

4WD BUYERS GUIDE

TRAKKA JABIRU REMOTE

CAMPERVANS

Trakka has expanded its Jabiru range with the introduction of a Remote variant that's based on the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 5-series 4x4.

When Trakka first launched its 'Remote' models we thought the company was drawing a long bow, because we felt it took more than diesel-fuelled cooktop, space heater and hot water system to qualify for the laurels of remote region capability. This doubt has faded with the introduction of the Sprinter 4x4 base for the latest Jabiru Remote.

The Sprinter 4x4 comes in different wheelbases and load capacities, but Trakka opted for the biggest and most powerful for its introductory model.



The Sprinter 519-based Jabiru we tested was powered by the aluminium-block-and-head V6 turbo-diesel that powers the M-Class 4x4 wagon and several other car and wagon models. From three litres displacement it puts out a healthy 140kW and 440Nm, which is enough urge to see the loaded Jabiru embarrass some cars at the traffic lights.

Our main mechanical interest centred on the 4WD system, which is done in Austria by Mercedes-Benz' partner and systems manufacturer, Oberaigner. This company makes a whole range of off-road kit for the Sprinter, including a 6x6 version, but Mercedes-Benz markets only the basic spec', which involves a ground clearance boost, semi-low-range gearing reduction of 1.4:1 (similar to Subaru's) and part-time 4WD operation via a transfer case with centre differential, but no centre-diff lock.

For additional traction in loose, steep and slippery conditions the Sprinter 4x4 relies on Mercedes-Benz' excellent electronic traction and stability control.

The designers at Trakka are well versed in 4WD characteristics and have decided that it's safe to equip the Jabiru Remote 4x4 with a civilised interior package that's almost identical to that fitted to 2WD Jabirus.

The limited off-road ability of the Sprinter 519 with its skinny 205-section tyres, rear duals and relatively stiff springing are unlikely to let it go into situations where more rugged interior fixtures and fittings would be required. In short, the Trakka Jabiru Remote 4x4 is no OKA or EarthCruiser and was never intended to be.

However, the 316 and 319 Sprinter 4x4 versions are shorter in wheelbase, have better ground clearance, wheel travel and approach and departure angles, and are therefore capable of getting much further off-road.



In a separate test we took a 319 van over our rough-track course and it easily matched the off-road ability of Japanese utes. (*See the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 4X4 Test Report and video under Campervans in the 4WD Buyers Guide*).

Trakka has no immediate plans to camper-equip these smaller Sprinters.

What You Get

Mercedes-Benz' Sprinter has been the largest selling van in Europe for many years and is also the large-van market leader in Australia. It comes with car-like features, including cruise control, climate control air conditioning and heating, all-wheel-drive traction and stability control, and ABS brakes. Transmission choices are six-speed manual or five-speed tiptronic-style automatic. The transfer case splits torque 33 percent front and 67 percent rear.



The new-release Trakka Jabiru Remote 4x4 is designed for a travelling couple: the two front seats swivel to become lounge or dining chairs in front of a removable central table; the driver's seat can also front a folding office 'desk'; and the rear of the vehicle is taken up by a king-size bed base with lift-up forward storage section underneath and a memory-foam mattress on top. The aft section of the bed sits over a roomy boot that's accessed via clamshell rear doors.



Between bed and seats is a bathroom with electrically-retractable cassette toilet that hides under the hand basin vanity when not in use, leaving plenty of unrestricted shower space. Hot water and room heating come from a diesel-fuelled heater.

Opposite the bathroom is a galley with Webasto diesel-heated ceramic cooktop, sink and folding tap. Drinking water passes through a filter and exits through a separate tap.



The other energy source is electricity, powering a 136-litre upright fridge, 800W microwave, TV/DVD player and several 12V outlets.

An optional 1000W inverter can power 240V appliances when away from mains and there are ample power points for when the vehicle is plugged into 240V supply.

House batteries are two 100AH AGM types, charged by mains power, the vehicle alternator and optional 160W roof-mounted solar panels.



We saw 3-9 amps going into the batteries from the test vehicle's solar panels, so self-sufficiency in reasonable weather is easy. Battery charging is controlled by an electronic monitoring system that also tracks water level and interior and exterior temperatures.



All windows and roof hatches are fitted with blackout blinds and flyscreens and the four opening windows are double glazed. Trakka's trademark roller shutters hide the contents of bedroom and galley cupboards and the drawers are self-closing and fitted with locking drawer pulls.

Diesel fuel for driving and heating does away with the need for gas bottle bins, so the external hatches are confined to toilet cassette access and mains power cord stowage. The exterior shower hose unrolls from the cassette access panel.

Options include an air compressor kit, for inflating tyres; a snorkel, to improve bush-ability; 80-litre additional fuel tank; rear wheel carrier; reverse camera; aluminium 'roo bar; and leather upholstery.

On Road Performance and Handling

Car-like ergonomics and equipment, combined with excellent forward and mirror vision made driving the Jabiru Remote 4x4 on bitumen surfaces a breeze and it was the same story on gravel. Supple ride, flat handling, a powerful engine and one of the best shifting automatic transmissions we've ever operated helped negate the size of the vehicle.

In rear wheel drive mode, on highway, the Sprinter was undetectable from a two wheel drive model: it rode, handled and steered well. Braking was powerful and engine braking reasonable, using transmission downshifts on steep grades.



On loose or slippery surfaces selectable full-time 4WD provided additional traction with the push of a button, provided the vehicle was rolling in neutral and the speed was below 10km/h. In this mode the steering loaded up slightly, but because the Sprinter is fitted with a centre differential it could be driven on firm surfaces and at all speeds in 4x4 mode.

Disconnecting 4WD mode was done in the reverse manner, by slowing to under 10km/h and slipping the auto lever into 'N' before hitting the button once again.

On rough, corrugated and potholed surfaces the combination of independent, transverse-leaf suspension up front and long mono-leaves at the rear gave a firm, pitch-free ride. We could maintain high cruising speeds without effort.

Vision from the high-set driving perch over the sloping bonnet was excellent and checking the rear was made easy by powered, folding truck-sized mirrors, supplemented by wide-view spotters.

Economy depended on how we drove it: using all the engine power and torque saw consumption soar to 22L/100km, but with more sensible use of the loud pedal we achieved a best of 11L/100km and the average was around 15L/100km.

Off Road



Low range selection was done at rest, with the transmission in 'N' or 'P' and in this mode the big Jabiru found grip wherever its restricted belly clearance and long rear overhang would let it go.

We know from previous experience with a single-tyred, 3-series Sprinter that this shorter, lighter model has much more 'real off road' ability.

After our four-day test we wouldn't recommend anyone take their new Jabiru Remote 4x4 across the Gunbarrell, the Tanami or the Canning.



If you consider the vehicle is a 'traction camper' not an 'off-road camper' that's the correct view of it, we feel.

This doesn't mean you can't stray off the blacktop. We wouldn't hesitate driving the vehicle over long stretches of reasonably maintained gravel road, such as the Oodnadatta Track or the Plenty-Donoghue Highway.

Because it has a centre differential it's possible to drive the Jabiru Remote 4x4 in four-wheel-drive mode for extended periods, for additional stability on loose or slippery surfaces.

Where the Jabiru Remote 4x4 shines is in its ability to drive to tricky campsites, away from the madding crowd. Also, when you're camped on a grassy bank there's no need to panic if it rains overnight.



Living With the Jabiru Remote 4x4

Other than creating a higher floor level the 4x4 mechanicals caused no compromises in our day to day use, but shorties might appreciate the optional powered side entry step. Two of us lived in the camper van without bumping into each other too often and the layout proved very user-friendly.

The memory-foam mattress was supremely comfortable and the black-out blinds were almost too effective. The swivelling front seats worked easily and we found the chairs comfortable for TV viewing and for computer use at the drop-down work table. Inverter outlets provide 240V power under the table.

We found the diesel-fuelled cooktop took some getting used to, because it took several minutes to achieve full heat, but we complemented it with an el cheapo gas-canister stove for quick boil ups during the day.

We loved the powered dunny that rolled out of sight when the shower was being used, effectively doubling the size of the bathroom.

With its enhanced rough terrain capability this Trakka Jabiru Remote 4x4 offers travellers more destination and free-camping flexibility than the 2WD model. The relatively small price increase over a two-wheel drive camper van should repay itself in terms of owner satisfaction and resale. RRP starts at \$169,950.



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