



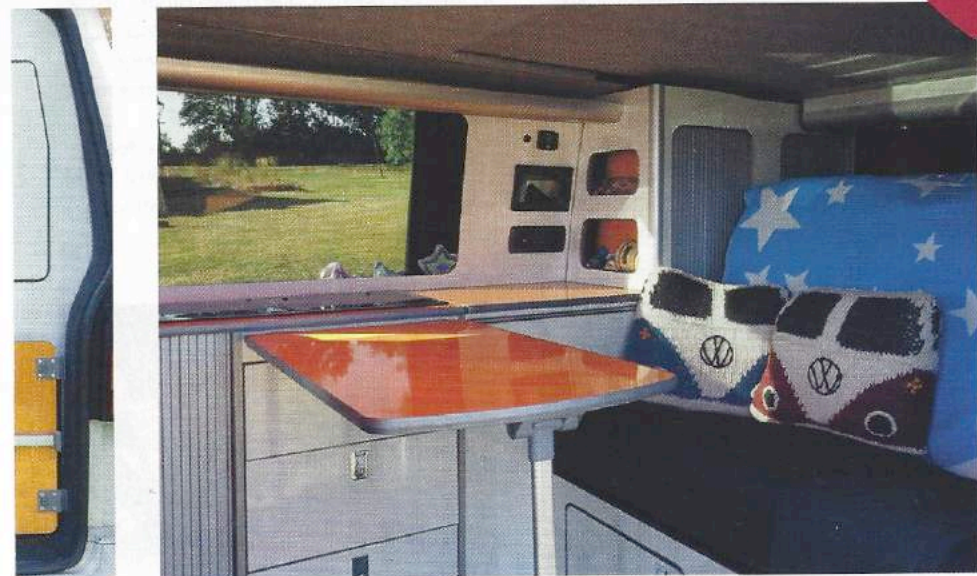
Lorraine Starr



Base vehicle 2010 VW T5 Transporter SWB
Conversion type Bespoke conversion by Cambridgeshire-based Blue Sky Conversions
blueskyconversions.co.uk
Owned since January 2018
Drive Front-wheel drive
Engine 2.0-litre turbo-diesel (Euro 6)
Power 102bhp
Economy 47mpg (estimated VW figure)
Gearbox Manual
Travel seats 4 **Berths** 4
Leisure battery 110Ah
Length x width x height 4.89m x 1.9m x 1.99m
Equipment Hilo high rise/low profile pop-top with orange canvas, two-burner gas hob, 40l top-loading fridge, sink and tap, on-board 20l fresh water tank, white hi-gloss units with orange tops and orange-topped table, RIB bed, electric hook-up, Eberspächer Airtronic diesel heating with 801-digital temperature control, 110W solar panel
Insurance £300 per year

COSTS SO FAR

The van.....	£12,000
Conversion and mechanical upgrades.....	£19,000
Awning.....	£650
Total costs to date.....	£31,650



the conversion work to begin: "I actually got quite emotional. It felt like he was going in for surgery. I was really worried about him. On the day that he was having his roof done, it felt like he was having an operation!" An email from Martin Styles reassured her: "Roy has got a heartbeat!"
 As handover day approached, excitement mounted. Martin Styles had agreed to deliver the campervan to Lorraine's home. "I was hovering by the window," she says. "Everybody knew that he was coming.

All the neighbours were at their windows. But just seeing him for the first time: he was so handsome. The first thing I saw was the windows. They looked amazing and he was all sparkly."
 She admits she cried. "I was a bit scared to open the door in case it wasn't as good as it looked in the pictures. But as soon as I opened the door I thought: 'Wow!' The orange is just the orange that I wanted."
 The newly arrived campervan was all that she had hoped for. It retains its original white

exterior but its Hilo roof with distinctive orange canvas makes the vehicle stand out. "I wanted it white, but thought 'Gosh, that's boring and it's not me', so that's why I went for the orange top."
 Black decals and matching detailing, and those dark stand-out windows give Roy a modern, sporty look, whilst Lorraine's choice of white units lifted by orange worktops and table give the inside a bright, warm feel. Lorraine adds her personality with a smattering of stars and two VW

campervan cushions, lovingly made by a friend. "I am really proud of him and I love talking about him. I keep saying to my friends: 'Don't let me bore you!'"

Big decisions

Before the travels began, important decisions had to be made. The first had been straightforward: "I took Olive with me as my co-pilot!" she says. "She's happy as long as she's with me and I'm happy as long as I'm with her. Wherever I go, I take her."

But after putting her house on the market Lorraine's next decision had been far from easy. She handed her notice in and left her job at the end of the summer term. With her voice breaking she says: "I absolutely loved my job. I adore the children. I adore the families. And I am a teacher through and through." But she says there are other things she wanted to do: "It's not because I was ready to leave. In some ways it was very difficult, because there's lots I still wanted to do in my job. But the need to be free and to travel was stronger than the need to stay."

Lorraine was amazed by the number of people who said 'I wish I was brave enough' and 'I wish I could afford it': "People would love to do it, but they don't. I think there's a point in your life when you think 'If I don't do it now, I'm just never going to do it.'"

With just three weeks to the end of term, Lorraine's summer plans fell into place and, by the end of July, she and Olive were off on their travels. She visited friends and family around the country, but those were her only anchor points. She soon developed a routine. "On my iPad I pulled up the routes and, using the Camping and Caravanning Club's SiteSeeker app on my phone, picked a site that was close to my route. I only liked to do 100 miles a day at the most. The

longest I was booking sites in advance was two days.

Mission accomplished

During glorious summer weather Lorraine, Olive and Roy spent 35 days on the road. "I had a lovely time," she says. "I've seen friends and I have been here, there and everywhere! The only thing I didn't do was wild camp. I just didn't feel safe enough to do it on my own. Apart from that, I've done everything I wanted to."

In just over a month, Roy travelled 1,500 miles through Yorkshire, Cumbria, Lancashire, Wales, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall, Dorset and Surrey. Lorraine visited old haunts, including Blackpool where she worked in 1988. She'd planned to visit Yates' Wine Lodge for old times' sake, but was disappointed to find that it had been destroyed by fire.

Roy performed well during her trip and Lorraine got used to the routine of camping alone. In Scarborough she had her first experience of putting her awning up. "It was really wonky," she says. "I have got better at it now!" Setting up camp the first time took her a good three to four hours and she says she was exhausted. "Now it is very much a routine, and I know exactly what to do." She's got it down to one hour.

But travelling alone and achieving her own goals were the highlight of Lorraine's summer. She says she has never felt threatened or worried.

"Travelling on my own has been a



The gas locker and cupboard inside the camper



How can you go wrong with fuzzy dice in your campervan cab?

wonderful experience, as a kind of proof that I could do it, and that I didn't need anyone to help me. Sometimes, if the wind was blowing and it was raining I'd think: 'This is crazy. What am I doing?' But it has been a really, really good experience.

"Just the fact that I planned my own route, chose where I wanted to go, chose my sites and the people I wanted to visit, makes me feel that it was a good achievement. I feel very relaxed."

Lorraine Starr turned relationship breakdown and bereavement into an opportunity to follow a new path before it was too late, and chose a VW T5 campervan to take her down it. She hopes others can do the same: "It would be brilliant to inspire people to travel alone. I would be very happy if people wanted to contact me to ask questions, especially women."

She has no doubts about how she feels: "What a great choice it was to do this! I think everyone should just get in a campervan and disappear!"



Best trip

This trip! I visited some beautiful places, stayed at lovely campsites and met some great people. I went on some amazing walks, and especially enjoyed stargazing at night.

