

The Washington Post

ELECTRIC CARS FOR SWISS ALPINE TOURISM

Green tourism project introduces Alpmobil to Alpine tourism

Jul 01, 2010

MEIRINGEN, Switzerland (Reuters) - A pair of sturdy goats led 10 cows with regional and national flags tied to horns and bridles up toward the mountains this week at the launch of a new Swiss eco-project.

Behind the animals came a silent line of 60 brightly colored small cars, which then sped off -- equally silently -- toward the nearest Alpine pass.

"I think just one of those cows made more noise than all of us put together," said bemused Swiss tourism official Federico Somarruga, at the wheel of one of the two-seater automobiles.

The occasion was the launch in central Switzerland of a green tourism project, dubbed Alpmobil, to promote the use of battery-driven electric vehicles -- EVs to the cognoscenti -- by summer visitors to the area some 100 km (63 miles) southeast of the Swiss capital Bern.

The area's plentiful electricity supplies, created by harnessing the power of mountain waters through reservoirs and dams, have been tapped to provide over 20 battery charge-points serving up, Alpmobil says, totally green energy.

Alpmobil, whose sponsors include the regional hydropower giant KWO and cantonal governments and climate research authorities, has acquired the 60 "Think" cars from the pioneering Norwegian EV company of the same name.

They will be on hire between July and September at hotels, garages and railway stations for 60 Swiss francs (US\$54) a day across the area's Goms and Haslital regions and Alpmobil offers booking on its so-far only German language website -- www.alpmobil.ch.

CONCEIVED AS TOWN CAR

The "Think," built in Finland by specialty manufacturer Valmet Automotive, was conceived -- like most electric vehicles -- as a town car, but Alpmobil's spokesman Dionys Hallenbarter says it is also ideal for leisurely mountain touring.

A smooth 20-km (12.5 mile) drive up from Meiringen round hairpin bends to the 2,165-meter (6,800 foot) Grimsel Pass and back suggests he is right.

But it also shows how much the survival of the stunning scenery in a country that lives up to the images on its picture postcards needs a big cut in the sort of emissions produced by traditional petrol-driven vehicles.

Along the way, huge boulder-strewn gashes in mountainsides stretching down from the peaks tell the tale of disappeared or disappearing glaciers, or of the landslides and avalanches that rising Alpine temperatures provoke.

The EVs, their admirers say, can also play a big part in tackling noise pollution, another topic dear to the Swiss in whose quiet mountains the boom of the alpenhorn or the call of the yodeller can still on occasion be heard.

Turning the key in a Think leaves a driver wondering if the engine has fired, and on the road even with the windows open the only sound of movement is the swish of tyres on the tarmac.

A set of instructions from the Swiss automobile association Touring Club Suisse (TCS) for visitors hiring the car warns that the absence of noise can also have a negative side.

"The electric cars are very quiet. Please take into consideration that cyclists and pedestrians are not used to this! Anticipate reactions and toot the horn if necessary," the plastified TCS card admonishes.

Jorg Beckmann, managing director of TCS' "Mobility Academy" says the EV -- despite needing its battery recharged every 120-180 km in an operation that can last four or more hours -- is the wave of the future.

With some of the world's biggest automobile companies in the United States, France, Sweden, Germany, Japan and South Korea announcing their own models for the next year or two, he says: "There is no way back."

Beckmann argues that even the high cost of the Think -- in Switzerland it will be marketed at a price of 55,000 Swiss francs (\$51,160) -- is easily compensated by the much lower running and maintenance costs, and by tax rebates.

Back in Meiringen, local people and visitors gather round the vehicles parked in ranks in front of the railway station. "Don't think I'd want to drive down in one," says a tourist from northern Germany.

"But I'd certainly use it round here."

Source: Reuters/washingtonpost.com