

Conquering the Big Apple

Bristol-based v6e beats off global competitors for conversion of New York open-top tour bus fleet to multilingual commentary system. Steve Rooney reports.



THE sights and sounds of New York are a huge draw for visitors and more than 50 million of them visited the city last year. And one of the best ways to get the flavour of the city is of course on an open-top tour bus. New York's main sightseeing operators, City Sights and Grayline, are now using an audio commentary system supplied by specialist v6e.

The two operators are part of holding company Twin America and a total of 141 buses are being fitted with v6e's multilingual sound system. Another client of v6e, Big Bus, has already fitted its systems in tour buses in the USA, but the Twin America order is a major breakthrough in North America for the Bristol-based company, which beat off 11 global competitors to win the business.

"It takes a state-of-the-art technology and the right supporting team for anything to function accurately in New York City, and the v6e Multilingual Commentary System does just that," says Twin America vice president James T Murphy. "We run in the neighbourhood of 160 double-decker buses each day during peak season. This system works and I highly recommend it."

City Sights and Grayline operate a fleet of modern double-deck open top buses and offer various hop-on hop-off tours in and around New York including special night tours which offer a chance to take in the illuminated Manhattan skyline from a special stop on the Brooklyn waterfront. Among the city excursions is a Downtown



tour which takes in the three most-visited sights, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and the site of the World Trade Centre 'Ground Zero', as well as Times Square, Madison Square Garden, Macy's, the Rockefeller Center, Carnegie Hall, the Lower East Side and many other iconic locations. For those wanting a more active tour, there is even a combined 48-hour package which includes a hop-on hop-off bus tour with 24-hour cycle rental.

The installation of the commentary system follows the introduction of new laws in New York regarding noise abatement. The tour buses pass through a number of residential neighbourhoods including the West Village, SoHo and Chinatown in Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn, and local people have regularly complained about the noise from the open-top guided buses. The two sightseeing operators therefore had to act to avoid substantial fines from the city authorities and have introduced the v6e system across their fleets with individual passenger sound modules and headphones. Some live guides are still operating as the companies did not want to lose the expertise of the well-liked tour guides, but they can simply plug into the v6e system on either deck of the bus and their commentary is delivered to passengers through the headphones.

The units installed in the New York buses are derived

from v6e's existing product range but have been modified to suit the particular requirements of the customer, including a new rapid-fit system that helped with the installation of a large number of units. The installation programme began last winter and the last few buses were being completed this summer, with around 70 buses each from City Sights and Grayline fitted with the audio units.

The new passenger sound modules provide very high quality audio and are designed for easy surface-mounting on the sidewall and come supplied with v6e's own aluminium conduit and elbow joints. The units have a simple two-line screen and twin jack sockets for pairs of seats. The open-top buses are fitted with a removeable canopy for bad weather, but the wedge-shaped passenger sound modules come complete with a protective saddle to cover all the connections and ensure they are watertight and robust enough to survive the rigours of an open-top environment. The conduit comes in an aluminium finish but can also be painted to match an operator's corporate colours if required.

The New York operators are developing the English commentary initially, but the system enables them to provide up to 24 language versions in the future.

As well as the rapid-fit installation, one of the big factors in v6e winning the contract, according to the company's Nathan Scott, is the system's GPS capability. "The commentary sections are all triggered through the vehicle positioning," explains Scott, "and there is no intervention needed by the driver."

But he points out that in the dense urban environment of a city like New York, you can't just rely on the satellite positioning as there is always interference from the reflection and refraction of adjacent buildings. "The issue with GPS is making sure that you pick up an accurate position," says Scott. "And that is exactly what our technology delivers."

The tracking system used by v6e is much smarter than a standard GPS application as it maps the precise location of the vehicle using known reliable location points and digital mapping software with the on-bus



gyro to precisely locate the vehicle and ensure that the right commentary is played in the right place.

The New York systems were fitted by the operator's own technicians, but v6e offers a complete supply and fit service if required, and has recently installed systems for Big Bus in Miami and Budapest. The fast-fit application is also handy for operators using hired-in vehicles for a temporary period since removal is also straightforward, something that is being utilised in the Shanghai sightseeing operation on two rental vehicles.

The audio systems also come with Tour Management Software which makes it easy for an operator to create and upload commentary sections using a simple timeline. Individual sections can be edited and replaced and fillers can be created which can be triggered to deal with any diversions off the main route. The system also comes with a full diagnostic function which identifies any faulty or damaged seat units that may require attention.

Multilingual commentary systems are supplied by v6e to major sightseeing operators in many countries including Big Bus, London Original Sightseeing Tour and City Sightseeing operations. The technology can be seen operating in major cities around the world including Dubai, Dublin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hong Kong, London and Shanghai. □

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