



Hard Actros to follow

Following the launch of Mercedes' new Actros Euro 6 heavy truck, Ian Norwell reports from the first drive experience – and says automation and control could help canny operators cut costs

When it comes to cutting costs, Hubertus Troska, the urbane head of trucks at Mercedes-Benz, has made some very ambitious claims about the new Actros. He's also on record as stating that lower operating costs start with fuel consumption gains.

Three years ago, Mercedes predicted that Euro 6 would require such a regime of strictures that even maintaining its current fuel efficiency would be a success. So where has a claimed 4% fuel bonus sprung from? A €2 billion investment in creating a new range from scratch has helped, and the commercial vehicle giant's decision to go for a clean sheet has clearly been savoured by its engineers.

Troska says the five areas of development that contribute most to this improvement are powertrain, aerodynamics, auxiliaries' power consumption, rolling resistance and driver assistance. First, M-B's long relationship with V6 and V8 engines has been consigned to its Stuttgart museum, as the Actros OM471 straight-six arrives. Born of its heavy-duty engine platform (HDEP) global engine programme, the new unit is at the core of Actros' new economy.

Beyond this, chassis, cab and the remaining powertrain components all play their part – and not least of these is its FleetBoard telematics.

FleetBoard has now matured into a serious tool for saving money. All new Actros models come with the hardware already integrated and a four-month free trial. Conversion to the paid-up version, post-trial, will be interesting. It will be charged at an €800 one-off fee and a minimum €59 per month per truck. Troska is unequivocal when it comes to benefits:

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Claimed fuel consumption benefits are 5–15%. These accrue partly from routing efficiencies, but primarily from the detail harvested by the driver assistance information. Driver performance data is as comprehensive as any we've yet seen, but with one extra edge that M-B claims is unique. In addition to the usual driving measurements, the system assesses how arduous the route and payload are – arriving at the 'degree of difficulty'.

Variety

What of the truck itself? Two cab widths, four cab heights, three trim levels and various engines give ample choice. Also, M-B notably brings the flat-floor premium truck spec to a 2.3m cab width, giving real driver appeal. Apart from these, the powershift 3 automated manual box gets ever more sophisticated; comfort levels take a big hike, and ride and handling set new benchmarks.

We drove the outgoing and new Actros on the road from Munich to Ulm, and on the Münsingen test track. On the sinusoidal surface, the difference was startling. Chassis frame and suspension fundamentals are new – and it shows. Safety systems, such as proximity assist, which monitors vehicles in front, ultimately intervening if necessary, add to the strong sense of security.

So will it be cheaper to run? Georg Weiberg, M-B's head of truck development, says it will. "We've cut the cost of contract maintenance packages by 6%, compared to the current Euro 5 Actros. If we've got it wrong, it will be at our risk." 

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