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From the Los Angeles Times

AUTOS

## Mini E lease program has electric vehicle fans all charged up

450 in a pilot program will use the automobiles as their daily commuters for a year. Experts say it could be a precursor to an explosion of relatively affordable electric cars in the near future.

By Ken Bensinger

May 11, 2009

The future of transportation is now available for lease.

In the next few weeks, 450 consumers in California, New York and New Jersey will begin picking up fully electric Mini coupes, charging them at home and using them as their daily commuters for the next year.

They'll pay \$850 a month, plus taxes and insurance, for the right to drive the first highway-legal electric cars that don't cost more than \$100,000 to hit the streets in more than a dozen years. As such, they'll serve as pioneers in what's being hailed as the next great moment in automobile history: the electric car era.

### FOR THE RECORD:

Electric cars: An article in Business on Monday about a lease program for an electric Mini coupe said the Tesla Roadster was the first all-electric, highway-legal vehicle to be sold in the U.S. since World War II. In fact, Toyota sold 328 electric RAV4 EV sport utility vehicles in 2002 and 2003. —

Never mind the fact that the lease cost on a Mini E is twice that of a regular Mini or that since the battery fills up the back seat, it fits just two people, said Nick Howell, a Pacific Palisades-based technology consultant who's getting one.

"I'm just excited to get a real car that is only powered by electricity," he said.

Howell, his wife, and several hundred other soon-to-be Mini E drivers got a first look at the car one evening last week in Los Angeles at the California Science Center, where BMW, which owns Mini, threw a party reminiscent of a pep rally.

Drink in hand, Howell stared across a room full of giddy fellow lessees savoring a buffet dinner and gushing over the cheery little electric vehicles, or EVs, which zip to 60 miles per hour in 8.5 seconds and top out at 95 mph. "This is going to be an adventure," Howell said.

Nearly a decade after the short-circuiting of the first modern attempt to jump-start electric transportation -- in the form of the EV1 from General Motors Corp., Toyota Motor Corp.'s RAV4 EV and other electric test cars, most of which were destroyed after their leases expired -- the auto industry is back on the switch.

The one-year Mini E pilot program is a precursor to what experts say could be an explosion of relatively affordable electric cars in the near future.

"This is a sign of what's coming," said Edward Kjaer, director of the Electric Transportation Division at Southern California Edison, which is working with automakers including BMW and Ford Motor Co. to develop electric vehicles and infrastructure. "The real fun is going to start next year."

That's when General Motors Corp. is slated to release its much-anticipated plug-in electric Volt sedan. Hot on its heels is Ford, which last week said it would invest \$550 million to retool a Michigan factory that will make electric versions of its Focus compact, due out in 2011.

Japanese automaker Nissan Motor Co. is targeting 2012 for mass-production of its sub-\$33,000 electric car, while Mitsubishi Motors Corp. is set to begin selling its own EV in Japan in 2010.

For its part, BMW does not plan to make a mass-produced version of the Mini E. Instead, it will use data from the lease program to help produce an electric vehicle it plans to sell in the U.S. in 2012.

Meanwhile, a group of start-ups are racing to deliver their own electron-fired vehicles. Among them are Fisker Automotive, an Irvine company that promises a plug-in hybrid in about a year's time, and Santa Monica's Miles Automotive, which in two weeks will unveil the prototype of its Chinese-made sedan that's expected to sell for \$45,000 when it debuts late next year.

Then there's Tesla Motors of San Carlos, Calif., which last year began selling the \$109,000 Roadster, the first all-electric, highway-legal vehicle to be sold (rather than leased) in the U.S. since before World War II. To date, about 400 of the sleek vehicles have been delivered, and last month Tesla showed off the design of its next electric car, the Model S, due in 2012.

"We believe electric vehicles are a big part of the future of this industry," said Mark Perry, Nissan's North American director of advanced technology. He said limited numbers of Nissan's electric vehicle may hit the streets as soon as late next year.

The industry's electric vehicle push is being aided by the Obama administration, which included \$2.4 billion in funding for the vehicles in the stimulus bill passed earlier this year. And on Thursday the administration cut funding for development of hydrogen fuel cell technology, the main challenger to battery-powered electric vehicles, on grounds that it wouldn't be practical for at least a decade.

Consumer awareness of electric vehicles is also rising, helped in part by the spike in gasoline prices a year ago, as well as growing buzz online. At least half a dozen of the people selected to lease the Mini E have launched [blogs detailing the experience](#).

"Transportation technology is vital to our future," Bill Nye, a TV actor known for an eponymous children's science show, said at the event.

He will put aside his Toyota Prius for a year in order to drive a Mini E.

"It was the first electric car I could get my hands on, and the Tesla is a little too rich for my blood," he said.

There are a number of roadblocks between the gasoline-fueled present and the electrified future. The big ones, such as developing batteries that can survive years of charging and not cost a fortune, are fairly well known.

For start-ups, raising enough money to keep going can be hard, as Phoenix Motorcars of Ontario discovered. The company's plans to begin producing an electric pickup in late 2007 were pushed back several times, suppliers sued and, late last month, Phoenix filed for bankruptcy protection.

Smaller hurdles also abound.

In the case of the Mini E, BMW discovered that although its range was lab-tested at 156 miles per charge, real-world driving put it closer to 100. Installing a 240-volt charger in every driver's garage also proved tricky, since many of the houses didn't have sufficient capacity to support the load.

Then there was the plug, almost an afterthought. It turned out that certifying the cable connecting car to charger -- a minor but necessary bit of red tape -- took so long that it delayed the Mini E rollout by more than two months.

"We knew we would have some obstacles to overcome," said Richard Steinberg, Mini's head of product strategy in the U.S. "They turned out to be a little bigger than we thought."

Such concerns didn't seem to register among the more than 200 people who showed up at the Science Center to gawk at the electric cars that they would soon be driving.

Chad Robertson and Kathy Bakken of Los Angeles brought their 12-year-old son, Weston, to inspect the goods. Bakken, an entertainment advertising designer, leased a GM EV1 in the late 1990s and, heartbroken when the company took it away from her, has pined for an electric car ever since.

"The minute I saw this car, I was like, 'I want it now!' " Bakken said, watching Weston sit behind the wheel, a grin spreading across his youthful face.

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