



The plant in Mussafah: making European quality available

Hafilat buses poised for big ride

The UAE recently became the first country in the Middle East to export locally built European-quality buses when Abu Dhabi based Hafilat Industries shipped its first batch of buses to Australia from its 15,000 sq m factory in Mussafah.

The shipment was part of a Dh30-million (\$8.1 million) contract won by Hafilat to supply the City of Melbourne with 'low floor' city-buses on Mercedes Benz chassis. By manufacturing and exporting vehicles, the company has reversed the usual UAE paradigm of importing them.

The establishment of Hafilat's factory, licensed by Australian Volgren, is a ground-breaking move to establish a local manufacturing industry that serves the region and other global markets, supporting the UAE's move toward economic diversification.

Commenting on the company's aim behind setting up a plant in Abu Dhabi, Robert J McCulloch, general manager, Hafilat Industries says: "There is an urgent need for public transport in the UAE. Our owners identified this need and decided to develop a bus manufacturing business to meet this and the country's need to diversify its industrial base.

"At Hafilat, our vision is to produce world-class products locally. This benefits local operators in having a high-class facility at their doorstep to backup the product in service - a most important factor in bus operating," he says.

"Our buses bodies are constructed using aluminium extrusion—the same material used in aircraft and high-performance cars. They are constructed using a system originating in Switzerland and adapted by Volgren to be able to

operate in harsh conditions as experienced in countries such as Australia and the UAE. Our buses are safe for passengers and drivers, more reliable, easier to repair and hence more cost effective than traditional steel buses. Our buses are designed to meet the most stringent safety standards in the world. They are also handicap-friendly and designed to fit the latest low-emission chassis, hence reducing pollution and carbon output, the hottest topic in the world today," according to McCulloch.

Hafilat's factory is designed to produce 500 buses per year. This is the first stage of its proposed plan. Developing the full block of land would provide capacity of 1,000 busses per year.

Established around mid-2008, the company says its first year of operation, so far, has been very successful. "We completed our factory, commissioned the operation, completed staff recruitment and training, completed local supplier evaluation. But most important of all, we built European-quality city buses in the UAE and exported the buses to Australia, the first company in the ME to do so," says McCulloch. The company will also provide a spares, repair and maintenance service.

It is now in the process of signing two government contracts in the UAE.

"Our major customer, like all bus builders, is the government as these buses are used for public transport and by schools. Our buses, using the Swiss Co-Bolt technology and our experience from Europe, the US and Australia means that our buses are European quality with extensive experience in public transport and school student transportation. They meet the USA, European and Australian 'Side Impact and Rollover

standards', which means they are safe," he says.

The company says it requires high-quality and specialist products for manufacturing buses and there are a few local companies with the capability to manufacture them. "Consequently, we are helping a few local companies build the capability to manufacture our high-quality raw materials," he says.

Hafilat sources chassis from European companies like Mercedes Benz, MAN, Scania or Volvo. Aluminium is sourced from the UAE and Australia. Other materials are sourced from quality suppliers throughout the world.

Commenting on the markets being targeted by the company McCulloch says: "With the large demand for high-quality and safe buses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, our immediate focus is the UAE. However, the entire region is experiencing a demand for quality and safe buses, so, in the future, we will be pursuing opportunities in the GCC region, with a long-term view to supply into Europe. From a 'customer use' perspective it is public transport and school student transportation."

On the company's future plans, he says: "This is best answered by looking at the trends in transportation in the UAE. There has been dramatic change in the UAE, specifically driven by the Department of Transport (DOT) and Road and Transport Authority (RTA) demanding high-quality and safe buses. The immediate need in Dubai is to reduce traffic congestion and studies have shown that this can only be done when quality buses are provided at high frequency and at reasonable cost.

"With the increasing traffic congestion in Abu Dhabi and Al Ain, they will also follow. There will also be a push for environmentally-friendly buses, specifically CNG (compressed natural gas) and hybrid buses (electric). In addition, safety will become priority, primarily for school buses, where parents demand safe transportation, and secondly with worker buses where it is deemed unacceptable to have a bus on the road which endangers the lives of other road users."

McCulloch says Hafilat will continue to increase sourcing raw materials such as aluminium and glass from local companies to support the economy.

As well as city buses, Hafilat can manufacture a full range of public transport buses, including articulated city, double-deck, compressed natural gas (CNG), hybrid (electric) and trolley buses. All of Hafilat's buses enable full access to people with special needs, and can be customised as per client requests.



A newly built Hafilat bus outside the company's factory



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