The ELECTRIC MYTH

Words by Tim Saunders

Tim Saunders reports on the reality of driving an all-electric car as he puts the Nissan Leaf through its paces

By 2030 the humble combustion engine will be phased out in England and Scotland. Hybrids will be given a stay of execution for five more years. This means in less than ten years the majority of new cars will be electric.

In 2020 a total of 108,205 electric vehicles (EVs) were sold, representing a 180% year-on-year rise and rising from 1.6% of the overall UK car market to 6.6% despite new car sales hitting a 28 year low.

When I was small I'd watch the electric milk float slowly make its way down the road wondering why it couldn't go faster. It was painful sitting in the long tailback behind it. Then in 1985 Clive Sinclair invented his famous C5. There was a glimmer of hope that there could perhaps one day be a proper electric car. But true mass production didn't happen until 11 years ago with the introduction of the Nissan Leaf and the Tesla when battery technology had improved.

It's 2021, so surely battery technology is even better. It's not just me thinking this but fellow motorists in my area have replaced their old gas guzzlers with electric. I do wonder how clean the electricity generating process is, though.

When Nissan offered me their green Leaf, I thought I'd better embrace this technology rather than avoid it, as I've always done in the past.

Compared to traditional cars the Leaf's design is more bulbous. It's finished in a striking magnetic red and black. It's a shame there isn't a manual five- or six-speed gearbox, instead there's a lazy automatic, which isn't particularly engaging.

We go on a 50-mile round trip leaving at 81% charge and 191 miles range. We return with 47% charge and about 100 miles range because of demisting the windscreens, heating the vehicle, listening to the radio and turning the headlights on. Try as I might I can't find any way of heating my poor little feet, my wife's or my children's on a cold day. Not good enough. Where a conventional car uses the heat from the engine for such purposes electric ones can't do this, so where's the under floor heating then? In this day and age we shouldn't have to suffer for protecting the climate. However, I would happily forego having power-folding wing mirrors, air conditioning, electric windows, even the heated seats and steering wheel if I could just have warm feet. Surely in the spirit of conserving energy and common sense all these luxuries should be stripped out?

You might think me a killjoy, but when the car is 87% charged it will travel about 190 miles on standard mode. If economy is selected, noticeably slowing the vehicle down, it will travel about 10 or 15 miles more. However, deign to demist the front and rear screens and 10 miles are instantly lost. It increases a little when the demisters are switched off. I then find myself snooping around the vehicle to see what else can be switched off to prevent further wasted energy. I'm becoming like that old fart who won't turn the heating on at home no matter how cold it is. That's a point, we'll each need to wear another sweater in the winter months to avoid shrivelling the Leaf's battery charge still further. That electric radio is a drain, so that can be switched off for a start. If this is what driving an electric vehicle is like, please save me. Now.

There's a constant fear that there won't be enough charge left to get you to your destination.

"But it's so silent," says my wife, Caroline, sensing my anxiety. It also has impressive acceleration but you don't want to enjoy yourself too much for fear of having to charge it up yet again. With a hybrid, at least you have back up once the charge is lost because it will revert to the conventional engine. Once the range has gone in an all-electric car there is no back up apart from a long wait for the breakdown service. When all is told, the 85% charged battery that claims to deliver 200 miles or so actually travels about 150 miles driving it normally, using the heating, demisting the windscreens and listening to the radio. That is just pootling around, travelling between 30mph and 60mph generally. Once you cruise at 70mph on the motorway that range drops further. There's only a speed limiter and no cruise control.

Huge advances have to be made in the next decade to convert the remaining 93.4% of car owners…

Watch the video at **testdrives.biz**.

LEAF E+ 3.ZERO

PRICE: £37,320 OTR

On the road price (includes Government Incentive – Plug-in Grant of 35% up to a maximum of £3,500 and £55 Government First Registration Fee)

TOP SPEED: 98MPH

0 TO 60MPH: 6.9SECS

RANGE: UP TO 319 MILES ON A FULL CHARGE

(driving at 30mph without using luxuries like heating or listening to the radio)

EMISSIONS: 0