Over 60 innovations and four world firsts, new Actros is a game changer

Step into the future with the mirrorless Mercedes-Benz Actros
Much of the technology onboard the new Mercedes-Benz Actros will undoubtedly become the norm in years to come. CM heads to Spain for a drive.
Last Christmas, I bought my 80-year-old mother her first-ever smartphone. On Boxing Day, she called me (from her landline) to thank me and to say she couldn’t work out how to turn it on! That’s exactly how I feel when I climb into a new Mercedes-Benz Actros in Spain and stare, bewildered, at the multifunction steering wheel and two tablets, which together form the basis of the new Multimedia Cockpit. Yes, I’m aware that Mercedes has had this set-up in its cars for some time – but that doesn’t help me as I drive a 20-year-old Toyota!

Fortunately, sat in the passenger seat of the 1853 LS I’m about to drive is a patient Mercedes demo driver. Before we set off, he spends 30 minutes showing me the basics – teaching me how to navigate the various menus. Despite appearing daunting at first, it actually proves to be remarkably intuitive. There is a pair of finger navigation pads on the steering wheel, the left one controlling the screen directly in front of me and the right one working the screen to my right (I’m in a left-hand-drive truck). Or I can choose to bypass the steering wheel and use the touchscreens instead.

**SCREEN TEST**

As I’m playing with the menus, which are, to the best of my knowledge all accessible while on the move, it occurs to me that they could be quite a distraction. After all, what’s the difference between using Spotify via Apple Play on the truck screen and doing so on a mobile phone? As far as I can tell, the key difference is that one is legal and the other one isn’t. This aside, I quickly become a fan of the Multimedia Cockpit. It has taken me 30 minutes to get to grips with it but I’m sure that if I was 20 years younger, it would have taken considerably less time. Mercedes really has raised the bar with this dashboard, and I reckon it’s just the sort of technology that will help to make the truck driving profession more appealing to a younger generation.

Of all the innovations on this truck, undoubtedly the one that has attracted the most industry attention is MirrorCam. Instead of external mirrors, the truck features a pair of cameras, mounted high above the doors. They feed through to a pair of screens on the internal A-pillars. I had a quick play with the MirrorCam at the truck’s launch last autumn and was immediately impressed. And as I set off from Barcelona on my two-hour drive, I am again surprised by just how good they are.

**LOOK SMART**

The first thing I notice is the superior visibility on the approach to a roundabout. With no external mirrors blocking my view, I don’t have to lean forwards to see around them. Also, a quick glance in the driver’s screen while halfway around the roundabout reveals that the back of the trailer is located dead centre of the mirror. It’s a vastly better view than I would be getting with a conventional glass mirror.

Until you try MirrorCam yourself, you are probably going to be sceptical about my next...
statement, but I can honestly say that looking at screens feels entirely natural and takes no more than a minute or two to get used to.

We join the motorway and a few minutes into the drive, the demo driver asks me to slowly drift into the hard shoulder. I do what he says, or at least attempt to: in reality, what happens is that the Lane Keeping Assist realises what’s going on and brings me safely back into the lane before I can even cross the solid white line. It’s a great system and clearly has life-saving potential.

I’m using the GPS-based Predictive Powertrain Control (PPC) and have set the cruise control at 85kph, with a +3kph tolerance. As a result the EcoRoll is engaging all the time, sometimes even on inclines. While this driving style is likely to be annoying the traffic behind me, it must be doing wonders for my fuel economy.

Next I try the level 2 autonomous Active Drive Assist, which not only brakes and accelerates for me but steers too, keeping the truck within my chosen lane. Now this definitely takes some getting used to, and I’m not a huge fan. It would make sense if I were able to take my hands off the wheel, but I can’t, at least not without an alarm sounding after 15 seconds. Instead, I gently grip the wheel while the truck steers for me. It feels counterintuitive. I don’t like the way that it meanders slightly either, and I’m convinced I would make a far better job of driving in a straight line without it. To me, it feels like there’s a gale blowing but a glance towards the trees at the side of the road reveals that there isn’t a breath of wind.

At one point, I’m overtaken by a tanker sitting dangerously close to my lane. Normally in such a situation, I would instinctively move to my right to aid its safe passage, but instead my truck moves dangerously close to the tanker. Had we had mirrors, I think they might have just touched. My demo driver tells me there is a menu function that positions the truck on either the left or right side of the lane, which while designed to avoid tramlines, can be used in this situation. But in this instance I wouldn’t have had time to locate the relevant option.

I persevere for a while longer, but the Spanish white lines are of poor quality and on several occasions an alarm sounds to warn me that the system can’t see them and has deactivated itself, handing control back to me. While it’s not for me, I have no doubt it would have safety benefits for tired drivers on long journeys across Europe. However, it’s not standard for the UK market, and indeed isn’t yet available on our commonplace 6x2 midlift tractors.

**SEE THE LIGHT**

At one point the road passes through a tunnel, and as the truck enters it so the GPS tells the ventilation system to go into recirculating mode, keeping traffic fumes out of the cab. It’s one of numerous clever functions this truck has of which the average driver is likely to be blissfully unaware. In the tunnel I take the opportunity to study the MirrorCam screen. I’ve read a number of negative comments on social media, stating that it can’t cope with darkness. On the contrary, my view is greatly enhanced, and vastly better than it would be with a regular mirror.

MirrorCam is consistently impressing me on this journey. I notice three horizontal lines on the screen, which appear behind the trailer. These are markers to tell me when it’s safe to pull in after overtaking another vehicle.

Mercedes-Benz claims that MirrorCam makes the Actros between 1.3% and 1.5% more fuel-efficient. While I can’t prove or disprove this, I can tell you that the lack of mirrors definitely results in significantly less wind noise.

We’re leaving the motorway now, which means passing through one of Spain’s notoriously tight tolls. Judging by the marks on the top of the toll booth, many a truck has lost its mirror here –

**KISSING GOODBYE TO CONVENTIONAL MIRRORS?**

While Mercedes-Benz is the first to market with a system like MirrorCam, we have no doubt many others will follow. After all, not only is it fantastic to use but it offers a significant fuel economy benefit over mirrors. Head of Mercedes-Benz Trucks Stefan Buchner says: “Mercedes is the pioneer and has invested many years into the technology. Feedback has been positive and I believe our competitors will see customers wanting it and will follow suit very quickly. I believe in Europe it will be very popular – and quickly, too.”

There are a few downsides to MirrorCam, not least the initial cost. Although it’s standard in the UK, specifying old-school mirrors will save you a few hundred pounds. But let’s not forget that you should be able to recoup this additional spend quickly thanks to lower fuel bills. There’s also the potential for malfunction or camera damage, both of which will leave the truck stranded at the roadside.

MirrorCam cannot currently be used for ADR work where a master switch is required because the system requires a continual power supply which currently can’t be isolated.
but there's no fear of that happening to me.

Mercedes has offered its PPC system for several years. But whereas it previously only worked on motorways, the latest version also includes rural mapping. It's an incredibly clever bit of kit, as it not only reads the road ahead but knows what speed to take the bends. To give it a proper test, I tackle a steep mountain pass with more than its fair share of hairpins. On the approach to every bend a message appears in the central screen, informing me what speed the truck will take it. For instance, on one particularly sharp bend it announces that it will be slowing down to 20kph in 200m. It sounds ridiculously slow, but sure enough, when I get there, it feels like exactly the right speed. While the system really is incredibly good, it's worth pointing out that our truck is fitted with a retarder. How effective it would be with just an engine brake remains to be seen.

Another smart function is Traffic Sign Assist, which reads road signs and reproduces them on the central display. It's particularly useful for notifying the driver of temporary speed limits that wouldn't be picked up by the truck's GPS mapping. The demo driver tells me that PPC won't actually change the truck's speed in response to these temporary signs as "it may not be safe." As he says this, I'm reminded of the opening scenes of The Cannonball Run, where the girls in the Lamborghini Countach change a 55mph speed limit sign to 155mph!

TOMORROW'S WORLD
At the end of the drive, all that's left to do is reverse into a loading bay. It's another chance to put MirrorCam to the test and once again, it copes admirably. A horizontal line on the screen depicts the end of the trailer, meaning reversing manoeuvres can be carried out with precision.

In case you're wondering, by the way, I spent two hours on the phone to my mum on Boxing Day, talking her through the basic functions of an iPhone – and by the end of the day, she was emailing me and texting photos. A few days later, she had an Instagram account and now she books her holidays and even does her online banking on the phone. Why am I telling you all this? Because like my mother's Christmas present, the new Actros isn't half as complicated as you first think. In fact, with a competent trainer, I reckon a driver could get to grips with the basics within 30 minutes or so, and should be fully au fait after a proper hand-over. But it's certainly no good throwing an agency driver a key and simply hoping for the best.

At the truck's launch, I described the new Actros as a game changer – and having spent some time behind the wheel I stand by that comment. There are so many features on this truck that will gradually appear on other commercial vehicles in coming years. I didn't catch who said the following quote, which Mercedes used in a PowerPoint presentation at its launch, but I definitely think it's apt: "The best way to predict the future is to invent it." And Mercedes has clearly done just that.
Everyone talks, one delivers.
The new Actros.

MirrorCam. In place of regular exterior mirrors, the new Actros is equipped with the revolutionary, aerodynamically ingenious MirrorCam. The system doesn’t just provide an optimal all-round view, it also offers high levels of safety when manoeuvring, turning and changing lanes.

www.mbtrucks.co.uk

For more information scan the QR code.

Mercedes-Benz
Trucks you can trust