

Mercedes-Benz

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# Transport

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## Every drop counts

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optimise their diesel consumption

Fast 'n Fresh is the difference | Metrobus - takes on the future | Mercedes Powershift put to the test



## The Unimog of vans

Imagine the versatility and loading space of a van able to carry 1.3 tons sitting on a permanent four-wheel-driven platform with a ground clearance of up to 300 mm, and front, centre and rear differential locks. You have a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 4x4...

Text and photographs first published in *Leisure Wheels*.



### Travel planner

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Recently, Johann van Loggerenberg of *Leisure Wheels* joined François Rossouw of *Radiosondergrense 4x4* tours fame on an introduction to the Sprinter 4x4 in the Western Cape. This is how they found the tough get going in the rough...

It might be the newest addition to the Sprinter range but it looks as if it can be related to the Unimog and our verdict is that this specially built Merc van will not be stopped by many obstacles.

But who would want a load-carrier with lots of space and outstanding off-road abilities?

Local authorities, for one. Many of South Africa's people live in remote rural areas accessible only to four-wheel-drive vehicles, so the Sprinter 4x4 will make a fine off-road ambulance or mobile clinic, for example. The SA National Defence Force and Police Services have also expressed much interest, while utility companies will undoubtedly have a use for a load-carrier that can bash the bundu.

Then, of course, there is recreational off-road use. Safari companies will definitely be fascinated by the prospect of an enclosed go-anywhere vehicle that can be converted into a mobile kitchen, for instance, or a walk-in mobile storeroom with shelves on either side.

Do we hear a few rusty old cogs starting to creak out there? Yes, it most certainly would be the ideal base for a camper van, with ample room for beds, a fridge, stove and whatever equipment the modern off-road traveller needs.

At the end of a day of highway and mountain pass driving – and some serious off-roading in the mountains near Villiersdorp – François Rossouw of *Radiosondergrense* was seriously thinking of various ways to lay his hands on one of these Mercs for use as lead vehicle on his 4x4 tours.

The Sprinter 4x4 to be sold in South Africa by DaimlerChrysler is not to be confused with the four-wheel-drive Sprinter being manufactured by Mercedes-Benz in Germany. The latter has “on-demand” four-wheel drive, the rear wheels being supplied with torque as soon as the front ones start to lose grip.

The local model, however, is based on a conversion done by the Iglhaut company and based in Germany, which has been building these 4x4 systems for close on 20 years. A licensed company, Artemus Trading, has been established in Pretoria to do the conversions locally, using components imported from Iglhaut.

Stephan Weber, a young German brought in to help run the local company who joined us on our Sprinter excursion, looks positively shocked when we ask whether Geländewagen or Unimog components are used for the conversion.





Out of harm's way: Protection plates keep vulnerable components safe. With a 300 mm ground clearance, there is not much work for them to do



Not so, he emphasises. The four-wheel-drive system was designed by Iglhaut. Power goes to all four wheels continuously via a fully lockable centre differential, while the front and rear differentials can also be locked electronically using switches on the dashboard. Of course, there is low range, and when it is engaged, the torquey Sprinter 4x4 is just about unstoppable.

The suspension is raised and, depending on the size of the tyres, ground clearance can be up to 300 mm. A front axle protection plate and seriously short front and rear overhangs add to the Sprinter 4x4's off-road prowess.

With Francois Rossouw behind the wheel, we get on to the N1 and head in the direction of Paarl. The test unit is fitted with huge 295/75 R16 off-road tyres with a mean tread, which translates into quite a bit of road roar on the smooth tar. Standard, however, will be 265/285 (depending on customer requirements) aspect ratio, dual-purpose tyres, which should provide a much softer ride.

Francois is cautious at first - the driving position is high off the ground, amplified by a truck-type air suspension seat, and he puts the stability to the test first before increasing speed. After a couple of kilometres he is more assured that the van is stable and eases the accelerator a little.

By the time we reach the Franschhoek Pass, Francois is quite confident that the van will not topple over and gives it stick. The off-road tyres complain about the tar treatment they are receiving but, hey, that is what motoring journos need to probe: is the Sprinter 4x4 unsure at speed and through the twisty stuff?

The answer, we are happy to report, is no. Despite the van's tall stance, body roll is negligible and permanent four-wheel-drive adds to the stability in corners.

In Villiersdorp we meet up with Daniel Roux

and his wife, Sonél, and head off to Kaaimansgat, where the Kroonland 4x4 route goes high into the Stettyn Mountain.

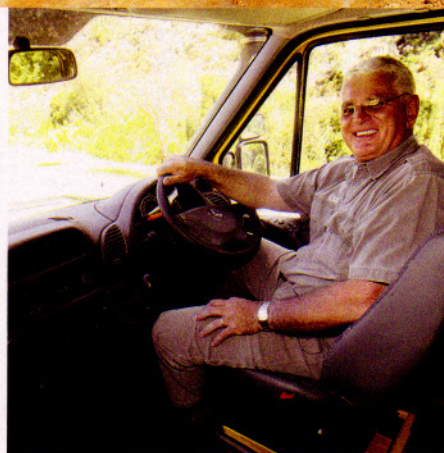
The route traverses the wall of the Elandsloof Dam. Halfway stop boasts a splash pool and lapa among rooiels (red alder) and ancient yellow-wood forests. It then winds its way up the Stettyn Mountain on roads with gradients quite tricky, but not impossibly so. It is a circular route on which the emphasis is on scenic beauty. There is also a mountain campsite with wooden chalets where we have a magnificent lunch - homemade boerewors and freshly baked bread with fig jam.

The mountain roads are quite rocky yet the ride is compliant, despite the fact that we are riding on hard tyres as we still have to tackle Sir Lowry's Pass on the way back to Cape Town International Airport.

Francois tackles a couple of very steep off-route inclines, selecting low range and locking both differentials. The Sprinter 4x4 simply climbs over them, the task made even easier by the fact that the full 300 Nm of torque is available at only 1 400 r/min.

He's more and more impressed as we go on. "I like the fact that you sit high up and that the nose is so short, which means you can see exactly where you are going and where the obstacles are. There is plenty of torque when you keep the revs around the 2 000 mark, and the gear ratios are perfect for the application.

"I would have preferred a bit more power on the open road than the 95 kW the 313 Sprinter offers as I often have to travel long distances in the shortest possible time. But in normal circumstances it is adequate, with the vehicle able to maintain 120 km/h quite easily," he says. Francois is pleased to hear that there are plans to utilise the new Sprinter 315 model with



Mr 4x4: Francois Rossouw in the high seat. He was highly impressed

110 kW for the 4x4 conversion.

"The turning circle is very small for a vehicle like this, making it much easier to drive in tight off-road conditions. The only thing missing, perhaps, is a grab handle above the driver's door to help you get in, as the vehicle is so high."

Daniel dares Francois to drive through a small dam. It's not that deep, but the surface is extremely slippery yellow clay. The momentum is right, but at the exit the low-mounted winch catches the steep bank and stops the Sprinter in its tracks. The Sprinter seems to be well and truly imprisoned, the four wheels just spinning on the super-slick surface.

But all those off-road challenge championship wins in his long and chequered career weren't due to luck. Francois manoeuvres the Sprinter back and forth, compressing the mud under the wheels, and then takes a run. Mud and water fly, the front wheels claw at the bank, but Francois keeps the tyres spinning, the centrifugal forces flinging the mud from the tread, and then the Sprinter's out, safely on dry land.

So, what did the 4x4 expert think of the new Sprinter 4x4? "In short? I want one!" ◀





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