

Making Tracks

Do sandpipers migrate north in spring? Maybe not, but when Trakka needed its flagship Sandpiper ferrying from Sydney to the CMCA Rally at Maryborough, my great adventure began

Words and photography by Richard Robertson

When Trakka rang and asked if I could deliver a new Sandpiper to Maryborough for the CMCA's 20th National Rally, I didn't need to be asked twice.

Though Trakka has been in the camper-van business since the year dot (sometime during the '70s, I believe), the move to a fully fledged motorhome has taken it quite a while.

Having started on Kombis and progressed to Sprinter vans and the like, the move to a 'proper' motorhome was just a matter of time. The end result has been worth the wait; especially the latest model, based on the refined and sophisticated Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 416.

The Vehicle

Mercedes's Sprinter range is well regarded, with a reputation for quality and durability.

I've had a gripe over the years with the level of standard equipment – especially safety-related – and unfortunately not much seems to have changed.

This Sandpiper included dual airbags, ABS, stability control, remote central locking, electric windows and mirrors, cab air-conditioning and a radio/CD player. Sadly, the passenger's airbag, power mirrors and remote central locking are extra-cost options.

I'm also puzzled by the un-availability of cruise control as a factory option, while the lack of steering-wheel adjustment and convex side mirrors is annoying. And I find Mercedes's charge of more than \$2000 for metallic paint – when the vehicle only has a cab – outrageous!

Fortunately, the 416 Sprinter is blessed with Merc's 'big' 2.7L five-cylinder diesel, with intercooling, turbocharging and common-rail fuel injection.

It appears to be a detuned version of the engine found in the ML270 off-roader, pro-

8/10

AD



ducing 115kW and 330Nm, as compared to 120kW and 370Nm in the ML. Still, it's refined and smooth, providing good pulling power and, with proper servicing, should last for years.

The engine drives through a 'proper' five-speed auto, rather than the 'pretend' Sprintshift gearbox of lesser Sprinters.

Mechanically, the rest of the chassis is pretty straightforward. There are disc brakes on each wheel, independent suspension up front and leaf springs at the rear. Drive is via dual 15in rear wheels running 195/70R tyres, and these are common with the front, too.

Driving

8.5/10

With its easy cab access, multi-adjustable driver's seat and good visibility, the Sprinter-based Sandpiper is an easy step up for anybody graduating from a car or small camper.

Being under the magical 4500kg gross weight limit also eliminates the need for a licence upgrade, which is an important consideration, too. Combine this with power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering, a responsive engine and smooth-shifting automatic, and you have a very easy motorhome to drive.

The engine starts easily, runs smoothly and is very well matched to the automatic gearbox. On the open road the engine

turns a lazy 2500rpm at 100km/h and feels like it will do so forever.

Fuel economy for the run up the New England Highway, including punting along at the legal limit wherever possible, ranged from a high of 16.4L/100km to a low of 13.8L/100km, but anyone gently touring could expect better.

This is just as well, as Mercedes fits a piddly 75L fuel tank, which means you'll become well versed with the location of our nation's many service stations...

Handling is safe, with little body roll and good high-speed stability, despite being buffeted by gale-force winds and driving rain (and even snow) for part of the journey. I also liked the optional, dash-mounted Garmin StreetPilot 2610 GPS.

On The Outside

9/10

Using in-house-manufactured vacuum-bonded panels of fibreglass, styro-foam and ply over an aluminium frame, Trakka has endowed the Sandpiper with a distinctive and slightly unusual appearance.

The body, which sits on a hot-dipped galvanised floor frame with a water-proof plywood floor, seems relatively sleek up front but a little bulbous at the rear. It's an impression accentuated by the deeply recessed rear wheels and curved end panel.

Finished in a high-gloss gel-coat, the bodywork is beautifully finished. There are plenty of Dometic's popular Euro-style double-glazed windows all 'round and one of its large roof hatches over the dinette.

For outdoor chefs, an optional slide-out barbecue can replace the forward hatch. There's also an external shower and water filler but, oddly, no mains-water connector.

Trakka feels the Sandpiper, which comes from the factory with four 80W solar panels and two 200Ah house batteries, will appeal to independent travellers.

But as the fresh water capacity is only 125L (and grey water 100L), I think owners will probably find themselves in caravan parks more frequently than Trakka believes.

In The Kitchen

9/10

More so than in most motorhomes, the Sandpiper's kitchen is its focal point. Positioned amidships, you walk directly into it.

Being L-shaped, the return piece neatly separates the dinette from the kitchen. The effect is enhanced by matching overhead cupboards and almost partitions the kitchen from the dining area completely.

Standard equipment is comprehensive and well suited to independent living. Included is a stainless steel sink with fold-



ing flick-mixer tap and a three-burner gas cooker, both by Cramer and both with flush-mounted smoked-glass lids.

There's an under-bench Smev gas oven and grill, range hood, a huge 195L 12/240V Isotherm two-door fridge/freezer, a Samsung 12/240V microwave, a Herron air-conditioner/heater and plenty of cupboard space.

Interestingly, gas is only required for cooking, as hot water comes from a heat-exchange system, so with 18kg on board, trips to the gas refill station will be few and far between. This Sandpiper was also fitted with an optional Webasto diesel-fired heater ducted into the dinette and bathroom.

At The Dinette

9/10

A pair of inward-facing double settees (with one seatbelt each) between the cab and kitchen makes up the main lounge/dining area. Both cab seats swivel to become part of the lounge too, allowing you to comfortably seat six for coffee.

Dining is best for four (six at a pinch) and the table can be swivelled and swung

through a wide range of positions, allowing maximum dining flexibility.

Panoramic windows on both sides provide excellent light and fresh air. Combine this with a large roof hatch and the lounge/dinette is a bright and airy place to spend your inside hours.

About the only thing I'd like to see added would be an overhead fluorescent light to supplement the four corner-mounted halogen reading lights.

Another option fitted to the test Sandpiper was an Orion 14in flat-screen LCD TV with in-built DVD player and speakers.

In The Bedroom

8/10

Designed to sleep four, the Sandpiper's main bed is in the kerb-side rear corner, with the secondary bed above the cab.

The front bed seems a good size and is (relatively) easily accessed via a sturdy aluminium ladder. During the day the ladder doubles as a sort of safety barrier for

things stored on the bed, as it sits cross-ways and is held in place by four clips.

There are windows at both ends, reading lights and a night-time privacy curtain, and although the bed doesn't tilt up, this doesn't noticeably compromise through-cab access.

Down the back the main bed is a lift-up unit on orthopaedic slats, and beneath it there's quite a cavernous storage area. The bed itself is reasonably comfortable and long enough for me, although I'd rather an innerspring mattress than the firm, foam item supplied.

Small, corner shelves by the bedhead are okay for books and glasses, though they have no edging, and things can easily be knocked off. There are several overhead cupboards for clothes storage, plus a deep wardrobe just forward of the bathroom door, which would benefit from some shelving.

Keeping Clean

8.75/10

Although not expansive, the bathroom, nestling beside the main bed in the rear

driver-side rear corner, is well equipped and has almost everything you need.

Its main feature is the separate, full-size shower, which is a pleasure to use, though the shower screen is a bit flimsy.

Hot water comes from a 20L Isotherm heat-exchange unit that runs off the engine and is supposedly sufficiently insulated to be able to keep water at bathing temperature for 24 hours after turning off the motor.

When plugged in at a caravan park, an electric element takes over, but for short-stay free camping, this gas-free system is fine. And, of course, you can always just run the engine for 20 minutes, or go for a short drive, if electricity isn't available.

Other bathroom fittings include the almost inevitable Thetford electric-flush cassette toilet, plus a small corner handbasin, wall mirror, overhead cupboard and a stylish metal-and-glass dish and drinking glass.

I'd like to see a mirror outside the bathroom and a small mirrored cabinet in lieu of the standard mirror.

Worth Buying?

In a word: absolutely. The Sandpiper is an excellent motorhome with first-class engineering, finish and inclusions, and one that's equally up to a week by the sea or a year around the country.

Trakka's customary build quality and design thoughtfulness is evident throughout, and while you can have the Sandpiper body on an LT Volkswagen or smaller-engined Sprinter, Mercedes's range-topping 416 with five-speed automatic is the pick of the bunch.



The main bed is a lift-up unit on orthopaedic slats.

So don't be surprised if you see flocks of Sandpipers migrating north (or in any other direction) next time you're out and about. With one of these on the driveway, owners will be itching to take off. **C&M**

SPECIFICATIONS

Manufacturer:	Trakka Pty Ltd
Model:	Mercedes 416 Sandpiper
Length:	7.1m (23ft 3in)
Width:	2.45m (8ft)
Tare Weight:	3600kg
Price:	The Sandpiper range starts at \$149,795 + ORC
Price as Tested:	\$179,134 + ORC

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