

Reduce, Reuse, Bi-cycle - Cutting Petrol Consumption

Contributed by Lozzie

The developed world's love-affair with the motor car is having a bit of marital strife at the moment, following the devastation caused to American oil refining capabilities by Hurricane Katrina, and the worsening political and economic situation in the Middle East.

I filled up my car - a modest Renault Scenic - this morning and it cost me more than £40.00. I sighed. When the assistant in the shop asked me how I would be paying, I replied "Through the nose, thanks." She didn't bat an eyelid. No doubt she had heard it many times before.

I rely on my car to run my business - frequently travelling about 200 miles a day, maybe two or three times a week. Clearly, I cannot do without my car (at the moment) and, until I change to a diesel vehicle and discover a local supplier of bio-diesel, I am reliant upon petrol, too.

So what can I do?

The obvious answer is to minimise the use of my car as much as possible, making sure I do not use it gratuitously, and save the petrol for when I do need it, for work. Since moving to Dorset from West London five years ago, I have found I need use my car considerably less than before. Schools, church, local shops/pub, allotment, playing fields and Post Office are all within easy walking distance. For now. But life may not always be so simple! Children grow up and change schools; two churches near here have been demolished to make way for houses in the last 6 months, allotments are under continued threat of development ... you get my drift? I need to make sure that I can remain mobile and independent. For which I need a car.

Environmentally sound driving is big news at the moment. In the recent budget, Chancellor Gordon Brown put in place a higher rate of tax for cars emitting higher levels of pollution. As I write this paragraph, the radio in the kitchen is announcing that forecourt prices of unleaded petrol are now at a record high, at just over 96p per litre.

Clearly, people who drive big cars, too fast, will end up paying more for the privilege of doing so. The government recently set aside £1.3m to help 'educate' bad drivers to use their vehicles and their fuel more efficiently. The Driving Standards Agency requires driving instructors to take on board and teach something they call 'eco-safe' driving, which is said to improve safety as well as minimising fuel consumption. Environmentally gentle driving may even become part Highway Code and the driving test.

So, what can I do in order to minimise the number of times I get attacked and robbed by an unassuming-looking petrol pump? Sounds like one of the monsters in an episode of Doctor Who. Is the answer really to trade in my nice little girlie motor and get a diesel job, then set up a bio-fuel still in my pleasant suburban double-fronted mock Tudor garage? Er, I don't think so.

Reduce, Reuse, Bi-cycle

The first thing I did was check out local public transport. I was surprised. When we moved here originally, public transport was as decreed as it is all over the British Isles (so it seems), with bus companies staggering and convulsing, on the verge of breathing their last. But it appears that in the ensuing vacuum, a new company or two sprang up and immediately started filling the route gaps. I was a bit cynical about this as I had heard tales of new companies putting flashy new buses on loads of new routes, developing a high profile and seeming to run services every five minutes to all the most local areas, and then slowly but surely reducing the service over the following months to a level that was more economically profitable for them. For the moment though, my neck of the woods is well served by buses, but I cannot help feeling that we are enjoying a romantic honeymoon period and the frequency and duration of our passion will fade somewhat as the relationship matures. Public transport is often not an option for people travelling to work, but for leisure travel it is worth considering when possible.

Nevertheless: I do urge you to keep abreast of public transport in your area, even if you tried it a while ago and found it to be rubbish - do give it a go again. In many cases, local public transport (most especially buses) could only have got better.

I do have a bicycle. It is in the garage. I have not yet summoned the courage to dig it out and try riding it again - mostly when not using the car I rely on buses and Shanks' Pony. But I will use my bike. I will, honest.

Moving swiftly on:

There are one or two cunning tricks you can employ then driving your car that help to conserve petrol, too. I've been trying them out. Here, in no particular order:-

Slow down

If it is safe to do so, travelling at 50mph as opposed to 70mph (or even faster!) on a motorway conserves a lot of fuel. Additionally, I have found I often arrive at my destination feeling a lot more relaxed than I would have done travelling at 70-odd. It means I need to leave my house approximately 15-20 minutes earlier than I might have done, which luckily isn't really a problem. It was hard for me to slow down at first as I freely admit to having been a bit of a speed freak in the past.

Get the Right Gear

Sorry - this is not an instruction to go out shopping for the most fashionable and expensive style of eco-driving clothing (although if you want to buy British organic hemp clothing from an approved supplier to use when driving, I have no complaint).

I use the highest gear I can without making the engine grumble, and frequently miss out 4th altogether - switching straight from 3rd to 5th. This has the added bonus of making me appear very cool to my passenger. It is also important to use as few "revs" (No. Not vicars) as possible - as revving the car engine simply uses fuel for nothing whatsoever. Plus it makes other drivers think you are a boy racer, which patently I am not.

Manoeuvre when Hot

The engine works more efficiently when it is warm. Hey, don't we all? As such, it is good to try and avoid lots of fiddly manoeuvring, reversing and 12-point turns, when you first start the car. I solved this one by remembering to reverse into my driveway when I get home, meaning that I drive straight out when my engine is cold. I try and do the same wherever I park up.

Unburden yourself

If a car is an extension of the male ego, it can also be said to be an extension of the female handbag. It was time to do a Life Laundry on the car, too - getting rid of all those silly little bits of stuff I had in there and was certain I would need, but actually never had. It is all excess baggage. Needless to say I left in the essentials - spare tyre, first aid kit, hazard triangle and plug-in curling tongs. But most everything else - including the obligatory kitchen sink (so THAT'S where it was!) - had to go.

Travel exclusively, tread lightly

No self-respecting Downsizer wants to be seen out in their car at a time when there are lots and lots of other people out to witness it, and so it really is best to avoid the rush-hour. There are solid environmental reasons for this, too; stopping and starting all the time is hard work for the engine, gear box and clutch (not to mention the human components of the car). I always plan my route - the AA and the RAC (amongst others) offer a free service for this now:

http://www.theaa.com/travelwatch/planner_main.jsp

<http://rp.rac.co.uk/rp/routeplanner>

I try very hard to "read" the traffic and the roads I am on as efficiently as I can, so for example I use uphill gradients to help me slow down (instead of brakes) or speed up (starting off from a standstill on a downhill slope in 2nd gear and easing up the clutch as the car reaches the right speed), easing off the accelerator in plenty of time when approaching a junction. Don't watch the car in front of you, my driving instructor used to say to me. Look at the one in front. It helps you anticipate the speed of traffic flow and adjust your speed accordingly - the more you can avoid starting and stopping, the more fuel you can save.

Once, on a family holiday in the Italian Alps, when getting horribly low on fuel, my father tried "free wheeling" - disengaging the clutch and simply coasting along under the momentum of the car - on some of the gentler down slopes. I suspect there are laws against this sort of thing, as you are effectively not in control of the vehicle when travelling in this manner, but in Italy you can drive anyhow you like provided you wave a white cloth out of the car window and pretend you are ferrying someone to hospital. It worked. I tried the technique (minus the white hanky) recently on some of Dorset's undulating hilly bits, and saved a fair bit of fuel, but I think modern cars nowadays can develop problems with the battery charging system, if you try and do it too often. I've been driving without major incident for over 20 years, and I cannot say that this is a good technique to try if you are NOT an experienced driver.

No doubt someone will tell me if I am wrong about this, won't you boys?

If I am unavoidably stuck waiting for a bridge or a ferry or an entire school crossing the road in a crocodile at one time, then I switch off the engine altogether, and glare meaningfully at anyone around me who doesn't follow suit. You can imagine I have made several life-long friends in this manner.

Streamline!

See, Superman was wrong to wear his underpants on the outside, and to wear a cape. Both those things would have had an impact on the aerodynamics of his body shape, causing additional drag and slowing him down. Or, in the case of

your car, making you use more fuel to travel at any given speed. I needed to decrease my wind resistance.

After a great deal of scrabbling around in the garage, I finally found the Allen key I needed and took off my roof-rack bars. I also regularly take the back seats out of the car when it is only me using it - that was one of the selling points of this make and model for me as comparable cars had seats that folded away but stayed in the car nonetheless. The three rear seats and the boot shelf thingy in my car weigh an absolute ton. They stay in the garage when not in use. Like most English people, my garage is used for everything except storing the car in, but don't tell my insurance brokers.

It is also important to keep your sun-roof and windows closed when travelling at speed - although be warned; cars with air-conditioning systems use extra fuel to run those systems. I have found travelling with just the ordinary ventilation fans going instead is almost as good. Short of avoiding travelling during the hottest parts of the day, I don't know what else to suggest.

Paying Maintenance

It really is important to keep your car maintained regularly, for safety reasons as well as environmental ones. In particular, where fuel efficiency is concerned, I had to make sure my petrol cap was tight-fitting (petrol evaporates rapidly - only fill up when you really need to!) and make sure my tyres were inflated properly (this was tricky to calculate, as the weight of my car tends to fluctuate pretty wildly). I used a foot pump, and now have thighs like Wayne Rooney as a result, but at least I can cancel my gym membership this summer. I'm hoping Sven will pick me for the England squad instead.

Are you still not convinced of the need to drive in an environmentally gentle manner? Well, how about I appeal to your wallets instead of your feelings of guilt regarding the state of the planet. The Department for Transport recently calculated that drivers of commercial diesel vehicles like vans could cut 10% off their fuel bills (about £500 a year), simply by adjusting the way they drive. I can't see the archetypal White Van Man being keen to change his ways for the sake of a load of trees and fluffy bunnies, but a direct impact on the contents of his cash box might just be enough to tip the balance.

The Driving Standards Agency claims that changing your driving habits in this way could save the average driver 1.5 litres of fuel for every 62 miles. For the fluffy bunny lovers - think about this: Drivers who cover 20,000 miles per annum and who change the way they drive could reduce their carbon emissions by a staggering quarter of a tonne PER CAR. How can you refuse?

Go on, break up with your car.

More Interesting Stuff.

The Walking Bus

Why not encourage your local school to cut the numbers of children travelling by car?

<http://www.walkingbus.com/>

<http://www.school-run.org/>

Driving Standards Agency

A small statement on the DSA's commitment to improving driver awareness of environmentally friendly driving techniques

http://www.dsa.gov.uk/Road_safety.asp

Department for Transport

http://www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_sustravel/documents/page/dft_sustravel_611384.hcsp

A list of documents relating to their Sustainable Travel policy

Transport 2000

“New Life for Main Roads” Network

<http://www.newlifeformainroads.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=53>

Some good links to other sites with details on cutting down your use of your car

Car Sharing schemes

<http://www.liftshare.org/>

<http://www.nationalcarshare.co.uk/>

<http://www.shareacar.com/>

DFT guidelines

http://www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_sustravel/documents/divisionhomepage/035125.hcsp