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Inside Line



BMW Hydrogen 7: A Surreal World Trial Run

March 31, 2008

By Nick Kurczewski

MONTE CARLO, Monaco — A hydrogen economy might still be a decade or more into the future but that hasn't stopped BMW from continuing its real-world hydrogen trial run, courtesy of some surreal clientele. Prince Albert II of Monaco was handed the keys to a [BMW Hydrogen 7 sedan](#) at this week's EVER Monaco ecological car show.

He joins an elite list of roughly 100 celebrities and VIPs who have been loaned one of BMW's Hydrogen 7s. The average loan extends from six to eight weeks. A BMW spokesman at the EVER Monaco ecological car show confirmed Prince Albert would have a Hydrogen 7 for a two-month trial.

Focus on the positive

Cameras flashed, security guards pushed and BMW representatives scurried around frantically as the prince received an overview of his new ride. He didn't seem overly concerned about trivial matters like finding the closest hydrogen fueling station. In Europe there are only a handful of them, with not a single one in France, much less the 435 acres that constitute the Principality of Monaco.

Our guess is the introduction focused on more exciting aspects of the car, such as its smooth and powerful V12 engine. With the press of a button mounted on the steering wheel, the motor seamlessly switches from running on normal gasoline over to liquid hydrogen. In hydrogen mode, the car's only emissions are a puff of warm air and water vapor — perfect for steaming out stubborn wrinkles before that next champagne social.

Less sexy than the high-tech motor — but no less important — are the Hydrogen 7's unique safety features. Small lights located on top of door-lock buttons are linked to hydrogen-detecting sensors. In the event that any (colorless and odorless) hydrogen gas seeps into the cabin, these sensors illuminate to warn the occupants.

The royal treatment to keep it running

We went for a chauffeured tour of Monaco to see what the prince can expect from his new car. Unfortunately, as clean and clever as the Hydrogen 7 might be, the luxury-laden green machine is far from perfect. From inside everything is quiet, comfortable, and the BMW cocoons its occupants like a proper Teutonic luxury sedan. But the fancy engine has a voracious appetite for fuel, be it gasoline or hydrogen.

The Hydrogen 7's standard V12 engine has been adapted to run on both liquid hydrogen and regular gasoline. Increased curb weight due to the Hydrogen 7's extra fuel tanks and other hardware means the big sedan burns one gallon of gas for every 17 miles traveled. Switch into hydrogen-burning mode, and fuel economy plummets to about 5 miles per gallon. That's bad enough to make Hummer H2 owners wince.

There is also the not-so-simple problem of creating a hydrogen infrastructure. The notion of hydrogen fuel stations becoming commonplace is at least a decade or further into the future — if it ever happens at all. As for Prince Albert's Hydrogen 7, he'll be given the loan of what BMW colorfully refers to as a "mobile refueling station."

This entails a tanker truck, a hose sticking out the back, a fancy nozzle and an intimidating computer screen that tells you when the tank is full. Being in the home of famous Monaco Grand Prix, we couldn't resist simulating a hydrogen pit stop. Prince Albert



had better have strong forearms, as the hose and nozzle assembly is awfully heavy.

For the moment, the BMW Hydrogen 7 is both an excellent marketing tool and one very flawed automobile. Too big, too heavy, too expensive, too thirsty and way too impractical for us mere mortals; the Hydrogen 7 still represents a (star-studded) first step in the right direction toward creating a hydrogen-powered future. •

Photos by Nick Kurczewski

Nick Kurczewski is a Paris-based correspondent for AutoObserver.

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