

My Alpaca Transport

A TRANSPORT OF DELIGHT

by Ian Davison, Illawarra Alpacas

Having entered the alpaca industry in 1992 with just four alpacas, the transport requirements of Illawarra Alpacas have seen dramatic changes over the past 14 years, as our herd has grown to its present size of about 450 alpacas.

In 1994, Celia took our one male down to the Royal Melbourne show, towed in a single axle trailer behind a Hilux ute. In 2006, we transported a total of 19 alpacas to the Sydney Royal in a purpose-designed van towing a purpose-designed alpaca float.

As alpaca enterprises grow, alpaca breeders discover two fundamental needs: a need for more space, and a need for bigger transports.

Transporting alpacas is a basic requirement to the alpaca breeder, whether it be to shows, for mobile matings, for shearing, to public displays, to the vet, or to deliver alpacas to clients. The same vehicle is also called into play for transporting fleece or feed, and may have to serve a variety of purposes unrelated to alpaca breeding.

Our own evolution has been from towing a box trailer, to a horse float, to a purpose-designed alpaca float, and finally to a dedicated alpaca transport van.

Our graduation to a Mercedes Sprinter Turbo Diesel 313 van was made last year, and is an indulgence that has justified itself time and time again in the twelve months since we took delivery.

We first spotted a similar vehicle over a year ago, when it overtook us on the highway as we returned from a show in the Toyota Land Cruiser, pulling a float of 8 alpacas behind us. It overtook us effortlessly, and pulled away up the hill ahead of us, and we wistfully mused how it might have made a useful alpaca transport vehicle.

Three months later, we took the plunge, having located a heavily discounted long wheel base, high roofline Sprinter that had been ordered and fitted out for another buyer, who had then reneged on the deal. The van was already configured with a tow bar, a single window on the kerb side panel, a wire cargo panel separating the cabin from the load compartment, and a sliding door between the two. A rubber mat had been cut to the size of the load compartment, and air conditioning fitted.

Our own customised fit-out included a fibreglass/rubber coating that was continuous along the side walls and floor of the vehicle (to facilitate hosing out the cargo compartment), additional air vents and ceiling lights in the cargo compartment, a system of modular meshed dividers to create separate pens within the cargo compartment, and a removable seat to accommodate two extra people immediately behind the passenger compartment.

We had thought that a custom ramp might be necessary for loading and unloading alpacas, but educated alpacas quickly learn to jump into and out of the side door during loading and unloading.

The air conditioning is powerful, and quickly cools the cabin. The meshed cargo barrier is lined with clear plastic to prevent alpacas sharing their rumen with their human minders, and so prevents easy circulation through the cargo compartment, but the sliding door may be opened between the two, even on the move, if the alpacas seem settled and unthreatening. Perhaps an auxiliary fan might improve circulation of cool air. The ceiling vents ensure that warm air is expelled automatically when on the move. Ceiling lights can be operated from the dash board of the cabin whilst in motion, or independently from within the cargo compartment.

The vehicle is driven by a five-speed manual turbo diesel, and drives like a sedan, with amazing acceleration and pulling power. The ride is comfortable, and engine noise is moderate. Fuel economy is amazing, at around 7 litres of diesel per 100 kms unladen, giving a range of up to 1000 kms on a full 75 litre tank. (Fully laden, or pulling a trailer, range will naturally be lower). Standard seating in the cabin is for two people, but there is sufficient room to install a double passenger seat in place of the single seat.

The vehicle travels effortlessly with a full load, towing an alpaca trailer behind, with a combined cargo of 19 show alpacas. Without dividers, the van alone could accommodate up to 10 adults or 15 weaned yearlings. We have a rubber mat on the floor, which ensures good traction for the alpacas, and helps to protect the fibreglassed floor. We spread hay on top for comfort and cleanliness, and all are easily removed for cleaning the van, which can be hosed out (towards the rear doors!).

With the modular dividers, we can pen off individual spaces for grown male alpacas, just wide enough for them to stand, but not to turn around. They seem to travel very comfortably and quietly in this manner, without challenging each other for space. Alternatively, we can pack a lot of animals in together, or choose a mixture of both modalities.

We have transported 8 pressed bales of fleece in the van, and could have accommodated more with judicious packing. The van has completed four return trips to Melbourne, and countless local journeys to shows, as well as taken four-wheel drive motor-bikes and ride-on mowers to motor hospital. The kids have their eyes on it for moving house, and their parents whimsically contemplate the day when the alpacas get pushed aside, and it becomes a mobile motor home.

Total cost was \$50,000 for the van, and a further \$12,000 for the custom fit-out and signage. Wherever it goes, it advertises Illawarra Alpacas: at \$100 a day for advertising, I reckon it will take about two years to pay itself off.

How does it rate against our previous transporters? Streets ahead in comfort, capacity, versatility, reliability, and even fuel economy. Disadvantages? Up front costs are a definite consideration, and the Cruiser has a separate life apart from transporting cargo.

Was it a good decision? You bet! From here, any increase in transport capacity would require a dedicated livestock transporter of the type used to transport sheep: reckon we'll wait till we're running an alpaca station before we head along that road.