

MIGHTY FINE CHINA

China's largest vehicle manufacturer, SAIC, is starting to shake things up in the Australia automotive maker both with passenger cars and light commercials, where the arrival of the LDV Deliver 9 has squared the brand up against the Euro heavyweights like Mercedes Benz, Renault, Ford and VW. This also applies to the burgeoning mini bus market with LDV also boasting a new passenger version of the Deliver 9. Coach & Bus took the 11-seater LDV mini bus for a spin to see how it shapes up in a competitive market.



The LDV brand has been around on the Australian market for almost a decade now and has found a degree of popularity with the original V90 van offering as well as the smaller G10 model but the new Deliver 9 takes things to a new level.

The Deliver 9 has hit the market with an extremely attractive price tag and a raft of high specifications, safety features and technology that match the far more expensive Euro counterparts.

That is exactly where the local distributor, Ateco is aiming the new LDV. It has the Euros in its sights and it is leaving nothing on the table in the quest to take a big share of the lucrative light commercial market.

Along with a range of sizes in the large van, LDV is also offering it as both an 11 or 14 seat minibus. In this instance we scored the 11 seater for a test drive around Sydney for a day or two battling the ins and outs of city traffic.

LDV claims that the Deliver 9 is 60 per

cent less than the MB Sprinter price wise, even though it boasts an array of features, technology and size specs that put it on the same footing as the market leading Benz.

Any way you cut it price is still the most important equation when it comes to choosing a work horse bus that has to earn its keep. That being the case LDV has put together a pretty strong case for the Deliver 9 with its list price starting at \$55,779 rrp for the mid roof 11 seater as tested, \$57,884 for the mid roof 14 seater, and \$59,990 for the

14 seater high roof. All of those are plus on roads which can vary state to state.

When you compare those prices with the other buses in the market it quickly becomes clear that the LDV is very well-priced, even when you factor in the more prestigious badges from the likes of Benz, VW, Renault and Ford.

The 11 seater LDV comes in roughly \$9000 cheaper than the Ford Transit and Renault Master 12-seater, about \$14,000 less than the VW Crafter 12 seater and a

whopping 20 grand less than the Sprinter 12 seater. Of course you will have seen the others are all 12 seaters up against the LDV 11 seater, but even factoring in an extra seat the price difference is a big one that for some would be hard to justify.

As one operator told us when he saw us photographing the LDV, that means that he could buy four LDV 11 seaters for roughly the same price as the price of three 12 seater Benz Sprinters, which he reckoned could be a pretty compelling equation.

The LDV's mid roof actually allows most adults to stand up easily and with a three row, two plus one seating configuration, access to all the seats is easy thanks to the gap, I dare not call it an aisle, between the seats.

Access to the main passenger area is through a sliding side door, which also features an automatic step that folds out when the door is opened and then retracts when it is shut, making it more comfortable for passengers stepping up into the cabin.

The 11 seats include two up front in the drivers compartment, although this would be a bit of a squeeze, and although it is legal, in terms of passenger comfort it is probably realistically and practically better as a 10 seater.

The rear is accessed by the standard barn doors opening out and there is not a lot of luggage space behind the last row and any operator using it for accommodation and airport transfers would probably need a trailer to carry the baggage, which is often the case with the short wheel base smaller mini buses like this.

We haven't sampled the 14 seater and would be interested to see how much space it offers in terms of luggage area.

Power comes from LDV's own two-litre, four-cylinder turbodiesel which pumps out maximum power of 110kW and torque of 375Nm from 1,500rpm. The turbodiesel is available with stop/start engine technology, and is mated to either a six-speed manual or six-speed automatic transmission, while power is fed to the road via its rear-wheels.

For the test we had the six speed auto, and despite the fact that it has either one or three gears less than the autos in the Benz Sprinter, depending on model, it does a pretty good job.

The power and torque is more than adequate, although we only had a relatively small load in the 11 seater bus, just a couple of colleagues on board for a short test, the engine proved to have excellent response, very good flexibility and ample torque to cope with Sydney's

hilly suburban streets.

The LDV's value proposition is bolstered by an extensive suite of safety equipment including Autonomous Emergency Braking (AEB), which only operates at a speed of up to 30km/h, it also has Bosch's latest generation Electronic Stability Control (ESC) system, Lane Departure Warning and an extensive array of six airbags, all things that bus operators and transfer services would embrace for the sake of their customers not to mention the need to look after their drivers in these times of stricter OH&S standards and corporate obligation.

The Delivery 9 bus comes with heated electric front mirrors, air conditioning, a multifunction steering wheel, adaptive cruise control on auto models, a three-seat cab layout, an eight-way adjustable driver's seat, rear fog lights, halogen headlights, and a wide view rear overhead reversing camera.

The huge 10.1 inch Infotainment screen is the centre piece for controlling the audio system, HVAC controls and other functions and comes with Apple CarPlay, although interestingly no Android Auto at this stage. This all works OK but is not exceptional.

There is also the obligatory Bluetooth phone and audio connectivity, as well as two USB ports, and a 4.2-inch multifunction instrument display in front of the driver with a digital speedometer and large and easy to read instruments.

We say it all works OK because while it all works, there are times when the infotainment screen interface is a little clunky and lacks an intuitive feel. This is compared with its Euro opponents, but we have to say the advance on this LDV is a massive leap ahead of its predecessors and other Chinese machines, including LDV's own ute, the T60. Having said that the Chinese electronics gurus at parent company SAIC are clearly working hard because the similar Infotainment system in the latest MG we drove recently is a leap ahead again compared with the Delivery 9.

The passenger area is fitted with a nice pile carpet throughout, helping reduce noise and insulate the area from any undercarriage clatter. The seats are also very well finished, with skirts down to the floor making for a nicer aesthetic than in many similar buses, where the under seat supports are often open to view. Not only are the seats nicely finished they are actually quite comfy to sit in, again, not always the case in vehicles like this.

There is LED lighting throughout which gives great coverage and lights up all corners of the passenger rear area.



In terms of external dimensions the Deliver 9 11-seater bus measures 5546mm in length and has a 3366mm wheelbase. With the mid roof configuration as tested it has an overall height of 2545mm, while the payload limit for this particular test 11 seater bus was 1500 kilograms.

Standard equipment for the Deliver 9 2021 model range is quite decent, considering that price list.

When it comes to choice of colours you have the choice of Blanc White or Pacific Blue, the latter setting you back an extra \$500. That is it there are no other colours, but most mini bus buyers like and choose white and often use vehicle wraps to brand vehicles these days, making them easier to 'strip' for sale when needed.

In terms of appearance it is a bus and as such it could never be considered a piece of automotive sculpture, but it isn't ugly and has a passing resemblance to the Ford

Transit, but does have its own individuality.

The cockpit area is well designed. It is comfortable, neat, well laid out and in terms of ergonomics and controls is easy to use and live with, save for the aforementioned infotainment system and its minor foibles.

The cabin has plentiful storage space which is to be expected in a vehicle that operated as the mobile office for many a transfer or shuttle bus driver.

It has huge door pockets incorporating bottle holders and additional storage, while the middle seat back flips down and is equipped with an elasticated strap for documents and a pair of cup holders making it quite practical. On the top outer edges of the dash there are a pair of high-mounted cup/bottle holders, because after all you can never get enough places to hold the coffee cups and drink bottles.

Above the windscreen there is also a

shelf for holding folders and paperwork etc. although there isn't an indented tray to hold papers on the top of the dash as there is in many vans and utes these days.

The driver's seat has eight way adjustment which makes up to a small extent for the lack of fact that the steering wheel has only rake and tilt adjustment but lacks reach adjustment. We didn't have too much trouble getting a comfortable position but it may not be the same for everyone.

The driver's seat has a fold down and adjustable arm rest on its left hand side, while the the bench seat on the passenger side is ample for two adults and under the seat cushion there is another handy, hidden storage box, which can be accessed by folding each of the two seats up independently.

On the road the Deliver 9 bus is fuss free and easy to drive. It's not a daunting vehicle to drive, despite its size, and is surprisingly

manoeuvrable and agile. The steering and ride are well tuned and sorted.

The Deliver 9 uses Macpherson struts on the front and a leaf sprung rear end, and although we only drove a relatively short distance with a load onboard, the ride quality was reasonable, if a little underdamped for Aussie conditions. Still it handled bump and dips reasonably well and most operators would not be troubled by anything the LDV does on the road.

The six-speed auto worked well, shifting smoothly and easily fitting the engine's torque band well on uphill climbs and under acceleration.

At the fuel pumps the Deliver 9 was reasonably impressive and for the time we had the van it recorded a respectable average of 10.4 ltr./100km, which given the frontal area of a vehicle like this was a good result. With the 80 litre tank you should eek out a range of around 800 km between

refills, and being a Euro 5 it doesn't need AdBlue, which is convenient if not as environmentally friendly as it could be.

The LDV comes with a shorter warranty than most of its rivals, and that may matter to you if you intend to hang on to your bus for a longer period of time.

However, LDV distributor Ateco has given the bus a comprehensive Capped Price Servicing program and specifies the first service at 5000km, with all following services at 30,000km or one year, whichever comes first. LDV says that for three years or 95,000kms the Deliver 9 will cost about \$1,895 to service. The van also gets the protection of a three year/160,000km warranty.

That is not as long as some of the other mini buses in the sector with five-year/ unlimited kilometre coverage for the Ford Transit, the Mercedes Sprinter and VW Crafter, while the Renault Master boasts

five years/200,000km and Fiat's Ducato a three year/200,000km coverage.

Even factoring in the warranty and potentially lower resale values you would have to have a lot of breakdowns and repairs and lose a lot on trade in for the price advantage to be eroded. If you plan to turn the LDV over every three years under its standard warranty, we reckon you could be a long way in front on price alone.

The LDV is well priced, doesn't give much away to the other more expensive mini buses in terms of driveability and practicality.

~~It is a whole lot cheaper, but doesn't feel cheap to sit in or drive, and has some.~~

The LDV Deliver 9 is certainly worth consideration if you are after a an 11 or 14 seat mini bus and will save you a lot of money in on the way in and won't cost you much while running it making it a great value proposition. 🚐