

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

My Year Without a Car - (Plus a Request)

Posted by [Robert Rapier](#) on March 19, 2009 - 9:00am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

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On March 1, 2008 I sold my [Nissan Micra](#) in Aberdeen, Scotland and hopped a plane to Amsterdam to take up a new position. I have not owned a car since that time. A while back a TOD reader asked what that experience has been like, and suggested I write a story on it. So here it is.

While in Europe

It is really a tale of two continents. In large parts of Europe, one can get along reasonably well without a car. In the past year, I have worked at my company's [Accoya](#) factory in the Netherlands most of the time. I fly in to Amsterdam, and there is a train station right in the airport. I catch a direct, 1 hour and 15 minute train to the Arnhem Central Train Station. From there, it's a 15-minute cab ride to my apartment.

I secured an apartment that is only about half a mile from work, and I adopted the common Dutch habit of riding my bike to work. I certainly don't feel safe all of the time with cars whizzing past me, and at times it has been an inconvenience, but the vast majority of the time the bike suits me just fine. (If you want to argue that my international flights more than offset any fuel savings from biking to work, you won't get any argument from me. But in this economy, you do what you have to).

As for the inconvenience, if I want to go out to eat, I am around a mile from the nearest restaurant. When visitors come over to the factory to visit, I often find myself riding the bike in the dark, to a restaurant that may be 3 miles from my apartment. That may seem like a piece of cake, but I have done it in the snow, in freezing rain, and with a fierce wind in my face. It would certainly be more convenient to hop in a car and go.

The worst inconvenience to date was when I had a bad cold, and my secretary made me a doctor's appointment on short notice. I hopped on my bike and rode a mile and a half in a freezing downpour. I could have probably bothered someone to take me, but I really try to be as low-maintenance as possible.

I do have other options, and I utilize them. There is a bus stop near my apartment, and I use it quite a lot. During the day the bus comes frequently, but later in the evening it only runs once an hour, and then stops altogether at about 10 p.m. (Incidentally, I learned one night while waiting for a bus at 10 that's when the prostitutes come out and take over the bus stops).

For trips of intermediate length, a cab is another option I utilize from time to time. When I fly home, I have to catch a train at 6 a.m. That's always a cab ride to the station. If I want to travel to another major European city, the train connections are superb. However, if you want to venture out into the countryside, it may be more difficult. My son wants me to take him to Normandy this summer, and that's almost impossible to do without a car because the major points of interest are scattered over several miles, and there aren't easy train connections to my knowledge. So this summer I expect to rent a car in Europe for the first time.

Meanwhile, Back in Texas

But as I said, it is a tale of two continents. When I fly back to Texas, it is hard to do without a car. I fly into the airport, and the first thing I have to do is catch a cab for the 35-mile drive to my house.

I bought a house 25 miles from my Dallas office, because 1). I hate cities, so I chose a house in the country; 2). I knew I wasn't going to have to spend that much time in the office. 3). Because the housing bubble was imploding, I got a builder's foreclosure for about half the appraised price. If I had to make that commute every day, I would have sucked it up and bought a house closer to the office, preferably close to some kind of public transportation. From where I live, public transportation isn't an option, so I rent a compact car when I have to be in the office, or borrow my wife's car if the kids are out of school.

How long can I keep this up? To be honest, I never thought I could keep it up for over a year. My

initial assignment involved several straight months in the Netherlands, and I thought I would have to buy a car when I returned. But every time I do a cost benefit analysis, I can never justify it when I only need it one or two weeks a month. I have no registration fees or maintenance to pay, and I don't have to keep insurance on it, because my insurance company covers me for a car rental at no extra cost. In the past six months, I have spent a total of \$825 on car rentals. I don't think a car purchase makes economic sense until I find myself spending 3-4 times this amount over a six month period. Given my current work arrangements, that is unlikely to happen any time soon.

Besides, I like the idea of living without a car. I will continue to put it off as long as possible, even if it occasionally means riding my bike to the doctor in the freezing rain.

Request on the Annual EIA Energy Conference

On an unrelated note, the [2009 EIA Energy Conference](#) takes place on April 7th and 8th. The conference is free, so feel free to drop by if you are in the area. There are a number of topics that look interesting, including the following two plenary talks:

Energy and the Macroeconomy - William D. Nordhaus, Sterling Professor of Economics, Yale University

Energy in a Carbon-Constrained World - John W. Rowe, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Exelon Corporation

There are also a number of panel sessions, including:

The Future for Transport Demand

What's Ahead for Natural Gas Markets?

Meeting the Growing Demand for Liquids

Financial Markets and Short-Term Energy Prices

Investing in Oil and Natural Gas - Opportunities and Barriers

I have been asked to participate on the panel **Energy and the Media**. The other panelists are [Steven Mufson](#) from the Washington Post and [Eric Pooley](#) from Harvard University (who was also former managing editor at [Fortune](#)). Mufson is the main energy reporter for the Post, and I think he does a good job of reporting the important stories. I have read a lot of his work, and have spoken to him on at least one occasion. Then there's me, the energy blogger. Please humor me and let's not play the game "Which One is not Like the Others?" :-)

Here's where I could use some assistance. I have a general idea of the themes I would like to explore. Namely, I want to discuss the amount of energy misinformation, which I think stems from some reporters really not having the background to know when they are being misled. We as a nation have a low energy IQ, and that creeps into many of the stories in the media. The [TDP fiasco](#) is a perfect example. Had the reporters dug a bit more and been more critical, it would have been another possibly interesting next generation fuel experiment, instead of something that ultimately had a lot of taxpayer money thrown at it.

But what else? What other themes should be examined on a panel entitled Energy and the Media?

Footnote

When this post goes up, I will be without Internet access at the family farm in Oklahoma. Following that, I am going on hiatus for a while as I try to figure out exactly what I am trying to accomplish here - and whether I think I am having any success. None of us are immune to the stresses of the meat-grinder that TOD can be, and I need a break from it for a while. However I don't intend for my hiatus to become permanent as has sometimes been the case with TOD staff. I will check back in at some point before the EIA conference to see what readers think should be explored on the panel. And if you happen to be at the conference, look me up and say hello.



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