



Dies'll be a hit

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I'VE SAID IT many times already, but I'll say it once again; diesel-powered cars aren't very popular in the USA. During the Seventies oil crisis, several manufacturers tried to introduce oil-burners to the US, believing that the low fuel consumption would be a sufficiently forceful argument, but American drivers took one look at the ugly plumes of black smoke, and took a big step backwards. Those who persevered had their confidence rewarded by lots of ungainly clattering during the milder seasons of the year and ominous silence during the depths of winter, when their vehicles failed to start.

The remaining diesel drivers who chose to live in a cloud of soot were clearly not bothered by the fact that many fuel stations didn't even stock diesel fuel, apart from those who did so for the benefit of heavy truck drivers. So, owners of such vehicles as the infamous, smoke-billowing Mercedes 240d had to fill up alongside colossal Mack trucks tended to be equally colossal, heavily tattooed gentlemen sporting bandanas and a questionable leer.

The tightening of emission laws, largely by the State of California, led to many diesel models being withdrawn from the market, with Mercedes for a while being the only European manufacturer to stay the course.

In the meantime, Europe forged onwards in the development of diesel engines and – this is a key factor – better diesel fuels. Diesel in the US was, until recently, sadly high in sulphur content, making it impossible for modern diesel engines, of the type developed by Audi, to run with anything like the required emission standards. However, since November 2006, all fuel stations are obliged by law to sell low-sulphur diesel. This legislative breakthrough having been achieved, the European (and by that read German) manufacturers have lost no time in shipping their diesels across the pond to the masses of Americans awaiting redemption from (relatively) soaring fuel prices.

Mercedes was the first, with its 3.2-litre V6 diesel unit, introduced last year in the E-Class. The same engine is also available now in the US in the R, M and GL classes. Audi's offering is coming somewhat later (as ever!). Towards the

end of 2008, it will launch the world's cleanest diesel ever, the Q7 3.0 TDI with ultra low emission system. This will be followed by similarly-powered versions of the A4 and the A5.

As part of its advance publicity, Audi joined forces with VW, Bosch and the German Association of Vehicle Manufacturers (VDA) to lay on a 'German TecDay' in San Francisco for opinion formers, the press and government lobbyists. The message – diesel is the way to a cleaner environment and to saving the US from the curse of foreign oil.

One impressive statistic being bandied about was that if a third of all light vehicles in the US were powered by diesel, it would save 1.4 billion barrels of crude oil per day. And, coincidentally, this happens to be exactly the same amount of oil that the US currently imports every day from Saudi Arabia. Funny, that!

As the hotbed of environmental activism and legislation, California was an obvious choice of venue. It is also one of the world's largest markets for the Toyota Prius, which has become the cool, PC badge of automotive environmentalism. Celebrities are delighted to be seen stepping onto red carpets from their environmentally-friendly hybrids and rarely question the somewhat dubious fuel consumption figures.

Audi's argument is that its TDI engines are just as frugal but much more fun to drive. Instead of something that'd look more at home on a fairground ride, you get to drive a real car, blessed with true Audi sporting characteristics. I had a spin in the Q7 3.0 TDI with ultra-low emission system and it was quiet-running, had lots of low-down torque and gave reasonable fuel consumption for such a large vehicle. It boasts 240 PS, 550 Nm of torque and returns just over 30 mpg.

But Audi is being careful not to put all of its environmental eggs into one diesel basket – at least not publicly. Also available for test driving was its Q7 hybrid. First revealed at this year's Frankfurt Show, it's a test bed for a new modular package of solutions for hybrid power. Although a full-size 7-seater SUV might not seem the most sensible application for hybrid motoring, it's certainly the most straightforward. Engineers had a much easier time packaging the extra electric motor and battery into the Q7 than they would've had with an A4. However, after much refinement and engineering, we're assured that Audi has now come up with a modular hybrid package capable of being applied to a large number of its models.

I also drove the Q7 hybrid, its colourful display showing where the power was coming from and, in the case of regenerative braking, where it was going to at any given point in time. It was also equipped with a start-stop system – if you pay close attention, you do indeed notice when the engine cuts out, but the 3.6-litre FSI engine is so quiet anyway that you could easily forget about the whole process.

As yet, Audi has no specific plans to bring its hybrid to market. Its position is that it is ready and able to do so as soon as 'convincing customer benefits can be established'. According to Audi, it 'sets particularly tough standards when it comes to hybrid drivelines – they must be able to stand up to the efficiency of its own in-house... guess what? ... 'TDI technology'.