

EXCLUSIVE

Who is...Dethleffs

Dethleffs is a major player in Europe but has so far found it a challenge to establish itself here as a dominant force. That, it says, is all about to change

DETHLEFFS IS ONE of those companies that most British motorhomers have heard of, but ask them to describe it in any detail and many will struggle.

This will not be the case for much longer as, following the buyout of the British Explorer Group, which makes Elddis motorhomes, by the German Erwin Hymer Group, Dethleffs now has a permanent presence in the UK.

As an Erwin Hymer Group company, Dethleffs aims to use the establishment of the new Erwin Hymer Group UK Ltd (EHG UK) – as the Explorer Group is now called – to reinforce its presence here and bring the Dethleffs brand to the attention of more British buyers.

“The first step was to form the EHG UK,” explains the company’s Managing Director, Alexander Leopold. “Dethleffs’ direction is clear, we want to increase our volumes in the UK.”

Prior to the Explorer buyout, Dethleffs had already started to put itself in front of more British buyers. Last year, it employed a UK sales agent dedicated to building the brand and appointing more dealers. “We felt that we were too far away to reach our sales potential in the UK and we wanted to understand the UK market even better,” explains Alexander. “So we needed somebody who already works in the UK market and who works closely with the dealers and their customers and the owners’ club.”

MAKING CAMPERVANS

Dethleffs sold some 120 motorhomes here last year (the 2016 season) and this year (2017 season) it will sell about 200. Its target is 400 motorhomes. So, it is already on course but, as with many manufacturers, its growth is limited by its factory. It simply can’t build any more. “This is a problem,”



“The challenge is to educate more people about the Dethleffs brand”

Dethleffs Managing Director, Alexander Leopold (right), alongside Export Sales Manager, Michael Bosch

says Alexander, in a classic case of understatement. The problem is that, at its Isny factory, Dethleffs also makes every Pössl van conversion (Pössl are sold here as Globecar). That’s some 4,000 campervans made annually by Dethleffs for another brand. The factory also makes all Dethleffs motorhomes and many of its caravans, as well as a small number of vehicles for Bürstner. Bürstner is another EHG brand, but Pössl isn’t.

A solution is in hand. “Our current capacity here is about 10,500 to 11,000 vehicles,” says Alexander. These vehicles are built by a workforce of

950 – 150 of who have been employed over the past 12 months to cope with increased demand. “We decided last year to increase our capacity by adding another production facility (next door to this factory). Our plan is to produce all the van conversions in this new factory.”

Much of the production in this new dedicated €21m (£18.75m) van conversion factory, which will open in spring 2018, will be for Pössl. This will free up capacity in the existing factory. “We will move all campervan production out of this factory and so make space for more Dethleffs motorhomes to be built.”

Strangely, while the new Isny facility will make campervans, Dethleffs itself does not sell campervans or van conversions under its own name and has no immediate plans to do so. It is purely a coachbuilt motorhome brand, regardless of what its actual manufacturing specialty is. “You will not see a Dethleffs campervan, yet,” confirms Alexander. “At the moment it is not in our strategy... not having a Dethleffs campervan does not damage the brand but it may hinder us in some ways to increase volumes.”

BRITISH DEALERS

With more capacity coming, Dethleffs is keen to grow in the UK. “We’ve committed to doubling the number of Dethleffs motorhomes sold in the UK,” says Alexander. But first, he says, the company needs to better understand UK buyers and appoint more outlets.

“We are looking for more dealers. We currently have seven on nine sites and we want two, maybe three, more – in the northeast and Midlands,” confirms Michael Bosch, Dethleffs Export Sales Manager. “We’ve just appointed JC Leisure in East Sussex and before that it was Southwest

Motorhomes near Bristol. We want dealers who fit with our philosophy.”

He adds that buyers can be confused by the variety and number of models it sells. “Our product range is quite complicated at the moment, we have a lot of ranges and layouts and so we are trying to make it easier for our customers and our dealers to find the right product.”

Dethleffs only came into the UK 15 years ago and it still has large areas that are not served by a dealer. “So the problem is not the brand or the product – we need more dealers – strong dealers – to give us the coverage. That is the first step,” explains Michael.

And this brings us right back to the foundation of the new EHG UK company. “We discussed how we could be stronger in the UK and we decided that we have to found one company – the EHG UK – so we committed to that and now we have done it,” explains Alexander. “We are confident that the UK market is stable, but the other question is how easy it is for us to get more market share and also the total industry is affected by the excess of continental brands in the UK market.”

WHAT'S COMING IN 2018

Dethleffs is a mainstream motorhome manufacturer and so competes in the most competitive middle part of the market. It doesn't make budget (that's its sister brand, Sunlight) and it doesn't make top-end motorhomes (other EHG manufacturers, like Hymer or Niesmann and Bischoff, do).

Its most popular motorhomes sit in its Trend range. “This is our biggest seller in the UK and across Europe,” says Alexander.

And its strategy for its 2018 models is to improve on this winning formula. “The idea is to focus more on the models we have already and not to expand our product range,” he explains. However, we can expect some new designs and layouts for the coming year. “For the 2018 season we will be bringing out some new models... Not a new range but major modifications in our current ranges and some new layouts... there will be something that is particularly suited to the UK market.”

Dethleffs motorhomes that are sold in the UK are already better equipped than in Germany. So, we get ovens and the electric option on the Truma heating systems as standard where in other markets these are options. “We also add the Chassis Pack, which has things like air-con, cruise control, etc. This is standard on UK motorhomes.”

While we already get better-equipped models, Dethleffs is looking to its new agent to help it appeal even more to British buyers. “He can get us closer to the market and tell us what it wants and to help us understand whether we can perform better if we have different layouts or a different interior,” says Alexander. “Our philosophy is if we want to be strong in a certain region or country, then we have to understand that market and the customers and we have to be open to modify our product so it fits best to this market.”

This, he says means understanding what British motorhome owners want and then delivering it. “That is one of the strengths of Dethleffs – we are flexible and quick and willing to modify the products so they fit best to the markets.”

The UK is currently only the fifth largest market for Dethleffs, but this will change. “We believe in the UK market and we try to increase our perception in the UK that Dethleffs is a strong brand that you can rely on,”

says Alexander. “We are perceived as a strong brand but our brand awareness is not as it could be. If customers know about Dethleffs then they know they are buying quality, but the challenge is to educate more people about the Dethleffs brand so more people know about us.”

WHY DETHLEFFS?

The German manufacturer is consistent in trumpeting its core message – that buying a Dethleffs means you become a member of its family. This is one of three core messages, the other two being quality and service. “Our claim is that we are a friend of the family, when you buy a Dethleffs you come into our family – you are a part of the Dethleffs family,” explains Alexander. “The ‘friend of the family’ is very important for us but, of course, when you buy a Dethleffs you get more – you get German quality and you get great service. These three values are very important for the brand. They are our guidelines – whatever we do we must provide these three core values: friend of the family, quality and service.

“We are interested in having a very long relationship with our customers, so our intention is that, if you buy your first Dethleffs, you also buy your second and your third motorhome from Dethleffs.”

UK FAVOURITE

Dethleffs sells all its models in the UK and its best-selling range is the Trend, which is not surprising as this is its most popular range across the Continent. Within the Trend range it is the twin single bed layout of the 7057 EB that British buyers prefer the most. “The UK is an unusual market but we expect this single bed layout to remain very popular,” explains Alexander, who adds that this UK favourite will be enhanced further for the 2018 season to make it even more appealing to British buyers. “The 7057 will be one of those models that will be improved for the coming season,” he says. “In the UK market we have seen a move towards more continental designs inside motorhomes in the past few years. It is not the same but it has moved

closer [to European taste] in the last eight or 10 years.” He estimates some 50% of all new motorhomes sold here are European models and says this confirms a change in British buyers' rather conservative motorhome design tastes. “I think British tastes are quite traditional,” he says. “The homes of the British people are quite traditional – just have a look at the carpets. But, tastes are now changing to more European.”

