



Mercedes-Benz Classic

Press Information

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Driving force of the Miracle on the Rhine: Mercedes-Benz L 319 and O 319 premiere in 1955

- **Van and minibus round off the product range with light commercial vehicles**
- **Both are market leaders between 1955 and 1968**
- **Efficient diesel engines prevail amongst traders**
- **The front design, also featuring elements from the 300 SL “Gullwing”, brings a smile to many faces nowadays**

Stuttgart. 65 years ago, in 1955, Mercedes-Benz presented a versatile talent bearing the star in the midst of the strongest economic growth phase of the Miracle on the Rhine: the L 319 van and compact O 319 minibus perfectly met the demands of assistance services as well as traders in all sectors. During its production period up to 1968, the 319 model series – built in many variants – became the market leader of its category. Nowadays the Sprinter, currently on the market in its third generation, continues the post-war tradition established back then, based on an ample range of vehicle variants.

Introduction at 1955 IAA: The presentation of the L 319 and O 319 at the International Motor Show (IAA) in Frankfurt/Main between 22 September and 2 October 1955 led the company, known at the time as Daimler-Benz AG, into a new commercial vehicle category. These vehicles, designed and developed by a team managed by Hermann Ahrens and Eugen Stump, closed two important gaps in the product range: vans and light commercial vehicles in the payload category between one and two metric tonnes and minibuses with up to 18 seats (excluding driver).

Germany in 1955: Up to that point, it had been the year with the strongest economic growth of the only recently established Federal Republic of Germany. The GDP increased by 12.1 per cent and, between May 1954 and May 1955, the average wage of West-German industry workers rose from DM 1.65 per hour to DM 1.76, which equated to six per cent more in workers’ pockets. Germans started travelling again – Italy was very popular. Italy was also the country Germany signed the first recruitment agreement with, welcoming many migrant workers. And Chancellor Konrad Adenauer used the Mercedes-Benz 300 (W 186), from then on nicknamed the “Adenauer”.

Mercedes-Benz in 1955: 65 years ago the brand covered every segment within the automotive segment except for motorcycles. It was the first year the company generated more than one billion German Marks in

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* Further information on the official fuel consumption and the official, specific CO₂ emissions for new passenger cars can be found in the publication entitled "Leitfaden über den Kraftstoffverbrauch, die CO₂-Emissionen und den Stromverbrauch neuer Personenkraftwagen" ["Guidelines on the fuel consumption, CO₂ emissions and electricity consumption of new passenger cars"], available free of charge from all showrooms and from Deutsche Automobil Treuhand GmbH at www.dat.de.

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revenue. In the United States it established Daimler-Benz of North America with headquarters in New York. The 190 SL (W 121) was launched on the market. Motorsport drew plenty of global attention to the company: Juan-Manuel Fangio was crowned Formula 1 world champion in the W 196 R Silver Arrow. The 300 SLR (W 196 S) won more than just renowned races. With drivers like Stirling Moss, Juan-Manuel Fangio, Peter Collins and Karl Kling behind the wheel, the vehicle also claimed the overall sports car world championship title. All in all, it was a strong year.

Background information about L 319 and O 319: In August 1949 Director General Dr Wilhelm Haspel put “1-metric tonne diesel HGVs” on the agenda of an executive board meeting. He identified that a diesel engine stemming from passenger car production would also be suitable for other vehicles, such as platform trucks, ambulances or rural mail delivery vehicles. Managed by the Head of Development, Dr Fritz Nallinger, trials with a test vehicle boasting a payload of 1.5 metric tonnes launched on 19 July 1951. This prototype still featured a conventional frame with rigid axles as well as coil springs and telescopic shock absorbers at the front and rear. However, between 1951 and 1954, engineers designed the vehicle completely from scratch. Different to what Director General Haspel had originally envisaged, the vehicle’s debut was thus postponed from the first ever post-war IAA in 1951 to the trade show held in 1955.

Design: Cost-effective vehicle production lies at the core of any specifications. As a result, engines, transmissions and steering gear assemblies were taken from the passenger car range. The decision to design the vehicle as a space-saving COE truck was made at an early stage. Consequently, the panel van variant provided a loading capacity of 8.6 cubic metres at a length of only 4.80 metres. Just like the rear-engined O 321 H coach, the 319 model series featured a chassis subframe and a body with a welded ladder-type frame as a self-supporting body. Engine, transmission, steering, the rigid front axle with multi-leaf longitudinal springs, torsion-bar stabiliser and telescopic shock absorbers (angled towards the rear) were linked to the chassis subframe, which had been elastically screwed to the floor assembly at four points. A rigid banjo axle featuring leaf springs and – once again – angled telescopic shock absorbers were installed at the rear. Coil springs supported the leaf springs in the event of increasing loads. The wheelbase was defined as 2,850 millimetres.

More payload and a new model designation: From 1963 the platform truck was also available with a wheelbase of 3,600 millimetres, which then also led to variants with a crew cab or a platform body with a length of four metres. At this point, the payload increased from 1.75 to two metric tonnes thanks to reinforced brakes and springs. The model designation also changed, the petrol-powered variant was now known as the L 407 and the L 405 became the diesel-powered variant. The new designations describe the weight and output: the engine in the first four-tonne van generated 70 hp, while the other vehicle’s engine developed 50 hp. This nomenclature became standard for all Mercedes-Benz commercial vehicles for decades to come.

First of all, the diesel: In the initial years after the war, the diesel engine had not yet prevailed in small vans. This changed with the L/O 319. As of its production launch in August 1956, it was initially exclusively available with an efficient diesel engine as the L/O 319 D. The commercial vehicles used the 1.8-litre four-cylinder OM 636 with hanging valves and 32 kW (43 hp) from the 170 D and 180 D passenger car types. The van’s consumption was specified as 9.2 litres of diesel oil per 100 kilometres and its top speed as 80 km/h. From autumn 1961 it was replaced by the more modern, new, two-litre four-cylinder OM 621 development generating 37 kW (50 hp) from the 190 D. It was the first large-scale-production diesel engine in this

displacement category with an overhead camshaft. In 1965 the output was increased to 40 kW (55 hp).

The petrol-powered variant followed suit: As of February 1957, additional versions featuring a four-cylinder M 121 petrol engine with an overhead camshaft and 48 kW (65 hp) from the 180 passenger car model launched in production. Ex-factory figures specified a consumption of 14.2 litres of petrol per 100 kilometres and a top speed of 95 km/h. From autumn 1961 onwards the engine output totalled 50 kW (68 hp), increasing to 59 kW (80 hp) from 1965. Petrol-engine variants were popular in areas where lower mileage and better performance made the difference. For instance, many fire service departments ordered this version of the L 319.

Variations: **The** L 319 and O 319 were available for delivery with different bodies, so that, according to the sales brochure, “there is a matching vehicle available for any transport tasks in retail, trade and industry”. Consequently, the small commercial vehicle – initially produced in Sindelfingen and later in Düsseldorf – was available in 1956 as a panel van featuring hinged doors or sliding doors, as a platform truck with frame and tarpaulin or as a delivery vehicle with open sides. In the latter variant the openings were sealed by tarpaulin, which could be set up to use as awnings – ideal for selling products at markets. The O 319 was available for commuters with a capacity of 18 passengers, as a coach with 17 seats and as a luxury coach with ten passenger seats. In terms of comfort, the brochure describes the O 319 as “featuring pleasant, upholstered seats, exemplary ventilation and heating, large, round windows and the sliding sunroof, its equipment stretches from the bare necessities to luxury-level comfort.”

“This front end is very nice”: You still hear people say this when they look at 319 model series vehicles today. After the stringent lines of many pre-war production commercial vehicles, designers developed a new shape for the COE vehicles of the 1950s with similarities to the brand’s passenger cars. The L/O 319 as well as the O 321 H minibus presented in 1954 took on pioneering roles. For decades this face became an ambassador for the Mercedes-Benz brand in everyday situations around the globe.

Market positioning: The 319 model series closed the gap between competitor vehicles and the larger Mercedes-Benz L/O 3500. And it was very successful in doing so: when production was discontinued in 1968, both the L 319 and O 319 were market leaders. Initially produced in Sindelfingen, the production site was moved to Düsseldorf in 1962. To this day, Düsseldorf remains the Group’s main plant for vans and is the home of the Sprinter. The T2 (1967 to 1996), known as the “Düsseldorfer Transporter” (the “Düsseldorf van”) was the direct successor of the 319. The TN van, produced in northern Germany, made its debut in 1977. It is often referred to as the T1 to distinguish it from the larger T2 – or known as the “Bremer Transporter” (the “Bremen van”) on the basis of its first production site. In 1995 the Sprinter succeeded the TN.

Praise from experts: In the 20/1955 issue, “Auto Motor und Sport” magazine said the following about the new Daimler-Benz minibus: “In many areas exemplary and modern, whilst being very, very traditional in other areas, the O 319 is less a technically interesting solution than it is a more economically interesting one which doesn’t need to hope for plenty of success, but can be pretty sure of it.” “Last-Auto und Omnibus” specialist magazine intensively analysed the O 319 in the 3/1957 issue: “We can genuinely praise the roadholding, suspension, steering, field of vision and many other elements. All in all, we can showcase a passenger vehicle here that merges significantly more benefits than you would initially assume. Anyone fond of gearshifts in the O 319 D – something that is actually fun with the genuinely smooth steering wheel transmission – will nonetheless reach average speeds that are definitely worth mentioning. As a result, we managed to achieve average speeds of 50 to 60 km/h on normal roads several times, albeit on routes without inclines, covering

distances of over 300 km. The diesel-powered variant doesn't move as slowly as you would initially assume.”

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Captions

2000M405

Mercedes-Benz L 319 D, with a panel van. Contemporary photograph dated 1950s/1960s, taken in Santa Cruz, USA.

1988M1298

Mercedes-Benz O 319 and O 319 D. "The large minibus" advert dated 1956.

00094365

Mercedes-Benz L 319, title page of the first sales brochure, circa 1956. The van was shown loaded with a host of parcels to underline its ample transport volume.

00094366

Mercedes-Benz L 319, title page of a sales brochure, circa 1956. Van with sliding door next to a Mercedes-Benz 190 SL underlines the kinship of the Mercedes-Benz face in both vehicles.

00006100

Mercedes-Benz L 319, platform truck. Contemporary photograph dated 1950s/1960s.

87504

Mercedes-Benz L 319, sales van. Contemporary photograph dated 1950s/1960s, taken in Durban, South Africa.

97187

Mercedes-Benz L 319/L 319 D, panel van equipped as a workshop van of the Berlin-Marienfelde plant. "Mercedes-Benz. Ihre beste Kraft." ("Mercedes-Benz. Your greatest strength.") slogan on the body. Contemporary photograph dated 1950s/1960s.

U1114

Mercedes-Benz L 319 B, LF 8 fire service vehicle. Contemporary photograph dated 1956.

U1324

Mercedes-Benz L 319, "Braunschweiger Zeitung" panel van. Contemporary photograph dated 1956.

U1050

Mercedes-Benz O 319 with glazing around the edge of the roof used in Switzerland between Gstaad and the Turbach health resort. Contemporary photograph dated 1950s/1960s.

68864

Mercedes-Benz O 319 luxury coach variant with glazing around the edge of the roof and seating for ten passengers plus driver. Contemporary photograph dated 1950s/1960s.

U37010

Mercedes-Benz O 319 D luxury coach variant with glazing around the edge of the roof and seating for ten

passengers plus driver. Contemporary photograph dated 1950s/1960s.

68916

Mercedes-Benz O 319 D with glazing around the edge of the roof and seating for seventeen passengers plus driver. Contemporary photograph dated either 1955 or 1956.

68923

Mercedes-Benz O 319 with glazing around the edge of the roof and seating for seventeen passengers plus driver. Contemporary photograph dated either 1955 or 1956.

00010345

Mercedes-Benz O 319 with glazing around the edge of the roof and camper van equipment. Contemporary photograph dated 1950s/1960s.

00012345

Mercedes-Benz L 405, platform truck with a crew cab. Contemporary photograph dated early 1960s.

00015032

Mercedes-Benz L 405 (successor to the L 319 D), low loader. Contemporary photograph dated early 1960s.

00015047

Mercedes-Benz L 406 (successor to the L 319 D), low loader with frame and tarpaulin. Contemporary photograph dated early 1960s.

U36928

Mercedes-Benz L 408 (successor to the L 319), ambulance van with Binz body. Contemporary photograph dated 1966.

54219-1

Mercedes-Benz O 319 with glazing around the edge of the roof. Last test car version prior to series-production launch, testing at Stelvio Pass, circa 1955 or 1956. The front end still differed from what would later be the series-production vehicle. The L 319 and O 319 were introduced in September 1955.

77686

Mercedes-Benz L 319 and O 319. Cross-section drawing dated 1957 with body structure, drivetrain and axles.

77687

Mercedes-Benz L 319 and O 319. Cross-section drawing dated 1957 with main focus on chassis and drivetrain. Secondary aspect: body of an O 319 with glazing around the edge of the roof and folding sunroof.

20C0405_001

Mercedes-Benz body drawing dated 27 February 1951 for a vehicle with a payload of 1.3 metric tonnes leading up to the L 319/O 319 presented in 1955. This design still featured a conventional frame with rigid axles as well as coil springs and telescopic shock absorbers at the front and rear. The standard vehicle featured a more complex design. It featured a chassis subframe and a body with a welded ladder-type frame as a self-supporting body. Engine, transmission, steering, the rigid front axle with multi-leaf longitudinal

springs, torsion-bar stabiliser and telescopic shock absorbers (angled towards the rear) were linked to the chassis subframe, which had been elastically screwed to the floor assembly at four points. A rigid banjo axle featuring leaf springs and – once again – angled telescopic shock absorbers were installed at the rear. Coil springs supported the leaf springs in the event of increasing loads.

Si51969

Si51966

Mercedes-Benz prototype with a payload of 1.5 metric tonnes leading up to the L 319/O 319 presented in 1955. Photograph dated 24 August 1951. This prototype still featured a conventional frame with rigid axles as well as coil springs and telescopic shock absorbers at the front and rear. The standard vehicle featured a more complex design. It featured a chassis subframe and a body with a welded ladder-type frame as a self-supporting body. Engine, transmission, steering, the rigid front axle with multi-leaf longitudinal springs, torsion-bar stabiliser and telescopic shock absorbers (angled towards the rear) were linked to the chassis subframe, which had been elastically screwed to the floor assembly at four points. A rigid banjo axle featuring leaf springs and – once again – angled telescopic shock absorbers were installed at the rear. Coil springs supported the leaf springs in the event of increasing loads.

20C0405_002

Mercedes-Benz test body as a panel van leading up to the L 319 presented in 1955. The front end still differed from what would later be the series-production vehicle.

20C0405_003

Mercedes-Benz test body as a minibus leading up to the O 319 presented in 1955. The front end still differed from what would later be the series-production vehicle.

20C0405_004

Mercedes-Benz test body as a minibus with glazing around the edge of the roof leading up to the O 319 presented in 1955. The front end still differed from what would later be the series-production vehicle.