Daimler to Offer a Monster S.U.V.

By KEITH BRADSHER

DETROIT, Feb. 20 - With sport utility vehicles becoming bigger and bigger, perhaps it was inevitable: Freightliner, the nation’s biggest maker of 18-wheelers, plans to start selling a four-wheel-drive vehicle that dwarfs even the largest family vehicles on the road.

Based on a German military transport, the vehicle, called the Unimog, makes even the Hummer look petite. It is 9 feet 7 inches tall, nearly the height of a basketball net and almost three feet taller than the tallest sport utility. Its front seat, mounted six feet high, is reached by a three-step ladder.

The Unimog is 20 feet long, more than a foot longer than the Ford Excursion, the longest sport utility on the market now. And it is nearly two feet wider than a typical car and 3.5 inches wider than even a Hummer, a General Motors vehicle based on an American military transport. The Unimog is so wide that, by federal regulation, it must carry truck marker lights across the top of the front and back.

Most remarkable is the Unimog’s weight: 12,500 pounds. That is more than two Chevrolet Suburban sport utility vehicles or four Toyota Camry sedans. The company says the vehicle gets about 10 miles to the gallon of diesel fuel, less even than the most fuel-hungry sport utility vehicles and pickups.
"You don’t need roads," says the cover of the Unimog sales brochure, "when you can make your own."

The vehicle will sell for a base price of $84,000. Freightliner will start taking orders for the Unimog in October, with manufacturing to begin in January, said Bruce Barnes, the Unimog marketing manager at Freightliner, which is owned by DaimlerChrysler A.G. Freightliner will sell the Unimog mainly in suburban markets, regardless of region.

The company’s initial sales goals are modest. Freightliner hopes to sell 1,000 a year at first, with just 250 going to individuals - affluent off-road enthusiasts and people who simply like to drive noticeable vehicles. "Even in Scottsdale, Ariz.," Mr. Barnes said, "moms will want to take it to the grocery store. It’s a head-turning vehicle."

The rest will go to fire departments and businesses that plan to adapt them for civic and commercial use. But if the vehicle is a success, production can be increased, Mr. Barnes said.

Ford tried to allay initial public concerns about the Excursion’s size three years ago by saying that it was mainly for businesses. But it has since built mostly luxury versions, selling them to prosperous families.

The introduction of the German-built Unimog marks an international escalation of the American highway arms race. A year ago, General Motors acquired the rights to the Hummer, a civilian version of the military’s Humvee. G.M. said last summer that it would set up its first new division since Saturn to design and market Hummers of various dimensions and prices, with the goal of increasing sales to as many as 150,000 a year from 1,000 then.

Mr. Barnes said Freightliner did not plan to sell anywhere near that many Unimogs, because the company wants to establish a reputation for off-road performance that might suffer if smaller, less expensive models were introduced.

Freightliner describes the Unimog as an off-road vehicle, but it is not a true sport utility. The $84,000 base version of the vehicle will somewhat resemble a pickup truck with enormous front and side windows to help drivers see the traffic below.

Customers may equip vehicles with a covered pickup-truck bed and jump seats, and many other options are available, Mr.
Barnes said. "Leather interior, G.P.S. navigation systems and high-end stereo systems are all available - just in case you'd like to spoil yourself," the Unimog brochure says. Walnut interior trim, "mood lights" and even a vertical exhaust pipe, just like the exhausts on real 18-wheelers, are also optional.

DaimlerChrysler will build Unimogs for the American civilian market at a factory in Gaggenau, Germany, about 50 miles west of Stuttgart near the French border, that has been making Unimogs for German military forces and farmers for 51 years. Unimog is short for "universal motor gerät," which Freightliner translates as "universal engine-driven apparatus."

The Unimog is far larger than Chrysler's largest sport utility, the Dodge Durango. "We could carry a couple Durangos," Mr. Barnes said.

Retail sales of Unimogs have been weak in Germany. "There were really very few vehicles being sold, for totally crazy people who wanted it," said Dieter Zetsche, Chrysler's chief executive, who coincidentally ran DaimlerChrysler's commercial vehicle operations until November.

The Unimog to be sold in the United States is considerably larger than models long sold in Germany, and will have four cup holders in the doors to help Americans quench their thirst while driving.

Unimogs will be sold and serviced by the 400 Freightliner dealers that handle the company's 18-wheelers.

Freightliner offered the first Unimog to Arnold Schwarzenegger, the actor who made the Hummer famous by using it as his personal vehicle. But the truck maker never received a response and now plans to promote the Unimog through off-road driving clubs and possibly with ads in magazines for sport utility vehicle enthusiasts, Mr. Barnes said. The company has already released a promotional brochure advertising the Unimog as "tough, rugged and eminently civilized."

"Wanting to conquer the great outdoors is simply not a good reason to give up leather and air-conditioning," says the brochure, which also has a diagram of a Unimog labeled "Here's what S.U.V.'s and other so-called four-by-fours will see as you drive by."

Freightliner is a little defensive about the width of the new,
larger Unimog, contending that it is still suitable for urban driving.

"It’s highly maneuverable and at seven feet wide, it still fits in standard parking spaces,” the sales brochure says, reading like most sport utility brochures and showing a Unimog driving past an office tower.

The Unimog is, in fact, 7 feet 6 inches wide when measured at the tires, with the cab 7 feet wide, Mr. Barnes said.

The Unimog is exempt from most federal safety, air pollution and fuel economy regulations because it exceeds the weight cutoffs for such rules. It will meet federal air pollution standards for medium-duty trucks - standards that are much more lenient than those for cars.

Freightliner is studying whether the Unimog can meet the more stringent rules that California has set for the sale of trucks there.

The Unimog has a 52-gallon tank; diesel tends to produce better fuel economy than gasoline. The vehicle can reach 68 miles an hour on the highway - but will not be allowed on some roads and bridges, particularly in the New York area, because it exceeds weight and height limits.

New York State used to bar the registration of large trucks like the Unimog as family vehicles, but changed its rules last year after heavy lobbying by the auto industry. State and federal regulations only require commercial drivers’ licenses for vehicles weighing more than 26,000 pounds when fully loaded; the Unimog weighs 26,000 pounds with maximum payload, so the license is not needed.

A few older Unimogs are already on the road in the United States, having been brought from Europe by collectors. Dr. James Molloy III, a family doctor in Sheridan, Ore., said he commuted 13 miles daily to his clinic in his 1963 Unimog and sometimes used it to reach remote areas of national forests during camping trips.

"I parallel-park my truck in downtown Portland and Seattle frequently." he said, adding that a Unimog seemed "a much sturdier platform than the Hummer ever would be."