

Program introduces electric rental cars in Orlando (Update)

September 5 2013, by Tamara Lush



This Sept. 4, 2013 photo shows an electric car at a charge point in front of city hall in Orlando, Fla. On Thursday, Sept. 5, Orlando will be home to a first-of-its-kind electric rental car initiative where hotel partners will valet park the electric rental for free and charge it for you. Orlando already has more than 300 stations in the area. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

Visitors to Orlando often try new things while on vacation: thrilling roller coasters, luxury hotels, different cuisines.

Now they can try out a fully electric car—and not have to pay for gas during their vacation.

Under a new program announced Thursday called Drive Electric Orlando, anyone who rents one of 15 Nissan Leaf cars from Enterprise Rent-A-Car will be able to charge the car for free. There are about 300 charging stations in the greater Orlando area, with many located at hotels, near theme parks and even downtown outside of City Hall.

"This is a first of its kind. This is groundbreaking," said Robbie Diamond, the president and CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based Electrification Coalition, a group that worked with Enterprise, several hotels, corporations and local officials to organize the program.

The group, whose aim is to get more people behind the wheel of electric cars, is made up of business executives, including some from Nissan—which means they have an interest in marketing the rental cars in hopes of courting future buyers.

"Our hope is that it's a revolutionary project—once we get people in the car, we're confident that the technology will sell itself," Diamond said.

Here's how it works: Once a driver rents the Leaf (at a cost of about \$30 a day or less) at the Enterprise counter at the Orlando International Airport, they can stop at any of the kiosks in the area when the car has a low charge. More than 25 hotels, including The Peabody Orlando and Renaissance Orlando, have charging stations, and valets will charge the cars overnight. Other large public places, such as the Orlando Convention Center, have charging stations in the parking lot.



This Sept. 4, 2013 photo shows Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer driving a new electric rental car in Orlando, Fla. On Thursday, Sept. 5, Orlando will be home to a first-of-its-kind electric rental car initiative where hotel partners will even valet park the electric rental for free and charge it for you. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

There are no charging stations inside the area's theme parks, but there are many nearby—and organizers say more charging stations are "in the works." Renters are more likely to charge their vehicles at hotels overnight, they said.

If the car runs low on power while on the road, its dashboard screen displays the nearest charging stations. If the vehicle's battery dies entirely, then AAA will come to charge the car for free, said Lisa Martini, a spokeswoman for Enterprise Rent-A-Car.

The cars have a range of about 80 to 100 miles (about 130 to 160 kilometers) on a full charge. All of the details, including how to plug the

car into a charging station, are fully explained to the renter at the Enterprise counter, said Martini.

"We want people to be comfortable with the technology," she said.



This Sept. 4, 2013 photo shows the screen of a charge point for a new electric rental car in Orlando, Fla. On Thursday, Sept. 5, Orlando will be home to a first-of-its-kind electric rental car initiative where hotel partners will valet park the electric rental for free and charge it for you. Orlando already has more than 300 stations in the area. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

Diamond, along with other officials, say that many people like the idea

of fully electric vehicles like the Leaf or the Chevy Volt, but are worried about how far the car's battery will go.

Electric car sales are only a tiny fraction of overall U.S. auto sales. Automakers sold just over 12,000 pure-electric vehicles in the U.S. through April, according to WardsAuto InfoBank, an industry database, and Tesla Motors, which designs electric vehicles. That's less than 1 percent of the 4.97 million cars and trucks sold during the same period. Even a \$7,500 tax credit from the U.S. government that effectively lowers prices couldn't persuade most car buyers.

The Nissan Leaf sells for \$29,650 including shipping costs, although the company does offer \$199 monthly leases with \$1,999 down.



This Sept. 4, 2013 photo shows Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer connecting a charging cable to a new electric rental car in Orlando, Fla. On Thursday, Sept. 5, Orlando will be home to a first-of-its-kind electric rental car initiative where hotel partners will valet park the electric rental for free and charge it for you.

(AP Photo/John Raoux)

Renting a car and driving it while on vacation or on a business trip is a "try before you buy" scenario, said Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, who took reporters on a cruise around downtown Orlando on a recent day in a Leaf.

He pointed out the charging station in front of City Hall, at the Amway Center—where many concerts and sporting events are held—and at other county-owned locations, all within a 2-mile (3.2-kilometer) radius of downtown. At one location, he popped the car's tiny hood and clicked a charging "pump" into the socket.



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Dyer noted that Orlando is one of the most-visited destinations in the U.S. and said it is the nation's largest rental car market.

"It gives them an option to try out an electric car and see how easy it is to use and get rid of that range anxiety," he said.

While the big money-saver from using the electric car is avoiding the cost of gas altogether, getting the charge for free also saves a bit of cash. Some public meters cost \$2.50 for a full charge, while others are free but require payment for parking at a meter. Under the rental program, drivers wave a key fob at the charger to proceed without paying.

More information: www.driveelectricorlando.com

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