

Hybrids, small SUVs, sense of relief at Frankfurt

September 9 2013, by David Mchugh



Veiled cars stand on the grounds during preparations for the International Motor Show IAA in Frankfurt, Germany, Sunday Sept. 8, 2013. The 65th IAA features more than 1,000 exhibitors from around the world and takes place from Sept. 12 to Sept. 22, 2013. (AP Photo/dpa, Boris Roessler)

The world's automakers are showing off their shiniest, most advanced vehicles at the Frankfurt Auto Show, which opens this week. Among the 70 world premieres are a notable number of new cars powered either by batteries or hybrid gas-electric systems. There are also outlandish concept cars that flaunt technology and design but aren't intended for sale.

It's all spread over 230,000 square meters—about 32 soccer fields—at the sprawling Frankfurt Messe exhibition center. The show, held every other year, attracted 928,000 visitors back in 2011.

Read: [Hybrids, concept cars generate auto show buzz](#)

Here's what to look for:

PLUGGED IN: The show has a slew of new battery-powered electrics and hybrids—which combine electric motors with internal combustion engines. However, they also come with uncertain sales and profit prospects. Both types of car cost more, and pure electrics can give consumers "range anxiety," or the fear of running out of power.

That fear is a reason that plug-in cars such as GM's Volt and Nissan's Leaf have struggled to win market share in the U.S. after three years on sale. And gasoline hybrids are a tough sell in Europe, where people can get good mileage using cheaper cars running on diesel fuel. Electrics and hybrids are less than 0.2 percent of vehicle registrations there.

Some of the vehicles being displayed are speedy high performers in luxury price categories—which makes sense in a way. Electric motors can supply quick acceleration, while high-end consumers are more able to pay.



A veiled Alfa Romeo car stands on the grounds of the International Motor Show IAA in Frankfurt , Germany, Sunday Sept. 8, 2013. The 65th IAA features more than 1,000 exhibitors from around the world and takes place from Sept. 12 to Sept. 22 , 2013. (AP Photo/dpa, Boris Roessler)

BMW has the i8, a hybrid sports car that uses carbon-fiber parts to save weight so it can accelerate from 0 to 62 mph (0-100 kph) in just 4.5 seconds. Audi has a hybrid concept of its venerable Quattro model, with a whopping 700 horsepower and top speed of 190 mph (305 kph). Toyota's souped-up concept version of its Yaris compact comes with three electric motors and a 4-cylinder engine that can belt out 400 horsepower.

Even Volkswagen, long skeptical of electric vehicles, is rolling out an electric version of its flagship Golf hatchback and another of its tiny Up! city car.

Ferdinand Dudenhoeffer, professor of automotive economics at the

University of Duisburg-Essen, says hybrids may help companies meet European Union fleet average emissions standards, even if sales are modest. Electrics have limited sales prospects so long as diesels are cheaper. He says VW will be lucky to sell 20,000 e-Golfs and the company may regard the car more as a demonstration of technological prowess than as a potential sales winner.

"The signal is, we don't want to sell this car," Dudenhoeffer says. "We just want to show we can do this."



A covered Maserati stands on the grounds of the International Motor Show IAA in Frankfurt, Germany, Sunday Sept. 8, 2013. The 65th IAA features more than 1,000 exhibitors from around the world and takes place from Sept. 12 to Sept. 22, 2013. (AP Photo/dpa, Boris Roessler)

WHEW, WE MADE IT: The mood at the show will be the recession is

over "and we survived," says analyst Christoph Stuermer at IHS Automotive. Sales in the United States, a key market for automakers worldwide, are finally back to pre-recession levels and could reach 16 million this year, according to figures released Thursday. EU sales are headed for just under 12 million this year—far below the 2007 level of 15.6 million.

Still, there's hope that sales have at least bottomed. The 17 countries that use the euro emerged from an 18-month recession in the second quarter.

SMALL SUVs: It's a hot category as more manufacturers try to emulate the success of vehicles like the BMW X1, Opel Mokka and Dacia Duster. These SUV-styled vehicles have muscular styling such as bigger wheel wells and a higher seat for the driver, but are built on small-car platforms. Mercedes will unveil its GLA small SUV and Lexus will feature the LF-NX concept—using Toyota's successful hybrid drive system.

Since 2009, SUVs have doubled their market share in Germany, the biggest European auto market, from 7 percent to around 16 percent.



A Toyota Auris Hybrid model is on display during preparations for t the International Motor Show IAA in Frankfurt, Germany, Sunday Sept. 8, 2013. The 65th IAA features more than 1,000 exhibitors from around the world and takes place from Sept. 12 to Sept. 22 , 2013. (AP Photo/dpa,Boris Roessler)

THE CONNECTED CAR: Linking the car to the Internet, smart phones or GPS services is billed as a theme of the show. But there's not a lot to see—yet.

One car on display at the show, the new Mercedes S-Class luxury sedan, can already drive on its own in stop-and-go traffic to reduce driver fatigue—although it quickly reminds drivers to put their hands back on the wheel. Other carmakers are aiming for similar levels of driver assistance, but technological and legal barriers remain.



Workers clean an Aston Martin car during preparations for the International Motor Show IAA in Frankfurt Germany, Sunday Sept. 8, 2013. The 65th IAA features more than 1,000 exhibitors from around the world and takes place from Sept. 12 to Sept. 22 , 2013. (AP Photo/dpa, Boris Roessler)

In the U.S. and Europe, manufacturers are already testing technology that would allow cars to communicate with each other and the infrastructure around. Mercedes calls it "car-to-x communication" and it would warn a driver of obstacles, like an overturned truck ahead, or anomalies, like a car heading into oncoming traffic, before they can be seen. The German company is putting cars equipped with this technology on the road this year. It's all part of a push to make driving safer.

Still, even if all the trials go smoothly and regulators force manufacturers to adopt such technology, it could take years before it reaches the market.

Maybe something for the next Frankfurt Auto Show in 2015.

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