

# Stage set for high drama



*A double-decker with East Lancs bodywork adds much-needed breadth to Scania's bus-and-coach line-up for the UK. But Stephen Morris wonders about the length of its rear overhang, about uncomfortably cramped rear seats, and about where the OmniDekka is going to end up in a market that is already starting to look fragile and distinctly overcrowded.*

**N**ot so long ago, you could have been forgiven for wondering whether Scania was serious about the UK bus-and-coach market. All it had to offer was a 12-metre single-decker with an in-line vertical engine. No problem for coaches. The K94 and its heavier, more-powerful K124 stablemate cut the mustard as largely-conventional rear-engined coaches, and still do in the eyes of a good number of operators.

But Scania's bus offering has been confined to one product, the L94, conceived originally as an inter-urban high-floor vehicle and adapted to suit UK operator preference for low floors by Wrightbus, the only bodybuilder willing to get to grips with turning it into a low-floor bus.

Scania's position here has changed dramatically over the past 18 months or so. It all started with the unveiling late in 2001 of a UK-specification OmniCity 12-metre low-floor bus (with transverse rear engine) and spin-offs based on the same chassis.

There is the Wright-bodied L94 and an articulated version of the OmniCity which comes into the UK as a complete vehicle rather than a chassis. Some have been ordered already for carrying workers to the terminal-5 construction site at Heathrow Airport.

Now Scania finds itself the only manufacturer in Britain able to offer two artic models. A 10.5m version of the OmniCity's N94UB chassis has been bodied as a midibus (unimaginatively christened "SmallBus") to give Scania a presence in a market dominated by the TransBus Dart. The Daf Bus SB120 is beginning to give the Dart a run for its money, seriously enough for Volvo to have decided to market the vehicle





No easy ride: the OmniDekka is up against some tough competition in the double-decker market, from vehicles like the Dennis Trident (above) and Daf DB250 (above right).



Are you sitting comfortably? Certainly not here in the cramped rear-most seats of the OmniDekka.

(minus the Daf name, of course) instead of developing its own contender for a sector of the market in which it has been singularly unsuccessful hitherto. MAN is another latecomer here, with its long-awaited 14.220.

Can Scania make a success of marketing a heavyweight chassis in this lightweight sector? That remains to be seen. Certainly its weight penalty is considerable. And the omans hardly look encouraging when Scania has ended up assembling Darts in Australia and when its first UK customer for the SmallBus, Durham Travel Services' London Easylink operation, crashed last year (though nobody is blaming the bus manufacturer for that).

But the biggest hole of all in Scania's UK bus-and-coach product line-up has been dug by its inability to offer a double-decker. A large batch of step-entry (as distinct from low-floor) double-deckers built for stock proved hard to shift once the overnight transformation to low-floor had taken place and Scania had no product to pitch against Daf, Dennis and Volvo. This has been addressed by the East Lancashire Coach Builders OmniDekkas, the first examples of which have just been delivered to Metrobus of Orpington for Transport-for-London work.

The OmniDekka's two key selling points in the double-decker market are a lower floor height than Volvo, TransBus and Daf rivals; and an extra row of seats downstairs. The low height results from a combination of chassis design and from the East Lancs sandwich construction for the lower-deck ceiling/upper-deck floor.

The cost of running a double-decker in London has to be lower when there is a future for the bus outside the capital at the end of the contract. But the potential for this is compromised when the additional passenger headroom demanded by the London specification means the bus cannot be used on routes with low trees or bridges. East Lancs has even thought about retrofitting double-deckers with a lower top deck when they come out of London, though never actually done so. The OmniDekka offers ample headroom on both decks, even for six-footers wearing thick-soled shoes, within an overall height of 4.21 metres (13ft 9.75in).

The OmniDekka's extra seating capacity in the lower deck stems from the length of the rear overhang (*Transport Engineer* November 2002 and February 2003). At 2.91 metres, this allows an extra row of seats to be fitted between the rear wheelarches and the five-seater bench, which can be mounted farther back than on rival designs because the transverse engine is inclined at 60 degrees.

Whereas Scania trumpets the virtue of extra seating capacity, TransBus emphasises how the compact rear end of its Trident double-decker with an overhang of only 2.15 metres, means less outswing. Volvo's B7TL sits between these two with a rear overhang of 2.365 metres. Indeed Scania's rear overhang is only 270mm shorter than that of the in-line engined version of the Volvo B7L, and this was judged unsuitable for double-deck use because of the length of its rear overhang.





The OmniDekka's rearmost seats on the lower deck are cramped. Headroom inevitable reduces gradually towards the rear as the floor slopes up over the 12-tonne rear axle. And the rear seat squab is bolt upright, with just a thin layer of padding on a flat base moulded into the rear end and attached by a metal strip which digs into the thighs. As if to add to the misery of rear-seat passengers, normal-size windows on the East Lancs body stop short of the rear seat, leaving only a tiny rearmost window. It is hard to imagine anyone other than vandals choosing freely to occupy these seats. The OmniDekka otherwise is a competent bus.

East Lancs uses the Alusuisse bolted construction which enjoys a good reputation for strength and ease of repair as well as aluminium's inherent corrosion resistance. A pre-coating system for interior surfaces is borrowed from the airline industry. This creates a durable though stark-looking finish.

Ride quality is helped by a low centre of gravity and by electronically-controlled air suspension with two wide-spaced bags on the front axle and four at the rear.

Power comes from Scania's DC9 Euro-3 nine-litre engine, rated at 230hp or 260hp. A particulate trap is optional at both power ratings. There is no choice of gearbox: it is the four-speed ZF 4HP502C with the 230hp engine and the four-speed 4HP592 with the 260hp engine. Metrobus is plumping for the 260hp engine with particulate trap on the 18 OmniDekkas it has ordered. Another 18, including two convertible open-toppers, have been ordered by Brighton & Hove, a sister company of Metrobus in the Go-Ahead group.

Metrobus managing director Alan Eatwell was engineering director at Brighton & Hove when it was a National Bus Company subsidiary. Now he recalls how the Scania's at Brighton were only ever over the workshop pits for routine maintenance. One fitter is said to have resigned because he reckoned the job had become too boring. "I'll be delighted if the new Scania's serve us as well on reliability and running costs," says Mr Eatwell.

John Horn, East Lancashire Coach Builders sales director, acknowledges that the OmniDekka



has to be more than just a "me-too double-decker". The East Lancs Alusuisse double-deck body is built on four chassis at present: from TransBus (Dennis Trident), Volvo, Daf and Scania. WrightBus meanwhile builds its body on Daf and Volvo chassis. TransBus offers both its former Plaxton and Alexander ranges on all but Scania, while the Daf decker is also available with Optare's body. And an Optare Integral is promised. So the UK market for double-deckers is already in danger of becoming over-populated. If London congestion charging turns out to be a disaster, politically or otherwise, and the result is less sympathy to public transport from London's local government, this crowded market could even collapse overnight. ■

**Uphill struggle:** but the inner London congestion charge has meant more orders for vehicles like the Volvo B7TL (above) and TransBus Trident (left).