

Ansair Scenicruiser

An innovative Australian day tour coach that stirred mixed emotions





Preface

Facts and anecdotes for this story are from my personal recollections and experiences of observing and operating Scenicruisers, along with comments from Bob Pollard, Ansett Pioneer Operations manager during the 1960s and 1970s. Bob, who was actively involved in the Scenicruiser program, shared many of his hands on experiences in a recorded interview that I conducted with him in the late 1980s.

Reginald Myles Ansett was an aviator and businessman. In December 1931, he founded Ansett Motors, by offering a service with a second hand Studebaker between Ballarat and Maryborough in Victoria, Australia, later to become a Ballarat to Hamilton service. By 1936 he was flying a small plane between Hamilton and Melbourne. He founded Ansett Transport Industries Limited which at one time owned Ansett Airlines – one of Australia's two leading domestic airlines, Ansett Pioneer coach lines, Ansairster bus and coach builders, Channel 0 television network and many other business ventures...but now all consigned to history.

This story focusses on Ansett Pioneer's creation and operation of the Ansairster Scenicruiser.

Gary Driver

Ansair Scenicruiser

Prior to the introduction of the Ansair Scenicruiser in 1965, Pioneer's day tour coaches consisted primarily of Ansair bodied Leyland Worldmasters. After a short stint on express, the Leylands were converted to day tour coaches with 45 seats and their rear luggage boots removed. They were supported by Deutz powered Ansair Saturns, some early Ansair Flexible Clippers and a small number of other assorted vehicles.

At the time, the very successful GM PD-4106 exclusively operated by Pioneer on its interstate express services, was the envy of the nation's coach operators. Pioneer held a dominant position in the interstate express sector and desperately wanted to have an equivalent in the day tour and interstate touring segment. Pioneer's aim was to offer the highest standard of service and make it difficult for competitors to match. To achieve this, the PD-4106 itself was considered for day tour work but at 30,000 pounds (Australian currency at the time), was deemed too expensive.

So Reg Ansett, 'RM' as he was known by his staff and friends, instructed Pioneer's management and Ansair, to come up with a new and innovative design that would raise the bar for day tour coaches to a similar level that had been achieved in the interstate express segment with the GM PD 4106...and so the idea of the Scenicruiser was born.

The Ansair team under the direction of Graeme Sterritt, went to work on designing a day tour coach body that would be seen by the industry and travelling public as an equivalent to Pioneer's GM PD-4106s. It was to have a style and flair that had never been seen on day tour coaches in Australia before and it was to be built at a lower price for lower mileage work.

Pioneer's management, under the guidance of Bob Pollard, had been given the task by RM of sourcing a suitable chassis. Reo Australia had available a robust bus chassis at a relatively low price that featured front and rear leaf springs, air brakes, a four speed Spicer manual constant mesh transmission and a rear mounted GM Detroit Diesel 6V53 engine. An order was subsequently placed with Melbourne Reo dealer, Queensbridge Motors, for five chassis' with an option for further units as required to get the Scenicruiser program under way.

The selected Reo model 5067-5040 bus chassis was to be manufactured in Lansing, Michigan USA. Reo truck production dates back to 1911 with the name being derived from the initials of the founder Ransom Eli Olds, who had started Oldsmobile car company in 1897. In its home country, the Reo 5067-5040 was used primarily for school based charter and school runs, often bodied by Superior, a large US bus builder. GM had become aware of Pioneer's order of the Reo chassis and was disappointed at not being given a first opportunity to come up with a suitable chassis themselves, especially after the success of the GM PD-4106 in Australia.

The original intention was to have the entire Scenicruiser program built on the Reo chassis until RM said to Bob Pollard "Why aren't you dealing with General Motors; you need to find out what they've got". Perhaps some pressure had been applied by GM!

So just after the Reo order was placed, RM sent Bob Pollard to the USA to visit Reo and observe the chassis' in production, and while there, stop by GM at nearby Pontiac, Michigan.



TOP ANSETT PIONEER PROMOTIONAL SHOT. #650 GM PD4106 LEFT, #408 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER RIGHT
RIGHT TWO ANSAIR SCENICRUISERS AND AN ANSAIR LEYLAND WORLDMASTER, SNOWY MOUNTAINS, NSW
LEFT #423, #444 & #442 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISERS



LEFT #434 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER WITH GM DENNING BEHIND, SNOWY MOUNTAINS, NSW 1972
 TOP ANSAIR PROMOTIONAL FLYER
 MIDDLE #424 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER, BEACONSFIELD, TAS 1969
 BOTTOM #440 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER



GM soon came up with a chassis that they thought would meet Pioneer's requirements. It differed from the Reo specification and did not include a Detroit Diesel engine, but with GM's assurances, Pioneer's engineers thought it would be quite suitable. Pioneer enquired about fitting a Detroit Diesel 53 or 71 series engine, but GM advised that the Detroit engines would not fit in the selected GMC model DSPA-5019 chassis. Much to the disappointment of Reo, Pioneer placed an order with GM for 44 GMC model DSPA-5019 chassis' to complete the Scenicruiser program. The GMC chassis would be built by the GMC division and delivered in CKD (completely knocked down) form to Pioneer in Australia for final assembly.

The GMC DSPA-5019 chassis specification included front leaf and rear air bag suspension, an Allison MT series automatic transmission and a GMC V6 Toro-flow D478 diesel engine that had been working well in US applications. The GMC Toro-flow engine was a dieselised

version of GMC's gasoline 401 engine that was made by GMC and not by GM's Detroit Diesel Allison division. Like the Reo, it too was marketed in the USA as a rear engine school and charter chassis.

With its RE body, Ansaair had always envisaged a curved glass windscreen to create the GM family look, but tightly fitting curved glass was not available in Australia at the time, so Bob Pollard had to be creative.

At Bob's request, General Motors agreed to supply Ansaair with GM front ends consisting of the front curved windscreen and header panels that were used on GM transit and suburban buses in the US, often nicknamed 'fishbowls' because of the curved glass design. It is believed no other bus body manufacturer in the world won the rights to use the distinctive GM front end. GM intended the 'fishbowl' front end for use on the GMCs only, and it was not to be used on the Reos...but Pioneer had a different idea.

The GM front end would create the desired GM family look on the new Ansaair designed Scenicruiser RE coach and would complement the GM PD-4106s already in Pioneer's fleet. Ansaair's design team had succeeded in creating an exceptionally stylish large window body suitable for sightseeing and touring that shared many styling cues with the GM PD-4106... at an affordable price. Notable interior highlights now included air conditioning entering the coach on the side walls at the window line, high back aircraft style seating with mixed colours and some with low back mixed colour seating for city tour services. As all Scenicruisers were to be used for touring, none were fitted with restrooms.

Between November 1965 and December 1967, a total of 49 Ansaair Scenicruisers were built. Along with the order of 44 GMC chassis' and 'fishbowl' fronts, Pioneer also requested 5 additional spare 'fishbowl' fronts...in case of accident damage. Somehow these spare fronts found their way onto the 5 Reo chassis'. American GM executives were speechless when they eventually discovered the 5 Reos also sported GM's exclusive front end!





#422 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER WHEN 2 MONTHS OLD, BRISBANE ST, LAUNCESTON, TAS DEC 1966

Pioneers chosen name of 'Scenicruiser' for its new tour coach, followed on from earlier Pioneer coaches that carried the name 'Scenic Clipper', which was used on the side of every Flexible Clipper, and 'Super Clipper', that was used on the side of every GM PD-4106. The 'Scenicruiser' name was coined to denote a 'day trip coach'. The original use of the name 'Scenicruiser' and an obvious underlying influence in Pioneer's naming of the vehicle, was by GM and Greyhound USA on its flagship 1954 GM PD-4501 Scenicruiser.

Over the life of the Ansair Scenicruiser with Pioneer, three different paint schemes were used and all were aligned with the corporate Pioneer liveries used on other GMs and later MCIs. The first scheme paralleled the original PD-4106 with a narrow blue waste band under the windows and sign writing of 'Air Conditioned Scenicruiser' in the blue band. Unpainted aluminium panels featured below and Pioneer Tours was sign written on the side of the roof up top.



ANSAIR SCENICRUISER IN PIONEER'S FIRST PAINT SCHEME, PRINCES BRIDGE, MELBOURNE, VIC

The second paint scheme introduced in May 1972, featured a larger blue waste band with Pioneer Tours in the band and an additional black band directly under the blue band, while the third scheme, applied to only one Scenicruiser #439 in November 1977, was the red, white and blue Pepsi or Chevron scheme widely used on Greyhound buses in the USA. Some Scenicruisers kept the original first livery for their entire time with Pioneer.



TOP #426 & #447 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISERS HIGHLIGHTING PIONEER'S SECOND PAINT SCHEME, SNOWY MOUNTAINS, NSW FEB 1979
 LEFT #423 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER IN PIONEER'S SECOND PAINT SCHEME
 CENTRE LEFT #440 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER IN PIONEER'S SECOND PAINT SCHEME
 CENTRE RIGHT THE DAY #419 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER ARRIVED AT DRIVER BUS LINES DEPOT, GLEN IRIS, VIC JULY 1975 - STILL IN ORIGINAL PAINT SCHEME
 RIGHT #439 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER IN PIONEER'S THIRD PAINT SCHEME



Not long into service, problems began appearing with the Toro-flow powered GMC Scenicruisers, but not the Detroit Diesel powered Reo Scenicruisers.

The initial Scenicruiser concept was to create a non-air conditioned day tour coach with a very stylish body at a low price. With Pioneer's management wanting to add many GM PD-4106 features to the Scenicruiser, it essentially evolved into a type of PD-4106 body on a school bus chassis.

Considerable weight had been added with items like an advanced heat/cool air conditioning system and other design features taken from the PD-4106. With the extra weight, the GMC Scenicruiser was a little under-powered and despite having air brakes, it was also under-braked. It was prone to over-heating because Ansair's RE body design restricted air flow over the engine and that combined with an undersized header tank made matters even worse. The fuel pump would often overheat and after the coach was stopped, it would not always restart.

These inherent problems had a negative effect on some drivers and although a delight to drive, it gained the nicknames of Horror-box and Horror-flow, obviously derived from Toro-flow.

In an effort to reduce weight, the Scenicruiser body was mounted on rubber blocks rather than directly tying the body to the chassis which was a heavier process. The rear section of the chassis was not directly attached to the body at all and this resulted in the rear bumper bar moving differently to the body – quite an unusual sight when following a Scenicruiser.

It became apparent that by incorporating features from the super strong GM PD-4106, the lighter duty GMC chassis with the now relatively heavy Ansair RE body, had become over stressed resulting in many engine failures and other related issues.

Pioneer had a major problem on its hands.



EX PIONEER #419 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER IN DRIVER COLOURS, ASHBURTON, VIC 1976
 EX PIONEER GMC SCENICRUISER IN HURSTBRIDGE COLOURS, MELBOURNE VIC 1984
 EX PIONEER GMC SCENICRUISER, IN LEVER COACH LINES COLOURS, QUEANBEYAN, ACT - NOTE MODIFIED BI-FOLD DOOR

TOP & LEFT
 RIGHT
 OVER PAGE

LEFT EX PIONEER GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER IN McKENZIE'S COLOURS, HEALESVILLE, VIC 1996 - THE LAST SCENICRUISER IN COMMERCIAL SERVICE
RIGHT EX PIONEER GMC SCENICRUISER IN LANDMARK TOURS COLOURS, MELBOURNE, VIC 1983
BOTTOM EX PIONEER #405 REO ANSAIR SCENICRUISER IN SHAVE BUS SERVICE COLOURS, MELBOURNE, VIC, ACQUIRED BY DRIVER IN 1986



EX PIONEER GMC SCENICRUISER MOTORHOME, MT WAVERLEY, VIC

EX PIONEER #418 GMC ANSAIR SCENICRUISER IN TURNBULL'S COLOURS, MT GAMBIER, SA 1987 (also shown at bottom of page as of 2017)

In an effort to make the GMC version of the Scenicruiser more reliable, Pioneer experimented with repowering a GMC chassis with a Detroit Diesel 6V53 engine to bring it to the reliability level of the Reo and it proved successful.

Pioneer then advised General Motors in the USA that the GMC Toro-flow engine they had recommended was simply not doing the job, resulting in numerous engine failures. GM was surprised by the news and to ensure Pioneer had complied with GM's installation requirements, promptly dispatched a GM engineering executive to visit Australia. Rumour has it that before the GM executive arrived in Australia, 7 or 8 header tanks were replaced with a larger capacity type to hide an obvious design flaw by Pioneer. Conveniently, the only Scenicruisers the American executive saw in Pioneer's workshop and yard, all had the correct size tanks, dispelling any notion that the engine problems were related to insufficient cooling! In an effort to rectify the issues and appease Pioneer, General Motors offered to replace all of the GMC Toro-Flow engines with Detroit Diesel 6V53s, at their cost, providing Pioneer would handle the installation. And it was so agreed.

To ensure the Detroit Diesel 6V53 powered Scenicruisers would not succumb to over-heating and resultant engine failure as the Toro-flow powered Scenicruisers did, Pioneer fitted a Murphy gauge with an engine shut down facility to each Scenicruiser. Although well intended, if the Murphy gauge was not set correctly, it would cause unnecessary engine shut downs while driving and from a driver's perspective, a great deal of stress. Breakdowns as a result of low water shutdowns became commonplace and plagued the Scenicruiser for the remainder of its service life. Coach drivers always carried spare water and often had to add, literally, a half a cup of water to allow the Scenicruiser to restart after shutdowns.

As a requirement of the engine replacement program, GM insisted that all of the GMC Toro-Flow engines must be destroyed, and so they were - they now provide homes for fish in Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay!

Pioneer's Ansaair Scenicruiser, on both Reo and GMC chassis', brought to Australia a new high standard for sightseeing and tour work. They had their share of reliability issues and were not able to perform to the level of the GM PD-4106, but the Ansaair Scenicruiser did achieve its goal of offering GM PD-4106 standards at a reduced capital cost. As Bob Pollard summed up... 'that body was a credit to Ansaair'.

Many thousands of overseas visitors and Australian tourists experienced the delights of Australia in absolute comfort and with great visibility...in style! Oh...and always with that unmistakable sound of the Detroit Diesel 6V53!

Footnote:

As of 2018, an operational GMC Scenicruiser motorhome has been located along with another Scenicruiser wreck that still has some interior fittings.

It is our aim to bring a Scenicruiser back to its former glory and join other Ansett Pioneer coaches in the Driver Classics heritage fleet.



EX PIONEER GMC SCENICRUISER AS A MOTORHOME, HALLS GAP, VIC 2018



EX PIONEER #418 IN TURNBULL'S COLOURS, HEALESVILLE, VIC, 2017 (also shown at top of page)

Complete Ansair Scenicruiser production list

All vehicles were built for Ansett Pioneer in Melbourne, Australia.

| UNIT No. | ORIGINAL REG | MODEL | CHASSIS No. | BODY No. | DATE IN SERVICE |
|----------|--------------|---------------|-------------|----------|-----------------|
| 401 | WBB 530 | Reo 5067-5040 | 556098 | RE141 | 11/65 |
| 402 | WBB 504 | Reo 5067-5040 | 556097 | RE142 | 11/65 |
| 403 | WBB 603 | Reo 5067-5040 | 556139 | RE143 | 11/65 |
| 404 | 287 378 | Reo 5067-5040 | 556968 | RE144 | 11/65 |
| 405 | MO 62 | Reo 5067-5040 | 556260 | RE145 | 11/65 |
| 406 | JMD 890 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F2992R | RE146 | 4/66 |
| 407 | NZM 794 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3211R | RE147 | 5/66 |
| 408 | JMJ 390 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3153R | RE148 | 5/66 |
| 409 | MO 81 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3206R | RE149 | 6/66 |
| 410 | JMK 854 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3132R | RE150 | 6/66 |
| 411 | TV 502 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3172R | RE151 | 6/66 |
| 412 | ECV 762 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3139R | RE152 | 6/66 |
| 413 | TV 804 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3145R | RE153 | 7/66 |
| 414 | TV 511 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3220R | RE154 | 7/66 |
| 415 | TV 437 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3012R | RE155 | 7/66 |
| 416 | JOA 416 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3194R | RE156 | 8/66 |
| 417 | JOB 417 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3224R | RE157 | 8/66 |
| 418 | JOB 418 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3185R | RE158 | 8/66 |
| 419 | WPD 210 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3253R | RE159 | 9/66 |
| 420 | WPE 183 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3159R | RE160 | 9/66 |
| 421 | WPE 342 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3179R | RE161 | 9/66 |
| 422 | WMG 683 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3201R | RE162 | 10/66 |
| 423 | WMG 647 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3215R | RE163 | 10/66 |
| 424 | WMH 317 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3244R | RE164 | 10/66 |
| 425 | TV 454 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3192R | RE165 | 11/66 |
| 426 | WZK 213 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3166R | RE166 | 11/66 |
| 427 | TV 430 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1065R | RE167 | 12/66 |
| 428 | WBE 213 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1080R | RE168 | 12/66 |
| 429 | JRC 726 | GMC DSPA-5019 | F3244R | RE169 | 12/66 |
| 430 | JSC 846 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1085R | RE170 | 2/67 |
| 431 | TV 521 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1096R | RE171 | 3/67 |
| 432 | JSH 184 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1083R | RE172 | 3/67 |
| 433 | PHP 138 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1092R | RE173 | 4/67 |
| 434 | TV 522 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1086R | RE174 | 4/67 |
| 435 | JTC 832 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1103R | RE175 | 5/67 |
| 436 | JTG 231 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1093R | RE176 | 5/67 |
| 437 | PHX 356 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1105R | RE177 | 5/67 |
| 438 | MO 83 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1094R | RE178 | 6/67 |
| 439 | TV530 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1087R | RE179 | 6/67 |
| 440 | JUT 910 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1048R | RE180 | 7/67 |
| 441 | PIG 813 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1091R | RE181 | 7/67 |
| 442 | JUZ 520 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1097R | RE182 | 8/67 |
| 443 | UBQ 132 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1101R | RE183 | 8/67 |
| 444 | JUZ 562 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1088R | RE184 | 8/67 |
| 445 | JUX 209 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1102R | RE185 | 9/67 |
| 446 | JUX 298 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1089R | RE186 | 9/67 |
| 447 | TV 538 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1090R | RE187 | 10/67 |
| 448 | MO 84 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1104ER | RE188 | 11/67 |
| 449 | PDO 380 | GMC DSPA-5019 | D1095R | RE189 | 12/67 |