

TRAVEL CLEAN CHOOSE GREEN

Petrol prices are still climbing and road transport is contributing to 22% of the UK's total carbon emissions, so there has never been a greater need for superior fuel and transport methods. Luke Bell asks: what's the alternative?

It is not always easy to see how we, as individuals, can make a real difference in the fight to save our planet and its natural resources. Of the 33 million vehicles on UK roads, 27 million are cars. Technology and improved transport networks have made travel a natural part of most people's lives, whether it be commuting to work, the weekly shop, annual holidays or the school run. Overall in 2009, there was an average of 973 trips per person, per year, and 6775 miles travelled. Making those everyday journeys eco-friendly is something we should all address to make a real environmental difference. Why not take a look at the various options out there for cleaning up our travel emissions?

The petrol burden

Let's address the elephant in the room: the car. It's all very well saying we should use public transport or hop on a bike, but for many, it is often not a practical or affordable way of reaching our destination on time. The supermarket boom of the last

few decades has proved that convenience is a winner when it comes to our everyday lives, and cars are undoubtedly the most user-friendly form of transport out there. They are also one of the most environmentally unfriendly! Huge amounts of money are currently being invested in developing a practical, efficient, eco-friendly car, from LPG fuelled to hybrids, hydrogen powered to those that run on electric fuel cells. There are a number of organizations, and even countries, who have simply by-passed the need for petrol altogether. Why spend a fortune on petrol when you can run your car on alcohol?

Alcool ou gasolina?

As Brazil is the first nation in the world to adopt ethanol as a major fuel, the question you'll be asked if you pull into a petrol station in Brazil is: alcohol or petrol? At one time, Brazil imported all its petroleum supplies. Following the embargo of oil exports from the Middle East in the early 1970s, supplies became disrupted and prices became wildly inflated, leaving

Brazil to face a devastating economic crisis (ring any bells?). Ethanol was already being used in Brazil to help stretch supplies, mixed with petrol as part of a fuel cocktail they called Gasohol. And as the economic crisis grew, those in charge decided it was time to switch entirely to ethanol.

Brazil produces ethanol from sugar cane, which it considers cheaper and more efficient to produce than the corn-based ethanol you would find in the US. In 1976, it was declared that only ethanol could be used in Brazilian motor sport. By 1977, all fuel stations were required by law to pump ethanol, and in 1979, the nation's car manufacturers were instructed to shift production to ethanol-powered vehicles for the domestic market. From the mid-1980s, you were hard pushed to find a petrol-fuelled car in Brazil. A change in public demand can change the shape of an economy, and the conversion from petrol to ethanol was primarily based on domestic demand. It was surprisingly straightforward to get the Brazilian people to accept the new ethanol-based technology. Increased taxes and registration fees were imposed on petrol-powered vehicles and, with ethanol prices around 40% cheaper than petrol, Brazilian consumers lapped it up. Back home in the UK, we don't exactly have the best climate for growing sugar cane, but harvesting fuel from corn could be an option.

Fuel for thought

The Somerset Biofuel Project launched in the UK back in 2004, aiming to introduce bio-ethanol to the area. The project, with European funding and partners in Stockholm, Rotterdam, Madrid, La Spezia, and the Basque Country, installed a network of ethanol fuel pumps and deployed bio-ethanol vehicles in key public and private sector fleets. Unfortunately, the project hasn't continued. I spoke with Ian Bright, the man who had



IMAGE COURTESY OF ALEX BRUDA

been tasked with coordinating the project, about the prospects of bio-ethanol production in the UK and worldwide. "The BEST project (www.best-europe.org) has shown that bio-ethanol is by far the most promising form of alternative fuel for road transport," he insists, "reducing carbon emissions and dependency on oil. World bio-ethanol production is growing strongly and is attracting massive investment in sustainable agriculture across the developed and developing world." But the management of this transition is far from straightforward. Oil companies throughout the world exert their influence with governments to maintain their market position as suppliers of transport fuel. "In my opinion, sustainable accredited bio-ethanol production offers huge opportunities for development of the agricultural sector across the developing world," Ian explains. "Social sustainability is a vital aspect of this development and we are losing out on major benefits for rural communities here and abroad if oil companies continue to dictate the regulatory framework for agricultural systems for biofuel production and use."

The politics of the fuel market are intriguing, to say the least. But for now, the most important thing to recognize is that bio-ethanol is a viable alternative to petrol: a cheap and increasingly available eco-friendly fuel, one that has a proven track record and that is being embraced by the global economy. It would be nice to think that we could develop a fuel that helps global society from the grass roots up, rather than from the top down, this time round.

Surprising alternatives

There are a few transport-based companies out there who have decided they can't wait for bio-ethanol and are using their own source of alternative fuel, namely cooking oil. The Lemon Bus in Brighton is a Community Interest Company founded



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in 2007 to develop a new kind of bus service. It runs public bus services, bus and coach hire, a festival coach service and a collection service for waste cooking oil, all fuelled on 100% bio-diesel sourced from local cooking oil. "You get that wonderful wafting chip-shop aroma and are just getting ready to fork out for a portion of Britain's finest when you see this bright yellow bus come round the corner," jokes one local resident. "It's great fun, a wonderful idea and really cheap too. £1.50 per trip it costs me, or £2.50 for the day. I use it regularly."

And the Lemon Bus is not the only public transport service helping to save the planet and encourage the move away from private cars. BioTravel and Explore South West have set up a 100% green taxi service in Cornwall, using 100% bio-diesel to power their fleet of four cars and two minibuses. Several other taxi companies offer eco-friendly services. By using a fleet of Toyota Prius hybrids, EcoCars in Aylesbury, and GoGreenCar in London, claim 60% less carbon dioxide emissions than other taxi firms.

On yer bike!

Cycling is good for your health and good for the environment! It is probably the most eco-friendly form of transport available, since the only emissions attributed to a bicycle are those involved in its production. Many local councils are now investing in improved cycle networks throughout local towns and cities. In the inner cities, you'll get from A to B a heck of a lot quicker by weaving through traffic jams on a bike, rather than sitting behind the wheel watching the engine needle creep up to overheating!

But what about journeys of more than just a couple of miles? If the route to your workplace is more uphill than downhill, and the thought of arriving at the office dripping with sweat doesn't really appeal, then try a bike that will take some of the strain. Electric bikes are a rapidly growing sector of the cycling community. They are like a conventional bicycle, but have an electric motor, which can be used full-time, or just for a helping hand up steep hills. The speed limit is 15 mph and can be used for up to 55 miles between charges, depending on a number of factors such as terrain and the level of power assistance required. Prices start at £460 for a reliable robust electric bike. "They are used by a broad range of people," explains Chris Moody from the Electric Transport Shop in Bristol. "They are popular with commuters who don't want to spend their lives sitting in traffic. A folding electric bike allows train commuters



to arrive fresh from their journey from the train station to the office. They are used by those who struggle to ride a regular bike because of advancing age or health issues." Chris has offered to lend the *Inspired Times* team an electric bike to review for a future issue of the magazine.

Share the burden

So, biking just doesn't work for your situation and there doesn't appear to be any bio-ethanol pumps at your local petrol station. The public transport system is unreliable and you've got too far to walk. You have no choice but to hop in the car and drive yourself to your destination. All those emissions, just for little old you? Car sharing is another rapidly growing area when it comes to everyday transport. It works especially well for commuters, where a number of employees travel the same route each day, and many companies are now actively encouraging their employees to car share. Liftshare.com is a great website for organizing your shared trip. Simply type in your start location

and final destination, and all the sharing options available to you will be listed. They even have a cost calculator so you can work out exactly how much money you'll be saving. It can work just as well for sharing your weekly shopping trip or taking the kids to school. I had a quick go to check out sharing a trip from Bristol to Bath. There were 278 possible sharers and it calculated that, to regularly share the journey with one person, I could save around 1402 miles each year, equating to £298, and 0.5 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide. Have a go and see how many miles, money and emissions you could save on your commute simply by picking up a passenger or two.

The one less travelled by

While bio-ethanol is looking like the most promising alternative fuel for cars, there are still many other options available. Electric cars are constantly being developed, but water-powered cars would certainly be the cleanest option. With the huge quantity of water wasted each year, it could be a fantastic way to improve our water management and clean up our transport pollution at the same time. Public transport systems are currently receiving a big share of the attention and money to develop and improve the reliability, accessibility, affordability and environmental impact of their services. In terms of greening up the transport systems, I feel the future looks bright. As petrol prices continue to rise, it's pretty clear that we need to find a cheaper and more eco-friendly way to travel. In the meantime, try to use the car only when absolutely necessary and even then, think about piling in the passengers.

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