

Built in two worlds By Joe Sage

The Daimler Trucks facility in Ladson, South Carolina, near Charleston, serves an unusual function in the industry. This is the assembly plant for both Mercedes-Benz and Freightliner Sprinter Vans. "Assembly" is a key word, as the trucks are originally built in Düsseldorf, Germany. To avoid import duties, ill-written into law many decades ago (look up the 1963 "chicken tax" on Wikipedia), the completed trucks are knocked down into separate powertrain and body packages, in Germany, loaded into separate shipping containers (so neither is a "light truck"), then sent across the sea to be reassembled in South Carolina. The whole process costs less than what full-unit import and duties would have been.

We had a comprehensive tour of the assembly plant—all highly proprietary and none of which we can show you. We also had a couple of days of field testing, with road time in the full range of Sprinter Vans—long, short, tall, empty, full—as well as an array of upfitted versions (more than 75 percent of US Sprinters are upfitted; see sidebar). Road testing is fairly routine at such an event. The cabin is engineered for function and comfort. Controls include advanced telematics. No matter how large a version we drove, the Sprinter handled and turned as easily as anything half its size.

Less routine were various torture and thrill sessions, engineered to show off some of the latest (and most exclusive) features of the Sprinter, in which technology smoothly delivers brute force.

We drove a specially built and highly challenging off-road course in the Sprinter with factory four-wheel-drive—a standout among its competition as a factory-built feature. The Sprinter 4x4's electronically-controlled mechanical transfer case system can handle a snowy road, but with huge ground clearance (9 inches under the suspension, 13 inches under the chassis) and steep approach and departure angles, it can also tackle the toughest construction site or backwoods terrain—pretty much anything a heavy contractor's fleet, or FedEx and UPS, might ever encounter.

We tested their electronically controlled and mechanically responsive Crosswind Assist technology against 90-to-100-mph crosswinds generated by talented locals with South Carolina and Florida swamp jet boats. With the feature off, we were hammered; with it on, we only felt a breeze.

A specialty driver took us out in a Sprinter with thousands of pounds of water barrels installed high in the cargo area, driving at high speed through very tight swerves and sudden emergency moves. The outriggers shown at right saved

our hides in the startling system-off run. With Adaptive ESP yaw controls on, balance is maintained through even the most challenging ballet.

Sprinter is available with either of two engines: a 161-hp 2.1-liter 4-cylinder BlueTEC turbodiesel with 7-speed transmission (high 20s MPG), or a 188-hp 3.0-liter V6 BlueTEC turbodiesel with 5-speed powertrain (mid 20s MPG). For sales, each has about a 50 percent take rate.

There are two wheelbases: 144.3 inches and 170.3 inches. There are standard, low, high and super-high roof versions (with as much as seven feet of vertical interior space). Specific combinations of wheelbase, roof height, and passenger, crew or cargo options vary.

A V6 Sprinter 2500 series has a payload capability ranging from roughly 2500 to 3500 pounds, depending on body-chassis configuration. The V6 3500's payload ranges from roughly 4000 to 5500 pounds. With the 4-cylinder diesel, both 2500 and 3500 series payloads are actually a little higher.

You can also get your Sprinter in a surprisingly wide array of 28 paint colors (all with black interior). You might think the three-pointed star will make for a pricey van, but cargo vans range from just \$35,995 base (short wheelbase 2500, standard roof) to \$44,485 (long wheelbase 3500, high roof). Cab-chassis comes in 3500 series only, in either wheelbase at either \$35,310 or \$35,800. Passenger vans range from \$39,995 (short wheelbase, standard roof) to \$46,180 (long, high). Mercedes-Benz and Freightliner badged Sprinter Vans cost exactly the same. ■



The Sprinter Van comes in a variety of flavors, ready for a wide range of applications. But they're not always completely done when they leave the factory. One reason for the Sprinter's success has been its longstanding Preferred Upfitter Program. In fact, fully 75 percent of Sprinter Vans are upfitted. We visited with a few of the upfitters while at the Ladson Plant in South Carolina.

MIDWAY SPECIALTY VEHICLES. John Violi, senior sales executive of Midway (top right) tells us the first Sprinters came through their Elkhart, Indiana facility in 2002. By now they have upfitted 15,000 of them and have opened their own plant in South Carolina, near Daimler's. He had a Peet's Coffee & Tea van on hand, for which they added a side bumper and body wrap, creating a moving billboard. The interior is built to Peet's specs, with shelving engineered to hold some 200 to 300 of their product boxes, while leaving plenty of floor space ("your most valuable space," Violi says). A 12-volt system runs a printer box, plus systems to track orders for efficient loading/unloading in the sequence of their rounds. He also showed us a passenger van, on which they installed custom windows, seats and running boards. "We don't do anything that takes the warranty or the integrity out of the airbags or seatbelts," says Violi. Just visit your dealer, and they can place an order. "It's just like building your own burger," he adds.

MORGAN OLSON marketing manager Kenn Kline was down from headquarters in Sturgis, Michigan, while Sprinter national account manager Scott Ames (center photo), who also handles the full company's southern region, is based in Atlanta. In Michigan, they are famous for manufacturing UPS, FedEx and similar big box trucks—they've made 40,000 UPS trucks since 1946 and are the inventor of the walk-in van. They also have a facility in South Carolina, about a mile and a half down the parkway from Daimler. Once a Sprinter is built, it's transferred to Morgan Olson, where they build boxes on the chassis, then bring the finished truck back to the Daimler plant, who will distribute it out to their dealer network. Their Sprinter work is 100 percent cab-and-chassis to box truck. Morgan Olson makes a UCV (Ultimate Contractor Vehicle), perfect for plumbers, electricians, landscapers and such; a UDV (Ultimate Delivery Vehicle), which takes their walk-in van technologies and expands to have cab-to-cargo and cargo-to-curb access, more fuel-efficient and far safer for the driver; and they had on hand the first refrigerated Sprinter truck with over-5000-pound payload capacity.

AIRSTREAM touring coaches general manager Tim Garner says his well-known company works from only the Sprinter 3500 long-wheelbase chassis, with every operational option and all safety features. But it's an empty shell, otherwise. They upfit the entire interior, floor to ceiling, and transform the exterior, with a body kit all the way around the lower part, plus chrome, new steps and so on. "We take the basic Sprinter," Garner says, "and do the lower body kit to give it a lower stance all the way around [note: body panels only, not a suspension drop], add a front valance, and a nice bumper wrap on the back. Everything's color-coded to the van, which gives it a very aggressive look. We add Alcoa forged aluminum wheels, and we put an awning treatment on the outside." Airstream offers their upfit in silver, black or white. Silver—their signature color—accounts for about half their sales. Airstream does not do custom orders, but they found their customers all liked to buy every possible option, anyway. The finished product is available at your Airstream dealer, for about \$153,000. •

We've met the big and small vans from Ram, Ford and Nissan. We've been familiar with the bigger entry from Daimler—the Sprinter Van—for a number of years now (first as a Dodge Sprinter). Now meet a new van from Mercedes-Benz, the midsize Metris, recently revealed in customized form at the SEMA Show in Las Vegas. As a midsize van, they say it has no competitors. Metris will be available in cargo and passenger versions later this year. •

