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Eco shopper diary: the joy of car clubs



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Let's get this out of the way: I enjoy driving my car club VW Golf. Not in a macho, Jeremy Clarkson, phwoar-look-at-my-horsepower fashion. More as a motor skills challenge akin to a giant game of mole-whacking, where I take an oddly Boy Scout-like pleasure in obeying the rules and letting old ladies cross the road.

I've been a [Streetcar](#) member for nearly a year now, and for the occasional London driver I think it's the best way of enjoying a car. The idea is simple: there's a network of hire cars in your local area and you book them by the hour via web or phone. But before I extol the joys of car club (first rule: tell everyone, get free discount hours from referrals) it's worth considering the eco impact. After all, what is green about encouraging people into cars?

Having less cars on the road, for one. As well as the lame boast of being home to the world's longest Champagne bar (surely it should be the best stocked or most expertly staffed?), the UK can lay claim to having over 27.5 million cars on the road in 2005. That's more than one for every household. And while France has a couple million more cars than us, it also happens to have twice the land size -- and then some. So you start to get an idea of how congested this island is (more facts [here](#), Statstos).

Add to that 402.4 billion kilometres of car and cab travel in 2006 (it was 359.9 billion kilometers only ten years earlier) plus an average central London speed of a pathetic 9.3mph, and it's pretty clear what the answer is. We need fewer cars. Lots of the research around car clubs is a bit fuzzy and not enough's been done in the UK, but Streetcar reckons each of its club cars take 20 cars off the road.

It's common sense that some drivers are going to sell their old car when joining a club, so even if Streetcar's figure is a bit high, it's likely some cars are coming off the road as a result of car clubs. Which is good news for congestion, car parking spaces (more of that later) and -- if the car clubs' research on drivers driving fewer miles is right -- carbon emissions too. Which is just what you'd expect from drivers on a meter.

That's lovely jubbly from an environment perspective -- but what about the actual experience? I've found it surprisingly blissful. For a start, it's cheap. An hour with Streetcar costs £5 (£4 on the new eco VW Bluemotion Polos), or you pay £35 a weekday and £50 a weekend day. The first 30 miles of petrol are free. New members pay £50 a year, though I smugly got in as a so-called founder member and don't have to pay that. Financially, that compares well to rental companies like Hertz, unless you're doing a lot of long distance journeys.

The real pleasure for me has been the complete lack of hassle. There's no parking grief because all the cars have dedicated spaces, often neatly painted out on the road and only for your use. There's no road tax, no insurance to pay, no tedious MOTs and sucking in of breath by mechanics -- in short, none of the dull side of motoring, just the fun bits. All you do is tap the swipe card against the sensor behind the windscreen (pictured below) and you're set to go.



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Case in point: on one occasion I got a flat tyre while ferrying my cat to the vet (taking a long-haired tabby on two hours of public transport is not my idea of fun). I'm a car maintenance muppet, so it was nice to hear the voice on the end of Streetcar's customer care line telling me they'd send an RAC man. For free. Fifteen minutes later, there he was, and I was back on the road. No hassle, and no need to replace the temporary tyre when I got home -- I just left the car and next time I hired it the tyre had been replaced, as if by magic.

That's another one of the nice things in my car club experience. There's a Neighbourhood Watch-like civic pride in leaving the car in good nick. Despite my apprehensions, not one car I've hired has been strewn with crumbs or splattered with mud. Plus the cars always have a minimum quarter tank of fuel -- a rule you have to play by too -- meaning your car gets refuelled by the fairies if you're only ever taking short trips. And you may fairly ask: why does a Smart person need a car in the first place? Well, my voyages this year have included a trip to B&Q for insulation, an annual IKEA voyage and a wedding in the middle of nowhere. In other words, trips that are not fun or even possible on public transport.

There are downsides, of course. The truth is that car clubs are only working spectacularly well in London, judging from numbers. On Streetcar's books the capital has over 600 cars to choose from, Brighton has a lame five and Cambridge a paltry two. Streetcar rival Zipcar hasn't even dared venture beyond the confines of the M25 (though it does deserve kudos for offering a wider range of motors than Streetcar, including the roomier Toyota Prius hybrid).

Secondly, there's no such thing as a one-way journey. You have to return the car to where you collected it. And you have to be organised. Like London life generally, the car club system doesn't reward spontaneity -- cars are usually booked at least a few days in advance by foresighted types.

If you're looking to join a club, I recommend Streetcar unconditionally from personal experience. It's not the only choice though -- in London the other two biggies are [City Car Club](#) and US-owned [Zipcar](#). Right now, Streetcar has more cars than Zipcar's 191, so in my 'hood, there's no question which I'm going to choose. Across the UK, there are over a thousand clubs to pick from -- a good start is this [map](#).

Of course, if you really can't bear to be parted with your motor, you could always create a DIY car club and share your own four wheels via a lift-sharing service like [Liftshare](#), which has just celebrated its 200,000th member.

Thanks to [Halycon Classic Parts](#), which kindly provided the fantastic retro driving goggles..

Posted: 17 December 2007, 03:06pm by [Adam Vaughan](#)

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Ben 27 November 2007 07:52pm

Too true.
I'm actually a streetcar member and this sort of thing is totally the way forward. So many people own cars that just sit around outside their home for days, weeks, sometimes months on end, only to be cranked into action for the occasional trip to Tesco's or Ikea. What a waste! Waste of tax, insurance and MOT money. Wasting the space it's parked in. And, I suppose, the resources and energy used to make the car in the first place!

Climate change means we will all, ultimately, have to make some lifestyle changes. I've given up my car but still have a gleaming golf (polo or van) at my beck and call just around the corner.. So while it won't suit everyone, this is possibly one of the easiest lifestyle changes I've ever made!

(ps - nah, i dont have shares in the company!!)

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Adam 28 November 2007 03:33pm

I've never given these a go but am tempted to now we've given up the car. I'm only put off by the yearly charge to be honest (especially as some don't pay it) as I'd like to see how much I make use of it first. It would be better if you got a £1 off per hour if you paid the annual fee.

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Ben Howard 18 December 2007 11:40am

So I had my first experience with Streetcar at the weekend and I have to say it was fantastic. I was in love with the concept from the start but slightly dubious that my car would be there when I wanted it and that the swipe card would magically open the doors as described. But hey...it all worked as described and although there's a few things you need to remember the first time you take your car for a spin (pin number for one) the whole process was great. I'm lucky enough to have 5 cars within 5 mins from my house so having sold our car in the summer, I plan on using streetcar for some time to come.

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Gemma 18 December 2007 01:00pm

I think Streetcar is a fantastic idea. We recently had to sell our car, due to ridiculously expensive car insurance and Streetcar has been our saviour! We took a trip to Norfolk a couple of weekends ago and the experience was so simple. Everything's explained very clearly once you get inside the car and for me to understand first time is quite a feat! It was also very economical and meant we could really spend our money on more important things. Like eating cake! Overall it was brilliant and we don't miss our car at all. Why would we when we have a Streetcar literally 2 minutes walk from our house?

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