

Zero emissions

REVA ELECTRIC CAR HITS THE HUNGARIAN ROAD

“It’s not a theory or a plan. It’s here now – a third-generation electric vehicle,” says Zoltán Palotai, salesman for the Reva Electric Car – the first ready-to-drive, zero-emissions vehicle available in Hungary. The pioneering company is developing the infrastructure and piquing consumer interest for the electric vehicles, which may pave the way for more environmentally friendly products or local manufacturing opportunities. **BY MARISA BEAHM**

DRAWING FROM POPULAR films, one would expect shoppers to scream and dive out of the path of a car barreling through a mall. But when the Reva car coasts through Arena Plaza, people stop in their tracks and stare as the nearly silent, brilliant-yellow vehicle passes them. “It’s really awesome to drive, but people ask, ‘What if someone crashes into you?’” Palotai says. “Well, everyone just stops and stares, so they won’t crash into me, but I’m worried they’ll crash into each other.”

For the summer, the mall is Reva’s Budapest headquarters, where customers can test-drive the car and view its vibrant exterior and comfortable leather interior. The Reva was designed in California, but made its debut in India in 2001, where it’s still headquartered. Although the vehicle just entered the Hungarian market in June – with sales points in Budapest and Debrecen – it already achieved success in other European markets, especially in London with more than 1,000 cars sold. In total, there are about 3,000 models on the road worldwide, according to reva.hu.

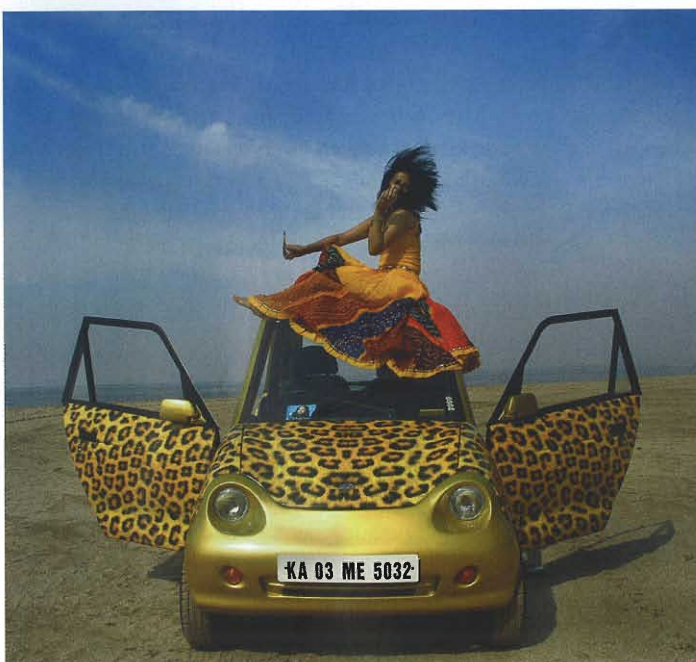
In Hungary, Reva is distributed through Comtex, which is composed of a small group of companies with diverse interests like

textiles and fashion merchandise to medical instruments. This year, the local sales team has a goal of selling 100 cars, which are retailing for €12,500 and take two to four months to manufacture, according to Palotai. “It works in London, so it just needs time,” he says.

There is no way that this car will not appeal to Hungarians, says János Szabó, Comtex CEO. “The current motorization is not sustainable, and the Reva is cool, the Reva is friendly. It is the perfect vehicle for city use. And it is small, but big enough to save our world.”

ON THE ROAD

DRIVING THE AUTOMATIC “plug and play” Reva is as simple as driving a golf cart, says Palotai. The driver only needs to release the hand brake, turn a circular dial to put it in drive, and step on the so-called gas pedal. Although compact, the two-door hatchback car can comfortably fit two adults in the front seats and the small back seats can easily accommodate two children, or they can be folded down for extra storage space. The car has been driven by people as tall as 205 cm, Palotai adds.



The Reva, which is made for inner-city travel, can reach 80 km per hour, yet its acceleration is nearly noiseless, and it's completely silent when still. While reducing noise pollution is one of the vehicle's perks, its main appeal is that it doesn't pollute. "It's the best feeling when you drive it in the city, and it doesn't poison the air," Palotai says. "When I'm back in my regular car, I feel bad and the gasoline stinks."

Not only are there zero direct emissions, there is a very small indirect emission caused from old-fashioned power stations, Szabó says. "The next good news is, as long as the electricity mix is going to be greener by setting up more and more renewable power station plants, your electric vehicle will be automatically greener in indirect emissions too," Szabó says. There are plans to make the Reva even more environmentally friendly, such as putting solar panels on the roof, which has already been done with a few test cars.

Whatever the electricity source, it has no local pollution, and the car's body and bumpers are made of recycled plastic and biodegradable materials. Furthermore, its used batteries are recycled through a reclamation process, according to Reva. A depleted battery can be fully charged within eight hours, and 80% charged in two hours, using a standard electrical cord. "At first I thought it would be difficult to charge, but then I realized electricity is everywhere," says Palotai, who usually charges it in a garage, but has even charged it at a coffee shop.

INCENTIVES

CURRENTLY IN HUNGARY, there is no direct competition to this electric car, says Szabó. And while this singularity is beneficial to their business, it also means that Reva must lay the groundwork for the market and infrastructure.

In the future, Reva leaders have expressed a desire to build a European assembly plant in order to reduce carbon emissions from shipping vehicles, and Hungary could be a potential site, Szabó says. Thus, Comtex is working on the Hungarian business plan and cooperating with the governmental authorities, he adds.

For now, Comtex has begun conversations with decision makers to try and establish incentives so the cars are more appealing, such as electric charging stations or free parking in some districts, Szabó says. "There was no need for such incentives until this time, since there were no available commercial electrical vehicles in Hungary. But now it begins," he says. Also, he is negotiating with the government to give cash subsidies to the buyers of electric vehicles, of about 25-30%.

"We are negotiating with governmental decision makers as well as local governments. I am sure they will support it," says Szabó. However, even if the government doesn't support the Reva directly, their mission and aim is to gain support for the wider use of environmentally friendly electrical vehicles. ★



CUTTING-EDGE CARS

Although they have not yet become commercially available, there are other Hungarian-designed low-emission vehicles on the horizon. One Hungarian-designed series of cars is the Bontino. These electric cars for inner-city use are being manufactured in Austria by Brixxon Electric Motorcars. The company will start manufacturing about 150 cars, including two different models, in September which will cost between €9,200-14,000, depending on the type of batteries, according to Sándor László Horváth, Brixxon CEO. The company is also creating solar-powered recharging stations and has plans to produce an electric truck and an urban tourist car.

In the hybrid market, there are novel designs being created by Antro, a nonprofit. Their cars include the large family car (the Duo) that can be separated to two identical mini-cars, called the Solo. Antro should start manufacturing in 2012, according to Zsolt Hegedűs, engineer and managing owner. This car will be able to run on vegetable oil and alcohol, as well as its electric motor, and solar cells on the roof will charge the car. Yet because of its sleek design, it will only use a quarter of the gasoline needed for standard autos. And what really sets the Antro design apart is its fitness component. The car will include a pedal generator, which gives the driver an option of powering the vehicle by cycling. Slated to start its manufacturing in 2012, the price of the car will be between €12-18,000, and the first plant will be built in Hungary.

Hybrid cars have an advantage to electric cars, because they can pass 700-900 km with one single refueling or recharging, whereas a solely electric car can only go about 150-205 km, says Hegedűs. "So we can say that the electric cars will remain in a city car category, until the new batteries will be significantly cheaper and have a bigger capacity," Hegedűs adds.