

Havana electric vehicle safety

The adoption of electric vehicles in Cuba, driven by economic necessity and innovative local companies, is revolutionizing the transportation sector. This feature delves into the technological advancements and challenges faced in this transition.

Havana is famed for the colorful vintage cars that can still be pattered around its streets and are a popular subject for visitors' photographs. However, these days, Cubans are just as likely to be found getting around quickly and quietly on electric scooters made with Chinese parts.

Electric motorcycles are solving a lot of problems in Cuba. They are already used for almost everything; Omar Cortina, a Cuban hotel worker who recently purchased his first electric vehicle--a lime-green scooter powered by a lithium battery told Reuters. This shift marks a significant change in Cuba's transportation landscape, as reported by Reuters.

Until recently, Cuba's roads had changed little in the six decades since former leader Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution: the old cars puffing sooty exhaust, rutted pavement, and light traffic. Electric vehicles are proving a godsend for many in the communist-run nation.

According to official data, between 2020 and 2022, the last year for which figures are available, Cuba-based companies produced more than 23,000 electric vehicles. Since then, demand has grown alongside an economic crisis that has slashed fuel supply and public transportation.

Fuel for combustion-powered engines has been scarce in Cuba for years, prompting hours-long or sometimes days-long queues. Earlier this year, a fivefold price hike meant a typical 40-liter tank of gas cost more than a state worker's average monthly wage, making it far out of reach for most.

Public transportation could be more palatable. Buses in the Havana area are far fewer, more crowded, and more uncomfortable than in previous years. According to state-run media, half the routes to points outside the capital have been eliminated this year as fuel and spare parts dwindle.

These dire circumstances have helped drive demand for the products of newly formed companies like Caribbean Electric Vehicles (Vedca), said company director Julio Oscar Perez. The firm, a joint venture between Chinese investor Tianjin Dongxing Industrial and Cuban state bicycle manufacturer Minerva, has produced over 2,000 scooters, bikes, and mini-tricycle trucks in Cuba with Chinese parts.

I think we're reaching a tipping point; Perez said in an interview with Reuters. That is, not just seeing electric vehicles as an alternative to mobility, but also solving other problems that exist because of fuel limitations.

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On a recent weekday visit to the company's plant outside Havana, some of Vedca's 64 employees assembled plastic parts, soldered wires, and tightened bolts in an orderly assembly line. In contrast, others greeted customers arriving for pick-up. Perez said the company had also begun testing a new electric tractor and experimenting with other electric-powered heavy machinery.

Other small domestic companies sell electric bikes, ranging from makeshift to upscale. The government recently authorized imports of far pricier electric vehicles. According to the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, automobile imports from the neighboring United States have soared to \$24.6 million thus far in 2024, with a growing class of new business owners attracted to more luxurious electric and hybrid options, including Teslas.

The shift to electric vehicles is about more than just convenience. It represents a significant economic and environmental shift for Cuba. With fuel prices soaring and availability dwindling, electric cars offer many Cubans a more sustainable and economically viable alternative.

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Web: <https://hollanddutchtours.nl/contact-us/>

Email: energystorage2000@gmail.com

WhatsApp: 8613816583346

