

Electric vehicles visit Rogue Valley

Riders are making their way around the world

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Inspired by Jules Verne's classic novel, "Around the World in 80 days," three electric vehicles from Europe and Australia zipped into Medford Sunday night on the North American leg of a journey that started in Geneva, Switzerland.

"It is so cold," said Sven Lehmann, a 40-year-old photovoltaic research director in Berlin, Germany, as he stepped off his retrofitted Vectrix two-wheeled electric vehicle after his chilly ride.

Lehmann was the first to arrive at U.S. Cellular Park, leading the Australian and Swiss teams after starting out in Portland early Sunday.

The Zero Emissions Race, which has taken teams of riders through Europe, Asia, Canada and now into the U.S., is an attempt to highlight how far electric vehicles have come.

"The reason is to show that we are able to go around the world in 80 days," Lehmann said.

Everywhere they go, people have been interested in the electric cycles, he said.

"There have been a lot of very friendly people all over the world."

The reception at U.S. Cellular Park was organized by Rogue Valley Clean Cities.

The three teams started their race on Aug. 16 in Geneva, planning to return there in January. The 80 days refers to actual days on the road because the vehicles had to be shipped across the Pacific from Shanghai, China, to Vancouver, B.C.

Even though the vehicles have extra battery packs, their range is limited to 180 miles, requiring stops of several hours for recharging.

One of the biggest problems they've found in the U.S. is the dearth of 220-volt charging areas. The German team had to spend \$30 at a campground to get their cycle recharged.

Louis Palmer, director of the race, said it was actually easier finding places to charge in China, where the electricity is 220-volts, rather than 110 in the U.S.

In addition, half the scooters in China are already electric.

Palmer, who won the 2008 European Solar Prize for driving a solar-powered car 27,961 miles across 38 countries in 18 months, said the Chinese couldn't believe the riders were making such a long journey on electric vehicles.

"The people in China said, 'Are you trucking the vehicles?'" Palmer said. "We said, 'No, we're driving them.'"

Choosing a victor is a tongue-and-cheek affair.

Palmer had the Australian and German teams, which arrived, first push their scooters 30 feet to determine which vehicle was the lighter. The Germans won by a whisker.

Andrew Reynolds, one of the drivers for the Australian team, said the electric cycles actually have a lot of power.

"They are pretty zippy," he said.

However, he said the riders try not to go too fast because it cuts down on the range.

Meendert Buurman, a renewable energy consultant from Germany, said the range on the Vetrix motorcycle has been extended from about 40 miles normally to 180 miles now.

Different riders have been used during different legs of the journey, which is now in its 49th day on the road.

The riders stayed the night in Ashland, but will head to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Texas, then down into Mexico before crossing the Atlantic for the last leg of the journey.

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