

A gas idea that might just gain traction in Irish motoring

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It was an idea that failed to gain purchase here in the 1980s, but LPG offers such savings as a car fuel that it has recently become a very attractive option

HOW WOULD YOU like to halve the cost of the fuel that keeps your car on the road? Believe it or not it can be done – with a technology that hasn't been the next big thing for decades.

Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) is not a new advance by any stretch of the imagination, but this alternative to diesel and petrol has come along in leaps and bounds since the first clunky gas cylinders were installed in Irish cars in the 1980s. And the potential savings that can be made through an LPG conversion are massive.

The average Irish motorist drives 16,000km every year and right now the average price of petrol is €1.60 a litre. An average family car will get 16km to the litre, which means the average Irish driver spends €1,600 a year on petrol.

LPG on the other hand costs just 75 cent, so a person driving the average distance using this technology will only spend €750 a year on fuel, a saving of €850.

A 30-year-old who switches to LPG today will save themselves €35,000 by the time they hit 70.

On the surface, it is hard to understand why more of us are not making the switch to this much cheaper fuel.

Apart from price, there are other things in its favour. It is in relatively plentiful supply and produces lower carbon emissions than oil, coal, peat and even electricity.

There are, of course, some butts. First off, the fuel must be kept under pressure in onboard tanks and many motorists don't like the idea of having a highly flammable gas sitting in a compressed state only a few metres behind them.

This perception of danger is entirely without foundation but it is still hard for many people to get round it.

There are also problems of availability – while petrol forecourts are everywhere, sourcing LPG is an altogether more complicated affair.

And if your boot is filled with a gas tank, where is your shopping or suitcase supposed to go?

Witek Spaniczek is a Polish chemist who until early this year was working for a pharmaceutical company. While pharmaceuticals were his bread and butter, cars were his passion.

He could not understand why LPG cars were so unpopular in Ireland given that there are almost 10 million of them across Europe. He thought it might have something to do with pricing until he realised that LPG cost much the same here as it does elsewhere in Europe. So he decided to set about making it popular again.

For around €1,000 he will convert a petrol car in to a dual-fuel car. The dual-fuel element is important.

“The switch between the petrol and LPG happens automatically and seamlessly, so if you run out of LPG the computers just switch you to the petrol back-up,” he says.

He is passionate about the technology and is convinced Irish motorists are missing a trick.

“There are none of the drawbacks that existed in the 1980s,” he insists.

In the 1980s LPG was briefly hot in Ireland. But Irish motorists lost patience with it because the conversion process was awkward and affected the resale value of cars. A few botched conversion jobs which caused explosions in car boots also created the understandable impression that it was not a safe technology.

According to Spaniczek, things have changed now. Conversions are “very advanced” and the dangers are “overstated”. He says that LPG tanks are actually safer than petrol tanks because in the event of a leak the gas dissipates in the air more quickly.

“Petrol, on the other hand, can stay on the road and pose a danger for hours after an incident. There are so many safety features in place that I really don’t think it should be of any concern to anyone.”

He believes there are a few reasons why it has not taken off in Ireland.

“The first conversions in the 1980s were problematic and then the Celtic Tiger happened and people were changing their cars every two years or didn’t care about how much it cost to fill their car, but everything has changed now.”

So far his new business has been a slow burner. This year his main depot in Kildare has converted just 20 cars while a sister operation in Clonmel has converted a further 10 cars.

“The target market is commuters or anyone who is spending more than €50 a week on petrol. The conversion costs €1,000 and a litre of LPG costs 75 cent.

“This means that someone who is spending just €40 a week on petrol today will have made their money back in reduced fuel costs in a year, after which they will be saving themselves a grand a year.”

Some industry sources express concern that conversions are harder to resell and that a large tank in the boot is a drawback.

Not so, according to Spaniczek. “These are fifth-generation conversions and because they are dual fuel, I think they increase the resale value.

“Also we have an option which can see the tank fitted where the spare tyre goes so you would not even notice it was there.”

Ed McDonnell is the head of the Irish LPG Association. He says one of the reasons LPG has not taken off in Ireland is that the two main providers – Calor Gas and FloGas – got badly stung the first time it was introduced.

They spent millions building up an infrastructure across the country in the 1980s but consumers did not back the new fuel because in many cases diesel was actually cheaper.

“We had the best infrastructure per capita in Europe and we had filling stations all over the country but it stopped being attractive to consumers because of high costs,” he says.

“Things have changed completely now. From the consumer’s point of view LPG is very attractive. But there are two pieces of the puzzle that need to be put in place: the providers need to throw their weight behind growth in the area and the Government needs to offer them some support.”

He says this support would not even have to be financial: a commitment from the Revenue not to increase the excise due on LPG for a period of 10 years to allow the business to develop would be enough.

“It costs between €10,000 and €20,000 to fit out a forecourt with an LPG pump and if the companies were to do that I think they would need assurances from the Government that the business would be allowed to grow.”

PJ Stedman switched his Jeep from petrol to dual fuel six months ago and saw his fuel bills fall dramatically. “I did it purely for the savings,” he says.

“I wouldn’t have bothered but for the amount of money involved. The whole process is fully automatic. You start her on petrol and run her on that for a bit until she warms up after which she switches automatically to the LPG.”

He is convinced that more people should make the switch.

“There is a problem here: the gas suppliers are not rolling out enough pumps on the forecourts. Across Europe it is much easier to find garages.”

A decade ago Dublin Bus flirted with LPG but ultimately rejected it despite a three-year study showing the move would produce less exhaust and noise emissions than diesel engines.

It concluded that the conversion of existing vehicles to gas power was not a viable option “due to financial, reliability and safety implications”.

Some countries prioritise the use of LPG and some governments offer the industry greater support than our Government does.

Almost all taxis in Hong Kong run on LPG models and six years ago driving a diesel taxi there became illegal.

According to the government there, a properly maintained LPG engine reduces pollution by anywhere between 50 per cent and 200 per cent.

LPG taxis also make up the majority of the cab fleet in Australia.

The Belgian government applies a zero rate of excise duty on the fuel, while Italy provides incentives up to 75 per cent of the cost of converting private vehicles over to the fuel.

France, meanwhile, offers grants of up to €2,000 for conversions of cars which are less than three years old.

ALTERNATIVE TRAVEL: SHARE A CAR

Forget about LPG and electricity and petrol and diesel: the cheapest way to run a car is not to run one at all.

Relax! We are not suggesting that you do without four wheels altogether, but there is a way you can stay (occasionally) on the road for a lot less.

Welcome to GoCar, a car-sharing scheme operating in Dublin and Cork, which continues to grow after a successful pilot in the southern city more than three years ago.

Think of it as the four-wheel equivalent of the Dublin bike scheme. Users sign up to the service through the website [gocar.ie](http://www.gocar.ie) and get access to fleet of of Ford Fiestas, Focuses and Transit vans around the city.

They can book a car 24 hours a day, seven days a week from about €5.75 per hour with additional charges added per kilometre travelled.

The company describes it as a “greener, more cost effective, more convenient and more socially aware way to use cars”, and the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Andrew Montague, agrees.

“Services like GoCar make the city a better place to live and give its citizens a chance to expand their range of alternatives to the costs and hassles of private car ownership,” he says.

“Any service that reduces reliance on private car ownership and changes people’s transport habits helps lower traffic congestion and, at the same time, encourages use of public transport, walking, cycling and can only be a good thing for the citizens of any area.”

When you sign up you get access to three Fords, a Fiesta, a Focus and a Transit Connect van. Each car comes with a fuel card, which you use and the company pays the bill.

You pay a joining fee of €50, a monthly administration fee, from €5 to €15 depending on the package you sign up for, and then you pay for trips as you take them. Prices vary depending on the day and time of the week you have the car.

If you take one on a weekday it will cost €5.75 per hour (overnight the price is €2.75 an hour) and then 45 cent for each kilometre travelled. So, a three-hour, 30km round trip to Ikea during the day will set you back €30.75, while a three-hour jaunt to an overnight Tesco from 11am to 2am will cost €21.70.

It does sound a little pricey, but if you only use a car occasionally, spending money like this makes a lot more sense than buying, taxing insuring, servicing and then refuelling a car.

PLENTY OF CHOICE: ALTERNATIVES TO PETROL

There are other options. The electric car is the most likely to succeed the petrol model, although how we get past the charging problem is still the great imponderable.

While battery-powered motors look like a cleaner energy source, the distances that can be travelled are unacceptably short and the benefit of using clean electricity is lost if you have to carry heavy batteries to achieve a decent range.

Electric cars will not take off until there is a functioning, reliable network of charging points in place. If they do, consumers could be paying 10 times less to run their car than owners of an average efficient internal combustion-fuelled hatchback.

Solar cell technology also works but the wattage delivered per square centimetre of solar cell is low. Unless you live in the Californian desert, you may not get enough power.

Batteries are the usual supplement used for cloudy weather or night journeys, but then the need to carry lots of battery weight works against efficiency and carrying capacity.

FUEL FOR THOUGHT: IS DIESEL BEST?

There is a perception that diesel cars offer better value for money, thanks to their superior fuel economy and lower car tax but, according to a Which? investigation published last week, diesel cars are often more expensive to run than petrol cars.

The consumer organisation carried out a comparison of diesel and petrol versions of six popular car models and found that petrol engines are often the more cost effective choice for drivers covering a typical annual mileage.

Diesel engines in the popular BMW 5 Series, Ford Fiesta, Vauxhall Astra, and Volkswagen Tiguan may deliver cheaper fuel bills than their petrol counterparts initially, but it takes many years before they actually save the average driver money.

With drivers having to pay a premium for a diesel car, tests showed that it could take up to 14 years to recoup the upfront costs in fuel savings.

Lower pump prices for petrol and advances in petrol-engine efficiency mean that petrol cars now often provide better value for money than previously.

Which? also carried out fuel-economy tests in which both diesel and petrol cars often fell short of the manufacturers' claims for them. "Fuel price rises have been hitting household budgets hard, so it's important that consumers know they are getting value for money when they buy a car," Which? executive director Richard Lloyd says.

"Diesel cars are known for their fuel efficiency, but with lower pump prices for petrol and a premium price tag for diesel cars, it may make more financial sense for families to go for the petrol version."

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