

CLASSIC DRIVER

Tesla Model S: Child of the revolution

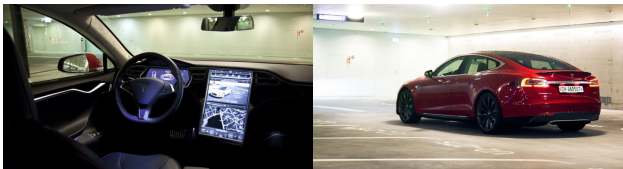
Lead

California-based Tesla has achieved what the big brands seem unable to do: create a useable electric road car that is more fun than most petrol engines. We're blown away by the Model S...

Californian eco-elite - or prophets of a new world of electric mobility?

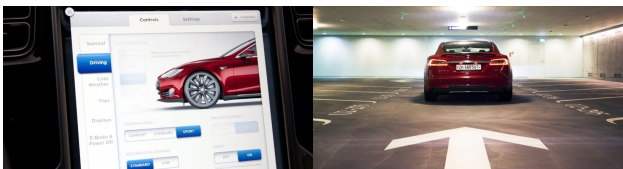
In 2008, Tesla became the first marque to put an electric roadster on the market that was not only emission-free, but also sheer joy to drive. The motor industry was baffled. Surely these Californians were the eco-elite; how could they become the prophets of a new world of comprehensive electric mobility? Five years later and Tesla has launched its first fully-developed-in-house model from the proverbial blank sheet of paper, beating VW, BMW, Mercedes, Jaguar and the rest to this remarkable milestone.

Is the Model S the iPhone of the motor industry?



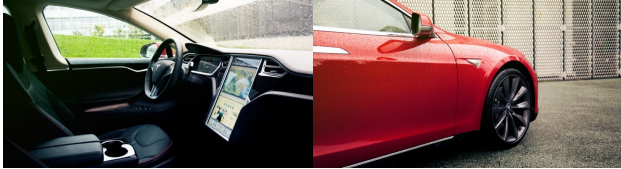
So could the Tesla Model S be, as per the iPhone, a role model for an entire industry? We spent three days with the electric Californian saloon - and were deeply impressed within the first few metres. The generation that is comfortable with the Apple MacBook and iPhone will feel immediately at home in the cockpit of the Tesla: knobs and switches have been largely omitted, and in their place is a massive touchscreen display in vertical iPad format. In photographs it looks a little weird, but in real life it's a revelation. In a matter of seconds you can connect to the internet via smartphone hotspot, access your personal music playlist, surf full-screen through the net or navigate easily and quickly via Google Maps. Surely this is how life on board should be?

If Ryan Gosling is looking for a getaway car...



The various functions of the Tesla - from the electric charging system to the sunroof - can be controlled intuitively via apps. How is it, one wonders, that a small company like Tesla is able to outwit the interface designers of all other brands? But as for the rest of the interior, American mainstream styling is the order of the day - there are none of the values of BMW, Audi and so on in here. However, there is much to like, including one detail that really appealed to us: the simplicity and speed of pulling away from rest. You simply climb in, put the drive mode lever to 'D' and place your foot on the pedal, and there you are, gliding noiselessly along. No start button, no show, just immediate function. If Ryan Gosling is looking for the ideal getaway car for the sequel to 'Drive', he might just want to give Tesla CEO Elon Musk a nudge on Facebook.

Astronaut training



And now the fun really begins: if you have the joy of an empty, open road that allows you to use the pedal freely, the Tesla will eagerly buzz forward as though it learnt its acceleration from the roller-coaster at California's Magic Mountain amusement park. Then again, we did have the Model S Performance package and larger 85kWh battery, which makes a significant difference. Accompanied by a slightly unworldly buzz, the saloon shoots to 62mph in 4.4 seconds and on to 130mph while the driver's stomach rotates around its own axis and the passengers begin to squeak, as if they'd been locked in an astronaut training device at the Baikonur Cosmodrome. The vast torque of 500Nm is available from a standing start, but perhaps the best part is your almost untroubled conscience: at the wheel of the latest roaring sports saloon you might usually feel a little uncomfortable, thinking of all those fossil fuels you're burning. Yet the Tesla gets no dirty looks from the PC brigade.

Too good to be true?



Too good to be true? Perhaps it is. One catch, of course, is the recharging infrastructure. For those unusual people who have an invariably orderly daily routine, driving the same number of miles to work and back every day, the Tesla Model S is a good choice. You can charge the car overnight or perhaps at a socket at work (the time to do so varies with the current strength, but a full charge takes from around 8 to 15 hours). And while the Tesla's range is exceptionally good (you could comfortably expect to get 200-300 miles of 'normal' driving), a sporty driving style will seriously compromise the distance you can travel. For that non-stop trip to Milan or Paris, you're probably better off in a conventional car. For the moment, the Tesla is really only a winner as a second car.

Just the beginning



Should high-speed charging devices or battery exchange stations become the norm, however, things would be quite different. That just leaves the question of where the electrical energy to power the car ultimately comes from. Perhaps, while electricity is still largely derived from burning fossil fuels, the Tesla driver is currently less of an eco-warrior than he'd like to think. We are only at the beginning of (potentially) an age of electric mobility, but what the Tesla Model S does prove is that the electric alternative needn't be dull. Quite the contrary.

Photos: Jan Baedeker

Gallery

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