

Selecting the right van for the job is not easy, given the sheer range of vehicles available. Steve Banner compares Mercedes-Benz' new Sprinter with Iveco's Daily van range

What

Choosing the right van can be a little bit like playing three-dimensional chess, given the vast number of variables. Is the load area the right size for the job? Will the door apertures be big enough to allow certain awkwardly-shaped items to be loaded? What about fuel economy? And how good is the dealer back-up?

Nor are comparisons between one manufacturer's range and another's always easy. One line-up may be in the process of being introduced and all the models may not yet be available –

altered cab interior, are now available to order for September delivery. The price penalty imposed by Euro 6 is approximately £1,000.

As for configurations, in van guise Daily is slightly ahead of Sprinter, as far as maximum load cube is concerned – 17.2m³, compared with 17.0m³ – and significantly ahead when it comes to maximum payload capacity. That is because Daily grosses at up to 7.0 tonnes, making it a viable alternative to a traditionally-engineered, and thus somewhat heavy, 7.5-tonner. Sprinter, however, stops at 5.0 tonnes.

As a consequence, Daily's top payload is 4,140kg, although most of Iveco's vans sold in the UK are at 3.5 tonnes, and



Ford's extended introduction of the new Transit being a case in point. Equally, a rival range may be about to be axed and replaced by a newcomer, with different engines, gearboxes etc.

Which is why comparing Mercedes-Benz's Sprinter and Iveco's Daily is, on the face of it, a little unfair. Mercedes is the first light commercial manufacturer to unveil its Euro 6 strategy: SCR (selective catalytic reduction), plus EGR (exhaust gas recirculation) and a particulate filter. Meanwhile, Iveco has yet to reveal its hand for Daily, although the heavier models in both line-ups will have to comply with Euro 6 from January 2014 onwards. Lighter models are not affected until September 2015.

Sprinters with a reference mass in excess of 2,840kg are already being produced solely to Euro 6 specifications, although models below that weight constructed to Euro 5 standards remain available. But Euro 6 Sprinters, with a restyled front and slightly

gross weights start at 2.9 tonnes. Bottom payload is 900kg, while the smallest Daily van comes with a 7.3m³ cargo bay. Sprinter load cubes start at 7.5m³, with a payload capacity running from 734kg to 2,515kg. Gross weights begin at 3.0 tonnes and it should be stressed that the robust construction of both models means that neither can be classed as lightweights.

Daily is ahead, as far as top-end performance is concerned. It can be ordered with a 205bhp four-cylinder Euro 5 twin-turbo 3.0-litre diesel. By contrast, the most Sprinter can muster is 190bhp from a V6 3.0-litre diesel, although one has to wonder how much difference that extra 15bhp makes.

That said, there can perhaps be such a thing as too much choice. Certainly, Iveco does not make engine selection all that easy for operators, given

Below: the Sprinter has radar-based collision prevention technology



to choose?

that there are no less than nine power plants. Aside from the aforementioned 3.0-litre, there is a 146bhp 3.0-litre, equipped with a VGT (variable geometry turbocharger). It meets the EEV (enhanced environmentally-friendly vehicle) emission standard and is also available at Euro 5 with a waste-gate turbo and 20Nm less torque.

So much choice

Also forming part of the line-up is a 146bhp Euro 5 2.3-litre with a VGT, along with Multijet 2+ fuel injection, with up to eight injections per cycle. In addition, Daily can be ordered in 106bhp and 126bhp versions of the 2.3-litre and as a 170bhp 3.0-litre, with either a VGT (Euro 5) or twin turbos (EEV). Finally, the ninth Daily offering is a

136bhp 3.0-litre

by NaNiC1_2 (sodium nickel chloride) Zebra Z5 maintenance-free, molten salt, sealed batteries positioned underneath the cargo floor. They can be recharged from a three-phase supply in eight hours; either three or four can be specified in parallel; and they power an asynchronous electric motor, delivering 60kW peak output.

Claimed top range is 56 miles between re-charges, if three batteries are specified, rising to 75 miles, if you specify four. Top speed is an electronically-limited 70km/h. All highly laudable, until you consider the price. Opting for an electric Daily means adding an eye-watering £50,000–60,000 to the cost of whichever of the standard Daily models it is based on, potentially landing you with a total bill somewhere north of £80,000.

Turning to transmissions, mainstream Daily models come with a six-speed manual gearbox as



EEV unit, capable of running on either CNG (compressed natural gas) or landfill gas.

Sprinter's engine specifications are somewhat more straightforward. As well as the V6 mentioned earlier, it can be ordered with a four-cylinder 2.1-litre diesel at 95bhp, 129bhp or 163bhp, plus a 156bhp supercharged 1.8-litre petrol engine that can also run on CNG. Euro 6 has not resulted in a change to the line-up of engines offered or their power outputs.

But there is another option in the Iveco range. Unlike Sprinter, Daily can be ordered with battery power: a plus-point for any operator that requires a vehicle with zero exhaust emissions and ultra-low noise levels (Transport Engineer, July 2013, page 31). Available at 5.2 tonnes, the electric Daily is powered

standard. So do Sprinters, but the two models diverge when it comes to the transmission options. Sprinter can be ordered with the fully automatic seven-speed 7G-Tronic Plus box. Iveco, meanwhile, favours the AGile automated manual box, one of the few of its type in a light commercial that can be described as driver-friendly. It is potentially capable of returning a 3% improvement in fuel consumption over Daily's six-speed manual, says the company.

Both manufacturers have introduced systems that kill the engine, if it is allowed to idle in traffic or at the lights, in a bid to cut fuel costs and CO₂ emissions:

Stop & Start in Daily's case, ECO start/stop in Sprinter's. Each also puts considerable emphasis on safety, with the usual alphabet soup of devices designed to preserve the lives of the driver, passengers and other road users.

An electronic stability programme – ESP 9 – is standard on Daily and sits at the heart of a safety package that embraces Hydraulic Brake Fade Control, Roll Over Mitigation and Roll Movement Intervention. Then the latest Sprinter comes with Crosswind Assist as part of its already comprehensive electronic stability programme. As its name suggests, this helps to prevent the driver from being wafted from one lane to the next when he or she encounters a sudden squall.

It is being marketed with a variety of sophisticated extra-cost safety packages. The roll call includes Blind Spot Assist, Collision Prevention Assist, Highbeam Assist and Lane Keeping Assist. The first of the quartet helps drivers to spot cyclists or pedestrians hidden in the vehicle's blind spot. The second is a radar-based package that signals an alert, if Sprinter is getting too close to traffic in motion ahead. The third prevents other road users from being dazzled by the van's headlights at night. And the fourth gives a driver who is day-dreaming a wake-up call – sensed by the vehicle drifting out of its lane.

Low loaders?

Both Sprinter and Daily are rear-wheel drive, which usually means a relatively high loading height. Mercedes has, however, lowered the latest Sprinter by around 30mm, in an attempt to improve its aerodynamics, as well as making it easier to load and unload. Sprinter and Daily are also up for grabs as 4x4s – although their relative appeal in that configuration is somewhat different. Four-wheel drive Sprinter will get you up an icy country lane or across a snow-bound car park in the dead of winter, but does not have sufficient ground clearance for off-road work. By contrast, the off-roading Daily is more capable of tackling demanding terrain and might be viewed as a poor man's Unimog.

Daily and Sprinter can both be ordered as chassis cabs, chassis double-cabs, crew vans and minibuses, as well as ordinary vans. Both manufacturers run approved body-builder programmes, with Iveco offering ready-bodied Daily 3.5-tonne tippers, dropsides and Lutons under its DriveAway Options banner.

What about



Above: Mercedes-Benz Sprinter, with its Blind Spot Assist, Collision Prevention Assist, Highbeam Assist and Lane Keeping Assist
Below: Iveco Daily in tipper guise, with ESP 9, Hydraulic Brake Fade Control, Roll Over Mitigation and Roll Movement Intervention

maintenance? With Daily, the service interval is 25,000 miles. Mercedes-Benz, however, says that servicing is determined by the findings of Sprinter's Assyst onboard maintenance computer. If the van spends a lot of time in a harsh working environment – mobile technicians running in and out of dusty quarries, for example – then it is likely to mandate more frequent visits to the workshop than if a vehicle is used by a carpet fitter and spends most of its life parked outside houses.

As a consequence, intervals can be as long as 37,500 miles. That is way too generous in the view of one leading price guide, which fears that long service intervals create the impression that vehicles do not require interim safety inspections and indeed may not need to be maintained at all.

Sprinter differs from Daily, in that some models carry a low-CO₂ BlueEfficiency-plus tag, with an official fuel economy figure of up to 40mpg on the combined cycle, said to be achievable at Euro 6. Otherwise the fuel consumption of the two vehicles is on a par, with Sprinter perhaps a little ahead.

Both models are supported by highly competent, commercial vehicle-oriented dealer networks, with workshops that are often open round the clock and sales specialists who should be competent to offer advice on any modifications or conversions. Most of their rivals rely on car-oriented dealers who do not usually offer the level of aftersales support that many van operators seek.

The Iveco network boasts 97 service points, while Mercedes has 90. Both Sprinter and Daily are protected by a 36-month, unlimited mileage warranties.

What about residuals? While Daily often has a tough time of it in the used market, Sprinter values tend to be rock solid. Last year, it was the third most searched for used light commercial on Van Trader's web site, with only Ford's Transit and Volkswagen's Transporter ahead of it, at number one and two respectively.

Verdict: while Sprinter's virtues may make it almost the default option for many fleets, Daily has a number of advantages, not least the breadth of the range, its robust chassis, its competent AGile automated box and its presence in certain niche markets – in particular, its availability at 7.0 tonnes. While it may be a less immediately obvious choice than Sprinter, it is one that certainly should not be ignored. 

