

Sprinters Mean Cost-Effective Luxury

If an airport shuttle customer is offered the choice between an eight-year-old Japanese minibus with almost no safety features and a safe, modern Mercedes-Benz Sprinter at the same price the outcome is pretty obvious.

Ian Holroyd and George Oliver, joint Managing Directors of Tauranga-based Luxury Airport Shuttles, are banking their company's future on this premise.

"We aim to be at the top end of the market," explains Ian. "We can't charge any more so we have to offer a better service and a safe, modern vehicle is part of that.

"Our brand is luxury and the Mercedes-Benz is the only luxury minibus available," Ian adds. "But the fact is that the whole of life costs are not dissimilar to those of the Japanese vehicles."

The two Tauranga businessmen purchased Luxury Airport Shuttles, along with two other local shuttle operations, in August 2009 and immediately set about upgrading the 20-vehicle fleet with new Mercedes-Benz minibuses and introducing a new colour scheme that includes turquoise uniforms for the drivers.

They intend to continue fleet replacements at the rate of around one new minibus every three months and they also expect to grow the business, which at present operates primarily to Tauranga, Auckland, Hamilton and Rotorua airports.



The operation was founded By Rob and Gail Brosnan with a single 12-seater Sprinter 312 in 2002 and most of the vehicles purchased during the business's initial growth phase are still at work and long overdue for replacement. Two Mercedes-Benz Sprinters have already passed 1.5 million kilometers and there are three Vitos with around a million kilometers on

their odometers and all still on their original engines.

"Maintenance of the fleet had fallen behind under the previous owner and we have invested considerable dollars in getting the vehicles back into good condition since taking over, doing jobs like replacing the suspension bushes in the Vitos so that they ride like new again," says Ian.

He and George are firm believers in the value of regular maintenance and fleet planning and their policy with the new Sprinters will be to move them out of the main fleet and in to local shuttle work after about four years, when they will have covered between 600,000km and 700,000km. After about five years they believe operating economics begin to favour purchase of a new vehicle over repair of an old one.

In keeping with the operation's luxury branding they have moved up-market with the first two Mercedes-Benz Sprinters purchased since taking over the business.

Both are medium wheelbase, high roof minibuses with 3.0 litre V6 diesel engines, full automatic transmissions, electrically-operated sliding doors, tinted glass, silver paint, alloy wheels, roof-mounted rear air-conditioning, cruise control and full factory seats, which Ian says are of higher quality than locally-fitted ones.

He says future purchases will be "mostly Mercedes-Benz" but are likely to vary in

configuration as the fleet's around-the-clock, door-to-door service ranges from single person VIP transfers to tour groups from visiting cruise ships and school parties.

"We'll probably look at Vianos for the VIP transfers and perhaps 17-20 seater Sprinters for the larger groups," Ian explains. "We like the high roof versions because passengers can walk up and down them more easily, but especially with the air-conditioning units on top, there are limitations on where they can go, particularly down people's driveways. However, the bigger vehicle does offer more options."

Luxury Airport Shuttles explicitly markets the benefits of its vehicles, saying: "We operate a fleet of quality European minibuses and cars offering our passengers a safe and comfortable trip."

This in turn creates a high expectation from the customer that goes

beyond merely arriving at the airport on time. The Sprinters play their part in meeting this expectation with their quiet ride, extra legroom and safety belts on every seat, Ian says.

And the company enhances this with a professional, attentive workforce, route optimisation and frequency of service resulting from the size of the fleet.

"Some days we have 15 vehicles going to Auckland alone, which means one departing almost every hour," says Ian.

All the vehicles are equipped with GPS tracking systems and mobile phones so customers can instantly be updated on their shuttle's arrival time.

"And having the Mercedes-Benz minibuses certainly helps us with driver retention," Ian adds. "The quality of the vehicle, the safety and the ease of use all make the whole thing easier."

