An Electric Driving Experience

Bob Arora

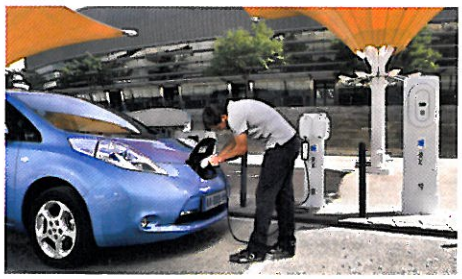
The new Nissan Leaf: car of the future

The car I have had the pleasure in driving this month is the new Nissan Leaf, courtesy of Benfield Nissan, Portland Road, Newcastle.

I really believe Nissan have launched the Leaf at the right time. The price of petrol is just going through the roof and there seems to be no end to the constant price rises. It is only a matter of time before petrol hits the doomed £2.00 per litre.

I was one of the lucky few people invited to the Nissan factory to drive the prototype version. After the briefest of drives I could not wait to drive the Leaf for a few days.

There was a time when, if anyone mentioned electric cars, the first thing that would spring to mind would be either milk floats or mobility scooters; how times have changed. Before the launch of the Leaf, the Toyota Prius was always the must-have accessory of Hollywood's 'A' list. I am sure the launch of the Leaf will change this.



The Leaf has won some major awards; the first piece of silverware was the Green Car Vision award in 2010. Recently it beat off stiff competition to win the European Car of the Year award in 2011. The icing on the cake for Nissan has to be winning the World Car of the Year award.

Most people would expect an electric car to be slow and sluggish. The Leaf is more of a "pocket rocket". Acceleration from 0-50mph is nothing short of phenomenal, moving off from traffic lights you give boy racers a real shock (pardon the pun!).

The car's top speed is an impressive 93mph and it gets to 60mph in an impressive 11 seconds. To give you some idea of the car's power, it has the same torque as the Porsche Boxster S. The leaf is powered by two electric motors and a raft of lithium batteries - when you drive the car it seems unbelievable that there is no combustion engine in it.

STARTING THE CAR IS QUITE SURREAL as there is literally no noise whatsoever, luckily the dashboard lights up and a musical sound alerts you. The usual dials that most drivers expect to see are present in the Leaf. Obviously the speedometer takes centre stage, on the right hand side a battery range, not dissimilar to a fuel gauge and the left hand side has a battery temperature gauge. The car's gear selector is very futuristic looking and it looks more like a computer mouse and is very easy to use.

Apart from the gear selector and the futuristic display dials, the Leaf is quite normal looking inside. The cars velour interior is quite retro and I am surprised Nissan did not fit leather instead. I was a little disappointed with the car's plastic trim, especially compared to its rivals. The car's steering is quite vague and the brakes are a little spongy. The heavy motors and equally heavy batteries obviously have an effect on handling and the car does not like being thrown into corners. Nissan have put the batteries under the passenger seats to try and make the car's handling the best possible.

The rear passengers have more than enough room, but boot space is slightly compromised by the batteries. Although saying that, the boot still has 300 litres of space. This leaves you more than enough room for the supermarket run or for your golf clubs.

Unlike any petrol or diesel cars, the Leaf does not make any noise at all. The obvious problem is pedestrians simply cannot hear you coming up behind them. To get over this problem, Nissan have fitted a digital warning noise to alert passengers below 15mph.

The Leaf's trump card is its impressive running costs: a full charge takes around 10 hours but it costs around £2.00 for about a 100-mile range. The car can be charged from a normal socket. You may have spotted quite a few charging points around Newcastle. You could effectively do your shopping and charge your car at the same time. The Metro Centre and Benfield Nissan garage have a rapid charger that allows you to charge your car in half an hour. This gives the car a range of 80 miles. This car is ideal for driving around town. If you do less than 80 miles a day, this car is the one for you. According to Nissan's figures, most people do less than 56 miles a day! (They clearly are not quoting me in this bracket!)

Charging the car for the first time was really easy and it quickly drew an inquisitive crowd with plenty of questions. The charging point is at the front of the car, one charging point is for a three-pin plug and the other is for the express charge. Driving the car at speed eats into the battery range and therefore the Leaf is not really at home on the motorway.

Driving the car in Eco mode helps improve battery range, but it reduces the car's performance. Most drivers can download an app to charge their car at the lowest electric tariffs, the car's heater can be operated while it is being charged and not eating into precious battery life. As you may expect, the car has excellent specifications with satellite navigation, reverse camera and Bluetooth phone connectivity. The car's only option is a solar panel on the rear spoiler. The batteries have a five-year warranty and they should retain at least 70% of their battery life after 10 years.

The car costs £25,990 with a £5,000 incentive from the government. After driving this car I honestly think Nissan's best selling point has to be the excellent running costs. Once battery range gets to 350 miles, I personally believe the combustion engine will be a thing of the past.

This car is the future and I can't wait for Nissan to bring out a battery-powered GTR!

If you are interested in further information regarding this car, please log on to the website:

www.drivebenfield.com

Bob Arora is an ambassador for Benfield Motor Group.