

Tried and tested

GiTi Tires' R&D facility at MIRA promises some interesting rubber that could cut costs for commercial vehicle operators in several ways. Keith Read pays a visit

When it comes to tyres, what suits the East doesn't necessarily satisfy the West. But that could be about to change, with one of Asia's fastest-developing tyre companies – GiTi Tire – establishing its R&D headquarters at MIRA, Europe's best known vehicle engineering and development centre and proving ground. GiTi Tire says it is producing GT Radial-branded tyres specifically for Europe by basing its director of R&D Eddie Young (pictured, bottom left) in the heart of the market.

GiTi Tire – essentially Chinese – is part of the Singapore-based multi-billion-dollar global GT Group, which is involved in petrochemical, rubber and consumer goods manufacturing. With its tyres branded GT Radial, one suspects that in the West this could well become the name by which this relative youngster will be more commonly known.

Established less than 20 years ago, the firm grew rapidly in China by acquisition to become the country's number one in TBR (truck and bus radial) production in 2004. At time of visiting MIRA, GiTi Tire had recently been accredited as the ninth largest tyre manufacturer in the world – and the world's fourth largest TBR manufacturer.

In the UK and Europe, GiTi Tire offers a range of GT Radial car, SUV, LCV, truck and bus tyres, including winter tyres, in all popular sizes. Throughout its R&D facilities – in China, Indonesia and the UK – the company says it pursues a policy of designing and producing low-rolling-resistance tyres that reduce fuel consumption and hence also vehicle emissions.

MIRA is seen by Young and his team as a key element in GiTi Tire's increasing presence. The proving ground, with its wet- and dry-handling circuits, high-speed test tracks, off-road facilities and ISO noise-test surfaces, facilitates objective and subjective test and evaluation of new products.

According to Young, over the coming five years there will be a whole new range of low-rolling-resistance, low-noise tyres. Meanwhile, Peter Foulkes (above right), European marketing manager Europe for truck and bus, says they will be targeted at the market just below premium tyres, but above the average second-line product. "It is, after all, the fastest-growing sector of the UK market," he explains.

On MIRA's Wet Handling Circle, with its surfaces of differing friction co-efficient, I was able to sample GT Radial truck tyres on a Volvo FH 12 tractor unit. With GSR220s on



the front axle and GT659+ covers on the rear, maintaining control – correcting with opposite lock as required – proved surprisingly easy. I also found the tyres gave ample warning of break-away and rapid recovery with appropriate steering input.

Clearly, the wet-handling circuit can't offer indication of tyre durability and wear. However, Ronnie McGruther, transport manager for demolition and earthworks contractor Thompson of Prudhoe, who is responsible for 135 trucks, says he's more than satisfied.

"We found the price-per-kilometre performance [of mixed-service GT Radial GT659+, GT686 and GT876 tyres] excellent, in comparison with other brands of a higher market positioning," says McGruther. "Hence, we have seen reduction in our tyre costs during the 12 months we have been using the product... We have also seen the casing durability playing a major factor in reducing our tyre cost further on down-time and less tyre damage than previously experienced."

Meanwhile, Suffolk-based Bartrums Warehousing and Distribution, which runs more than 400 prime movers and trailers, recently awarded GiTi Tire a sole-supplier agreement. That was after an 18-month evaluation, started in October 2010, which subjected a range of GT Radial patterns to comparative testing across various vehicle types and wheel positions. ^{TE}

