

# EarthTalk™

## From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

**Dear EarthTalk:** I've suddenly been seeing a lot of those tiny "Smart Cars" around. Who makes them and what is their fuel efficiency? And I'm all for fuel efficiency, but are these cars safe?

- David Yu, Bend, OR

Originally the brainchild of Lebanese-born entrepreneur/inventor Nicolas Hayek of Swatch watch fame, Smart Cars are designed to be small, fuel-efficient, environmentally responsible and easy to park—really the ultimate in-city vehicle.

Back in 1994, Hayek and Swatch signed on with Daimler-Benz (the German maker of the venerable Mercedes line of cars) to develop the unique vehicle; in fact, the company name Smart is derived from a combination of the words Swatch, Mercedes and the word "art."

When initial sales were slower than hoped for, Hayek and Swatch pulled out of the venture, leaving Daimler-Benz full owner (today Smart is part of Mercedes car division). Meanwhile, rising oil prices have driven up demand for Smart vehicles, and the company began selling them in the U.S. earlier this year.

Measuring just a hair over 8 feet long and less than five feet wide, the company's flagship "ForTwo" model (named for its human carrying capacity) is about half the size

of a traditional car.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rates the car's fuel efficiency at 33 miles per gallon (mpg) for city driving and 41 mpg on the highway (although actual drivers report slightly lower results). Three ForTwos with bumpers to the curb can fit in a single parallel parking spot.

And with soaring gas prices, the cars have been selling like hotcakes in the U.S. The company's U.S. distributor is working on importing an additional 15,000 cars before the end of 2008, as its initial order of 25,000 vehicles is almost depleted. Some four dozen Mercedes Benz dealers across the country have long waiting lists for new Smart vehicles, which sell for upwards of \$12,000.

As for safety, the ForTwo did well enough in crash tests by the independent Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) to earn the group's highest rating—five stars—thanks to the car's steel racecar-style frame and liberal use of high-tech front and side airbags. Despite such good safety performance for such a tiny car, IIHS testers caution that larger, heavier cars are inherently safer than smaller ones.

Beyond safety concerns, some analysts bemoan the ForTwo's price tag as unnecessarily high given what you get. The cars are not known for their handling or acceleration, although they can go 80



The EPA rates the Smart Car's fuel efficiency at 33 miles per gallon for city driving and 41 on the highway. Three Smart Cars with bumpers to the curb can fit in a single parallel parking spot. (Photo courtesy of Flickr)

miles per hour if necessary.

The website Treehugger.com suggests that eco-conscious consumers might do better spending their \$12,000 on a conventional sub-compact or compact car, many which get equivalent if not better gas mileage not to mention likely faring better in a crash.

But for those who need a great in-city car for short errands and commutes, today's ForTwo might be just the ticket. Environmentalists are hoping Smart will release the

higher mileage diesel version of the ForTwo, which has been available in Europe for several years, in the U.S. soon.

And they are keeping their fingers crossed for a hybrid version which could give the hugely successful Toyota Prius—which looks almost huge in comparison—a run for its money in terms of fuel efficiency and savings at the pump.

**CONTACTS:** Smart USA, [www.smartusa.com](http://www.smartusa.com); IIHS, [www.iihs.org](http://www.iihs.org).

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