

CLASSIC DRIVER

Driven: Tesla Model S

Lead

In California, the first eight examples of the Tesla Model S have been delivered to their fortunate new owners. We take a trip in the electric saloon that has turned the automotive world on its head.

“We don’t do any advertising, because our car sells itself. It’s the best car in the world,” says George Blankenship, vice president of worldwide sales and customer satisfaction at Tesla Motors in the United States. He’s talking about the [Tesla](#) Model S – a 2.1-ton saloon that provides enough power and space to ensure a permanent grin on the face of up to seven occupants, thanks to its 5+2 seating. Those first eight customers waited for three years for the delivery of their new cars and, no doubt, are now wavering between relief, pride and sheer electric madness.

The fact that with the most powerful battery option the Model S can achieve speeds up to 130mph and 0-60mph in 4.4 seconds (thanks to the magic of 600Nm of torque) certainly puts pressure on its petrol-powered competitors. And that, according to Tesla CEO Elon Musk, is exactly what was intended: “The world lived with the illusion that electric cars cannot be better than petrol-engined cars. That – if you buy an electric car – it will somehow be less good. We’ve proved that electric cars can be the best cars in the world.” And he goes further. “From a performance standpoint, we have to beat such target vehicles as the BMW 5 Series and the Porsche Panamera.”





The silent acceleration from standstill paints a compulsive grin on every face, while the traction control ensures continuous monitoring and control of that immense driving force. Unlike the Tesla Model X, which comes with either rear- or all-wheel drive, the Model S versions are driven solely from the back axle. Says Product Manager Ted Merino, "Technically, it's like this: if I go into a BMW dealership, I'm ten years out of date. The Model S is an extension of my current smartphone." That's only partly to do with the 17-inch touchscreen in the centre of the dash that controls a huge number of the car's functions.





But even the 'best car in the world' is not without faults. The steering isn't perfect, although the low centre of gravity, thanks to the battery being installed in the floor, still means you can drive extremely quickly and satisfyingly through tight curves. The brakes almost do what you want, but a heavier, more sporting feel would be appropriate.





A disadvantage, too, of an all-but-silent automobile is that you can hear it creak and groan in tight corners and on uneven road surfaces. What's more, the two children's seats in the rear face the oncoming traffic. I'm not sure I'd want to put small children there, whatever the safety crash tests show.





Despite a few shortcomings, the fact that the Model S can – says Tesla – manage up to 300 miles on its lithium-ion battery does suggest that the future for electric cars could be more fun than we expected. Then again, with re-charging times of between one and ten hours, we also need to consider how practical this fun really is. It's a question of attitude.







One interesting fact from technical director J.B. Straubel is the following: “A weak battery pack can easily be replaced by a stronger pack, without requiring changes to the suspension settings. The weight differences are so small that a re-adjustment isn’t necessary.” So a higher top speed can readily be achieved. Why haven’t they done it? “The demand simply isn’t there,” says Straubel. Not yet, anyway.

In early 2013, the first Tesla S models should be available in Europe. The price has yet to be confirmed.

Photos: Press-inform, Tesla Motors

Gallery

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