The winner of the International Coach of the Year 2012 title is the VDL Futura 2, the new integral design from VDL that replaces the former Bova Magiq and will ultimately also replace the Futura and the Berkhof Axial when the whole of the planned range comes on stream.

The International Bus & Coach of the Year Jury that makes the award is made up of journalists representing leading magazines from 19 European countries. They voted for the Futura 2 after first evaluating a field of six strong candidates at the Coach Euro Test event which was staged in Arendal, Norway at the beginning of June. We carried a full report on the event in B&CB issue 1135, 12 August 2011. The other candidates were the: Irizar i6 Integral, Scania Touring 6x2, Setra S416GT-HD/2, Viseon C13 and the Volvo 9500.

It represents a double success for VDL as last year the company won the International Bus of the Year 2011 award with the Citea following the Bus Euro Test event held in Bucharest. Launched last summer, the Futura 2 made its first exhibition appearance at the IAA event in Hanover. Initially, five model variants have been launched, all of which are 3.665m high HD versions. There are two two-axle models: the 12.215m FHD2-122 and the 12.895m FHD2-129, as well as a three tri-axles, the 13.165m FHD2-131, the 13.965m FHD2-139 and the 14.865m FHD2-148 which can accommodate 67 passengers.

The new Futura 2 is destined to become a family of coaches with lower height (LD), super high (SD) and double deck (DD) models to follow in the future, in much the same way that Setra offers European customers choices with its TopClass andComfortClass ranges. Built in the former Bova plant at Valkenswaard using a similar modular system to that developed for the Bova Magiq. The Futura 2 has many sub assemblies completed off line. To ensure longevity, the structure is built in 3CR12 stainless steel and incorporates the steel roll bars required to meet the enhanced ECE R66.01 rollover regulations. The one piece side panels are galvanised, the front section and rear bumper are of polydicyclopentadiene (PDCPD), the rear hatch panel is aluminium and the roof is an aluminium sandwich composite.

The coach entered in the Coach Euro Test and on the performance of which the decision was based was a 12.9m long FHD2-129/410 model with Paccar/DAF MX300S Euro5 + EEV emission level 12.9-litre six-cylinder engine developing...
310kW (410PS) at 1,900rpm and torque of 2,000Nm at 1,000-1,500rpm. The transmission was the fully automated manual ZF AS-tronic 12 AS2001-BO with intercooler. Other engine options are available including different ratings of the MX unit and the smaller 9.2-litre PR265 engine which offers 361bhp and torque of 1,450Nm at 1,100-1,700 rpm and can be supplied with a fully automatic ZF 6HP60AC transmission. ZF also supplied the axles and steering gear.

It participated as a 45 seater with a rather unusual interior layout that enabled VDL to show the three types of specifically designed seat that are being offered as standard options. The front of the saloon featured the Class 500 Luxe with an adjustable leather trimmed headrest that slides vertically to give increased seat height, as well as two tables, while towards the rear, the left hand side of the saloon featured the mid range Class 300 Premium seat and the right hand side the Class 100 Basic unit which is nevertheless a very comfortable seat.

Unusually, the Futura 2 has a flat saloon floor which, together with a wider aisle than the previous generation coach contributes to a feeling of spaciousness. One juror likened the impression created within the coach to 'a modern Italian lounge.' Air conditioning is an integrated 30kW system using Denso components. Jurors praised it for its all round performance, combining ease of driving and a roomy, well laid out cockpit with excellent passenger comfort, and the potential for low ownership cost as a result of low unladen weight (13,140kg) and a competitive price for product relationship.

Particularly impressive is the quality embodied in the coach, with well chosen materials precisely assembled to luxury car standards. The result is an absence of any squeaks and rattles. This is no ‘kitchen sink’ coach but as another juror observed, ‘everything fits like a pair of rubber gloves.’

As our Rob Orchard found when he drove it, on the road, the cab is a well laid out one and the matching of the driveline and other components maximises the potential of the units so that they perform more smoothly than the same ones do in some other vehicles. The result is an extremely smooth ride.

**UK version**

You will eventually be able to buy a right hand drive example in the UK, but not yet. It isn’t expected to be available over here until the 2013 season with the first example likely to debut at Euro Bus Expo 2012. In the mean time the associated Moseley group of companies will continue to offer the 12m and 13m two axle versions of the existing Futura. There will be no more examples of the Magiq as the lines on which they were built are now fully occupied building the Futura 2.

At the launch of the new Futura 2 last year, CEO of VDL Bus & Coach, Remi Henkermans, had commented, 'We have high ambitions and we make no secret of it.' His aim is to reposition the company to become third among Europe’s Bus & Coach manufacturers from its current position of sixth. Winning both of these titles in the face of such tough competition will provide encouragement that the moves being made are taking the company in the right direction.

The handover of the award will take place at the forthcoming Busworld Kortrijk exhibition in Belgium which is being held from 21-26 October 2011. Next year’s Bus Euro Test will be staged at Versailles in France to select the International Bus of the Year 2013.

By Stuart Jones