

2012 FISKER-KARMA ECOCHIC ROAD TEST

Possibly more chic than eco, depending on where you drive.

By Peter Egan

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Discovery Communications-owned Animal Planet has been wanting to take a real shakedown road trip with the Fisker Karma, we scanned the map for a proper destination and came up with a place called Biosphere 2. Located in Arizona, some 440 miles east of our current offices in Newport Beach, California, this remote facility is a sort of a futuristic architectural wonder that doubles as an experimental greenhouse/enclosed environmental laboratory in the mountains northeast of Tucson.

It seemed like an appropriate choice because, like the Karma, Biosphere 2 is both quite beautiful and built to explore the boundaries of environmental technology. It was also expensive to build, somewhat controversial and government subsidized. Fisker got a federal loan of \$529 million to develop and build their cars (only \$169 million used so far on the Karma), and Biosphere 2, which started out as a private foundation, is presently owned and supported by the University of Arizona, so it all fits together, ja?

In hitting the road with the Karma, however, we wanted to do more than just find a symbolic photo backdrop; we also hoped to put some real road miles on the car and see what it was like to live with. That, and answer

the basic bystander questions that popped up virtually every place we stopped: "What exactly is this car, and what is it trying to do? What's it for?"

Is it an expensive (\$116,000 as tested) and powerful (402-hp) luxury 4-door sports car that just happens to have a hybrid gasoline/electric drivetrain, or is it a boundary-pushing technological marvel that will allow even the very wealthy and discriminating car buff a chance to participate in reduced carbon emissions? Nearly everyone wanted to know what it was like to drive. So did we. But first, a look at the basic architecture of the thing.

The Karma is classified as a plug-in hybrid with the drivetrain in series configuration. Which is to say it's a rear-drive car with a gasoline engine under the shapely hood—a 260-bhp turbocharged GM Ecotec 2.0-liter inline-4. As in a diesel locomotive, the engine never drives the rear wheels directly. Instead, it runs a 175-kW generator that charges a large lithium-nanophosphate battery pack that runs down the center of the car's aluminum frame. The battery, in turn, powers a pair of 201-hp electric motors located fore and aft of the rear axle.

So what we have here is a 403-hp car with prodigious quantities of instantly available electric motor torque—959 lb.-ft. starting from zero rpm. All of this wizardry is not made from helium, of course, so the Karma's weight—5430 lb.—somewhat mitigates the effect.





On the morning we left Newport Beach, the battery was fully charged and it lasted for exactly 30 miles of mostly city driving before the gasoline engine kicked in. As we hit the open highway, I found the Ecotec gas engine surprisingly quiet and non-intrusive from inside the car; you hardly notice the transition from pure battery to charging modes. You do notice the fuel gauge drop, however. On our first fill-up, only 180 miles after running out of charge, we got 19.9 mpg. (Overall mileage for the 880-mile trip would be 20.5 mpg.) That makes for fairly short range, so you have to keep your eye on the fuel gauge.

From the moment we pulled away from the office, my immediate impression of the car is that it feels solid and well-built, with superb ride and taut-yet-fluid suspension compliance. The steering is perfectly weighted, for my tastes, with just the right touch of heaviness on-center, responsive turn-in and good road feel through the wheel. A sense of refinement and quality comes through instantly. Not for nothing have designer Henrik Fisker and Chief Operating Officer Bernhard Koehler come to us through BMW and Aston Martin. This chassis could be a product of either company, and that's high praise. Interestingly, members of the suspension design team also worked on the Ford GT program.

In western Arizona we stopped at a rest stop after using a half-tank of fuel, and as we pulled back onto I-10, two warning lights lit up on the dash—a loose fuel-cap symbol and a check engine light. We checked the fuel cap, which seemed properly tightened, and then called the Fisker engineers. They said the gas-cap light would go out when we filled up again and the engine light—part of the same system—would have to be reset at the dealership. We suspected heat expansion, as it was an oven-like 112 degrees at the rest stop. As they claimed, the gas-cap light went out after we refueled, and the engine light stayed on for the entire trip. The car ran fine, however. Like a train, literally.

On a winding stretch of desert road near Biosphere 2, I found the Karma to be quite flingable and fun to drive. It has immense grip and transitions to light understeer if you push it hard, turning in with an easy, intuitive precision. Though it feels weighty and solid, its low center of gravity makes it quite nimble, and the only effect of the long wheelbase seems to be a stable and composed ride quality over bumps. The big brakes work well, with a moderately hard pedal and just a hint of grabbiness as you slow to a complete stop. The Hill paddle also has a braking effect, almost like downshifting a conventional gearbox, and adds several miles of range on a long descent.

We had a great time exploring Biosphere 2, where the gigantic Aztec-pyramid-like greenhouse encapsulated a vast rain forest of breathtaking

heat and humidity, while the air conditioned offices next to the Coke machine were also of great scientific interest to Guy and me. They had an outdoor electric-car charging system, but we couldn't stay long enough to put any discernible charge back into our battery. The whole facility is absolutely beautiful, perched on a scenic ridge of Sonoran desert overlooking the Santa Catalina Mountains. I may have to go back and get a degree in botany or window glazing so I can live there.

On the trip home, we came perilously close (15 miles remaining range) to running out of gas. The fuel gauge goes down rapidly on its second half, especially when you're climbing into a headwind. The good thing is, however, you can get fuel and keep driving—uphill at 75 or 80 mph, with plenty of kick to spare—which pretty much defines the Karma's versatility.

If you had a short daily commute (say, from Bel Air to Universal Studios) and could plug the car in at night, you'd never have to stop at a gas station. But if you want to get out of town for the weekend, you can—accepting that the highway mileage will be worse than a Corvette's. It's worth remembering, though, that the Karma is a 4-seater, and you can actually put humans back there. Children or small people will be happiest, but even I can fit in the back seat for a reasonable distance. Also, there's a small, moderately useful trunk, even if the oddly curved hinges intrude on its depth.

So who is the Karma built for?

Well, someone who has more than \$100K to spend and wants a handsome high-performance 4-seat sports car that draws a crowd of curious car buffs wherever it goes, an unexpected sight that's a little outside the norm, visually and technically. It also has to be someone who doesn't mind the mixed blessings of free lunch and slight inconvenience that come with owning a plug-in hybrid.

That lunch is not totally free, of course. The EPA uses a complicated mpg-equivalent formula for fuel use at electrical powerplants, and that gives the car an official rating of 54 mpg for the first 33 miles of range. After that, it drops to 20 mpg combined city/highway. This is still class-leading efficiency among high-end performance hybrids, but, needless to say, it's not going to make a big dent in world oil consumption anytime soon—unless the Karma stays in town and lots of folks buy them. Could happen, I suppose; Fisker has sold just under 1000 of these cars so far. And, as we're discovering, reduced energy use comes from winning a plethora of small battles rather than a few big, easy ones. Everything helps.

Perhaps we should just consider this a luxury sports car that's taking us in an interesting and upbeat direction, providing style and performance without the depressing onus of a gas-guzzler tax. The Karma may be an outlook on life as much as a car. Maybe that explains the name.