

Cars Auto Financing Event Tickets Jobs Real Estate Shop Online Degrees Credit Card Offers HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

Search

How do I find it?

Subscribe to paper

Advertisement



Home News Travel Money Sports Life Tech Weather

Become a member of the USA TODAY community now!

Log in Become a member What's this?



Money » Cars Test Drive: James R. Healey Photo Galleries Research a Car Buy a Car Sell a Car Incentives Recalls Other Reviews

GET A QUOTE:

Enter symbol(s) or Keywords



DJIA 13,727.03 +101.45 NASDAQ 2,718.95 +12.79

Small electric car sales could get a jolt

Updated 1h 18m ago | Comments 1 | Recommend 2

E-mail | Save | Print | Reprints & Permissions | RSS



Enlarge By Noah Berger for USA TODAY

Green Motors in California sells the Zenn and other electric vehicles like the IT, shown here getting a once-over in the dealership's showroom.



Enlarge By Noah Berger for USA TODAY

Instead of an engine, a bank of batteries fills the space under the hood of a Zenn electric car.

By Julie Schmit, USA TODAY

BERKELEY, Calif. — Here's a sticker shock that feels good: 245 miles per gallon.

So reads the sign on the two-seater Zenn electric car at a new dealership here that peddles electric cars, scooters and bikes. Green Motors is one of an increasing number of electric-vehicle dealers aiming to tap distaste for high gas prices and growing environmental concerns.

PHOTO GALLERY: Electric cars (from July 2006)

The Zenn, which began selling in the USA a year ago, falls into the category of "neighborhood electric vehicles" (NEVs) or "low-speed vehicles." NEVs are legal only on roads marked for 35 miles per hour or less. In most states, they can go up to 25 mph; in two states up to 35 mph. Depending on make, NEVs will run 30 to 50 miles after a four-to-eight-hour charge and plug in anywhere.

But unlike electric golf-cart-like vehicles popular in retirement communities, the Zenn looks like a regular car. It's based on Europe's Microcar, which has been produced as a gas or diesel-powered low-speed vehicle for more than 20 years.

FIND MORE STORIES IN: Honda | BERKELEY | Motors

Former software salesman Marc Korchin, who opened the Berkeley dealership in October, says his goal isn't to get drivers to ditch gas-fueled cars. He wants them to use those cars less and drive electric on low-speed city streets. His mantra? "Use the right tool for the job," he says. "You wouldn't hang a picture with a sledgehammer, and we're all driving sledgehammers."

Clean and quiet

The Zenn cars, short for Zero Emission, No Noise, cost \$12,750 to \$17,600 and are slightly smaller than the Mini Cooper. Korchin also sells a four-seat sedan from Dynasty Electric Car for \$20,000, as well as the Dynasty mini-truck for \$25,000.

Both Zenn and Dynasty are based in Canada. Zenn Motor gets car bodies from Europe and adds electric components. Other NEV providers include California companies Miles Electric Vehicles and Zap and North Dakota-based Global Electric Motorcars from Chrysler. The 10-year-old GEM, largely sold through Chrysler dealers, has 34,000 NEVs on the road.

Big carmakers have long dabbled in highway-speed electric cars but haven't delivered and promoted a mass-market product. Tesla Motors, a Silicon Valley start-up, plans to deliver a highway-capable roadster next year for about \$100,000. General Motors (GM) is working on the Chevrolet Volt electric car for 2010. Miles, which launched its first NEV in 2005 and has about 200 on the road, says it'll have a highway-speed electric vehicle in 2009.

The neighborhood electric vehicles, Korchin says, are here and now. And they spin heads.

On a recent drive through Berkeley, Korchin stopped at a stop sign, and a motorist dropped his window to yell, "What kind of car is that?"

"It's electric. Go to gogreenmotors.com," Korchin yelled back.

Related Advertising Links

What's This?

Hot Stock Alert - GFET

Green Energy, Cellulose Ethanol. Growth Stock... www.GulfEthanolCorp.com

Penny Stock Pick

QEDC positioned to capitalize on \$9 billion... www.AnalystResearchReport.com

Advertisement

OTHER VOICES FROM THE WEB

Chevy to Introduce Malibu Hybrid in Just 11 States

Posted on: KickingTires - 54 minutes ago "Citing limited numbers of the 2008 Malibu Hybrid, Chevrolet has announced it will restrict the debut of..."

2007 Honda Civic GX: Draining it Dry, Almost.

Posted on: Long-Term Road Tests - 11 hours ago "They told me when I joined the Edmunds team that I would probably be the designated driver for the..."

"Pre-owned" 2008 Nissan GT-R sold for \$94,000 in Japan

Posted on: Straightline - 11 hours ago "In Japan the 2008 Nissan GT-R MSRP's for \$70,000 to \$75,000. Here we have a pre-owned one that fetched..."

E-mail features

What's This?

E-mail newsletters

Sign up to receive our free Cars e-newsletter and get the top news of the day in your inbox.

E-mail

Select one: HTML Text

Breaking news E-mail alerts

Get breaking news in your inbox as it happens

Green Motors has sold 11 cars — one Dynasty and 10 Zenns — about half to people with solar-powered homes. Korchin expects low profit margins in part because there'll be little service revenue. Electric cars have a handful of major parts compared with hundreds in a regular car. The batteries, like those in regular cars and in boats, make up half of the Zenn's 1,200-pounds, for instance. Dealership technicians will make house calls, if needed.

While Zenn looks like a regular car, there are differences. Tires are on a petite 13 inches. Drivers flip a switch to go forward or backward. Because they are low-speed vehicles, crash testing isn't required. Seat belts are required but air bags aren't.

The 245 mpg claim, an estimate, is based on the energy output of a gallon of gas, which is about the same amount of energy required to charge the Zenn seven times, the company says.

Korchin, who has two children ages 7 and 12, doesn't fear taking them in his Dynasty, which, like the Zenn, has an aluminum frame. The U.S. Department of Transportation, which set safety rules for the vehicles in 1998, requires they have seat belts, turn signals and rearview mirrors. Zenn may make air bags optional, it says.

Playing to an eager market

Green Motors inhabits the space of a former Cadillac dealership in one of the USA's most liberal cities. For Korchin, it is a work of love. A year ago, he bought his first electric car, a Dynasty. Wherever he parked it, people gathered. His wife, editor of an environmental magazine, created a promotional flier. Korchin then saw *Who Killed the Electric Car?*, a 2006 documentary that largely blames the oil and auto industries, and vowed never to buy another gas-powered car. His family also owns a 1989 Honda (HMC) Accord. He gave up a regular job and plunged into the electric motor dealership.

Instead of being a big contributor to the greenhouse gas problem, "I'm part of the solution," says Korchin, 52.

Kathleen Giustino of Berkeley feels the same way. She and her husband bought a Zenn last month to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide they release into the atmosphere. Four years ago, they converted their house to solar power.

NEVs have long attracted enthusiastic supporters. A paper published in 1994 by an expert on transportation and energy at the University of California, Davis, said the benefits were "potentially so large ... it would be irresponsible not to pursue NEVs." The paper noted that NEVs cut carbon dioxide emissions more than 60% when compared with a subcompact gas car.

Like Korchin, the Giustinos also have a gas car. Kathleen uses the Zenn to commute to her teaching job and for errands. She drives it about 7 miles a day. While she says she'd feel more comfortable if it went 30 mph, "in case I have to escape something," she's fine at 25 mph as long as she's on streets where traffic is slow. She and her husband, who is 6-foot-2, sit comfortably in the car together.

The slower speeds aren't for everyone. Glenn Nunez of Oakland recently test drove the Zenn and "felt like I was slowing up traffic," he says. Still, he says, "It's a perfect city street vehicle."

Curbed appeal?

The vehicles' limitations will curb their appeal, says Bruce Harrison of market researcher Global Insight. Because they're not highway-capable, they'll attract consumers who like the novelty and who can afford a second or third car, he says.

Washington and Montana allow the cars to go 35 mph. Electric-car supporters in other states are pushing for the same, says Steve Mayeda, co-owner of MC Electric Vehicles in Seattle. NEVs aren't legal on public roads in Connecticut, Delaware, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Wyoming. Canada recently gave them the green light, but each province must decide whether to let them on the road.

Zenn has shipped about 200 cars to the USA. Zenn founder Ian Clifford says the company hopes to launch a highway-capable electric car next year, assuming advances in battery technology.

Korchin says he's ready to adapt. After all, he's already altered his bedtime routine. He and his wife still ask each other whether the doors are locked and whether the kids are tucked in. Now they add a new question: "Honey, did you plug in the car?"

Share this story:


[Digg](#)
[delicio.us](#)
[Newsvine](#)
[Reddit](#)
[Facebook](#)
[What's this?](#)

Posted 12h 16m ago

Updated 1h 18m ago

E-mail | Save | Print | Reprints & Permissions | [RSS](#)

To report corrections and clarifications, contact Reader Editor **Brent Jones**. For publication consideration in the newspaper, send comments to letters@usatoday.com. Include name, phone number, city and state for verification.

Conversation guidelines: USA TODAY welcomes your thoughts, stories and information related to this article. Please stay on topic and be respectful of others. Keep the conversation appropriate for interested readers across the map.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Register](#)

Subm

Comments: (1)

Showing: [Newest first](#) ▼



dwilli11 wrote: 1h 21m ago

These cars do not go too slow on city streets. The real problem is that the gas guzzlers are going too fast. In a few more years oil will be a thing of the past and then we can all slow down and start "smelling the roses"

Recommend 1 | Report Abuse

Sponsored Links

Penny Stock Pick

QEDC positioned to capitalize on \$9 billion Internet Security market
www.AnalystResearchReport.com

Earn From 4.91% to 5.43%

With AAA rated, GE Capital Corp. Not an offer of securities for sale
GEInterestPlus.com

Hot Stock Alert - GFET

Green Energy, Cellulose Ethanol. Growth Stock Investment.
www.GulfEthanolCorp.com

[Get listed here](#)

Advertisement

Business ★ Criminal Justice ★ Nursing
MBA ★ Accounting ★ Technology ★ & More!

Newspaper Home Delivery - Subscribe Today

[Home](#) • [News](#) • [Travel](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

About USATODAY.com: [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Jobs with Us](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Right](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Media Lounge](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Reprints and Permissions](#)

News Your Way: [Mobile News](#) | [Email News](#) | [Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds](#) | [Podcasts](#) | [Widgets](#)

Partners: [USA WEEKEND](#) | [Sports Weekly](#) | [Education](#) | [Space.com](#)

Copyright 2007 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.