

Windstar Lines



by Jeff Greteman
Photos courtesy of Windstar Lines

A recent Windstar Lines tour visited this Iowa farm. A sister company, Star Destinations operated by Cathy Greteman, specializes in preformed group travel. The coach is a 2005 Van Hool C-2045 purchased new by Windstar Lines in the fall of 2004.

Although Windstar Lines officially started in 1995, their roots run much deeper. Mike and Cathy Greteman first became involved in the travel business in 1982 as they purchased Town and Country Travel Ltd. in Carroll, Iowa. Cathy managed the travel agency while Mike is a partner/owner in a local insurance and real estate agency and also operates as a partner in a development/general contracting company. Town and Country specialized in selling airline tickets, cruises, packages and incentives. Mike and Cathy saw the potential decline in the travel agency business with the advent of the Internet and began operating more motorcoach tours. Tours were conducted for local bank travel clubs, schools and other miscellaneous groups.

The tours that Cathy operated were always first-class – hotels, attractions and tour directors. The area that fell below the bar was the motorcoaches that Cathy was forced to rent from area motorcoach companies. Cathy was never satisfied with the cleanliness of equipment, age, quality of drivers and overall experience. Mike and Cathy talked for a few years about purchasing their own coach, and bit the bullet in 1995. After a short battle with an area competitor who protested their operating

authority, Windstar opened for business July 1, 1995.

The initial goal of the company was to provide superior customer service with late model equipment that was clean, along with drivers who were friendly, safe and accommodating to their customer needs. These same goals still apply today.

The first coach, number 001, was a 1992 Van Hool T-840 that was purchased from ABC Bus in Faribault, Minnesota. This 49-passenger coach was a beautiful piece of equipment in its day. A driver was hired and between him and the travel agents in the office, the motorcoach company started to take off. A second 49-passenger Van Hool was purchased the following year, this time a 1994 Van Hool.

In July of 1997, Mike and Cathy's oldest son, Jeff, was hired as manager. Jeff, 23 at the time, was a recent graduate of Iowa State University with a degree in Transportation and Logistics, and had a year of experience in his field. Windstar added a third coach in 1997 and Mike and Cathy's second son, Scott, then 21, was helping in the office and washing coaches as he finished up his schooling at Buena Vista University. A fourth

coach was added in the fall of 1998 and this was the company's first brand new coach, a 1999 Van Hool T-2145. Sales continued to increase and soon the Greteman's third son entered the mix. Patrick helped wash coaches on weekends when he was home from college as a University of Nebraska finance major. The summer prior to his senior year, Patrick spent the majority of his time traveling across the country driving charters.

Expansion

Pat graduated in 2000 and timing could not have been more perfect. Windstar had been eyeing the purchase of a small operator in Iowa City and acquired Prairieland Coaches in July of 2001. Pat moved to Iowa City and became the manager of the Iowa City terminal. A month later, Windstar bid and won the athletic department contract for the University of Iowa, a contract Windstar has held since.

The three Greteman brothers work well as a team with sales and equipment purchases continuing to grow. Windstar Lines opened up a terminal in Des Moines in 2003. Purchasing late model Van Hools, Windstar's fleet was now growing at three to four coaches per year.



September of 2005 saw this convoy of four Windstar Van Hool coaches followed by the University of Iowa equipment truck departing from Ames, Iowa. The buses were headed for Iowa City following a University of Iowa/Iowa State University football game. In addition to providing transportation for the University of Iowa, Windstar Lines also counts Iowa State University in Ames and Drake University in Des Moines as customers.



Windstar Lines coach 038 is a 2004 Van Hool T-2145 model. It has been upgraded by Windstar Lines to include Alcoa Durabright aluminum wheels and an in-motion satellite TV. All 30 coaches in the Windstar Lines fleet have the same external graphics scheme. Currently, eight coaches are assigned to the Carroll facility, 10 are in Cedar Rapids, and 12 are assigned to Des Moines. Six mechanics do service and maintenance.

Windstar Lines has always been on the cutting edge with regard to technology. Windstar Lines was the first in its market to install GPS Tracking devices on all of its equipment. It was also the first to switch its entire fleet over to DVD, the first to install DriveCam in all vehicles, GPS Navigation Devices in all units, and to offer satellite television in several coaches.

Windstar acquired two small motorcoach companies in Iowa within the last three years. March of 2006 Windstar purchased Excel Executive Coaches in Storm Lake, Iowa. Windstar obtained three older coaches which were rolled into the Carroll operation, and they closed the Storm Lake location. Windstar then purchased Huffman Coach/River City Coaches in Mason City, Iowa. This added four coaches to the fleet.

Three older MCIs were sold and the Van Hool T-2145 was repainted and put into the Windstar fleet.

The company has had its share of building projects over the past 10 years. An initial "bus barn" was built in 1997 that was designed to hold four motorcoaches and was set up for cleaning and storage. Three years later, an addition was built that houses a parts bay, two work bays with a pit, and a separate bay for painting and body work. In 2005, a 3,000-square foot addition was added to the Carroll facility making the entire complex more than 13,000 square feet. Then again in 2007, Windstar moved into a new facility in eastern Iowa on the south side of Cedar Rapids that replaced a rented terminal in Iowa City. In August of 2008, a building and ground

in Des Moines was purchased that will replace a temporary facility in Ankeny, a suburb of Des Moines. Plans include adding new service and wash bays to the existing site in the upcoming months. Mike Greteman serves as general contractor on all projects.

Customers

Windstar's customer base is broad and loyal. Providing service for anyone from cub scouts to Presidential candidates, Windstar provides charter service for groups of all shapes and sizes. Obtaining DOD certification and scoring a perfect "1" rating, Windstar is authorized to transport the United States military. Windstar provides some large coach movements regularly. Three to four times per year, one customer charters 13 to 16 motorcoaches for an 800-mile trip to Nashville, Tennessee. Windstar also arranged for more than 160 motorcoaches for the 2007 Republican Straw Poll in Ames, Iowa. They operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Windstar Lines does not just wait for the phone to ring for customers, but actively pursues target customers aggressively. Along with the University of Iowa Athletics, the company has recently been awarded the contract for all of the athletics for Iowa State University and Drake University in Des Moines, along with several smaller colleges scattered throughout the state of Iowa.

Along with charters, Windstar Lines operates several casino routes throughout the week based in each terminal. Every Wednesday, coaches from each terminal have a route to a casino located near the middle of the state. This is a great opportunity to switch equipment around and parts, without having to deadhead equipment.

The first Windstar bus was this 1992 Van Hool T-840. Mike and Cathy Greteman purchased the used coach from ABC Companies in Faribault, Minnesota in July of 1995. It founded Windstar Lines and served in the fleet for 10 years.





This row of Windstar Van Hool T-2100 coaches was photographed adjacent to Windstar's Cedar Rapids, Iowa terminal. The photo was taken following a heavy snowstorm in January of 2008.



Windstar coach 008 was photographed adjacent to the Cedar Rapids Terminal. A 1998 Van Hool T-2145, the coach recently received a refurbished interior by Sardo Bus and Coach Upholstery.

Employees

Windstar's business philosophy is based on safety, service and technology.

They look at safety as an investment, not an expense. They are constantly providing drivers and shop personnel with valuable feedback to improve the way things can be done, all with safety in mind. From maintaining equipment to installing DriveCam (driver monitoring cameras), the cost of these are future investments in the long-term viability and profitability of the company.

Every hire made has to have a customer service attitude – every one including the drivers, sales staff, cleaners and mechanics.

The employees all know that if a high level of customer services is not offered, the company will not be a first choice to the customers. Everyone's job revolves around customer service. All employees see copies of the customer feedback reports. If they did not score high on cleanliness, the cleaning staff knows about it – and they want to know about it – so they can improve. This customer feedback sheet goes directly to the customer at each trip and covers all areas of the operation.

With regard to technology, the company has seen many things change in the short time they have been in the bus business. They continue to research the new products and see if they can see a return on the invest-

ment. If they can, and it can make the company safer, more efficient, more service oriented, they make the jump. They also realize that if all of the above things happen, they will be more profitable.

The business model they have in place works very well. People have asked what the secrets to growth are, and there really is not any one thing that they can point to. They think they just do a lot of little things right. They watch expenses very closely, and increase rates at regular intervals, and try and maintain healthy relationships with the customers.

One huge factor to the success has been the employees they have been able to hire and retain. They try and treat the employees like they would want to be treated. Their drivers, cleaners, mechanics, office staff are all great people. They have been blessed to have so many wonderful people stick with them. They have their share of bumps in the road, but they try and learn from each one, and minimize the risk of those bumps happening again. Problems are going to happen, but how they handle those problems and learn from those problems will make them the company they want to be.

Equipment

The fleet ranges in age from 1998 to 2007 model coaches.

Windstar offers a diverse fleet of vehicles consisting of all ABC Companies products. The company operates six Van Hool C2045s, four Van Hool T-2140s, 18 Van Hool T-2145s (one of which is fitted with sleeper seats), one ABC M-1235 and one Van Hool S-2145 Entertainer Super Coach, converted by Vulcan. Another ABC M-1235 was delivered in October of 2008.

Each coach is assigned to a terminal, with eight coaches assigned to Carroll, 10 in Cedar Rapids, and 12 in Des Moines. Six

Windstar Lines has an attractive converted coach in its fleet. The Van Hool S-2145 was originally converted as a 12-bunk entertainer coach. Bruce Basden of Vulcan Coach in Hueytown, Alabama rebuilt the coach for Windstar Lines so it now seats 26 passengers and sleeps 22. Hence, it can be used for both day and night travel.



mechanics perform all maintenance and keep the Windstar fleet running in tip-top shape and looking sharp.

Windstar has inherited other brands of motorcoaches over the years, but have always felt that staying with one brand has many advantages, and has always enjoyed the service provided by ABC and its sales representative, Pete Bachrach.

Forward Thinking

As far as being forward thinking, Windstar thinks you just have to keep thinking positive and keep looking at where the business is going, and what they want it to be. Looking six months ahead is planning, looking three to six years down the road is forward thinking. Having a short-term and long-term plan is a necessity. They are constantly evaluating the sales and equipment to see whether or not they have an even balance.

In the past eight years, Windstar's sales have grown 33 percent annually on average. Sales have climbed, utilization has increased, rate per mile has increased for 12 consecutive years and the future at Windstar looks bright. Continued growth at two to four motorcoaches per year is a conservative plan. The three Greteman brothers, who are all in their lower 30s, enjoy the motorcoach industry and plan to make a career in the business. □



To better accommodate smaller groups, Windstar Lines has operated an ABC M-1235 bus in its fleet. Unit 039, the first smaller bus in the fleet, is a 2007 ABC M-1235 based in Cedar Rapids. A new 2009 M-1235 is due for delivery in late 2008 and will be based at the Des Moines Terminal.

From the May 2009 issue of:

National Bus Trader

The Magazine of Bus Equipment for the United States and Canada

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