

1176 words

## **Join the Club!**

**by Kirsten de Keyser**

In a gesture of solidarity with Austerity Britain, we really should all take a long, hard look at how we can contribute meaningfully and in some tangible fashion to the green 'war effort'. Words are all very laudable, but what are we actually *doing* about it? Judging from the furious heat generated whenever the discussion turns to residents' parking, speed limits, or any motoring related issue, our cars are a popular topic.

Let's face it, car ownership is expensive. Be honest, we make lots of trips by car just because it's there, when it would be quicker, easier and cheaper on foot, by bike, bus or tube. Research shows that 80% of car journeys are between 2-5 miles. When you add the time it takes to get there, find a place to park, return home, and find another place to park, I bet you that a gentle walk would have taken half the time.

And so it was that, on a wet September morning, my diary noted that it was that time again - the BMW was due for its MOT. Now, for years I'd practically lived in that car. Clocking up 30K on an annual basis for work, teenager taxi service and camping holidays around Europe. The result? The previous year's MOT inspection had me nearly taking out a mortgage to pay the welding bill.

A quick web search of 'the cost of running a car' turned up a dizzying array of figures with the AA claiming annual costs of £17K in "standing charges" and "running costs," to a more modest £8K calculated by the What Price website. My own kitchentablecalculations indicated that adding up the cost of tax, MOT, fuel, servicing, repairs, depreciation, insurance and parking, I was likely looking **at** well over a hundred pounds a week!

I also have several irritating, car-free-taxi-riding "what parking problem?" friends who kept waving their green credentials at me. They would regale me with monologues about how car use makes a significant contribution to CO<sub>2</sub>, deteriorating air quality and health through

pollutants. In April 2011, only four months into the year, London exceeded the maximum pollution levels for the whole year, risking a multi million pound fine which will be slapped onto all Londoners' Council Tax. Our fair city apparently also has the nation's worst air quality and the highest levels in Europe of PM10 particles, which can be inhaled into and accumulate in the respiratory system. I didn't struggle monumentally to stop smoking only to inhale a load of PM10s! Air pollution from traffic and industry kills as many as 50,000 people in the U.K. annually.

This sort of talk seriously challenged my good-neighbour credentials so was it time to throw in the towel and join my green friends? After all, I'd packed in my workaholic profession, the kids had gone solo and, as for holidays, I'd donated our RanulphFiennes-styledome-tent with all its accoutrements to the local scout troop and adopted a more leisurely style of sojourn. It was a wrench but finally, after much hand wringing - and calculator tapping - I decided that the time had come to say goodbye to my old friend. Lovingly gathering up an impressive pile of faded receipts and yellow plastic envelopes from the glove box, I came upon a flattened little packet of Danish salty liquorice pastilles. As I sat there sucking one of the last, slightly sandy, sweets, memories came flooding back of a fun fortnight on the west coast of Jutland. The boot revealed where the missing vacuum cleaner tube had been all this time and a Michael Bolton CD had united with a piece of bubble gum on the mat under the passenger seat. Happy days.

Anyway, life happened and what, with one thing and another, it's been five years since all that wet September agonising and I still haven't replaced the old BMW. Happily, I saw the light and joined a car club instead. Car clubs are a pay-as-you-drive alternative to owning a car. Membership gives you all the benefits of clean, modern and reliable cars without the hassle and hidden costs of car ownership. Parking problems are a distant nightmare and I smile inwardly listening to others' insurance premium groans. I'm fit to Olympic standard (ok, bit of an exaggeration perhaps) walking, bussing or tubing everywhere. I use the club cars for trips to IKEA or anywhere inaccessible by public transport - which is practically nowhere.

According to Camden Council's traffic planner Jacqueline Saunders, Car Club use encourages effective trip planning, because users are aware of the whole cost of a trip. This leads to people planning their routes more efficiently so that they include more than one destination in a trip, reducing their mileage, pollution and congestion. Apparently, one car

club car typically replaces about 24 private cars, which is pretty staggering, and of course it reduces parking stress and helps to relieve congestion and pollution. Car clubs also give you greater flexibility, charging only for the time you use the car, not when it is sitting on the street. What's not to like?

Finding a car club is simple, just tap "Car Club" into a search engine and a whole lot of links appear, or try the really useful Carplus website at [www.carplus.org.uk](http://www.carplus.org.uk). The site provides a map of all the car club locations in the country. Click the link to 'Find a Car Club car', then 'London,' then whatever borough is appropriate to find a car club nearby .

Booking is by phone or on line and pretty instant. A yearly subscription costs around £50 but some clubs give you most of that back in free initial drives. Charges then run from around £5 an hour including fuel, insurance and the Congestion Charge. So you'd have to cruise about for three hours a day, seven days a week to burn up the £100 it costs you to have your motor sitting on the street - and that's the minimum! You can rent a car by the hour, day, week or month. The cars are parked in dedicated on-street car club parking bays and models typically include VW Golfs, Polos, 7-seater Tourans, vans and BMWs. They can be reserved and collected and returned 24/7 using a smartcard and PIN number.

Camden currently has 266 car club bays at 159 different locations operated by three private car club operators: [Streetcar/Zipcar](http://www.zipcar.co.uk) [www.zipcar.co.uk](http://www.zipcar.co.uk), [City Car Club](http://www.citycarclub.co.uk/) <http://www.citycarclub.co.uk/> and Hertz on Demand, [Hertz on Demand](http://www.hertzondemand.com/london) [www.hertzondemand.com/london](http://www.hertzondemand.com/london). Haringey's Car Club scheme offers Zipcar members access to 87 on-street vehicles (including cars and vans) plus two vehicles off street. There are 200 car club vehicles in Islington. I know what you're thinking: "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is". I do have one regret about Car Clubs: I wonder what took me so long. And take it from me: next time you need a change of motor, have a break, join a Car Club and feel the difference. You'll be a lot fitter, a lot richer and a much better neighbour.