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Electric car rental scheme hits Paris

Autolib scheme opens to Parisians in bid to cut air pollution and build on success of Velib cycle hire scheme



A parking station for the Autolib electric car-share scheme is seen on a street in Paris, December 2, 2011. Photograph: Christophe Ena/AP

Pay-as-you-drive electric car rentals are expected to help cut pollution and reduce traffic in Paris, as the new fleet of fully electric Autolib' vehicles hits the French capital.

As of Monday, Parisians could take the bubble cars for a ride from more than 1,200 parking spots where they rest for recharge.

A subscription cost €10 a day or €15 a week, while an annual subscription of €144 subscription allows users to take the car for only half an hour each time for €5, just over the price of two underground tickets.

The Autolib' system builds on the success of the Velib' bicycle-sharing service and could provide a shop window for entrepreneur Vincent Bolloré and his nascent car battery business.

"We want to persuade people to shift from the concept of owning a car to that of using a car," Autolib' General Manager Morald Chibout told Reuters.

Soaring insurance and parking costs have already persuaded 25% of French citizens to cut back or give up on using their cars, according to a study published last year by Chronos TNS Sofres.

The little four-seater Bluecar, designed and manufactured exclusively for Bolloré by Italian designer Pininfarina, famous for sculpting Ferraris and Maseratis, will have a range of up to 250 km between before a recharge which will take about four hours.

Bolloré said his batteries are safer than the lithium-ion variety used by most of the car industry because they are less prone to overheating. They are also more stable when being charged and discharged.

The car rental scheme follows the car-sharing project launched on 30 September 2011, which also aimed to clear the traffic-clogged Parisian boulevards and deliver what its backers hoped would be a major boost for electric vehicles.

Under the €235 million project, the brainchild of Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë, the car-hire service debuted with 66 cars and 33 rental stations across Paris before expanding to 3,000 vehicles and more than 1,000 stations by the end of 2012.

Similar projects exist in the US and in other European countries, such as Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. The Belgian 'Zen Car', one of the first EV-for-hire services, was launched at the beginning of this year with around thirty "100% electric" cars.

The vehicles can be booked by internet or via phone and can be found in around 15 different parking spots around Brussels, next to transit stops. The standard annual subscription for 'Zen Car' costs €40 with an hourly rate of €7 in the day time and €5 at night.