

Trends in Manufacturer Service Facilities

By: Tom Gonser – Publisher – RVers Online

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Ed. Note: Although a construction delay has put us a bit behind schedule on our move to Oregon, where the absence of a sales tax is favorable to RV purchases, we've continued our review of motorhomes that we think would be most suitable to our RVing life style. This is part of a continuing series that we anticipate will lead to the purchase of a new diesel pusher. Since this will be our second purchase of a new diesel motorhome, we're examining the factors that we consider most important to "second time buyers". While the following analysis is done in the context of a diesel motorhome, we think the considerations discussed below are equally important for the purchase of any type of RV, whether gas, diesel, or towable.

In [a recent editorial](#) we reviewed the factors that we believe are likely to drive purchase decisions in the year ahead --particularly among sophisticated buyers. Our conclusion is that among other key factors, when making a choice of brands discerning buyers will carefully weigh a manufacturer's after-sale commitment to providing timely, competent service support. While some selling dealers no doubt make significant efforts to provide service for the brands of units they sell, many RV owners conclude that the very best source of service and repair for the RV they've purchased is likely to come from the manufacturer of that unit. They built it, designed and installed the various systems that are unique to that coach, have a very direct interest in customer satisfaction, and are usually better situated for many trouble shooting and repair jobs than any dealer or service center that does repairs on a wide range of brands.

While we do not pretend to have broadly researched the actions and plans of all RV manufacturers, in the course of our own search for a new motorhome we've taken a closer look at three of the manufacturers of particular interest to us. In general it appears the trend is in favor of increasing the manufacturer's commitment to providing factory based service for the RVs it produces. However, whether the increased capacity for service will keep pace with a corresponding increase in the number of new units being sold is quite another matter, and deserves careful attention as well.

Some months ago we had occasion to visit the large new service facility constructed by Monaco in Harrisburg, OR. With Monaco's acquisition of other motorhome manufacturers, and thus a greatly increased level of production, one can only surmise that the number of RV owners looking to get factory service from Monaco-produced units must have increased exponentially. The new service facility, with approximately 50 service bays, is indeed impressive, as are the new overnight facilities and club room for coach owners. However, even with this increase in capacity, it appears the lead time for owners wanting to schedule service visits has already become quite substantial. This raises the legitimate concern that even where new facilities are built, if the capacity for offering factory service does not keep pace with the growing number of that manufacturer's units out there on the road, not even seven maids with seven mops will be able to sweep the sand from that beach.

Our own experience with Country Coach during five years of ownership of our Intrigue provided first hand experience of how popular factory service is with a growing number of coach owners. And we found there's good reason for that popularity. In our experience the service offered at the Country Coach factory was superior to most other service options (both during and after the initial warranty period), and well worth the time required to travel to the factory. In anticipation of that fact, we had narrowed our choice of coaches the first time around to those with a factory presence in the Pacific Northwest -- where we live. During our five years with the Intrigue we saw the lead time required to schedule a factory service visit grow increasingly longer. No doubt this relates in part to the growing complexities of the newer high tech coaches, which puts factory know-how in greater demand. But it also relates to the number of new coaches produced.

We understand Country Coach is committed to expanding its factory service capability to meet the growing demand, though as of this writing we're not yet aware of the specific nature or extent of how this will be implemented.

We found one of the most positive signs of company commitment to enhanced factory service on a recent tour of the brand new Western RV Service Center in Yakima, WA. Western RV produces both towables, and its relatively new high-end diesel pusher, the Alpine Coach. Until recently Alpine owners have had to deal with a factory service center that had six service bays available -- but with only a single entry door, which caused obvious inefficiencies. However, coincident to moving all of its manufacturing facilities to a very spacious new "campus" south of town, they built a new modern 24 bay service center complete with a spacious "RV park" for WRV owners to use when they bring their units in for factory service. Included in the expansive new building are dedicated bays for water testing, paint prep, paint, and VIP/Customer pickup. While the WRV facility will handle both the Alpine coach and the company's extensive line of towables, this expansion represents a very substantial increase in factory service capability, and a clear demonstration of a long term commitment to customer support.

There are 33 brand new comfortable serviced spaces for WRV owners to use, which approximately triples the number of sites available at the old facility. A club house is also being constructed for the comfort of RVers at the factory having service performed. The number of service techs is being increased by 50%, and the objective is to ensure that all requested factory service can be scheduled within a 30 day period, with "emergency" service visits being handled on a case by case basis.
(Bold type added by Western RV for emphasis)

One question that seems common to all manufacturers is the ability to provide timely service at the factory not only for new units under warranty, but also for coaches that are beyond warranty. From the coach owner's perspective, the need for the best quality service does not end when the warranty expires. In our judgment manufacturers tend to commit available resources first to warranty work, and secondarily to coaches that are out of warranty. In the past this has likely been an essential choice given the limited amount of factory service that key manufacturers have been able to provide. Whether current stepped-up commitments to increased service capacity will be sufficient to assure a coach owner's reasonable access to factory service after the warranty has expired is yet to be seen. But we think it is of great importance to the prospective new coach owner. New coach manufacturer warranty periods are quite limited in time, and we think the savvy purchaser will want to know what priority the factory will provide his service needs in future years.

As we contemplate our own "second time around" purchase of a diesel pusher we've become keenly interested in evaluating the manufacturers' commitment to expanded service, both for new units, and for those that are beyond the initial warranty coverage. This commitment can best be inferred from the actual ramping up of factory service capacity, and by the articulation of standards and policies governing service quality, schedule lead time, and whether factory service is intended to extend beyond the initial warranty period. The assurance of continuing access to quality factory service, on a timely basis, for the period we might own the coach will surely be crucial to our purchase decision.

**For more information on Alpine Coach and Alpenlite Recreational Vehicles, please phone toll free: (800) 777-4133, or visit our website: www.wrvc.com.
Alpine Coach and Alpenlite Recreational Vehicles, PO Box 9547, Yakima, WA 98909.**