

Singapore's bus services operate to some of the highest standards in the world, including irtec accreditation for some operators. Richard Simpson finds out more

Singapore has been independent for over half a century (from the UK in 1963 and Malaysia two years later) but cultural ties are still stronger than might be expected, with English being the first language of business and education, and right-hand drive double-decker buses plying the city's streets.

With a population of four and a half million spread over just 241 square miles, car ownership is highly taxed for a reason. This makes Singapore good bus territory; but it is far from being a capitalist free-for-all.

It once was, but earlier in the city-state's history an industrial dispute between a bus company and its workers led to the Hock Lee bus riots of 1955, which left four dead and 31 injured. Singapore's many competing bus companies were then forced to consolidate, and now bus operations are closely regulated by the government and franchised to individual operators in a unique format which sees the necessary infrastructure of depots and



Where quality

workshops owned by the state.

Government franchises the routes to operating companies, which in turn lease the vehicles they use from the state, and profit from advertising on the buses and retail concessions at bus depots. This system is controlled by the state's Land Transport Authority, and is called the Bus Contracting Model.

With over 3.9 million passenger journeys a day, Singapore's bus industry is big business, and as such it attracts names that will be familiar to British eyes: notably Tower Transit and Go-Ahead Singapore. These operate alongside the much larger Singapore-owned ComfortDelGro (which trades as SBS Transit and also has UK operations

including London bus giant Metroline), coach company Westbus and various taxi operations, as well as SMRT, a government-owned arm's length multimodal mass-transit company (bus, rail and taxi).

While buses built in the Far East have appeared on Singapore's streets, currently all four major players have fleets dominated by British and European manufacturers including Alexander Dennis, MAN, Mercedes-Benz, Volvo, and Wright.

WORKSHOP ACCREDITATION

Two of Singapore's 'big four' have also turned to the UK for confirmation of their high workshop standards. Tower Transit's Bulim depot was assessed by the IRTE in September 2016, and found to already meet or exceed the organisation's accreditation standards, fulfilling a pledge made when it was awarded the contract to operate the depot as part of the bus service tendering process.

Approval for Bulim followed IRTE approval for Tower Transit UK workshops in Westbourne Park, Atlas Road and Lea Interchange, as well as Whippet Coaches in Cambridge. Tower Transit Singapore also took the opportunity to enrol all its engineering staff as IRTE members.





matters

Subsequently, Tower Transit Singapore's dedicated vehicle examiners (DVEs) have been tested to the irtec standard for vehicle examination, and, at the start of last year, the company became the first in South East Asia to launch an engineering centre of excellence, where technicians from outside the company are trained to Institute of Motor Industry standards in vehicle parts and heavy vehicle maintenance and repair.

The Bulim centre of excellence is also the first outside the UK to assess technicians for irtec licences, and Tower Transit has the objective of having 100% of its technical workforce assessed and irtec-qualified. Facilities at the centre include a Volvo B8 chassis complete with Euro VI engine to ensure trainees work with the latest technology.

As bus repair is seen to be an unglamorous profession – just as it is in the UK – vehicle operators have to innovate to fill the staff roster. Tower Transit Singapore's head of engineering Mark Hegarty says: "Skilled vehicle technicians have been one of the hardest talents for us to find. In the absence of experience and know-how, our approach has been to hire promising young candidates and a top-flight

engineering leadership to upskill them, and nurture a new generation of knowledgeable, well-rounded vehicle technicians. The engineering centre of excellence is the cornerstone of this recruitment strategy."

The company takes on automotive engineering students from ITE College West on an 'industry immersion' programme, where 40 at a time have a month of workshop and e-learning experience at Bulim.

'EXCEPTIONAL'

During May of last year, another of the big four, SBS Transit, had six depots assessed by IRTE. Assessors from the UK found all premises to be of an exceptionally high standard. Not only were the buildings and facilities first-class, there was also a strong health and safety culture, reinforced by daily 'toolbox talks' and the issuing of appropriate PPE to all who needed it. Careful track was kept of the formal 40-hour-per-year training programme undertaken by each technician.

Equipment ranging from torque wrenches to lifts was all calibrated and tested where appropriate. Singapore operates a similar vehicle test regime to the UK, with the exception being that these external tests are carried out at six-monthly, rather than annual intervals, and in most depots SBS Transit had lanes dedicated for this purpose. **TE**



ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE: FRAIKIN'S UK EXPERIENCE OF IRTEC

Fleet management firm Fraikin has embraced irtec licensing with enthusiasm. It is responsible for the maintenance of around 59,000 trucks, trailers and vans in the UK, undertaken at eight depots nationwide. The vehicles are operated by a wide range of customers, mostly own-account operators who wish to outsource their fleet management responsibilities.

Ant Perfect, learning and development manager, is responsible for the training of the company's 270 staff. He explains that Fraikin technicians primarily perform maintenance and inspection on a variety of vehicle types and brands. Most of the trucks tend to be less than five years old, so major repairs are rare.

He says: "We have a minimum standard for recruiting technicians, which is irtec level 2. Our approach is centred around competence. Qualifications show you have the skills, but we also have a Fraikin standard of competence which is measured by continuous assessment. The Fraikin standard measures how quickly we can move vehicles through the workshop, and get jobs done right first time.

"The best-assessed candidates will go on to levels 3 and 4 of irtec. We have the aim of getting a level 4 master technician into each of our branches – and not necessarily as a manager.

"An unexpected positive that we have noted since we introduced continuous assessment is that managers have had greater opportunities to engage more with technicians."