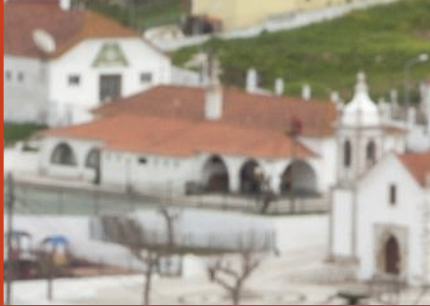




Daimler has invested €27 million over the last three years in the Tramagal, Portugal factory where its revitalised Euro 6 Fuso Canter light truck range is now built



LIGHT HEAVY



Truck manufacturers have a balancing act to perform when they decide to build far away from home. Fuso's Kawasaki HQ in Japan has an outpost in Europe – and it's changing. Ian Norwell reports from Portugal

Setting up a factory on another continent is seen by many as a necessary step to gain acceptance in foreign markets – not only to achieve that 'locally built' tag, but also to cut the costs of shipping complete vehicles. So it was with the humble Canter light truck, which started life in 1968 at the Mitsubishi Kawasaki HQ, but entered Europe in 1980 when an existing Berliet plant was taken over in Tramagal, Portugal. This has since developed into a 158,000m² factory that has now transformed production.

When I last visited in 2008, that factory was running a CKD

WEIGHT

(completely knock-down) kit operation, unpacking boxes from Japan and assembling for modestly-growing European demand. Its biggest hurdle was to establish the Fuso brand in Europe, where only its light truck product is sold. This was helped by dropping the Mitsubishi name in 2009 and, although the diamond logo remains, Fuso is now writ large across the front of the cab.

It may be a relatively new name in Europe, but in the Far East Fuso is a big player which includes heavy truck product that revels in oriental names such as the 'Super Great'. Inside Daimler, MFTBC (Mitsubishi Fuso Truck and Bus Corporation) is 89.3% owned, and, to put this so-called lightweight into perspective, more Fusos than Mercedes hit the road each year, with 140,000 Canters registered last year.

Massive investment

And so to the Portuguese plant, two hours east of Lisbon, where CKD has gone, and the factory now resembles something closer to the Mercedes-Benz special trucks assembly in Karlsruhe, where the Zetros, Econic and Unimog are built. That is not to say it has the air of ruthless German efficiency present in Wörth: this is Portugal, after all. "For sure, this is not a clone of the Actros assembly lines, but it has transformed its production methods in recent years," insists Michael Kamper, managing director for commercial vehicles at Mercedes-Benz UK.

In 2008, cabs arrived complete, painted and trimmed from Japan. Today, the pressings still come from the Kawasaki plant, but welding, assembly and paint are now all carried out at Tramagal. That said, in contrast to the dozens of robot welders that stitch an Actros together, there stands a solitary robot in Tramagal, completing door assembly. Yet this factory has seen Daimler investment to the tune of €27m over the last three years. Those funds have to be seen as a vote of confidence in the future – although the last five years have been dire.

With a big dealer network in Germany (Canter is sold through

Mercedes-Benz outlets), it's no surprise that this country takes the number one European sales spot, soaking up 25% of Tramagal's output. The UK comes a close second with 22%, and, in pre-recessionary Britain, the Canter came within an ace of outselling its cousin Atego at 7.5 tonnes. Indeed, even last year Canter managed 852 registrations, while the more sophisticated Mercedes struggled to pass the 1,000 mark. Meanwhile, in less substantial European markets, either Mitsubishi or independents provide sales, parts and service. Of these figures, MBUK's Kamper comments: "They address quite different sectors, with the Atego going for the traditional 7.5 tonne customer, and the Canter majoring on smaller radius work and selling on payload."

Revisiting the plant, I drove a selection of chassis, including the Canter 4x4, and a new 8.55-tonne variant. The 4x4 has been around since early 2012, and the latest model has a reduction gear added to give slow speed ability off road. It put in a good performance on the steep and slippery course in the Sintra mountains. Light construction work, landscapers, utilities and local authority roles will probably be where this little truck does best. In brief, it's more capable than it looks.

More interesting is the decision to push the upper weight limit. The 8.55-tonne gvw variant is new for this year and, with a claimed 6-tonne body and payload allowance, it is mining the carrying ability to the extreme. On the road it felt pretty much the same as the previous 7.5-tonner, and there's a choice of 150bhp or 170bhp outputs plus the Duonic twin-clutch set-up as standard. This AMT (automated manual transmission) is based on the regular six-speed manual box, with a pair of hydraulic wet clutches and electronic control.

With recent modifications to the shifting logic, the vehicle I drove seemed to manage automated shifting particularly well, avoiding downshifts until really required. On hilly sections of the test route, it hung on too long at times, but manual intervention was easy. Although a small cab by light truck standards, there was enough headroom and more than enough legroom for a six-footer. I wouldn't care for a lot of motorway duty with this chassis, but the urban manoeuvrability score is high.

Under 6.0 tonnes gvw it uses EGR (exhaust gas recirculation), oxidation catalytic converter and a DPF (diesel particulate filter) to achieve Euro 6. Above that weight, (and for the 4x4 and EcoHybrid) it needs the additional laundry provided by SCR (selective catalytic reduction) and AdBlue.

For the last eight years, Fuso's place in the Daimler firmament has included its designation as the centre for alternative drives R&D, and it was largely responsible for the Canter's Eco-Hybrid. Despite costing an additional €8,500, compared to a standard chassis, this parallel hybrid now accounts for 5% of production. The vast bulk of those are in the home market of Japan, but 25 units have also been registered in the UK in the last three years.

With this background, it was not entirely surprising to see an all-electric second prototype 7.5-tonne chassis on show – the 110kW (150bhp) E-Cell. Neither technical details nor any production date were available, but my money is on it appearing at the Hannover IAA later this year.

The ex-factory dropside and tipper bodies may have a market at home, but they will have to push hard to overcome the UK market's preference for a local bodybuilder. Nevertheless, those who are seeking every last penny in cost savings may be the first to chip a hole in that dam. With support from the Mercedes-Benz dealer network, the risk is certainly reduced. 