

Small is beautiful: Japan's hand-made electric cars

March 4 2010, by Karyn Poupee



An environment-friendly car built by hand by a small family-run business at their garage-workshop in the snowy foothills of northwestern Toyama prefecture on February 24, 2010. While auto manufacturing giants spend millions to develop environmentally-friendly electric cars, one Japanese company has taken a more low-key approach, crafting hand-made "green" cars.

While auto manufacturing giants spend millions to develop environmentally-friendly electric cars, one Japanese company has taken a more low-key approach, crafting hand-made "green" cars.

Takeoka Jidosha Kogei may be the antithesis of the world's Hondas and Nissans. The family-run business makes its cars from scratch in a garage workshop in the snowy foothills in the northwest of the country.

There are no industrial robots or assembly lines in sight. Instead just a

dozen mechanics crafting each model by hand, right up to the finishing touch of adding a set of beady headlights to their "Milieu" range.

The cars seem to owe much of their design to Japan's manga cartoon tradition -- their one-seater T-10 seems barely large enough for an adult driver, with just enough extra room left for a small pet, as requested by customers.

The box-shaped two-door car -- which is dubbed the "Eco-beagle" and comes in green, white, red and canary yellow -- has a relatively affordable price tag of 856,000 yen (9,600 dollars).

Company head Manabu Takeoka said he wants to change the image of minicars, which he said "are generally viewed as cars for the elderly, or for drivers who had their normal licences removed due to drunken driving".

"We've improved the shape of our latest model to make it cuter, to attract younger clients," he said.

Like other electric cars, it runs on a lithium-ion battery. It can also be charged from a conventional wall socket.

The latest model can drive up to 70 kilometres (45 miles) at 60 kilometres per hour when fully charged.

Takeoka's cars are aimed at rural households, which often have more than one car, as opposed to the cities, where more people opt for public transport to avoid the cost of parking.

The Takeoka lineup includes six models made from lightweight fibre-reinforced plastic, ranging from one- to four-seater cars. They measure less than three meters (10 feet) and weigh between 300 and 740

kilograms (660 to 1,600 pounds).

"People who buy our cars use them primarily to run errands or go shopping a few hundred metres from their homes. They don't need to charge the cars on the road if they already did so at home," said Takeoka.

Takeoka began its business in 1981 by building minicars for the disabled.

It started developing the electric cars in the 1990s with help from the local electricity company. Nearby Toyama University has since come on board, helping design the models.

The company also makes electric minicars specially designed for railway companies to inspect tunnels.

The [electric cars](#) may be a novelty, but they are unlikely to take the world by storm anytime soon, with sales currently at around 100 vehicles per year.

Asked whether there are plans to ramp up production, Takeoka exclaimed: "The company cannot build that many!"

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