



50 Years of NEOPLAN Skyliner: World's Longest Double-Decker Moves Among the Stars

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The NEOPLAN Skyliner is both exclusive and versatile, a description that has held true since its début in 1967. Little surprise, then, that both the shortest and longest double-deckers in the world are Skyliners. Indeed, a Skyliner model was used at NASA.

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- **World record: NEOPLAN built world's longest double-decker in 1985**
- **NASA used 14 Superskyliners as visitor tour buses**
- **Extra-long Skyliners prompted change in maximum length for rigid buses and coaches in German law**

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Trailblazing in development and technology, NASA sets the highest standards for human and material resources. For space research, even the best is just good enough. In 1985, the space agency picked the NEOPLAN Skyliner to help demonstrate that ethos on earth. For several years – 24 hours a day and seven days a week – 14 “earth shuttles” from Stuttgart transported millions of NASA visitors around the space agency’s impressive complex. NEOPLAN set a new world record in the process. Having created the shortest double-deckers in the world for the Japanese market at a mere nine metres long, NEOPLAN’s double-decker buses for NASA were the longest on the planet. They measured a full 14.5m in length, 2.60m in width and 4.10m in height.

The vehicles, which were known as Superskyliners, offered 106 seats and were designed with four axles. The buses would make each of the visitor centre’s stops as they followed their circular route. As was only fitting for

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NASA, this was done with high-precision timing. Once the passengers had alighted at a stop, the bus would drive ahead and a subsequent service would take the same visitors onwards.

“We don’t know how NASA became aware of us exactly, but it was a project of tremendous prestige for us,” recalls Bob Lee, a former director and engineer with NEOPLAN. “As a small German company, we had the job of supplying buses to NASA! We were infinitely proud.” To be approved for the US market, however, it was still a case of making a few adjustments. “There had to be two air conditioning units. The Kennedy Space Center is in Florida and the heat there beneath the large windows would have been unbearable for the visitors,” Lee adds. These were designed as push-out windows that could be opened in case of an emergency. In addition, the steps were widened and headlights with 12V operating voltage were fitted, while the bumpers had to undergo testing as well. Bob Lee remembers it well: “There couldn’t be any noticeable deformation at an impact speed of 4.8 km/h (3 mph).” Under the hood, engines from Detroit and Allison automatic gearboxes were used, meaning that almost any local workshop could carry out maintenance and servicing. Albrecht Auwärter also personally visited the US sites on a regular basis.

NEOPLAN’s great success working on the American continent by that time was certainly another advantage. Bob Lee had previously helped to build up the first US plant in 1981. By 1985, the coach and bus manufacturer had two production plants in the US along with a dedicated sales division, Neoplan Coach Sales Inc. There were then already eight contracting service partners, which dealt with the vehicles produced both in Germany and at the US plants. The best conditions for an ideal cooperation effort.

The longest double-decker coach in the world was not only put to use at NASA. The Superskyliner also came to be appreciated in Argentina, Chile and North Africa. Only in Germany were the vehicles not permitted. They exceeded the maximum permissible length for rigid buses or coaches, alongside the maximum radius specification of 12.5m. A welcome challenge for Albrecht Auwärter. Eventually, a chassis with a reduced wheelbase and, for the first time, four steerable axles was developed back in Stuttgart. This



enabled him to convince authorities that even longer coaches would not exceed the maximum radius. In April 1993, the maximum length for rigid buses set in Germany's Road Licensing Regulations (StVZO) was finally increased to 15m. Another chapter in the NEOPLAN Skyliner's 50-year success story.