A NEW CHAPTER **FOR AN OLD FAVOURITE**

Volkswagen Caravelle eHybrid



The latest Volkswagen Caravelle is larger, quieter and considerably more sophisticated than any of its predecessors and, for the first time in South Africa, electrified. At R1,794,000, it also sits a long way from the utilitarian roots of the original Bus. Yet perhaps its greatest strength is that it doesn't try to emulate an SUV. In a market increasingly dominated by large premium SUVs, the Caravelle offers something refreshingly different.

Volkswagen's Bus has an especially deep connection with South Africa. More than seven decades ago, the first locally produced Volksie Bus rolled out of what is now Volkswagen Group Africa's Kariega plant, beginning a relationship that would see generations of the Transporter become woven into the country's automotive landscape. The much-loved T3 remained in local production until 2002, while successive generations steadily evolved from practical people-movers into increasingly refined passenger vehicles.

The Caravelle name itself first appeared in 1983, when Volkswagen introduced a more passenger-focused and better-equipped derivative of the Transporter. It marked the beginning of the Caravelle as a premium family and leisure vehicle.

That evolution continued through the T4, T5 and T6 generations, with the T6.1 becoming a familiar sight on South African roads. By 2020, more than 10,000 examples had been sold locally since its 2015 introduction, underlining just how firmly established the Caravelle had become. Now comes the T7, and it feels as though the Caravelle has finally reached maturity.

PREMIUM WITHOUT THE BADGE TAX

At almost R1.8 million, the new Caravelle occupies rarefied territory. However, context is everything.

This isn't simply a Kombi with a few luxury touches. South Africa receives the Caravelle exclusively with Volkswagen's new plug-in hybrid drivetrain and 4MOTION all-wheel drive, while the standard specification reads more like that of a premium luxury vehicle.

Inside are seven individually adjustable seats mounted on rails, with the three rear

by ***bernie hellberg jr*** */ photography by* ***volkswagen group africa***



seats removable when additional luggage space is required. A multifunction table provides a genuinely practical focal point for the cabin, while electric sliding doors and a powered tailgate make everyday use remarkably convenient.

Technology is equally comprehensive. A 10-inch infotainment system and Digital Cockpit Pro come as standard, alongside three-zone climate control, 30-colour ambient lighting, IQ.Light LED Matrix headlights, adaptive cruise control, Park Assist, a rear-view camera and an extensive suite of driver assistance systems. The 13-speaker Harman Kardon audio system is another welcome inclusion.

The result is a cabin that feels far removed from the Caravelle's commercial-vehicle origins, offering an ambience that comfortably rivals many premium SUVs.

CLEVER ELECTRIFICATION

The drivetrain is arguably the Caravelle's most fascinating feature. A



passengers on relatively short journeys. Plug it in overnight and many daily commutes can be completed without the petrol engine ever starting. Longer journeys remain effortless, with the combustion engine eliminating the range concerns associated with a fully electric vehicle.

It is an impressively well-executed application of plug-in hybrid technology, with the transition between electric and petrol propulsion occurring almost imperceptibly. The additional electric assistance also gives the Caravelle unexpectedly effortless overtaking performance for a vehicle weighing well over two tonnes.

Charging is supported at up to 11 kW on AC, while DC fast charging is also available to make longer journeys more convenient. Maximum towing capacity is rated at 1,570 kg.

COMFORT COMES NATURALLY

For me, though, the Caravelle's biggest surprise isn't its technology but the way it rides.

There remains something wonderfully familiar about sitting high behind the wheel of a Volkswagen Bus, yet the refinement delivered by the new Caravelle would have seemed unimaginable in the Volksie Buses of my childhood. The ride is supple without becoming floaty, and the suspension deals exceptionally well with the imperfect surfaces that characterise so many South African roads.

A particular test came during our drive to Palala Hotel and Spa in Limpopo, where severely rutted gravel roads provided the only access to our overnight destination. Some sections were rough enough to make me wonder whether the Caravelle would emerge with every nut and bolt still in place. Unsurprisingly, it did.

Despite its generous dimensions, the Caravelle feels remarkably easy to drive.





The steering is light, visibility excellent and body control impressive for such a tall vehicle. At highway speeds, wind and tyre noise are exceptionally well suppressed, reinforcing its credentials as a refined long-distance tourer.

There was, however, one notable blemish during the launch drive. The brake pedal feels softer than it should and, at times, its response lacks consistency. In a vehicle of this size and weight, particularly one capable of carrying seven occupants, I would have preferred a firmer, more predictable relationship between pedal input and braking performance. It never detracts significantly from the overall experience, but it does feel slightly at odds with the Caravelle's otherwise polished character.

VERDICT

So, who buys a Caravelle at R1,794,000? Most likely someone who has deliberately decided they don't want another premium SUV.

That is perhaps the Caravelle's greatest appeal. It offers the space and versatility of a dedicated people-carrier, the refinement expected of a luxury vehicle, and the quiet satisfaction of arriving in something rather more distinctive than yet another BMW X7, Mercedes-Benz GLS or Land Rover Defender 130 waiting outside the school gates.

It also occupies an interesting niche beneath the Mercedes-Benz V-Class and EQV, with recent local comparisons placing the Volkswagen roughly R500,000 below its Mercedes-Benz rivals.

Viewed in that context, the Caravelle presents a compelling proposition. It combines generous standard equipment, genuine versatility, premium refinement and an impressively sophisticated plug-in hybrid drivetrain, all while preserving the unmistakable character that has defined Volkswagen's Bus for generations.

The Caravelle may have grown up, but it hasn't forgotten where it came from. For those of us who remember the old Volksie Bus with affection, there is something deeply satisfying in discovering that the magic has endured. It simply arrives these days with a Harman Kardon sound system, Matrix headlights and, fittingly, a charging cable.