The popularity of hybrid and electric cars is growing, with the lure of zero emissions at the tailpipe, and constant improvements in battery performance. Petrol and diesel-powered vehicles still reign supreme, but environmentally-conscious drivers are increasingly making the switch. For those with solar panels at home, in theory you can even charge the car for free.

During Go Green Week, we had electric cars on campus – the Mahindra e2o city car, and the Nissan LEAF – for staff and students to find out more information, and even take one for a test drive. On a short run, it’s just like driving any other car, because, well it is just like any other car, apart from its power source. But what’s it like to live with one? Daisy Malt, Sustainability Projects Coordinator at the University, borrowed a Nissan LEAF for 4 days to find out.

THE DRIVE

I have been keen to find out what it’s like to drive an electric car for a while, so I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to have one for a 4-day test drive. You don’t need gears in one of these, so at first I just had to get used to it being automatic; I have always driven a manual transmission. No problems there though, and I actually got rather fond of not having to faff about with a gear stick! On the road, the car was so smooth, and a real pleasure to cruise around in.

Not long after I picked it up from the dealership, I got caught in traffic. Normally a frustration, it was actually quite satisfying, as the battery can regenerate a little under braking, and of course I knew I wasn’t spewing out noxious fumes. Once on the move the car accelerated well, and from 0-30 it’s very nippy indeed. The car has 2 main settings for driving – eco and normal. I spent most of my time in eco mode, but switching this off gives you an extra boost when going up hills, for example, but is much hungrier on the battery.

Which brings me on to…

THE BATTERY LIFE

As a new user, with a vague idea of where I could find charging points, I did inevitably get a bit of ‘range anxiety’. In reality, I had no problems whatsoever! Nissan say you can get up to 130 miles on a single charge. I managed a good few trips and never got so low that I needed to be concerned. The amount of power used up depends on lots of factors, but like any petrol/diesel car, the faster you go, the more you use up. It was a little nerve-wracking seeing the range drop more rapidly as I drove along the A12, but I think if I owned an EV I would be better acquainted with charging points and not be concerned about higher usage on some roads.

So, where did I go? Apart from running normal errands, going to the supermarket and the gym, there were two main trips I did in the car. I went to Chelmsford via Braintree, and back to Colchester with no problems. I was worried that I’d need to charge it in Braintree on the return leg, but decided I’d be OK to get back and head to the Glyn Hopkin dealership, where they have a charger which can be used for free! It took around 45 minutes to get almost to full charge.

The next day I went exploring, in search of Grayson Perry’s A House For Essex, at Wrabness. It was also a lovely drive around the beautiful Essex countryside, through some gorgeous villages.
**CHARGING**

When it actually comes to charging the car it’s all very straightforward. Two cables are kept in the car – one for plugging in at chargers such as the Pod Points on campus, and one for plugging in at home (and yes, there really is a 3-pin plug for this, you charge it just like a phone). These have smaller connectors and charge more slowly. There’s also a connector for rapid chargers, which is bigger, and the cable will be found on the charging unit itself.

I live in Wivenhoe and don’t have off-street parking, so couldn’t take advantage of the ability to plug the car in at home overnight, but if you do, you can also get a home charging set up for the convenience of plugging in on the driveway or in your garage. I took the opportunity to charge the car, for free, at the University while at work. This was when charging was super-convenient, as it was simply a case of plugging it in when I arrived, and leaving it to do its thing. There are six Pod Point chargers located on the ground floor of the multi-deck car park.

I used free chargers, but plenty of places do incur a cost. Most of the time you’ll have a swipe card with your details, and you’re charged either per session, or for the amount of energy used. Rapid chargers typically cost more than the standard ones, around £5-6.

**THE CAR SPEC**

Now, obviously Nissan loan out a car with the highest specifications. I had one with leather interior, a rear parking camera, heated seats and steering wheel, built-in sat-nav and a slightly longer battery range. It’s all the mod-cons you would expect from a car like this, and is very comfortable.

I found that the sat-nav would sometimes try to send me on slightly strange routes, but I think this was because it was set to use the most battery-efficient routes. It improved once I changed the setting!

It’s a great, mid-size car with plenty of room for rear passengers, and a spacious boot – which very comfortably took my dad’s wheelchair.

**THE VERDICT**

I am pretty much sold on EVs, certainly as a car you’d use for journeys closer to home. I would love to see how long it would take to get from Colchester to Edinburgh in one – which is absolutely possible (and in fact Nissan will loan you a ‘normal’ car for longer trips, up to 14 days per year).

You need a slightly different approach to planning longer journeys, as it won’t go as far as a petrol/diesel car, but I can’t see that it would be such an inconvenience. This will improve over time though, as the technology develops; plus the number of chargers will increase as the amount of EVs on the road increases too.