

## The electric car and the Caribbean

Could the Caribbean become a location where innovative new technologies might be trialled or developed in ways that offer the region and the tourism industry comparative advantage?

One interesting possibility of a technology that is new, developing rapidly, and is of particular relevance to small islands and discrete locations, is the all-electric vehicle. Known as EVs, a number of companies in the Caribbean are beginning to import these cars and vans for general use.

In one tourism related example, Cayman Automotive recently announced that they had received a first order for electric cars for use on Cayo Largo, the tourist island off Cuba's south coast about 50 miles south of Havana, that is being developed as a fully eco-friendly tourist destination. The five to ten vehicle initial shipment is intended to service the destination's seven hotels which are linked by a single paved road.

According to the company, if the test order proves successful, further vehicles are likely to be supplied to three neighbouring Cuban islands and eventually nationwide. The vehicles, which can travel at a maximum speed of 25 miles per hour, have been purchased by Transtur with the related charging stations being purchased separately.

In Cayman itself, EVs are also available for rental alongside hybrids and other vehicles from Budget-Rent-A-Car which has shown an interest in marketing an emissions-free choice that they promote to visitors as helping to protect the islands natural environment.

Another interesting example is in Barbados, though not yet aimed specifically at sales to the tourism sector, a young dynamic company Megapower Ltd is selling and operating EVs. The company imports the all Electric Nissan LEAF, builds and manages solar carports, and is in the process of establishing a growing network of electric vehicle charging stations strategically located across the island.

The company's owners, Joanna Edghill and Simon Richards, say that Barbados, with its relatively short driving distances and constant sunshine make the island and the Caribbean more generally, an ideal location in which to operate electric cars recharged by the sun.

Ms Edghill believes that the region may be the best place in the world for the mass adoption of EVs; especially in those nations that are small size, have relatively flat terrain, an abundance of solar energy, and are reliant on imported petroleum products.

That said, electric cars do not yet make sense everywhere in the region, and need to overcome a number of constraints of both a practical and local nature if they are to become a part of the Caribbean's marketing offer, whether for tourism or in relation to the way in which governments present the region internationally as an all but zero carbon emitter.

The biggest obvious challenge is technical, but likely to be overcome before too long as almost every major motor manufacturer is working on moving beyond hybrids to full EVs that will have greater range between charging and higher speeds.

From a regional perspective, however, the challenges relate to recharging, taxation and those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo.

Most vehicles presently available in the Caribbean have a range of around one hundred miles making the development of recharging points essential. This ideally requires the development of solar panel recharging centres, costs to fall, and solar to be incentivised and encouraged.

However, the biggest obstacle to developing a greener presence are very high import duties on EVs and related equipment and governments' reluctance to show the leadership or vision that would enable tourism dependent nations in the Eastern Caribbean to capture internationally media attention and visitor imagination.

Hoteliers in one way or another are anxious to establish their green credentials so as to demonstrate to clients that not only are their properties eco-friendly but also they are actively engaged in improving the Caribbean environment. In this context many larger Caribbean properties have been using for some years now variations on electric golf carts to move clients, bags, staff, and catering around their properties.

Perhaps as a first step, properties that want to go further to demonstrate they are taking global warming seriously should consider making use of true EVs for short visitor journeys to airports, cruise ports or local attractions.