

**THE LAKE WOEBEGONE BLUES:
WHERE CAN I BUY A GOOD GREEN CAR?**

By Nick Gier

My parents were much like the people in Lake Woebegone: they were obsessed with gas mileage. I remember visiting my rich uncle in Nebraska and being amazed that even he would coast down every hill. He was a hypermiler long before there was such a word. Our small family trust would be only a quarter of its size had it not been for Uncle "Scrooge" Arthur.

I also remember the day that my family bought a brand new 1950 Studebaker, with the famous twin torpedo styling. Buying new was unusual for us, because we always bought used. The reason we bought new was that the Studebaker got 20 miles to the gallon. Standard procedure on all long trips was my father stopping the car at the edge of town and reaching under the dash for the lever that engaged the overdrive.

Even with the advance in technology over 100 years, it is incredible to think that our cars can't do better on a gallon of gas. What amazes me even more is that when I ask people what their mileage is, most of them don't have a clue. I suspect that many Americans would not even know how to calculate it.

Henry Ford's Model T with 20 horsepower got 25 mpg in 1908. My 1970 Super Beetle with a 60 horsepower engine got only 27 mpg. My 1985 62-horse Tercel Wagon did better at 34 mpg. Although I love my Subaru Outback for North Idaho winters, I'm disappointed with the 27 mpg I get.

The 2007 U.S. fleet average was a mere 20.4 mpg compared to 40 mpg in Europe and 45 mpg in Japan. The Civil Society Institute reports that while overseas markets offer 113 cars that average 40 mpg, the American market has only two available—the Honda and Toyota hybrids. (The 40 mpg figure combines

highway and city driving.) Amazingly enough, many of these 113 models are made by American companies.

The excuse that American automakers give is that Americans wanted bigger cars, SUVs, and trucks and that they felt more safe in them. Average gas mileage actually peaked in 1988 before Americans convinced themselves, once again, of the old myth that big is always better and that being friends with Saudis sheiks was exotic.

Used SUVs are now, as one writer phrases it, piling up on "car lots like mini 21st-century replicas of deserted Rust Belt steel mills a few decades ago." NPR ran a story about a guy who was trying to downsize from two 403-horsepower Cadillac Escalades to one, hoping to recoup his \$52,000 equity in a \$70,000 vehicle. The highest bid at the auction was \$32,000. I hope that they keep all the rusting Hummers out of my sight.

Long ago high gas taxes forced Europeans to think seriously about fuel economy. (The 2008 American average state and federal tax is 8 cents per liter vs. 50 cents per liter in the UK.) I remember paying \$4 per gallon gas during my sabbatical in Denmark in 1978-9 when the price was 86 cents a home. As a result I used the car sparingly and I rode my bike or took buses and trains instead. Most of the Danish train system has now been electrified, so there has been huge savings there, especially when 20 percent of the power comes from wind mills.

In 2001 each European consumed an average 76 gallons of gas and diesel while each American burned an average of 429 gallons. President Bush was right when he exclaimed "We are the world's greatest polluters" at the end of the most recent G-8 meeting. As usual his frat boy antics were embarrassing.

European fuel taxes have also meant more money for high quality roads, public transportation, and passenger trains that run on average 81 mph faster than their American counterparts. The fastest are the French TGVs which have reached

357 mph in test runs. The added advantage is that most of the electricity for the French rail system comes from nuclear plants.

The main reason for the high fuel economy of European cars is that 40 percent of them are diesels, which are at least 30 percent more efficient than gas engines. With 97 percent less sulfur in the new blends and new exhaust systems, acceleration and fuel efficiency have improved and engine noise and air pollution are way down.

When I was in France two years ago I rented a Renault Megane diesel, ran the A/C the whole time in 100 degree weather, loved the 6-speed stick shift, and got 40 mpg overall in congested cities, freeways, and country roads.

Europeans are actually feeling less of a pinch at the pump than we are because their prices have gone up only 15 percent in a year while ours have gone up 33 percent. The main reason is that the dollar has reached a new low against the Euro and oil prices are of course set in dollars. High general taxation has not destroyed the European economy, and high fuel taxes specifically have forced Europeans to conserve, innovate, and switch to alternative energy.

After the driving fun in France, I thought that my next car would be a European diesel. But \$5 per gallon has killed that idea, and besides we all have to kick our petroleum habit. I've decided that my next car has to be a plug-in hybrid, and then the one after that pure electric.