

EVER Conference 2007 - Ecological Vehicles and Renewable Energies

by Joe Simpson - 04 Apr 2007

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Whether the European Commission does or doesn't succeed in fixing a tight new emissions cap on vehicles by 2012, 'clean' is definitely in vogue right now. So it seemed appropriate that the eco-party last week moved to the French Riviera. 'EVER' - Ecological Vehicles and Renewable Energies - is in its second year and showcased a motley crew of environmentally-friendly vehicles at the Forum Grimaldi in Monaco. One might have expected the event to showcase the same disparate array of machinery - from major manufacturers through to home made EVs - that was seen at the Los Angeles AltCar event in December last year. Instead, EVER was a more apologetic affair with none of the "let's get off middle-eastern oil" vitriol seen in America, nor any of the glitz one has come to expect from auto spectacles in Monte Carlo.

Concerns over the internal combustion engine's contribution to climate change have been on the agenda in Europe for much longer than they have in the USA - yet this event showed little by way of encouragement that any move away from gasoline powered vehicles was likely to be led by the Europeans.

In America, GM's plug-in hybrid Chevrolet Volt concept from NAIAS 2007 generated huge coverage and an overtly positive public response, whilst in Europe, Smart announced plans for a limited run of EV versions of the Fortwo at the British Motor Show last year - perhaps in part responding to a burgeoning number of electric quadricycles offered by non-mainstream manufacturers such as 'Nice' and Reva/Gwiz. Although obviously 'under-designed' these cars have been quite a hit, particularly with inner-city commuters looking for 'green' car options. One wonders whether in part this is a sign that manufacturers are buying into Christopher Flavin's view - argued at the Art Center sustainability event in Pasadena in February - that 'those who were not at the table, would be on the menu'? It's a shame nobody from Europe was there to hear him. In Monaco, Citroen's display of Biofuel and Natural Gas vehicles, while promising a hybrid diesel-electric C4 by late 2008, neatly sums up the issue here. Most European manufacturers are backing bio-fuels as a key part of the future, with a long-term focus on hydrogen.



The Grimaldi Forum, Monaco.



Venturi Eclectic



Venturi Eclectic solar roof, made up of multiple photovoltaic cells



Riding in the Venturi Eclectic



'Ride and drive' alternative fuel vehicles at EVER



Citroen C4 E85 Super Ethanol



Saab 9-5 Biofuel



Venturi Eclectic



Venturi Eclectic's 3-seat interior layout



Honda Civic Hybrid. Click for larger images



North American model Toyota Camry Hybrid, being imported by Toyota Monaco to cater for the local market.



The market leading Toyota Prius



Prince Albert II of Monaco has the benefits of the Honda Civic Hybrid explained to him.

Yet consumers seem unconvinced by the environmental benefits of biofuels - which have come under serious attack recently for overstating their green credentials. With hydrogen still some way away therefore, hybrid gasoline-electric vehicles are seen as the current best bet. Home-grown Venturi was the undoubted star of the show here, with its Eclectic. First previewed at the 2006 Paris Motor Show, the Eclectic sold the benefits of near-silent electric propulsion here by offering actual public rides, with its 2.5m square solar panel roof soaking up the Cote-d'Azur sun and converting it into energy used for rides around the principality. Designed as the world's first autonomous vehicle, and powered by a battery providing 50km of range, it can be supplemented by an optional wind turbine (adding 15km range) - and the solar panel, which dictates the car's appearance and - somewhat surprisingly - interior environment so much.

At 2850mm long, the Eclectic is little longer than a Smart, but its 1800mm width makes it larger in footprint. These dimensions generate the best surface area for the solar panel roof, and dictate a McLaren F1-esque seating layout inside - with two passengers sat rearwards of the centrally placed driver. The solar roof itself is comprised of 5x5cm photovoltaic cells, which sit slightly apart from one another - allowing light to filter into the passenger cabin in an extremely pleasing way. Combined with the open sides, riding in the Eclectic is reminiscent of what one experiences at speed in a roadster. The sensation of fun and speed is not something one would expect from a Quadricycle with a top speed of only 50km/h.

Toyota and Honda continued to show their dominance of the current market for hybrids - with the biggest, most auto show-like stands. As Thomas Mesnil of Honda explained to CDN, Honda is unhappy at being perceived as number two in this area to Toyota - having captured much initial attention with its 1999 Insight - and has high hopes for the success of its 2006 Civic Hybrid (IMA).

Perhaps, in part this position of underdog is due to the Prius - Toyota's market leader - being a standalone model, which customers more readily identify as a hybrid, green car. The Civic, in contrast, is also available as a non-hybrid model - making its environmental credentials less obvious to the average buyer.

This raises an intriguing question about the current consumer awareness for all things green - do the actual environmental credentials of the machine matter, or is the image it projects the key selling point? As the market evolves, it will be interesting to see how successful the hybrid versions of existing models are, compared to stand-alone designs such as the Prius.

EVER raised more questions than it answered about Europe's current position on clean vehicles. Currently, shows and products from Japan and the USA are leading the way - Tesla's fully battery electric roadster hits driveways in just a few weeks - and one has the feeling that there is a market for similar products across Europe right now. Witness, for instance, the success of the Toyota Prius and G-wiz in London - where hybrids and electric cars are given exemption from the daily congestion charge.



Honda Civic Hybrid interior



Toyota Camry Hybrid Interior - centre screen features the same graphic 'energy' display as the Prius



Prius interior characterised by the centre console screen displaying flows of energy in the hybrid drivetrain

And the final irony? Well with Europe's car makers barely able to muster a hybrid between them, Prince Albert II of Monaco has resorted to driving a Prius in his attempt to position Monaco as a European leader on sustainable vehicles.

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