



<http://www.bellabarista.co.uk>

EXPOBAR OFFICE LEVA

A Closer Look



The details were correct at the time of writing, but the manufacturer and Bella Barista reserve the right to change the technical specification of the packaging, machines and any accessories supplied with the machine (including quantity and type of accessories supplied)

Overview

The Expobar Office Leva arrived well packed in a very sturdy cardboard box that has a little space for accessories to be added. Nice to see the use of shaped polystyrene as a packing material. This machine is unlikely to get damaged in transit.

Externally the machine is well finished using high quality components and has a solid and quality feel. The construction is high polished stainless steel. The warmer tray is reasonably well sized, the machine is quite tall, there is sufficient clearance under normal height kitchen wall cupboards (non-standard height cupboards would almost certainly cause a problem), also there is not much room above to place items on the cup warmer tray. The Expobar Office Leva had no rattles, even from the cup tray which was a snug fit on the test machine the vibe pump is reasonably quiet when operating and certainly it is not obtrusive.

The drip tray is the same as the Brewtus II, huge, holding around 2.5 litres of water and in complete contrast to some machines is properly finished at the front. The lower part curves to follow the bodywork underneath and has an extra front plate to clean up any exposed edges, very similar to the Zaffiro. The drip tray has been cold formed and although this leaves it thinner than a steel plate welded drip tray, it gives it a much neater look inside with rounded corners which makes cleaning much easier. It is also not too heavy when full of water, important when it can hold nearly 2.5 litres.

As with some other machines the portafilter basket comes assembled and the spout in the right place. The standard equipment is a double portafilter (2 spouts) and a single and double basket plus a rubber disk to insert when backflushing.

The insulated boiler is a good size of 1.5 litres (not surprising because I am sure I have seen it before as one of the two boilers on the Expobar Brewtus II. It is a **Heat Exchanger** machine with a powerful 1200w heating element. This is more than sufficient to maintain temperatures and give fast recovery times. You can brew espresso and draw steam or hot water all at the same time with this machine. There is no special preparation required to switch it into steam mode as on some cheaper (and more expensive!) machines. It is a very strong steamer and the single hole steam tip works very well indeed, the recovery time after drawing water for an Americano is fast with a small impact on brew water temperature (while recovering).

Some of the things I loved were:

- The simple lever on the bottom of the case that operated a valve which meant you could switch from the internal tank to mains water operation. Just a fabulous idea that would come into its own if you needed to descale a machine that is plumbed into the mains water supply.
- The water and steam wands are well placed, mounted on ball joints and the knobs are a really nice size.
- Just how well it was put together on the inside, the Spanish have certainly done a nice job on this machine, with a lot of attention to detail and a very clever and well thought through design.
- Acres of space internally, this will be one of the easiest machines I have seen to work on, with great access to all the components.

Usually there are few minor changes that I would like to see, but not this time...for the price, this is a well sorted machine and no quality issues. Well maybe one thing, why are the non compression valves used on the cheaper Pulser but not on the more expensive machines? My guess is that they would have to use less attractive knobs!

Bella Barista
Nene Court, The Embankment, Wellingborough, Northants, NN8 1LD
Tel: 01933 273275

e-mail: claudettep@towability.com

Servicing this machine will be easy as all components are quite accessible, case removal is 5 screws, and the water tank platform (which may also need to be removed) has two screws and a couple of hex screws (puzzling why they decided to use 2 hex screws?). There is little potential for an inexperienced service engineer to damage the machine when removing the case, the pump is quite accessible and pump replacement looks straightforward. The water sensitive control board is mounted in the area least likely to be exposed to water during filling the tank, or venting.

There are no instructions regarding lifting the Expobar Office Leva from the box and it is a bit awkward. The best method is to lay the box on its side, slide the machine out in its polystyrene shells and then flip it upright. It's heavy and solid, but easily handled by one person. Then tip the machine over to one side and remove the first polystyrene shell, then tip over to the opposite side and remove the other.

In summary; The Expobar Office Leva is a fine machine for the domestic consumer to use, easy for the reseller to support and maintain. It should provide years of reliable service with the minimum of maintenance.

I really like Expobars approach, this is the 3rd machine I have had the pleasure of reviewing and I love the fact that they use a common parts bin. This means that cheaper machines don't have cheaper components (unlike some manufacturers), also all the machines perform the same way....very well! There are no surprises and no performance deficits when using a cheap, as opposed to an expensive machine. This is the same approach as Izzo and an approach that I believe distinguishes these two manufacturers from the pack.

I can only say to again to Expobar, well done yet another great machine (and I don't praise these companies lightly). The only Italian competition to come close to displacing this particular machine or attacking its market is Izzo with the Vivi. The major difference between the two is slight, different aesthetics and possibly slightly higher quality on the Vivi, balanced with slightly better design and pricing on the Expobar. That said, Expobar have the price right, the design right and it works really well!

The machine carries its electrical rating sticker and serial number behind the drip tray.



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The vital statistics for this machine are again a little conflicting and many reviews are of earlier models. An accurate view from measurement, rating plate information and internal examination, is as follows:

- Dimensions all approx. (not including steam/water wands) W = 260mm, D =460mm H=420mm
- Heating element is 1200W
- Boiler has a capacity of approximately 1.5 litres.
- Boiler is copper with brass ends
- Weight is approximately 20kg
- Pump in the test machine was an Ulka EX5 48W
- Group is an E61 type group

How it arrived and unpacking



Sturdy box and good use of polystyrene packaging obviously specifically designed for the machine. It is not easy to get the machine out of the box as there is limited room at the sides to reach down and get a good grip. Box needs to be placed on its side and the machine slid out.

The manufacturer's manual gives limited information as usual but the machine is very easy to use. It only covers the basics of machine operation and a very brief description of how to make coffee.

The UK Bella Barista guide will prove to be of significant help to the novice user.

A corner positioning of the Expobar Office Leva is ideal, especially when located near a sink. Once in position on the counter the machine looks nice and does not dominate on standard sized work surface. It is a very tall machine as you can see, and there is not a lot of room under standard height kitchen cupboards.



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e-mail: claudettep@towability.com

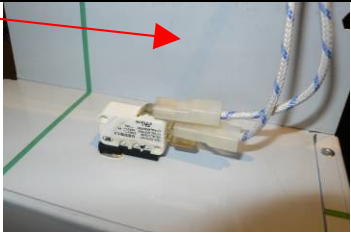

Lower feet are apparently available at £9.95 per set as an option and Bella Barista are investigating the possibility of making them a standard item on the UK Leva machines. The "tall" feet, I seem to remember, are put on there to meet the regulations in some countries (which state a certain clearance below the machine. I think lower feet could also significantly improve the look of the machine (in my opinion, although I still think it looks OK)

Refilling the water tank can't be done without pulling the machine from under the cupboards and is annoying with those grippy little rubber feet!. This problem is easily solved with the addition of 4 felt furniture pads (as used on wooden floors).

Preparing the machine for use



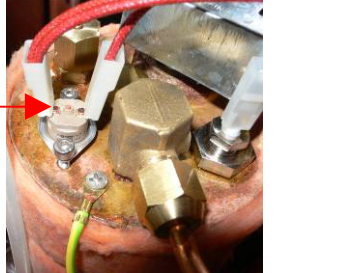
Peel off any protective film, wash the cold water tank and fill it with filtered water. I never like the idea of using a machine without thoroughly flushing it through, especially considering that the machine may have stale water from factory testing (many months old), or manufacturing residues. Flushing through because of the design is fast and easy.





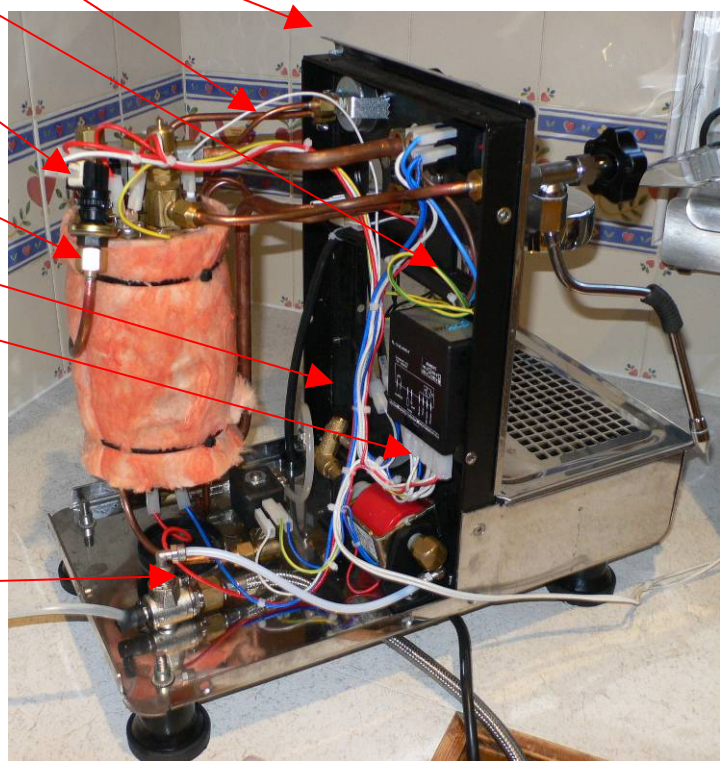
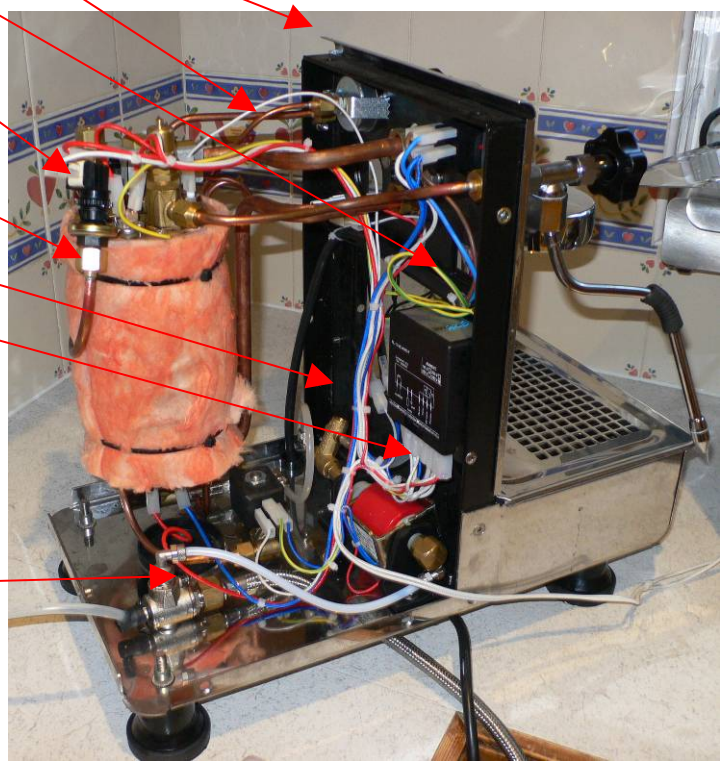
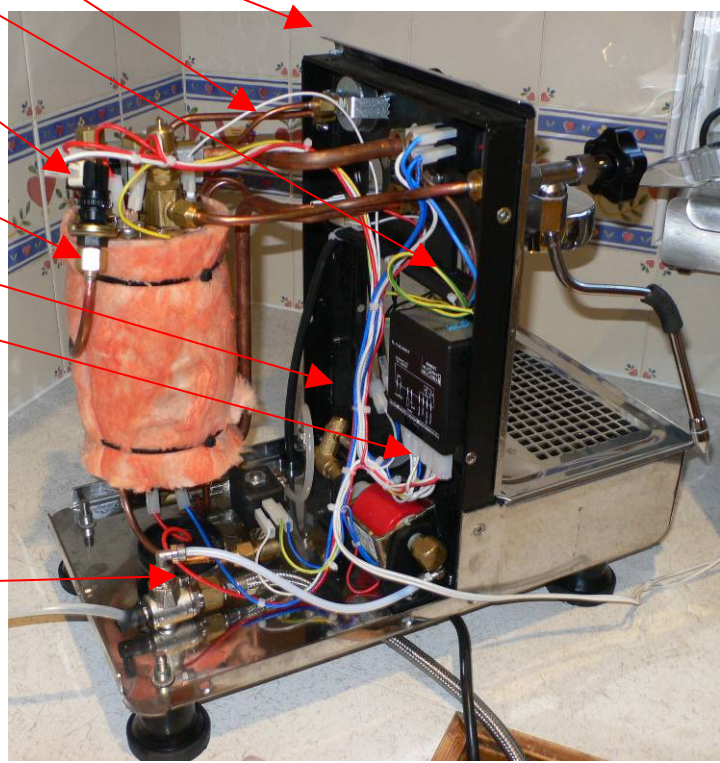
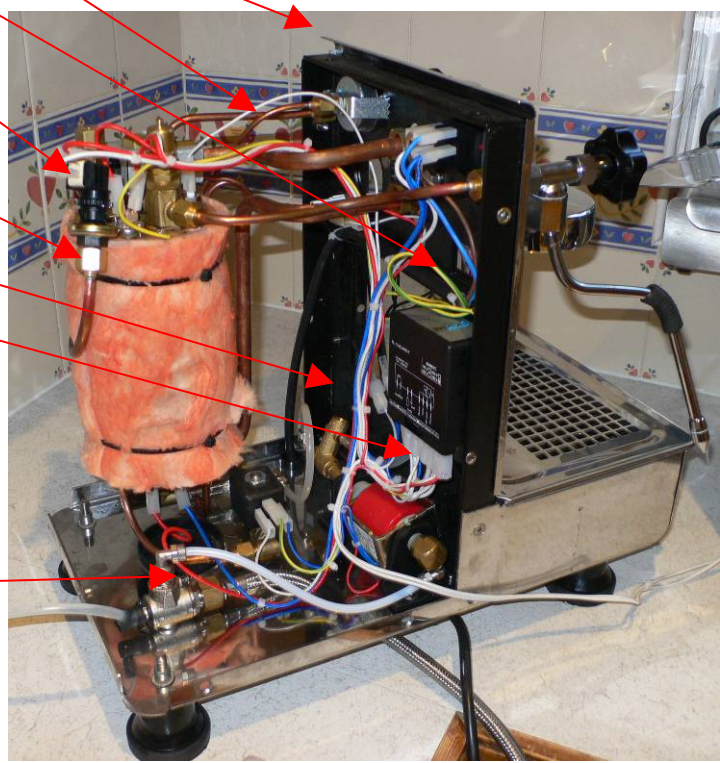
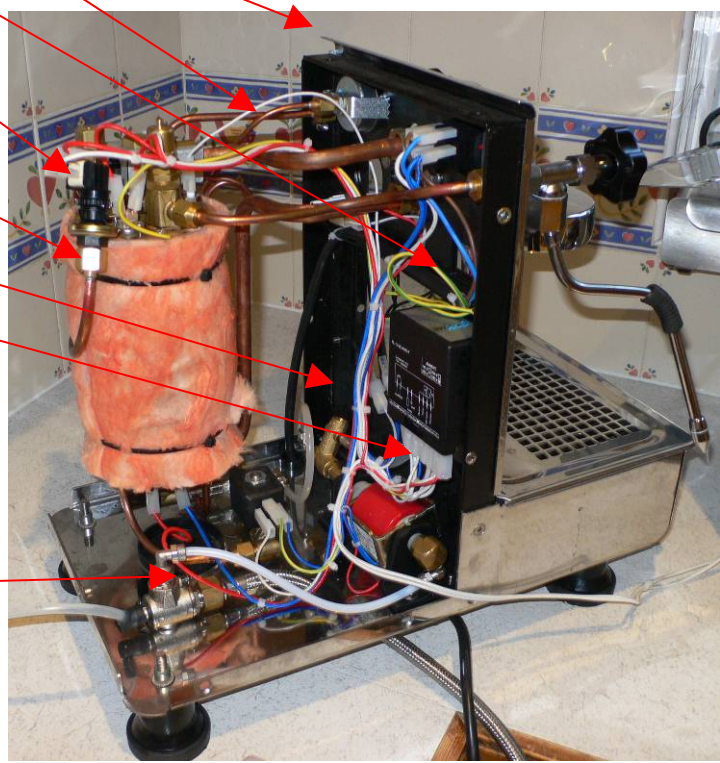
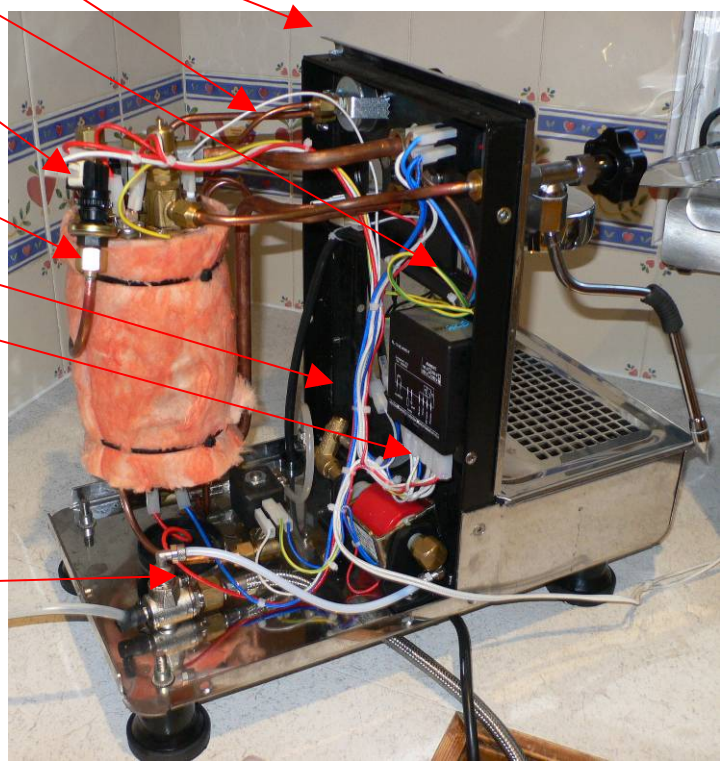
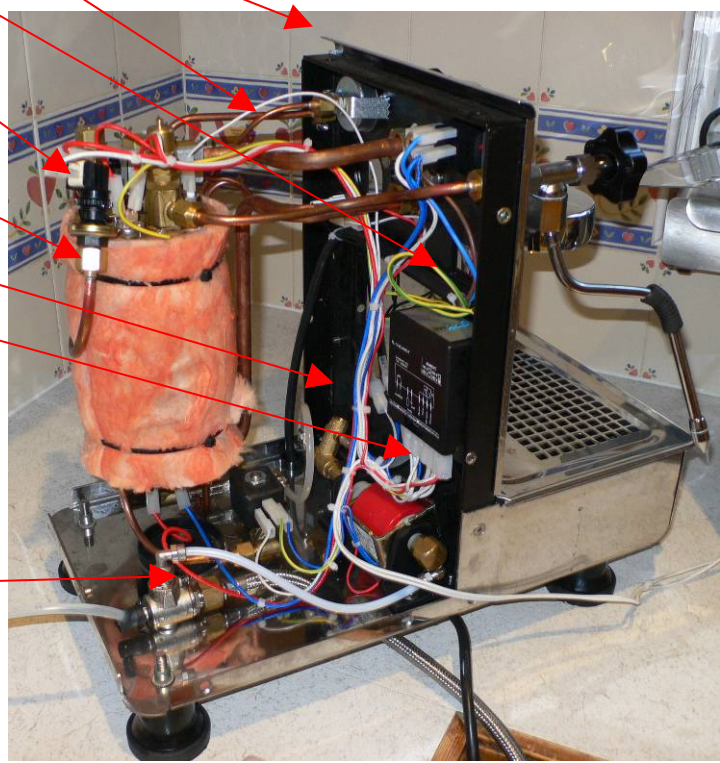

Key features

Item/Description	Picture	Comments
No rattles!	Enough said!	
High pressure pump lines were simple high pressure plastic tubing not the steel braided pipes seen in some machines	I don't expect it will cause a problem, It is just an observation. No doubt braided pipe would have added to the cost, with little if any impact on reliability.	
Water tank platform and shield has a protective film on the inside surface. I decided to leave this on		Expobar should remove this prior to assembly, but again I can't see a problem with it being left on, certainly not worth the trouble of opening machine to remove it.
Small hole in water tank a blessing and a curse. The tank is well made and good quality		Means that crud doesn't fall easily into the tank and water doesn't slop over the sides when moving it (in fact you can fill it right up. The small hole however does make it more difficult to fill and much more difficult to clean (so don't go on holiday for 2 weeks with it full of water!)
When low on water machine just switches off. Power light (on switch) stays on.	A warning bleeper like the Vivi which starts beeping even though the machine switches off. Because you're only aware it has switched off when it goes cold!	
I hate it when the espresso shot just stops.	Second Micro switch to illuminate a low water buzzer or light a few oz before the machine will switch off due to low water level. Or a dual pole/position micro switch to replace existing one	

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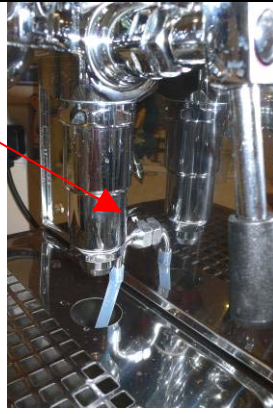
e-mail: claudettep@towability.com

<p>The badge looked great, not all metal, but looked the right size and quality for the machine</p>		<p>One of my pet hates, are these cheap looking labels some manufacturers use. This badge looked nice on the machine!</p>
<p>Removing the outer case was easy</p>	<p>There are 5 screws, and the water tank platform (which may also need to be removed) has two screws and a couple of hex screws (puzzling why they decided to use 2 hex screws?).</p>	
<p>Wiring all braided and high quality. Much better than you would expect of a machine of this price</p>	<p>It's good, not as neat as an Izzo, but then so far no machine has come close to the neatness of Izzo wiring</p>	
<p>Brew Pressure, factory preset is around 12 bar, as are almost all Vibe pump machines.</p>	<p>The pump was set a little high, with the blind filter disk in place; I lowered it to about 11 bar. To do this you would need to purchase a pressure measuring portafilter (possibly Bella Barista would consider doing this on request for a nominal charge).</p>	
<p>The rubber feet are nice quality, but do grip well.</p>	<p>A bit annoying when pulling it in and out to fill it with water. Fortunately these feet can easily have a "glide pad" or felt furniture pads fitted or even the use of castor cups with "glide pads" fitted. Moving the machine then becomes easy</p>	
<p>Strong Steamer with a nice single tip steam wand. Identical to that on Brewtus II</p>	<p>Steamed 400ml of water from 5c to 60 c in around 60-70 seconds (similar to an Isomac Millennium), easy to steam small or large quantities of milk and micro-foam successfully. Wand is good for beginners or more experienced users</p>	
<p>The double portafilter holder comes ready assembled and spouts in the right place. Heavy and of good quality.</p>	<p>It is unusual to only have one on a machine of this level, but single and double filter baskets are included as is a rubber disk to seal the portafilter basket for backflushing.</p>	
<p>The water feed tube has a water softening filter already attached</p>	<p>One already fitted to the pipe</p>	
<p>Drawing water is good, nice and smooth</p>	<p>Wand is sufficiently long and with a good range of movement.</p>	
<p>Drip tray is huge and cold formed. So rounded corners with no unsightly welds.</p>		<p>It holds about 2.5 litre and removal is easy.</p>
<p>The water tank platform and switch is hinged at one end and only uses a single spring.</p>	<p>This design seems to eliminate the rattles and the simplicity of design appears to be reliable and efficient. I certainly prefer it to the more usual design seen on prosumer espresso machines</p>	
<p>Protective thermostat on boiler. I obviously couldn't test it but am 90% sure that it's resettable too using the little red button in the middle.</p>		<p>Having high limit thermostats should reduce the incidence of failure due to fill and level problems. A small detail, but one that could save an expensive repair bill</p>

<p>Water & steam valves had a great feel, the knobs were a good size and the wands being mounted on ball joints is a real bonus.</p>		
<p>Nice quality steel case</p>		
<p>Wiring routed neatly</p>		
<p>Giemme control Unit</p>		
<p>Accessible pressure stat</p>		
<p>Insulation on the boilers is a great idea it certainly will prevent heat loss and helps keep the components cool.</p>		
<p>brew pressure is easy to adjust</p>		
<p>Pump quite accessible and easy to change. C.E.M.E. 47W.</p>		
<p>Nice sturdy feet easy to adjust to level machine</p>		
<p>All components very accessible. This should make servicing quick and easy.</p>		
<p>The simple switch between mains water and tanked water on the outside of the case operates this valve here.</p>		
<p>Plumbed in or tanked operation switched via a simple lever and valve, a great idea and so easy. You don't have to remove the case, just reach underneath the machine</p>		<p>Possibly the right design model for all domestic prosumer machines. It's great to have a choice that can be so easily made! And great at decaling time if you have plumbed it in!</p>
<p>They remembered to place an access port in the frame below the heating element of each boiler</p>	<p>This means you won't have to remove the boiler to change the heating element</p>	
<p>Drawing water is good, nice and smooth</p>	<p>Wand is sufficiently long and with a good range of movement, so that steam does not burn your hand when drawing water like some machines</p>	
<p>The review machine was running at average of 0.9 bar</p>	<p>Although lower than the Brewtus II, seemed to have no adverse impact on steam pressure. Possibly helped to keep shot temperature down and reduced cooling flush.</p>	

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The little pipe behind the group vent. This is for venting water from the pump OPV valve (over pressure valve) when pulling a shot. As the machines only form of pressure regulation a little water comes out on every shot. It unfortunately isn't long enough to be over the hole in the drain rack over the drip tray so you get a pool of water forming on the top drain rack. Solved by cutting about 30 mm off water inlet pipe in the tank (of which there is plenty), placing that on the pipe and routing it into the drip tray as shown



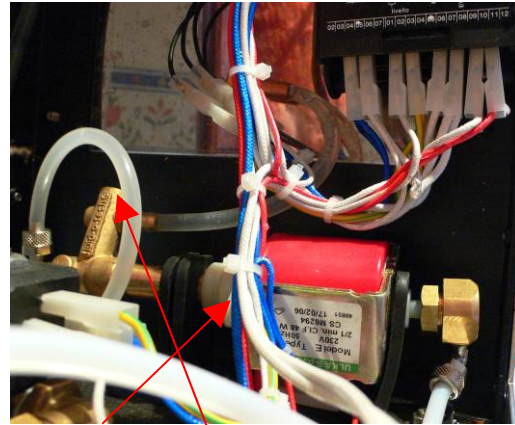
This really should be fixed, it cannot be that hard to do and Expobar should address this.

You have two solutions, either do as I have done in the picture or purchase a piece of Teflon pipe and route it back into the water tank, from behind the panel (most other coffee machines vent OPV runoff back to the tank).

Photo gallery



Top of the boilers with hi limit stat, vacuum breaker pressurestat and safety valves



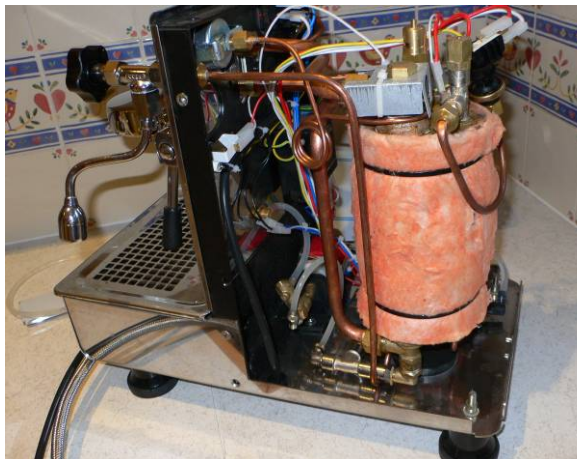
The pump and OPV valve (to adjust brew pressure)...so easy to change the pump!



The group from the bottom, all standard 58mm, E61 , water and steam wands on ball joints



A shot with the case removed but the water tank in place, note the simple rocker platform



The access from the opposite side, effectively what you would get if you left the water tank platform in place.



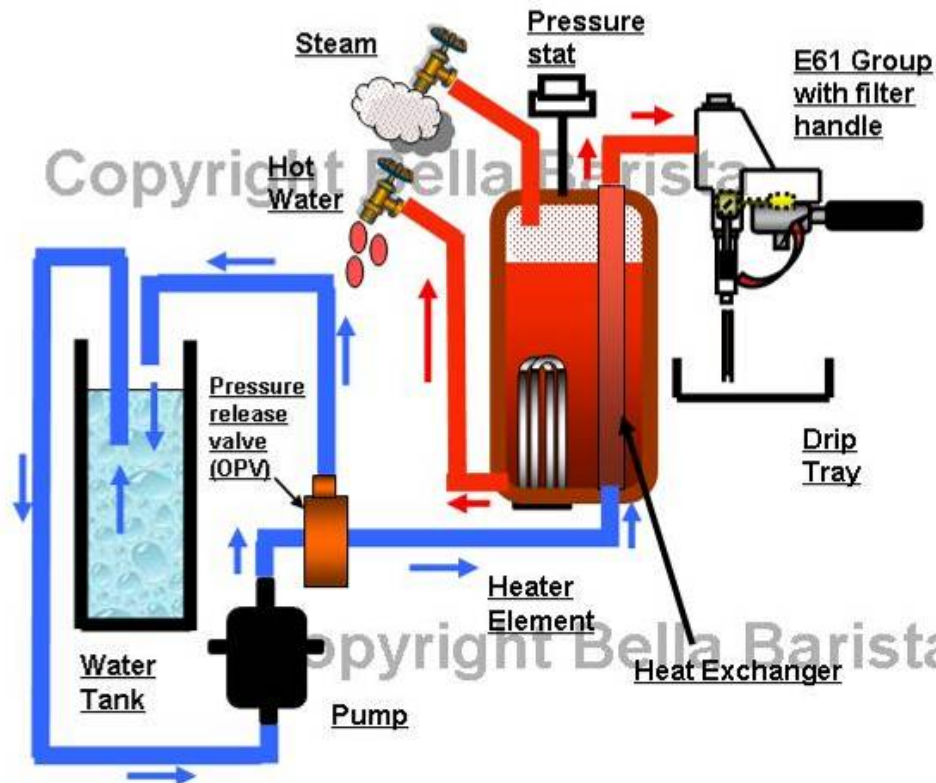
A shot with its clothes on!

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How it works

The diagram shows a simplified HX machine. The pump keeps the boiler about 60% filled with water that is heated and kept at a pressure of 1.3-1.4 bar (about 22 psi). The temperature of this water is above boiling point and has an area of steam above (similar to a pressure cooker).



Steam - The pipe for the steam wand is at the top of the boiler (in the steam area) as the steam tap is opened, steam is forced through the steam pipe and as the pressure drops more of the water instantly flashes to steam, giving a continuous supply.

Hot Water - The pipe for the hot water tap is at the bottom of the boiler. As the hot water tap is opened, steam pressure forces the hot water from the boiler through the pipe and out of the hot water outlet.

Coffee Brew Water - Coffee brew water for the group does not actually come from the water in the boiler, but is pumped directly from the tank through a "heat exchanger" (essentially, a big copper tube) that passes through the hot boiler. As the cold water from the water tank passes through this tube it is heated to the correct temperature for brewing coffee.

Lifting the lever on the group controls the pumping of brew water, lowering the lever operates a valve that releases the pressure (**all 140 psi of it**) from the group head, so you can remove the filter handle safely when you have completed the shot (the excess water goes into the drip tray when pressure is released).

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Brew Water Temperature

The Expobar Office Leva ran quite hot, which is usual with Heat Exchanger (HX) machines, because of the tight compromise between continuously available steam, and production of brew water for espresso. The pressure in the boiler is directly related to the temperature, a higher pressure gives higher temperatures. Because of the way HX machines work most require a cooling flush prior to drawing the first in a series of espressos, the Leva in common with other machines of this type also requires this "cooling flush". It required the usual 4-6 oz, and between shots a few oz kept things under control.

Espresso

As long as a cooling flush is performed, the Leva makes consistently good espressos and easily maintains the temperature during the pour. Domestic volumes of espresso one after another will be absolutely no problem with this machine.

Steam Production

The Leva is a strong steamer but the steam wand is well designed, and very forgiving. I like single hole steam tips as used on the Leva and micro foam with large or small amounts of milk is quick and easy...

Hot Water

Plenty of really hot water on tap, the 1.5 litre is large and has plenty of water available. The water draw is smooth and controlled, recovery time after drawing water for an Americano, is rapid due to the 1200W heating element and large water capacity of the boiler.

The group head is E61 type (an industry standard), and many other industry standard components are used in the machine. This means that parts such as, pumps, gaskets, shower screens, filter holders, filter holder handles etc. are all a standard size and readily available from multiple suppliers. This also means that the pricing of these spares is highly competitive. There are a few components specific to the Expobars, like the parker solenoid valves (in the auto fill circuit) and the pressure stats which I haven't come across before....but if the competitive price of the machines is anything to go by I would imagine these components will also be keenly priced. If not, there is always MATER or CEME and Sirai to use as alternatives!

Final Thoughts

It is another great machine from Expobar and a great performer, especially when you consider the price. It's so easy to use, switch it on, wait and then make coffee. The design although not innovative, is robust, well built and well above the bar for machines of this cost. You could reasonably not expect all the things you get on a machine of this price:

- Ball joint mounting of steam and water wands
- Heat Exchanger system with E61 group
- 1.5 litre boiler (insulated)
- Big 3 litre cold water tank
- High polished stainless steel case
- Mains or tanked operation (via a simple switch underneath the machine)

Expobar takes a lot of trouble attending to details and quality, this means you the customer get good value for money and it really highlights how many of the manufacturers of domestic machines have sat back and in some cases become complacent. You could pay a lot more for a lot less.

Congratulations to Expobar another great machine at a great price!

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