



## Chapter 1

# INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN WITH RUBY

## The dream that came from Tokyo to Tranent

I'd seen all the adverts for camper vans and I knew what a fun way they were to travel. We had hired them when Tessa (our daughter) was small and we had enjoyed some great holidays. In fact, as we got older, we hired one almost every year and had a brilliant time. It was an extra treat added to all our other holidays. We had done fantastic road trips in the US along Highway 101 in Oregon and Washington State and in the southern states of Georgia and Tennessee, taking in places like Atlanta, Chattanooga, Nashville and Memphis as we both love music. But the freedom and peace that "getting out into the great wide open", as Tom Petty said, really touched our hearts. It was time "to put up or shut up" as it were, because we were at a crossroads; we had both retired and yearned for the freedom that only a camper van could give us.

We had thought about buying a van of our own but, thinking sensibly, a big van was out of our league unless we won the lottery and, to be honest, there were places we had visited and wanted to return to where

a big van had been a liability, in spite of the luxury they gave you. Also I would have hated to buy a van that was too big for our drive as it would have to go into storage which would cost more money. It also meant that the freedom of just being able to make a decision to up and go away when we wanted would be minimised. So – hand on heart – I can say that I wanted a van that I would feel comfortable driving on single track roads, that I could keep on our drive and one that I could park and enjoy driving whenever I wanted. Every time I got into it, I wanted to feel excited about the journey as well as the destination.

Then I read about the Mazda Bongo craze online. Lots of people had been buying Bongo vans, which were currently being imported from Japan. Some people told good stories and other people talked about how they had bought what Geordies would call, “a good looking nowt.” I had never seen a Bongo, but I found lots online and the idea of being able to turn one into a camper van to suit our taste appealed to me. I was also very aware of having to ensure whatever we were going to buy would have to be checked over very carefully. I had also seen Fiat Doblos and Renault Kangos and Trafics transformed into camper vans and people who had made a really good job of their conversions.

At this point, it is important to tell you that I had had similar ideas myself, along with the idea of asking Jim to buy me a tear drop caravan that my mini could pull, as well as various types of other towable pods I had seen online. I didn't want a caravan because it would take up too much space on the drive and, to be honest, I never saw us two in a caravan. Poor Jim, I was always wittering on about how fantastic having a Bongo or any van would be, so – after weeks of wittering (and for a bit of peace) – he agreed to take me to see some Bongos at a dealer nearby.

Although the idea got my imagination going, I was neither impatient nor desperate to buy the first one we saw. In fact, when I saw the layout of some vans, I knew I hadn't found what I was after. Some had extending roofs which were shabby and would need replacing, there was evidence of