

MOTORING MATTERS by Sandie Goodwin

Today's auto sector is an extremely competitive market, with many variants of vehicles and aftermarket sales of products such as sat navs. In this issue, we take a look at one vehicle which is now available to the executive private hire market – at a price far exceeding a taxi. We also look at travel of the future with an electric car and at how one sat nav system proved the undoing of a thief.

MIRAGE VITO OFFERS LUXURY TRAVEL TO PRIVATE HIRE MARKET

This month sees The Chauffeur Show take place in Farnborough, followed by the PHM Taxi and Private Hire Show at Coventry in May. Luxury minibuses are becoming more popular within the executive private hire sector and Mirage based in Faversham will be showcasing its Mercedes-based flagship at Chauffeur Drive '08 at Farnborough in April as well as the European Bus and Coach Show at the NEC, Birmingham, in November.

Mirage takes the Mercedes Vito Traveliner and it then takes 450 hours of work, to strip out the standard Vito 115 CDI and replace it with a leather-and-wood-trimmed interior crammed with high-tech gadgets, including a 25-inch HD LCD TV, drinks cabinet, intercom system and individual air-conditioning systems front and back. The already comfortable Mercedes seats are removed to make way for custom-made, fully-reclining leather seats in any layout required. Owners can personalise their vehicles by choosing from an exhaustive list of extras – which could add a further £20,000 to the £44,564 cost of the standard Mirage Traveliner. "These are bespoke vehicles and we will go out of our way to build the vehicle the customer wants," declares Managing Director Chris Bichard.

Orders are already coming in from the private hire industry. Mirage also supplies vehicles to private individuals, who can create their own unique Vehicle. Looking to the future, Mirage is working on a new vehicle that will be based on the larger



Mercedes Sprinter Traveliner minibus. "Whether the requirement is for a vehicle with wheelchair access, a mobile office, or high quality transport for airport runs, we can build a luxury interior to suit," says Mr Bichard. "Ours are hand-crafted products and each vehicle is as unique as the person who orders it. The only limitation is the customer's imagination."

FIRST FULLY ELECTRIC CAR TO GO ON SALE IN THE UK

Motorists in the UK will soon be able to place orders to buy the first fully electric powered car. Revealed at the 2008 Geneva Motor Show by Norwegian electric vehicle pioneers Think, a company with 17 years experience in EVs, the new TH!NK city will be available for customer orders during the last quarter of this year.

TH!NK city is a true, modern urban car, not a quadricycle. It is emission free and 95 percent recyclable. With an energy efficiency three times that of a traditional combustion engine car, the two seater urban car has a top speed of 65 miles per hour. It accelerates from zero to 30 mph in just 6.5 seconds and 50 mph in 16 seconds. It requires just an overnight top-up of electricity and can travel for 124 miles in city driving on a fully charged battery. A full charge from a domestic electricity socket takes just ten hours. Over 10,000 miles use, the total cost of electricity used to power a TH!NK city will be in the region of £125.

The car is equipped with ABS brakes, airbags and three-point safety belts with pretensioners and it meets all European and US requirements. "Unlike the lower-



range, electric quadricycles that have had limited success in the UK, TH!NK city is a real car which provides a realistic option for those motorists who want to drive a true zero emissions car," said Richard Blundell, Managing Director of Think UK. TH!NK city's body is made of recyclable ABS plastic, designed specifically for city driving. Not only is it ideal for motorists want to avoid visible scratches and irritating dents, the unpainted plastic bodywork also reduces both energy consumption and toxins, while also making the panels easier to recycle. The batteries are returned to the supplier at the end of their useable life.

Standard equipment on each TH!NK city includes power steering, central locking, a 4kW electric heater, and electric windows and mirrors. Optional equipment will include air conditioning, a pre-heat timer, electrically heated windscreen, full length sunroof, Radio CD with MP3, USB, Bluetooth, a navigation & multimedia system, alloy wheels, roof rack and 2 + 2 children seats (including 3-point seat belts) The expected retail price of TH!NK city is £14,000.

TOMTOM SAT NAV BEATS A THIEF!

Portable sat nav systems have become an ever increasing must have for motorists, including many of London's taxi drivers. There have been problems with sat nav systems being stolen from vehicles when left on display - but for one company in Sheffield, the TomTom WORK's GO 715 gps navigation system in one of their vans meant they got the van back when it was stolen! The thief struck when the driver of the £30,000 Mercedes Sprinter van belonging to local company Dedicated Couriers left his vehicle for just a few seconds to get a delivery note signed.

"Despite the vehicle being in a secure compound at a customer's premises with security staff on

duty, the thief was able to make a clean getaway," said Dedicated Courier's managing director, Eric Whittaker. "He was after the van but also thought that he'd got an ordinary gps navigation unit along with it. What he didn't know was that I could instantly locate the vehicle from my office in the centre of Sheffield thanks to the tracking capability built into the TomTom GO navigation unit.

"This enabled me to relay precise details of the van's position to the Police, who immediately alerted their helicopter. Within a very short time they had tracked the stolen vehicle down to an area of Rotherham, an arrest was made and our van was recovered intact. Interestingly this was not a fixed unit in this vehicle.

All of our TomTom GO units are portable and able to be moved easily between any of the 26 vans that we run. Our principal reason for using them is to relay collection information direct to the driver without having to call his mobile 'phone. He can acknowledge the instruction by simply tapping the screen and the unit then directs him by the shortest route to the customer.

"Having a tracking capability built into the TomTom unit is a bonus. And what a good bonus it has proved to be. We got our vehicle back the same day and the Police took a vehicle thief off the streets of Sheffield. Superb result for TomTom WORK and super work by the South Yorkshire Police!"