With a raft of new arrivals in recent months, there's never been such a comprehensive and diverse selection of vans and LCVs. Keith Read takes an inside look at some of the latest

Under the

Time waits for no man in the competitive world of vans and LCVs. Nissan, for example, has quickly followed its launch, late last year, of its NV400 panel vans with an impressive 13-strong range of factory-built conversions, based on the NV400 chassis-cab. Available now are six- and nine-seat minibuses, crew vans, and single- and double-cab dropsides and tippers.

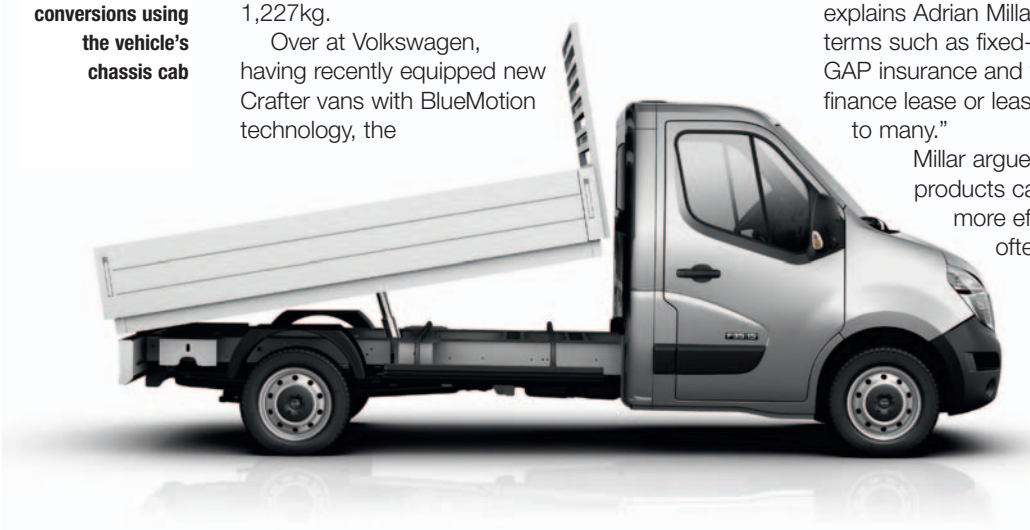
NV400 chassis cabs start life as mid- or long-wheelbase variants, with either front- or rear-wheel drive, single or twin rear wheels and either 125bhp or 150bhp versions of the economical 2.5-litre dCi diesel engine. Minibuses come with either 100bhp or 125bhp versions of the same engine. The NV400 dropsides have a double-skinned light metal body and integral front ladder rack, and are available for payloads up to 1,462kg, making them unusually flexible. Incidentally, the tippers are available with mid- or long-wheelbase and payloads up to 1,227kg.

Over at Volkswagen, having recently equipped new Crafter vans with BlueMotion technology, the company is about to add the low-emission, low fuel consumption technologies to its Transporter range. With emissions as low as 166g/km and economy of 44.8mpg on the combined cycle – a 16% cut in emissions and an improvement of almost 19% in fuel economy – BlueMotion versions stack up well against standard Transporters, especially for operators whose customers demand green credentials.

BlueMotion technology embraces energy recuperation, engine start/stop, low-rolling-resistance tyres and cruise control. Two power outputs, 84bhp and 114bhp, are available across the range of Transporter panel vans, kombis, window vans and nine-seater shuttle derivatives.

Meanwhile, the German manufacturer is also flagging up the benefits of manufacturers' finance packages for new LCV purchase. "Traditionally, smaller operators have bought vans with their own capital, or via a bank loan or hire purchase," explains Adrian Millar of VW Financial Services. "So terms such as fixed-cost maintenance packages, GAP insurance and finance methods – contract hire, finance lease or lease purchase – may be unfamiliar to many."

Millar argues that the latest finance products can help a small business to run more efficiently or update vehicles more often. "A wider choice of finance methods is a key benefit of buying from a manufacturer's retailer, especially as they often have subsidised offers, more competitive rates and incentives such as free servicing," he advises.



The Nissan NV400 tipper is one of 13 conversions using the vehicle's chassis cab

covers

For operators favouring a single-brand fleet, a wide range of derivatives can be a vital factor in deciding where to place their investment. Citroën's award-winning Ready to Run programme – one of the most comprehensive line-ups of Lutons, dropsides, tippers, crew vans, refrigerated vans, glass carriers, car transporters and minibuses – has been improved for 2012/13, with extensive developments.

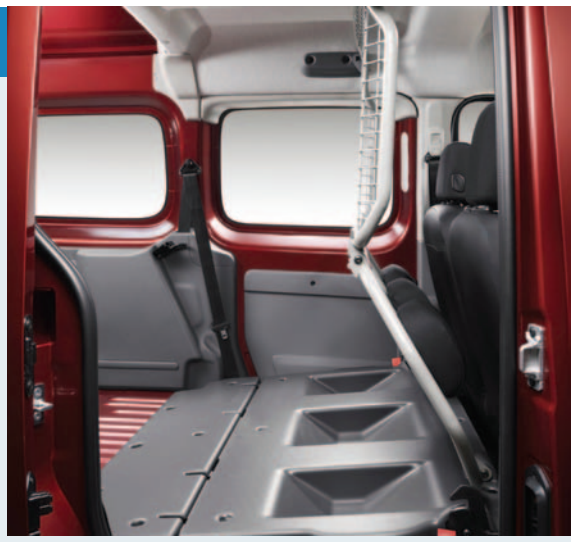
Ingimex bodies, for example, fitted to the Relay dropside, are the first and, at time of writing, only N1 category bodies built and tested to meet demanding new European EN12642 XL standards. Lashing rings are also tested to meet DIN755440/1 standards. Then again, Buckstone is now incorporating enhanced aerodynamic nosecones to its entire Ready to Run Relay Luton range, while Somers has announced further refinements to the design and structure of its Ready to Run chiller/freezer vans to improve both aerodynamic and thermal performance.

Supertrucks has upgraded the specification of its Ready to Run glass-carrying racks for Berlingo, Dispatch and Relay vans – again to enhance aerodynamics – and has also introduced the option of a retractable ladder for faster access to the roof rack. Supertrucks' continued development of its low-loading, high-cube dry freight Spacevan range has also resulted in enhanced front-end aerodynamics and new side door options.

Scott Michael, Citroën's commercial vehicle operations manager, comments: "Our Ready to Run partners continue to maintain very high levels of technical innovation and quality. Customers not only benefit from competitive pricing, but also from developments that deliver quality and efficiency gains." And he adds that warranties on Ready to Run conversions match Citroen's.

Pick-up truck users also now have some useful choices, following the recent launch of new models from Isuzu and China's Great Wall Motors, hot on

Plenty on top



Bulkheads are a boon, but in five-seat crew vans they can limit the carrying capacity. Renault recognised this and the new Kangoo Crew Van offers a clever multi-positional bulkhead that effectively raises capacity from 2.4m^3 right to 3.6m^3. Maximum payload is 740kg.

In brief detail, the moveable barrier permits the rear row of seats – and the metal mesh screen incorporating the headrests – to fold forward. This allows the lower section to fold into the floor, giving an extended flat load area. Meanwhile, the higher section is repositioned behind the driver and passenger seats to protect occupants from flying objects from the load area in an impact or under heavy braking.

Renault – like some other small van manufacturers – also provides for the passenger seat area to be converted to cargo space and, again, an extended floor length (up from 2.1m to 2.9m). The passenger's seat folds flat and the hinged bulkhead swings into a north-south alignment, thereby protecting the driver from toppling boxes.

Other features offered by many van manufacturers that might seem insignificant – yet can make a huge difference to practicality, driver comfort and efficiency – include: power outlets; sensible lighting in the cargo area; rear doors with anti-slam locks to prevent them blowing closed; and storage in the cab.

The cab is, after all, the driver's office where he or she may spend much of their working day. So lockers, where laptops can be stored out of sight, spaces for clipboards and hand-help delivery-loggers, bottle holders and even a coat hook can be important. Unfortunately, not all manufacturers seem to realise this, so passing the spec sheet under the microscope is a worthwhile exercise.

Vauxhall's new Combo offers two wheelbases

the heels of the arrival of Ford's all-new Ranger and, some months before that, Volkswagen's Amarok.

Isuzu's D-Max, for example, went on sale in June and is available as a double-cab, single-cab and – for the first time in the UK – an extended-cab, featuring rear-opening, side-access panels. Powered by a fuel-efficient, 2.5-litre twin-turbo common-rail diesel engine, D-Max generates 163bhp and 400Nm of torque at 1,400rpm. Newly developed six-speed manual – or five-speed automatic – transmissions are available.

Meanwhile, Great Wall's Steed is positioned to offer two tough, well appointed pick-ups at prices below the D-Max equivalent (and other rivals, too). Power comes from a four-cylinder two-litre, 16-valve common-rail diesel engine, with a variable-geometry turbocharger that develops 143bhp at 4,000 rpm and 305Nm of torque from 1,800 to 2,800rpm.

Customers for small, supermini-derived vans now have Fiat Professional's revised Punto to consider. It offers 1m^3 of load space and a payload of 520kg. One diesel engine – the award-winning 1.3 MultiJet II – is available with three power outputs (75bhp, 85bhp and 95bhp). Stop/start is standard on all but the 75bhp version.

Moving on, Vauxhall's New Combo replaces its long-running entry to the van range. Let's not beat about the bush, New Combo is a Turkish-made Fiat Doblo by another name. Yes, it's badge-engineering, but the tie-up makes a lot of sense. After all, the Mk2 Doblo was International Van of the Year 2011.

New Combo also offers two wheelbases, two heights, two gross vehicle weights (2,000kg and 2,300kg), two trim levels (Combo and Sportive) and four turbocharged, common-rail Euro 5 diesel engine choices. These are: a 1.3-litre CDTi 16-valve 90bhp, 200Nm five-speed manual, also available with stop/start; a 1.6-litre CDTi 16-valve 90bhp, 200Nm with five-speed Tecshift automated manual transmission and stop/start; a 1.6-litre CDTi 16-valve 105bhp, 290Nm with six-speed manual and stop/start; and a 2-litre CDTi 16-valve 135bhp, 320Nm with six-speed manual and stop/start. And Vauxhall's ecoFlex package is available on 1.3-litre models. Service intervals for all vans are 21,000 miles or one year, whichever comes first.

And as if all those new arrivals are not enough, Ford's new Transit Custom – launched at the CV Show and heralded as a new generation of Ford one-tonne vehicles (the first step in the Blue Oval's pledge to refresh its commercial vehicle line-up by 2014) – goes on sale in a couple of months' time. TE

Space and flexibility

Despite myriad permutations of length, height, payload and performance from almost every LCV manufacturer, it's sometimes the less well-publicised features – or their absence – that can make all the difference.

For example, 'cube' is critical for many van buyers, but wheel arches can ruin it. That's why Ford, for one, has 'optimised' the 6m^3 load space of its new Transit Custom to allow 8ft x 4ft (2,440mm x 1,220mm) sheets of building materials to be carried flat – or vertically. Alternatively, three Euro pallets (loaded to at least 1m high) will fit in the SWB model and, thanks to a neat, low-level hatch in the full-height bulkhead, loads up to 3m in length, such as pipes, ladders and timber, can be securely accommodated inside the van.

To avoid awkward obstructions in the floor when loading, and to make cleaning the cargo floor easier, Ford has also repositioned the tie-down fixing points to the body sides. And to accommodate the needs of different owners and operators, the firm has increased Transit Custom's payload options, which now range from 600–1,400kg.

The bottom line: before making any investment in new vans, fleet and transport engineers need to check out the operational role, and relate tasks to payload and cube. As Scott Michael, Citroën's head of commercial vehicles and business centre programme, puts it: "Not all vans of a similar type and size are equal, in terms of load-carrying capacity; major differences exist between different makes. And just because a fleet may have traditionally comprised LWB/high-roof vans, it doesn't necessarily mean that's the right replacement vehicle."

Michael reasons that, if your typical cargo is a couple of pallets, each 650kg, not only will a LWB/high-roof offer considerable unnecessary space, but it might also be overloaded, as some vans of that configuration struggle to carry a tonne. "On the other hand, a shorter-wheelbase, lower-roof van might well swallow 1,300kg with plenty in hand, as well as costing less to run and maintain," he continues. "Equally, if you're running smaller vans and having to make double journeys, because drivers can't get enough on board, then a larger van makes good sense."

Citroën's top CV man also advocates examination of what's permanently carried in vans – particularly those run by service engineers. "Our experience with fleets shows that they have a tendency to keep bits and pieces on-board for spares. These can be both heavy and space consuming, even though they are never likely to be used."