



GREEN machines

Eco cars may help the planet, but
it's up to us to embrace them

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Joining the traffic in downtown Oakland, on the outskirts of San Francisco, there's plenty of competition for the road. From where I'm sitting, everything seems big, fast and noisy. Gas guzzlers sweep by, revving their engines as they take off from the lights.

My ride, on the other hand, doesn't make a sound. I'm a passenger in an electric vehicle and, as the tiny three-door ZENN (Zero Emissions No Noise) silently glides through the streets, driving feels different.

Not only are we quiet, but we're slow. California laws dictate we can do only 25mph (40km/h), though the ZENN could handle 60km/h and, as anyone who saw *Who Killed the Electric Car?* knows, electrics can go much faster. Although they need regular charging (the ZENN needs a boost every 40km), electrics are perfect commuter cars.

As we ease into small parking spots and bypass petrol stations with glee, my usual greenie guilt about driving diminishes. Plugging in the power cord at home to charge the battery with green power, I'm positively joyous. If the cars of the future are here, I wonder, why are we so enamoured of our petrol-dependent present?

Likely the answer is threefold: speed, convenience and habit. Although 60km/h is plenty for the urban commute, which rarely exceeds 40km a day, we like the idea that we

are free to drive far and fast. But, as we show interest in driving green, various alternatives to traditional high-emissions vehicles are entering the market.

While public transport, bicycles and good old-fashioned shanks' pony easily beat private vehicles in the green stakes, there's no doubt that weaning ourselves off petrol is a slow road. The federal government's proposed *Green Car Innovation Fund* may help by encouraging car manufacturers to improve emissions and fuel efficiencies.

Still, Australians are gradually becoming more conscious of how they get around, with growing numbers of drivers taking a second look at their transport choices.

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DRIVING YOUR CAR GREENER

- **Inflating tyres** to the maximum recommended pressure can improve fuel consumption by 6 per cent (even more if you increase it a further 3–5psi).
- **Regular servicing** keeps cars operating at peak efficiency. Clean air filters, fuel filters, wheel alignments and good-quality sparkplugs all make a difference.
- **Clear out your junk!** Extra weight increases fuel consumption.
- **Don't idle when you don't need to.** It's an urban myth that this is better for the car and the environment.
- **Cut unnecessary car use** by combining a few trips into one (stopping and starting produces pollution).
- **Buying new?** www.greenvehicleguide.gov.au can help.
- **Do you need that (second) vehicle?** Car sharing offers excellent alternatives for urban dwellers: www.goget.com.au, www.flexicar.com.au, www.charterdrive.com

Eco driving tips thanks to King Street Autos, Sydney

Car-share programs, non-existent 10 years ago, are booming. Members rent vehicles by the hour, paying for a car only when they need one. With every shared car replacing at least seven privately owned cars, this option is one way of effectively reducing congestion (and emissions) in our capital cities.

In private ownership, sales of small cars are trending upwards with no sign of stopping. There are still plenty of Toorak tractors out there, because mid-size SUVs are selling like hot cakes, but the good news is that bigger SUVs (and bigger cars in general) are experiencing a sales downturn that doesn't seem to be shifting.

Although the future may be electric, you can't get one from the big companies yet; conversions or DIY are the current options (see over). The next best choice is a hybrid, which weans us off oil dependency



without moving us out of our comfort zone. According to sales figures, Australians are lining up in droves.

Hybrids are petrol cars with an electric motor. Models vary slightly, but typically the petrol engine does most of the work, while the electric engine powers the car at low speeds or while idling. On braking, the car's heat helps to recharge the battery.

Hybrids are fuel-efficient for their size, often using less than half the fuel of a standard family car. It's hard to knock the benefits: they drive well, look good and don't push our boundaries about how a car "should run" — under the hood you'll still see a regular-looking motor as well as the electric battery.

Overseas, hybrid options abound, but Australians have three choices: the Toyota Prius, Honda Civic, or (for the cashed-up) Lexus. As most early adopters know, new technology rarely comes cheap. A Prius is around \$37,000, Civics slightly less (about \$30,000). Lexus remains high-end — the SUV hybrids start at \$95,000 and spiral to \$233,000.

Still, initial outlay on a hybrid is offset against cheaper running costs and, although all three products are selling beyond initial expectations, much-hyped waiting periods are virtually a thing of the past. With the exception of the Lexus, order a hybrid today and you'll be on the road within a couple of weeks.

So where is the future for green machines? "Plug-in" hybrids may not be far away, allowing some hybrid driving to

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be completely emissions-free with the option of charging overnight at home (as electric cars do).

Despite controversy, electrics have real potential — if we charge up with green power and if the politicians support rather than suppress the technology, we'd never need to line up at the bowser again. (Electrics still need cheaper, stronger batteries and, although these exist, they're not yet being used by big manufacturers.)

The 5000 Australians who bought hybrids in the past 12 months (3100 of these were Priuses) should be thanked for helping to

reduce our collective emissions and for reminding us that greener driving options are out there.

But, ultimately, we can all green up today simply by realising that cars are just one part of our transport mix: sometimes cycling, getting a lift or catching the train makes more sense financially, practically and environmentally.

So walk, ride, car-share or biofuel your way towards the future, but travel with awareness and remember that futuristic cars are only beneficial if we have a healthy planet to drive them on. ♦

