

Dirt under their fingernails

Mercedes-Benz Vans get domesticated—and get down to work

by Joe Sage



Daimler and the Sprinter Van have been setting the pace for years now. We had visited the Sprinter plant in Ladson, South Carolina two years ago, for a comprehensive tour of their reassembly process and a look at (and drive of) several key new technologies—Crosswind Assist, Load-Adaptive ESP yaw control and the only factory 4x4 in the business—as well as sessions with manufacturing partners in their dealer-pipelined third-party MasterUpfitter customization program (see our November/December 2014 and January/February 2015 issues).

Within a couple of months of that, the smaller Mercedes-Benz Metris Van hit the show circuit, and we drove it in Southern California later that year (see our November/December 2015 issue).

This year brings more big announcements on several fronts: huge plant expansion, full domestic production, a new trade-oriented lineup and an in-brand upfitting program for that lineup.

South Carolina Vans Plant

The Mercedes-Benz plant in South Carolina has been performing a process called semi-knock-down (SKD), taking Sprinter Vans that had been built in Germany, then taken apart and shipped in two separate crates on two separate ships, and reassembling them in the US (finished with either Mercedes-Benz or Freightliner grilles and badging). This was a key way to keep prices down in the face of America's longstanding "chicken tax" oddities (a political trade war leftover from 1963), which otherwise would add a 25 percent tariff to (fully built) imported trucks.

The van business in the US—Sprinter's second-largest after Germany—is heating up now, as a number of brands have released new global or Euro-style vans, large and small. To address both the increased volume and the increasingly competitive field, Sprinter and Metris Van manufacturing is now being brought to our shores.

This means expanding South Carolina operations with a new plant, which will invest about \$500 million, create about 1300 new jobs itself and add 400 more at local suppliers—making it one of the largest industrial employers in the re-

gion (also home to Boeing, nearby), enough to entice South Carolina's governor and senior senator to speak and then turn shovels at our event.

The new plant is an expansion of the existing plant's site in North Charleston (it bears a Ladson SC address). The current production and administration plant covers 409,000 square feet; the new facility will add about 1.1 million square feet of manufacturing space, plus a marshalling yard for finished vehicles. First to be built will be the body shop, followed by a paint shop and full assembly lines yet this year. New digital communications technologies on the shop floor will enable faster response to market changes and customer needs.

There is more news on the horizon: the new plant will be introducing and building a next-generation Sprinter before the end of this decade.

With their South Carolina expansion, Sprinter Vans will now be built in six locations worldwide—at two plants in Germany, and one each in the US, Argentina, China and Russia.

Dovetailed with all this news, the Vans operations in the US has formally changed its name from Daimler Vans to Mercedes-Benz Vans LLC.

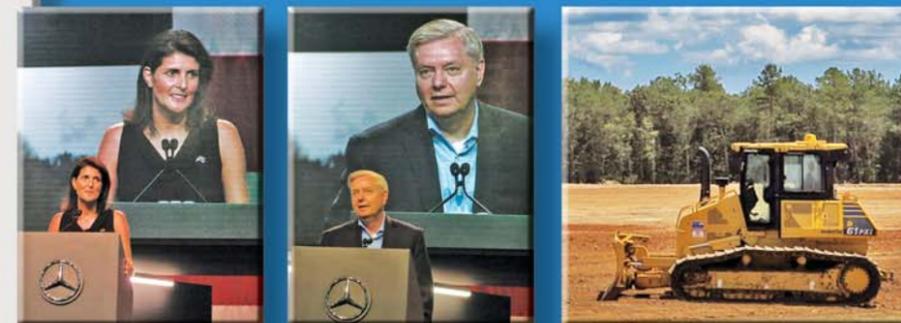
Sprinter and Metris Worker Vans

Mercedes-Benz has long been associated with luxury cars, SUVs and crossovers in the US. The rest of the world has long known Mercedes-Benz as a workhorse, a tough and solid investment, a Middle Eastern taxicab or South Asian work truck that will last for 500,000 or a million miles.

The Sprinter Van has been well established in the US for over 20 years. Though its badge may make it look expensive, Sprinter to date has started at just \$36,495 and midsize Metris at \$28,950.

Sprinter has long been available with 4-cylinder and 6-cylinder engines in four models (Cargo Van, Passenger Van, Crew Van and Cab Chassis), three lengths, two wheelbases, three heights, three GVWRs and with rear-drive or most recently also (uniquely in the segment) as a 4x4. Midsize Metris is available as a Cargo or Passenger Van, with three types of rear door treatments.

While endlessly adaptable, the vans even in their simplest form included more than some buyers wanted or needed—not in terms of power-train or safety and handling features, but in terms



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Finished MasterSolutions-upfitted Sprinter and Metris vans were on hand for our factory event—from a new leatherette 13-passenger Sprinter, to custom campers nicer than your house, to Cab Chassis variants such as this flatbed stake truck, to various market-specific upfits, such as this fully-refrigerated Metris, and contractor variants with a variety of integrated roof racks and task- or industry-specific interiors. We drove comfortably all day in the spacious, highly-featured vans.

of interior finish in particular. Why buy a fully developed interior, if you are going to completely purpose-build a new interior (or even strip it out completely for the roughest duty), anyway?

Enter the Sprinter and Metris Worker Vans, with a full complement of comfort and technology features, yet at a base-level price, with a rear interior that's ready for inevitable adaptation by tradesmen, mobile retailers and other van buyers.

Sprinter Worker delivers workhorse fundamentals: a 3512-lb payload, 319.1 cu.ft. of cargo volume, cargo bed length and width of 137.4 and 70.1 inches (53.1 inches at the wheelhouse), and 5000-lb tow capacity. It has a 161-hp 2.1-liter 4-cylinder two-stage BlueTEC turbo diesel engine and 7G-Tronic automatic transmission and includes such breakthrough trademark Sprinter safety, performance and handling features as Crosswind Assist and Load-Adaptive ESP. And all this comes at a new low price of \$32,495.

Metris Worker has a 208-hp (258 lb-ft) 2.0-liter turbo four and 7G-Tronic auto, over 2500-lb payload, 5000-lb towing, 186 cu.ft. of cargo volume (good for 60 sheets of plywood) and rear-wheel drive, plus Attention Assist, Crosswind Assist, Hill Start Assist and Load-Adaptive ESP. And all this starts at \$25,995 (or \$29,995 in passenger form). Even if you go all out, comprehensive option packages just add \$1,999, \$3,999 or \$5,999.

MasterSolutions

MasterSolutions systems build upon the existing MasterUpfitter program, which lets customers customize their Sprinter or Metris to become anything from a luxury camper van to an ambulance, with work done by some 80 companies who meet engineering and regulatory standards.

The new MasterSolutions program works with three select MasterUpfitters—SmartLiner, Knapheide and Auto Truck Group—to make the most common upfit configurations orderable directly from the dealer, a simpler customer experience.

Customers identify their vocational needs (at the dealer or online) and are then shown which vans are the best matches, along with which MasterSolutions upfits are available. These can be added à la carte, like options in the typical car-buying process. The buyer sees a total price and is ready to order. The van will be shipped from the South Carolina factory to the MasterSolutions upfitter, then delivered to the customer (at their dealer or fleet location).

SmartLiner can build a ship-through upfit 13-passenger shuttle van, while Knapheide or Auto

Truck Group can provide shelves, racks, box trucks, refrigeration units or extensive other upfits.

Competitively priced, dealer-orderable upfits turn any Sprinter or Metris Van into the perfect tool for any vocation and take the guesswork out of the ordering process, all with a seamless buying experience at any authorized Mercedes-Benz or Freightliner dealer, and with a final build that's a perfect fit, both mechanically and for the buyer's needs.

Here are some rounded-off prices. HVAC contractors have Sortimo Expand or Ranger Aluminum packages from about \$3750 to \$4020. Electricians will be fully and professionally outfitted in one stroke with the Ranger Aluminum Electrician Package for about \$7200.

Food transporters may choose a \$15,900 Gruau Fresh Package with ThermoKing B-100 Refrigeration upfit for Metris (shown at right) or a \$25,330 Gruau High Roof Frozen Package with ThermoKing V-300 Max Refrigeration upfit for Sprinter. Several Sprinter 12- and 14-foot box conversions run about \$10,000.

Partitions, cargo racks and ladder racks are in the \$500-1100 range, while a general shelving upfit for the Sprinter 144 runs about \$2400.

An impressive 170-inch shuttle van upfit with 13 leatherette seats runs just over \$12,000.

Your complete Sprinter or Metris Van, including MasterSolutions pre-configured upfits, can be purchased through Mercedes-Benz Financial Services and Daimler Truck Financial, with a variety of tailor-made finance packages available.

And now it's time to get to work. ■

