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MERCEDES PANEL VAN

The LP402 is the forefather of all panel vans from the commercial vehicle division of Mercedes-Benz. It was the solution that spawned a series of LCVs which addressed consumer goods transportation in Europe and elsewhere.



This LP402 model comes from the Daimler-Benz collection and was seen at the Hannover Truck Expo.



Edition 7 of a special CV series by

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THIS ISSUE OF THE MAGAZINE HAS THE first story on the new all-monocoque people carrier from Tata Motors known as the Winger. The association of the Winger to this edition of the Unstoppable is huge and pretty significant because the Winger has been spawned off the very popular and commercially successful range of panel vans and people carriers which we knew as the first generation Renault Traffic. Of course, panel vans from Tata Motors will follow the passenger versions in due course but it is significant that we do have the basis of a very modern vehicle in the light commercial vehicle class to haul both people and goods in the inner confines of cities as it is adequate in both size and proportion while also being nimble and easy to handle.

And so over to the subject of this edition of The Unstoppable, the LP402 panel van. This vehicle came out in the early 1960s and has that unmistakable lineage of buses (and trucks) sporting the three-pointed star in that era. In fact, if one were to check out some of the luxury coaches from Mercedes-Benz in the 1960s, the front fascia and treatment was pretty similar to that on the LP402 and obviously it would have been too far fetched to have suggested that the look of the LP402 was lent to the top line coaches, the reverse being actual fact.

What however sets the LP402 apart is the fact that it has the all integrated clean look of panel vans going in the world. There indeed were panel vans before the second world war as well but most of these were on beefed up passenger car chassis and seemed to mirror a model extension of the basic family saloon. The LP402 changed everything and more. It quite clearly signalled the onset of a more aesthetic design for even the most humdrum load carrying application and the clean hygienic treatment with its all metal painted body lent itself to operator identity and also made for a far pleasing vehicle to other road users. In fact the pleasing aesthetics turned the public's mindset in favour of the non-offensive design and as such this tangible acceptability was a further plus point in making the concept workable. Just to illustrate one other crucial aspect, truck operators tend to advertise their organisation on the sides and front of their vehicle. It was crude and very minimal in the early days but the strong shiny all metal surfaces of the LP402 made for a great canvas for corporate identity which many truckers / transport operators made ample use of. Truck signage has not looked back since then.

As is visible in the two images of the LP402 in this feature, the LP402 developed the full-forward control



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concept and brought it way down the line from coaches and trucks. This coupled to the wheels at extreme corners plus the high seat stance allowed the driver to have an optimum operating position stemming from great all round visibility. Top notch manoeuvrability was a natural feature, as vehicles of this kind designed to operate in the tight streets of a developing Europe. A front engine, rear wheel drive approach was incorporated and while this remained the norm for much of the next two decades, clever packaging optimisations helped lend the vehicle designers to strike out in different directions as regards model extensions. This versatility of the concept was very well exploited not just by Mercedes-Benz but also by other car and truck makers all over the world and one of these also made it to India in the 1970s.

This Indian vehicle was not one with the three-pointed star but the Tempo Matador made by the then Bajaj Tempo Ltd. The Matadors delivered the panel van concept to us Indians but it also showed off its versatile character via its passenger carriers, its ambulance application, its bottle carrier and crane versions and many others. In fact going down the years, Bajaj Tempo did offer India the logical successor to the LP402 in the form of the Tempo Traveller which is still doing business to this day. In fact once the LP402 concept caught on and European designers began to stretch their thought process to encompass many different applications they also understood the need to deliver better space optimisation, better loadability, better dynamics, whether unladen, with a part load or fully loaded and this meant that they turned to the full monocoque concept even for such a category of commercial vehicle.

The LM402's success meant that the next stage was for the European CV makers to go the all monocoque route and the first such application which we saw on our Indian roads was the Tempo Traveller. The Traveller remained the only vehicle of its kind until the advent of the Winger. We are sure that the front engine, front wheel drive Winger will spawn panel vans, specialised application carriers, ambulances, custom-outfitted mobile offices and such in the months to come.

As one can see the impact that the LP402 has had on light vans goes beyond OEMs. This is because, the van's very generic essence has remained intact though the detailing and the execution have changed with the onset of time and the development of technology and new design and manufacturing processes.