

Dual duty daily driver

by Joe Sage

There is a new van explosion on the streets of America as of late. Ford first brought us their global little Transit Connect and has now added the big Transit van (new to the US, but actually in its fifth generation), relegating the ubiquitous Econoline to history. FCA (Fiat Chrysler) has brought us both the Ram ProMaster and ProMaster City (rebadged and somewhat reskinned Fiat Ducato and Doblo vans, also around for about 35 and 15 years, respectively, in the rest of the world). GM is slow to the game, recently rebadging the smaller Nissan NV200 as a Chevrolet City Express, while the big Chevy Express and GMC Savana soldier on some two decades into their lifespan. Nissan has been selling their big NV van (1500, 2500, 3500) for several years in the US, joined recently by that smaller NV200 under its own Nissan badge.

As Mathias Geisen, general manager for vans in the US, puts it, Mercedes-Benz was “14 years ahead of the curve.” Sprinter vans have been here since the dawn of the millennium, though badging has evolved, with Sprinter first badged in the US as Freightliner, then (in the DaimlerChrysler era) your choice of Freightliner or Dodge.

History from there can get complex. In short, Daimler took over the van products, through and lingering past the DaimlerChrysler split. Passenger versions built in Germany could be imported easily into the US, while cargo vans were built there, disassembled, shipped with different portions aboard separate ships and reassembled in Ladson, South Carolina, to avoid a 25 percent duty known as the chicken tax (see our facility tour and test drives in our Nov/Dec 2014 and Jan/Feb 2015 issues).

Last spring, Mercedes-Benz announced a new Charleston, South Carolina factory will be built starting in 2016, where the next-generation Sprinter will be built.

Sprinter falls behind Ford and GM in overall US big van sales, while long defining the eye-catching Eurovan niche. Now we have a smaller Mercedes-Benz van.

TWO SIZES: The whole idea behind two van sizes may seem obvious. Some people need a bigger one and some need a smaller one. But a basic commercial plan involves one customer buying plenty of both. Ford’s naming scheme illuminates this, though it was confusing at first in our market, as they introduced the Transit Connect several years before the Transit.

The basic idea is to carry goods from origin to depot in a big Transit, then from depot to customer after, well, connecting to a Transit Connect small van network.

Ram has delivered this same formula straight out of the gate, as has Nissan. GM is dabbling in it with Nissan’s help.

For 2016, Mercedes-Benz introduces the Metris van to North America—known globally as the V-Class, or the Vito in cargo form, Viano in passenger form and Marco Polo as a camper van. There is no Freightliner-badged Metris planned as of now.

TWO FLAVORS: America loves trucks, and that love extends to vans. One look at a commercial Sprinter van, and people want to know if they can have one with windows for their own road trips. Sprinter is available this way, plus has a thriving, sanctioned third-party conversion network, with Airstream, Midway and Morgan Olson (see our Jan/Feb 2015 issue).

For the new Metris van, the factory (in Spain for now, but also moving to South Carolina) will be churning out both cargo and passenger versions, showroom ready.

We flew to LA to drive the new Metris.

MEET THE METRIS: The Mercedes-Benz Metris van is built for duty first, which any truck lover should appreciate. Thus the passenger version’s interior is relatively spartan, by luxury brand expectations, though nicely higher-end by truck stan-

2016 MERCEDES-BENZ METRIS VAN

ENGINE.....	2.0L 4-cylinder turbo
TRANS/DRIVE.....	7-spd auto w paddles / RWD
POWER/TORQUE.....	208 hp / 258 lb-ft
WHEELBASE.....	126 in
LENGTH/WIDTH/HEIGHT.....	202.4 / 75.9 / 75.2 in
TURNING CIRCLE.....	38.7 ft
CARGO BETWEEN WHEELS.....	50 in x 111.5 in
CARGO VOLUME.....	186 cu ft
PAYLOAD.....	cargo 2502 lb / passenger 1874 lb
ROOF LOAD.....	331 lb
GROUND CLEARANCE.....	3.8 in
GVWR.....	6724 lb
TOWING CAPACITY.....	4960 lb
GCWR.....	11,684 lb
FUEL.....	91 octane recommended (87 acceptable)
MPG.....	.22/25/23 cargo / 20/23/22 pp (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE (CARGO).....	\$28,950
BASE PRICE (PASSENGER).....	\$32,500

dards. With a starting price of \$28,950 in cargo form, this is the lowest-priced Mercedes-Benz in the US. The passenger model starts at \$32,500. (There is a luxury V-Class globally, but not here for now.)

Metris is almost three feet shorter than Sprinter, about four inches narrower, and almost two feet lower in height. Classified as a midsize, it’s larger than Ford Transit Connect or Nissan NV200 by some 45 to 50 percent cargo volume and claims higher payload in the 54-73 percent range. Cargo and payload specs are closest to the interim Dodge Caravan-based Ram C/V Tradesman, falling between FCA’s newer ProMaster and ProMaster City vans.

A wide range of options bring additional function, creature comforts and style points to cargo or passenger versions. You can replace standard fabric seating with leatherette for just \$200 (\$70 cargo).

Metris specs are very competitive and versatile, ready for a builder’s 4x8 sheets or a weekender’s just-about-5000-pound boat, though ground clearance is less than most.

If interested in buying for personal use, don’t expect the posh cabin of an S-Class. Do expect the satisfaction of a stylish and nicely-equipped vehicle with a significant level of utility. And expect plenty of curiosity and envy when you pull up at the soccer match, club or boat ramp.

Mercedes-Benz—at some 800,000 units per year, the world’s largest commercial vehicle manufacturer—emphasizes this is not a minivan. It’s a commercial vehicle—a cargo van or a useful shuttle in passenger form. But it could fit nicely in your garage. And it’s surely also ripe for luxe conversion.

The new Mercedes-Benz Metris van is available for order now, with production beginning before the end of 2015. ■

