

FOR the eco-conscious driver, the latest must-have is an electric car. Sales have soared, with 180,000 bought so far this year, compared to just 3,500 five years ago.

On paper, it's easy to see the appeal: a full 'tank' for less than £5, a Government grant of £3,500 off the sale price and the sense of satisfaction in helping to save the planet from the evils of fossil fuels.

The technology is evolving fast, too, with BMW, Renault, Nissan, Citroen and now Jaguar joining Tesla in the electric car revolution. Electric vehicles are now said to be just as high performing — if not better — than their gas-guzzling counterparts.

With public charging points cropping up around the country, how hard could owning a purely electric car possibly be? As **LOUISE ATKINSON** found, very hard indeed...

SCEPTICAL HUSBAND

JUNE 17, 2018: My car lease is up for renewal and the idea of an electric car excites me. The monthly lease payments are similar (£250) to

by Louise Atkinson

my old Toyota Aygo, but fuel costs will be quartered — saving up to £2,000 each year.

I pick the Renault Zoe because it is small, sporty-looking and claims to have a range of 160 miles on one charge (double the Nissan Leaf).

My husband, Jon, begs me to reconsider, informing me that the world isn't ready yet.

But I refuse to be deterred. Attitudes are changing fast and the Daily Mail's plastic campaign has taught me that when it comes to saving the planet, every step makes a difference. I don't want to feel miserable every time I fill my car with poisonous fossil fuel.

Besides, I'm full of optimism that I can handle being a pioneer. Battery-powered cars are pretty mainstream now, so what can possibly go wrong? I order the car.

A (VERY) SLOW START

JULY 16: My electric car is here! It is *beautiful!* Unfortunately, it's like a Christmas present without batteries. It sits on our drive, but the battery (which is under the floor of the car and powers the motor under the bonnet) is nearly empty, so I can't take it for a spin.

There's a charging cable in the boot, which fits both public and special home charging units, but no three-pin plug adaptor for me to hook it up to the mains.

As I leap in, Jon is sceptical: 'Do you know how to charge it?' (No).

Fearing the battery will die any minute, I crawl to the supermarket (six miles away) to find our nearest public charging point. I plug in the cable, but nothing happens.

I wiggle the cable, unplug it and replug it. Still nothing. Instructions on the charger inform me to download an app and input MY credit card details. Still nothing.

I draw quite a crowd. Electric cars are clearly a novelty here and everyone wants to know how I'm getting on. Not well.

I phone the charge point helpline. 'What's the name?' they ask. I give them my name. 'No, the name of the charging point.'

It turns out many have cheerful names, rather than serial numbers, and I am currently in dispute with 'Fred-Geoff'. They run the checks and tell me, sadly, Fred-Geoff is out of order, but not to worry as 'Laura-Clare' is fighting fit and only... 25 miles away.

By driving *very* slowly and free-wheeling down hills (which works like a dynamo to boost the battery), I make it to my gym car park and plug in. Stressful? Immensely.

POWER PROBLEM

JULY 20: I love my electric car! It drives like a dream. I love the futuristic 'tron' noise it makes at low speeds (to warn unsuspecting pedestrians, as the engine is silent), the touchscreen controls, the massive pull (experts call it 'torque') when you overtake, the 'eco' mode option (which conserves energy by slowing acceleration and capping your speed at around 60mph).

But the charging situation is a nightmare. Without a plug at home, I am reliant on public points, but these — it turns out — are scarce and notoriously glitchy.

With an electric car, you have to meticulously plan every journey. There's an app (Zap Map) of UK charging points, but you have to dig deep through user comments to see if your chosen point is public or private, which company owns it and how to pay.

There's no joined-up thinking. Some public charging points require you to download an app and input credit card details, some ask you to apply for a payment card (which can take up to ten days).

There is a mystifying variety of plug and socket types and no consistency in power delivery — so 'superfast' isn't necessarily quicker than 'supercharge' or 'rapid charge' — and the time it takes to 'fill' your car depends on the power of the charger and of your battery, and whether the plug sockets fit.

Sometimes you have to pay (around £6 for a full charge), sometimes you don't — and there's never any guarantee any public charger will be working anyway.

I frequently find non-electric cars rudely blocking charging stations (this is called being 'ICED', which stands for Internal Combustion Engine Driver) and the sight of a plug-in hybrid (a car powered by both fuel and electricity) in a public charging space prompts fury.

Driving my electric car is starting to engender a state of low-bubbling stress. When I wake each morning my first thoughts are: 'How much charge have I got?' and 'Where am I going to charge?'

CHARGING AHEAD

JULY 25: I ask my lease company, DriveElectric, for advice about installing a home charging point on the side of our house. It gives me a list of 50 companies to contact.

Charging points come in all sizes and colours and vary in cost from £150 to £850. I pick the cheapest and book an installation on August 9.

TRIPPED FUSE

JULY 26: After failing to find a charging point that works and limping home amid a deafening cacophony of LOW BATTERY! alarms, my neighbour kindly lets me plug into her home charging unit.

I do so and trip her fuse. She has a Tesla and her unit clearly isn't happy to be hooked up to my Zoe. From a tangle of cables she keeps in the boot, I select a three-pin plug charging lead to feed through our letterbox. It works! But the process is painfully slow (23 hours for a full charge) and, worryingly, the kids complain that the Xbox is giving off an alarming whining noise.

£495 FOR A LEAD

AUGUST 1: I email Renault to ask if I can buy an adaptor, so my charging cable can fit an ordinary three-pin plug just for emergencies. The answer is no. Such a thing hasn't been invented yet. I'm told I can only use a Renault cable (£495) in a household plug socket (or I might blow my electrics — car or house).

When I balk at the price, they tell me all Renault Zoe owners qualify for a free home charger installation anyway, via an arrangement with a company called Chargemaster.

Really? That would have been nice to know from the start. I email Chargemaster but, because my Zoe is leased, rather than owned, they don't know if I'll qualify.

TWO-WEEK WAIT

AUGUST 8: I'm having to rely heavily on Fred-Geoff, painfully aware that, although he has turned out to be free (bonus!), he's not always reliable.

Worse, using him (them?) means my still-gloating husband has to pick me up and return me, once the car is charged, in his gas-guzzling, fume-emitting Land Rover. Hardly the eco-friendly experience I was hoping for.

Chargemaster say my approval is confirmed, but there's a two-week wait for an engineer. I tell them an alternative company is due the next day. 'We'll be there tomorrow,' they respond.

CABLES HITCH

AUGUST 9: Charge point installation day! I can't quite believe my charging stresses are nearly over.

They're not. Within minutes, the engineer identifies two crucial cables that link our fuse-box to our electricity meter that must be updated first and this can only be done by the regional electricity company, SSE.

Nobody had mentioned that old electrics such as ours might need to be updated.

I call SSE, but no one seems to know what I'm talking about. After much re-dialling, I'm bumped over to our electricity supplier (E.ON).

Cue more calls. No one seems to know what I'm talking about (again). Finally, I'm told the soonest they can send an engineer is September 5 and it can't be done by anyone else because that might constitute tampering with the meter.

I'm told if I make a complaint, the date might be brought forward.

GOING IN CIRCLES

AUGUST 10: E.ON'S complaints team calls to ask what I'm complaining about and tell me I've now lost my September appointment and 'can't be seen until October 10'. So we enter a ridiculous loop of infuriatingly bureaucratic ineptitude.

Jon adopts a now-permanent 'I told you so' demeanour.

'GOLF BUGGY' TRIPS

AUGUST 20: With no security of supply I have been using my car like a golf buggy: only venturing out for short local runs until it needs refilling again. But feeling brave, I nip to the new shopping centre in Oxford that

Christmas.

£3

Victoria
Turn any occasion into a Celebration!
With this deliciously indulgent biscuit selection

600g

£4

Quality Street
SINCE 1936

720g

£5 each

Thorntons
CHRISTMAS SELECTION
LIMITED EDITION

418g

FERRERO ROCHER
The Golden Experience

300g

Retail Industry AWARDS
WONNER
SUPERMARKET OF THE YEAR

Supermarket of the Year 2018.

Morrisons
Since 1899
Makes it



Disappointed: Louise with her electric car

Picture: JOHN LAWRENCE

She joined the eco dream. But read LOUISE ATKINSON'S sorry diary of nightmare journeys, dud chargers and maddening bureaucracy and you'll see why she says...

Electric cars? They're just

SOO MANY

boasts electric charging points in its underground garage. There are no instructions on the points and I have to take the lift up to ground level to access my app and find a 'chat', which reveals you tap your credit card on the unit to release the free charge. Sometimes, it feels as if having an electric car is like being the member of an exclusive club — with an ever-changing set of secret rules.

LONDON LETDOWN
AUGUST 30: In the spirit of EV (stands for electric vehicle, don't you know) pioneering, it's time to brave a trip to London, to go to the theatre. EVs are exempt from the Congestion Charge (though I'm not able to benefit this time as it requires filling in forms and then waiting a week for confirmation)

and I figure surely the capital's streets will be paved with charging points? Not so. We spend a fruitless hour driving in circles. Every post is in use — except one. I park up and plug in. Nothing. The brand doesn't correspond with any of my numerous EV apps. The voice at the end of the helpline tells me I'd need to have registered

for a special card, another process that takes seven to ten days. I end the evening eating cold chips at a motorway services station on the M40 while the car takes on enough charge to get us home.
WASTED HOURS
SEPTEMBER 1: E.ON emails to say it can't speed up my electric cable problem, but will send £26 to compensate for the hours I've spent on the phone.

MAD PLAN

SEPTEMBER 15: Jon thinks I'm mad to want to drive the 97 miles from home in the Cotswolds to Gatwick and leave the car at the airport for a few days while I'm on a trip. But I plan the run meticulously: with enough time for a one-hour charging stop on the way; a second charging option if the first fails; a valet parking service (Tudor Rose) which promises to charge my car while I'm away; and, on a friend's advice, I learn to drive on eco-efficient cruise control. I barely sleep the night before. But, to my amazement, everything works like a dream.

FORM FILLING

OCTOBER 10: The engineer from E.ON arrives to update my electricity meter. Hurrah! It's a quick job. But now, Chargemaster say all my old forms have expired and I have to download, sign and send a new lot. Grrrr.

A BUMPY RIDE

OCTOBER 26: Installation day! My home charger is fitted and my lovely electric car is plugged in at home. Finally. Owning an electric car has been an exhausting labour of environmentally friendly love. It drives like a dream, and incredibly, thanks to the free public chargers, I have driven 3,000 miles on less than £20 of electricity. But I wouldn't rush to recommend getting a pure electric car yet. This is the future of driving, whether or not you're concerned about the environment, but the charging infrastructure is chaotic and disorganised and drivers like me are getting a very bumpy ride. If the Government really does want to meet targets for all cars to be zero emission by 2040, there's going to have to be some support behind an effective network of charging points.