# AFC Transportation Puts Safety and Customer Service First

## Expanding fleet includes new Temsa minicoaches

*by Ann M. Kammerer*
*Photos courtesy of AFC unless otherwise noted*

**Based in Houston, Texas, AFC Transportation places major emphasis on safety, efficiency and customer satisfaction. In order to accomplish this, they operate a very diversified fleet of 170 vehicles ranging from limos to full-size charter coaches. Shown here is one of their new mid-size Temsa coaches that is making a hit with their customers.**

Customers can expect even the smallest detail to be taken care of when securing a ride through AFC Transportation.

Based in Houston, Texas, AFC boasts the largest fleet of limousines, town cars, motorcoaches, charter buses and transit vehicles rolling within city limits. With more than 170 vehicles, AFC serves multiple markets including the luxury-minded, and provides everything from airport town car shuttle service to school bus transportation. What's more, AFC continues to raise the bar on safety, efficiency and customer satisfaction as the company grows beyond Texas borders to offer charter services to 48 states.

"We've built our company culture on safety and customer service," said John Ferrari of GBJ Inc., which does business as AFC Transportation. "Our clients love the quality assurance we provide."

**Serving the customer**

AFC Transportation rolled onto the roadways via the restaurant industry in January 1992.

"My parents owned a few restaurants and one of them was five-star," said Ferrari who grew up in Houston. "It featured French cuisine and being five-star, lots of our guests came by limo."

Ferrari described how his family decided to enhance the guest experience by taking transportation into their own hands. His father, Sonny, purchased a limo and put Ferrari behind the wheel. At the age of 22, Ferrari spent the first year of the new limousine service driving guests to and from the restaurant and coordinating phone reservations. The service took off and within 12 months, the family had purchased several more vehicles, employed 10 drivers and ventured into the corporate market for airport trips.

Two years after turning the key on his first limousine, Ferrari bought a minibus and rode the exponential growth curve of minibus transportation in the 1990s. Building on industry popularity and success, the family business branched out and began providing a range of coach and other transit services.

"We've grown from day one," boasted Ferrari. "We never had a very large start, but we just had steady business and a steady increase year after year."

Today, AFC employs about 265 staff. The team handles reservation and dispatch services, drives, attends to safety and maintenance, administers operations and provides top-notch customer service.

The company attends to the needs of multiple markets through a full slate of standard and customized transportation services. The three major lines of service include charter, scheduled and transit routes, and limousines, with specialty or subgroups within each.

Travelers, for instance, can book airport transfer services, extensive transportation services for major cruise lines and charter services for sightseeing tours. Customers attending social or sporting events or parties related to weddings and other special events can choose from a line of complete event transportation services in a variety of vehicles.

AFC drives virtually every type of limousine or party bus available from Hummers to stretch limos to party buses. Vehicles can be decked out with special amenities such as surround sound stereo, big screen TV, strobe lights, neon, fully stocked wet bars and onboard bartending.

Corporate travelers can leverage AFC's extensive experience as Houston's largest

transportation provider. AFC personnel frequently work with event planners to arrange comprehensive corporate travel services for events and meetings of all sizes. Airport pick-ups, shuttle services, limousines, town cars and an extensive line of minibuses and motorcoaches stand ready to serve any group with any need, including company outings, retreats, clientele entertainment, sales and executive meetings and conventions. Vehicles can be equipped and staffed with concierge services, digital plug-ins, audio-visual equipment, wet bars and food services, as well as a multitude of other amenities to ensure luxury and comfort.

"While our clientele has not really changed, we are growing in number," said Ferrari as he points out that AFC is very well known in the Houston area. "Our clientele is also a lot wiser about ground transportation and the amenities we provide. While ground transport takes a little longer than flying, it is less expensive in groups, and if you want to get out and about and see the sights, it's nice."

**Building the fleet**

AFC claims the largest minibus fleet in Texas with about 130 vehicles from manufacturers like El Dorado, Mercedes-Benz Ambient, Krystal Koach, Champion, Turtle Top and StarCraft. The AFC logo is also emblazoned on more than a dozen different colored full-sized Van Hool motorcoaches that accommodate larger groups for sightseeing, recreational and corporate travel.

The pool of Van Hool coaches includes a newly delivered Vanhool C2045. The luxury coaches came equipped with high-end leather trimmed seats and three-point seat belts, woodgrain floor, 22-inch video monitors, and connections for electronics. In keeping in line with their safety focus, AFC also outfitted the vehicle with state-of-the-art navigation devices.

**AFC was originally founded as a limousine service to a restaurant owned by their family. Within a year the operation started expanding into other vehicles and other types of service. Parked adjacent to the company garage are several Temsa coaches that have become popular with smaller groups.**

On top of the newly acquired Vanhool, AFC added another ride to the fleet. At the turn of the year, Ferrari oversaw the purchase of 10 Temsa mini-coaches from CH Bus Sales – the exclusive distributor of Temsa coaches in the United States. The four TS35 and six TS 30 coaches have been well received by both customers and staff.

"Clientele love them," he said. "And so do our drivers. These coaches have a phenomenal turning radius and all the amenities of larger coaches – everything is just shrunk down." Ferrari said that AFC chose to invest in the Turkish-made vehicle for a variety of reasons, with safety and longevity topping the list.

Temsa, Ferrari explained, is different from conventional minibuses. The lighter body is constructed from stainless steel, helping to make it corrosion-free and efficient on fuel. Integral construction contributes to a stable ride, as well as maneuverability, making it optimal for city driving. While built to accommodate 30 to 35 passengers versus the standard 57 for full-size coaches, Temsas have spacious interiors with lots of legroom, helping to guarantee guest comfort.

"Temsas are smoother and don't rattle," said Ferrari, adding that the integral construction typically lasts longer than a cutaway. "They're built to last about 15 years."

The Temsa coaches, Ferrari said, will open up a new charter niche for AFC. Smaller groups will enjoy the more intimate interior compared to a standard size coach. The full slate of amenities – including Wi-Fi and electricity and power for every seat – also makes the mini-coaches attractive for corporate and leisure groups.

Ferrari mentioned one more factor that contributed to his acquisition of Temsa mini-coaches. In minibuses, he said, AC condensers are typically underneath the bus. Temsas, however, have AC roof mounts with large compressors, which contribute to a greater ability to blow more air conditioning into a vehicle.

"For cities like Houston that are always extremely hot, that's important," Ferrari laughed. "Temsa riders say they stay very cool and comfortable because of the high-powered AC. Some say they even close the vents. That's not normal in the minibus world."

**AFC also operates full-size coaches for larger groups. Van Hool is their brand of choice. Special features include three-point seat belts, woodgrain floor and video monitors.** ABC

AFC operates a very diversified fleet in order to meet every customer need. Shown here are two minibuses that AFC provides for small groups.

This photo shows part of the interior of the AFC garage. Note the wide range of limos, vans and minibuses stabled to meet customer needs.

**Putting safety first**

The Temsa coaches will join about 30 other coaches in AFC's fleet – bringing the total number of full-size, transit and mini-coaches to more than 40.

Most AFC vehicles dispatch from the company's central location about three minutes from the George Bush Intercontinental Airport. Sedans and SUVs are assigned to chauffeurs, which helps with some space and storage at the four-acre facility.

As the company grows, Ferrari said that he and his personnel are attuned to the increasing responsibility to ensure passenger safety and comfort through reliable and environmentally sustainable transportation.

He reiterated that safety has and will remain a number one priority for his growing company. All personnel undergo rigorous training, and all vehicles are equipped and maintained with state-of-the art equipment. Devices include GPS tracking and DriveCam technology, and data backup systems and electronic security at facility sites that keeps client records private and secure.

"We've been through several safety audits and come through satisfactorily every time," says Paul Gage, AFC safety director. "Safety comes first over everything."

Gage boasted that AFC is a member of such renowned safety organizations as ISNetworld and the National Compliance Management Service. He also mentioned the company's membership in the National Safety Council and the resources the council provides for ongoing training and retraining for drivers.

"Something else that makes us stand out is that we are one of the first companies of our type to have three-point safety belts in all our new vehicles," Gage said. "Customers like that."

A self-described safety geek, Gage talked at length about the GroundTrack GPS tracking and remote video technology that allows his staff to closely monitor all vehicles from a central location. He says the device enables him to not only note the vehicle location and turn-for-turn route information, but to also note key details such as speed, idle time and whether or not the wheelchair lift has been used.

"GroundTrack sends a signal every few seconds," said Gage of the system that AFC installed about a year ago to replace another monitoring system. "The system sends an e-mail with details, and we can pull reports to assess the situation."

Gage goes on to describe how the AFC dispatch center is equipped with big screens that are networked with the navigation system. Digital feeds enable personnel to watch where the vehicles are on maps and to chart their course. Some clients also have access

AFC recently added 10 Temsa mid-size coaches to its fleet. Included were four 35-foot TS 35 coaches and six 30-foot TS 30 coaches. With their big coach features, the Temsas have been well received by both customers and staff.

**Rudy Vitello has been with AFC for 18 years. He is the reservation manager for the company.**

**John Ferrari (left) sends Charter Operator Donald Johnson off on a trip with a Temsa coach.**

to the system through the Internet and can monitor vehicles through their own laptops or smart phones.

Gage said that the DriveCam technology on every vehicle allows drivers and supervisors to visually monitor conditions around the vehicle and to assess driver performance. DriveCam creates audio and visual recordings of hard cornering, hard braking, fast acceleration, rough surface and collisions. That footage, Gage said, is then repurposed to help train drivers by analyzing the situation and assessing potential accidents.

The third technology piece that ensures AFC's premiere safety record relates to transaction histories, client records and private data stored and managed through a state-of-the-art reservations management system.

Gage said that the AFC operations and electronic files are linked to a complete disaster recovery system to ensure passenger safety in the event of emergencies and natural disasters. In the case of power outages, AFC can maintain seamless communication by redirecting all communication between vehicles and the facility to a backup location and to cell phones.

Server data, too, is constantly backed up to a remote location, while a technologically advanced Unified Livery System tracks all client information and creates custom reports that guarantee client confidentiality.

**The new Temsa coaches in the AFC fleet have proven to be very popular with smaller groups. A major reason for their popularity is that they provide the same features as the big coaches including underfloor luggage space, reclining seats, overhead parcel racks, restrooms and onboard entertainment systems. AFC operates both the 30-foot and the 35-foot Temsa coaches in its fleet.**

"Technology is my tattletale," joked Gage. "In the old days, you would have to call or radio a driver if a vehicle broke down or if you wanted an update on progress. Now we can just see things on the screen and know exactly where they're at. That way, too, we can dispatch assistance right away, if needed."

**Driving the future**

All things considered, customer service, safety and technology have been the driving forces behind the continued growth of AFC Transportation.

Technology can track vehicles and monitor safety and allows reservation staff to call up instant information on clients, book appropriate services in seconds, and assign and dispatch vehicles and assistance from central and remote locations.

"Technology has truly helped grow our business," confirmed Ferrari. "Our customers love the reassurance and the ability to monitor and track particular vehicles through web-based and cell phone apps without having to call and ask."

The company, too, is making strides to reduce their carbon footprint by two percent each year. All newly acquired vehicles feature reduced-carbon bio-diesel engines and meet 2012 emission standards. AFC is also exploring the feasibility of the acquisition of hybrid or propane vehicles in the future.

Green initiatives include an ongoing partnership with Sustainable Travel International – an organization that helps companies measure and reduce carbon emissions. Customers can participate by using a web-based carbon offset calculator to measure the difference between using AFC transport versus other forms of travel. In addition, AFC riders can make donations through the program to support organizations involved in sustainable development, reforestation, energy efficiency and renewable energy.

Finally, AFC adheres to high standards of vehicle technology and maintenance. Every vehicle is routinely inspected to ensure optimally performing engines, transmission and tires. The latest instrument technology also allows AFC to keep vehicle emissions to the bare minimum.

"Our clients are definitely more knowledgeable about ground transport than in the past," says Ferrari. "While our range and concentration is primarily the Houston metropolitan area, we're getting increasingly wider known as we charter trips anywhere our customers want to go." ❑

**One of AFC's Temsa coaches has received special graphics that highlights Carnival Cruise Lines. The suggestive wording on the side of the coach reads: "We are on our way to the Caribbean. Where are you going?"**

# From the September 2013 issue of National Bus Trader

Address: 9698 W. Judson Rd, Polo Illinois 61064
Office: (815) 946-2341
Website: www.busmag.com