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hybrid cars

Although thoroughly out of character, I would like to be serious and say a few words about the astronomical price of gas and the geopolitical implications therein — AAAGGHHH! Someone please help my wallet from being punctured like a hot-air balloon near a duck hunt!

Thank you for the indulgence, as I feel better now. While doomsdayers set up scenarios of petroleum shortages, as refineries need updating, and the country maintains its dependence on black gold from sandy climes, the rest of us suffer from severe gas pains that can't be cured with Tums alone.

Although alternative sources for gasoline have been talked about since the energy crunch of the 1970s, only recently have automakers done a darn thing about it. As with any emerging technology, the results remain a mixed bag. However, the mainstreaming of hybrid cars does provide a window of hope in the increasingly expensive world of driving.

I am not an engineer, but here's how the things work: rather than plug hybrids into an outlet to get a charge — like the short-lived, underpowered electric cars — hybrid cars contain small gas engines that work with an electric motor that gives the engine a boost while it's running. Batteries, which recharge while you drive, power that electric motor. The results are striking,

AT 60 MILES PER GALLON, WE CAN'T HELP BUT BRAKE FOR THESE GAS-SAVING ALTERNATIVES

BY MARK LUCE

especially in town, mainly because the hybrids feature what's called "regenerative braking." In a normal car, you lose about 30 percent of your engine's productivity to braking. With hybrids, it's nearly the opposite. Every time you brake, you recharge your battery. This dramatically improves fuel efficiency — to the tune of 60-plus miles per gallon with the Toyota Prius and more than 30 miles per gallon for the new SUV hybrids.

Enough of the science; how do the things drive? Surprisingly well. They may not burn up the quarter mile, but even the smallest of hybrids has enough torque to help get you into the flow of traffic on the freeway, and many owners say driving the Prius, arguably the best of the hybrids, feels more like driving a V6.

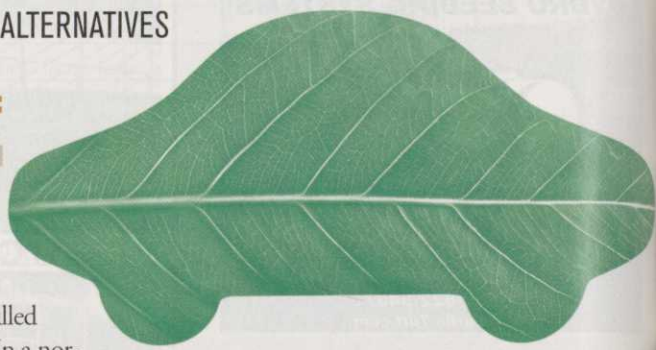
Last year 80,000 hybrids were sold, but demand has far outstripped supply. For example, when Jennifer and I looked into buying a Prius, for about \$20,000 two years ago (I was commuting more than 80 miles a day then), we were told it would be five months — at the least — for delivery.

However, Toyota has ramped production as demand continues to increase because of improved technology. Next year alone brings the following hybrid models: Honda CR-V SUV, Toyota Camry, Saturn VUE, Hyundai Accent and Kia Rio. In 2007, Chevy, Mazda and Nissan get into the act. This increase in selection and size (pick-ups, SUVs and even luxury models) should help address the supply glut.

The cars aren't foolproof, as batteries for the things can run into the thousands of dollars, so make sure to check the warranty and do your research before plunking down your money. That said, the hybrid car certainly is the wave of the future (at least until hydrogen cars) and will help, albeit slowly, not only to reduce our dependence on oil but also significantly reduce the amount of emissions that slowly poison our air.

Happy efficient driving.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he dreams of hybrid hovercrafts.



GOLFDOM (ISSN 1526-4270) is published monthly by Questex Media Group, Inc. Corporate office: 275 Grove St., Suite 2-130, Newton, MA 02466. Accounting, Advertising, Production and Circulation offices: 131 W First St., Duluth, MN 55802-2065. Subscription rates: One year \$30 (U.S. and possessions), \$49 (Canada and Mexico) and \$78 (all other countries). Air expedited service is available in countries outside the U.S. and Canada for an additional \$45 per year. Current issue single copies (prepaid only) \$5 (U.S. and possessions), \$7 (Canada and Mexico) and \$8 (all other countries). Back issues (if available, prepaid only) \$10 (U.S. and possessions), \$14 (Canada and Mexico) and \$16 (all other countries); add \$6.50 per order shipping and handling for both current and back issue purchases. Periodicals postage paid at Duluth MN 55806 and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to GOLFDOM, P.O. Box 5057, Brentwood, TN 37027-5057. Canadian G.S.T. Number: 840033278RT0001, Publications Mail Agreement number 40017597. Printed in the U.S.A.

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