

Wee wheels Palatine dealer finds demand in the latest drive for efficiency

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Posted Friday, July 27, 2007

On a sunny summer day, my convertible rolls up a busy suburban street to a stoplight.

A man pops his head out of the car beside me, calling curiously: "Where's the other half of that thing?"

He stares, looking it up and down.

"Where do you get one of those?"

George Kiebala is used to questions like this. He's the founder of Windy City Smart Car in Palatine, the only Chicago area dealership selling this spunky little ride.

At just 8.2 feet long and 5 feet tall, Smart cars have been on European streets for almost a decade. More than 750,000 have been sold in 36 countries - but until now, none in the U.S.

Kiebala, who is importing his cars from Europe, has one of the few outlets in the nation for Smart cars. More dealerships are expected in 2008.

The Palatine showroom began offering the car two months ago. So far Kiebala has sold 15 - 10 of those to out-of-state buyers from New York, Ohio and Minnesota and elsewhere.

Smart cars have turned up in recent movies, "The Da Vinci Code" and "The Pink Panther." With the combination of Hollywood and the Internet, this tiny vehicle is starting to get a lot of American attention.

The Smart car is shorter than the Volkswagen Beetle (14 feet) and the Mini Cooper (12 feet).

It gets 50 miles per gallon, uses regular gasoline, and is easy to park and maneuver.

Once you start driving it, there's an artificial intelligence chip inside that learns the driver's habits. It computes shifting patterns and after two to three weeks of use the same driver can increase gas mileage to 60 miles per gallon.

Get inside one and you won't realize its size.

The engine sits in the back, so there's leg room up top. If you're riding alone, the passenger seat folds forward for extra space. There's one cup holder, and the small trunk can fit a couple of grocery bags.

Kim Burney of Erie, Pa., wanted one the minute she saw it online.

Through Web research, she found the Palatine store and took Amtrak with her 6-foot-2-inch husband to get here.

"I love it," she said. "I feel just as confident in it as any car in the U.S."

Plus, she says, her husband's long legs fit just fine.

Kiebala imports each Smart car from Italy and has them converted to American specs in California before they're shipped to U.S. customers.

They cost \$24,900, and a convertible version is \$27,900.

The profit isn't big right now, says Kiebala, but he loves the efficient vehicle.

"We should be seeing these cars here," he said. "We're doing this because of our passion. Maybe it will catch on."

The vehicle's official sales launch in the U.S. is expected in early 2008, says Ken Kettenbeil, spokesman for Smart USA. A 50-city tour is under way to hype the car.

Kettenbeil said more than 50 dealerships will open across the country next year, three to five in the Chicago area. Most will be housed in Mercedes-Benz stores.

But there will be differences. The Smart USA cars will start at under \$12,000 and will have a Mitsubishi engine inside of a Mercedes one. The car will also get an average of 40 miles per gallon.

Kettenbeil wouldn't comment specifically on the Palatine venture, saying only that he's "aware that people have been importing these cars to sell them."

With no advertising, Smart USA has already received 20,000 reservations for the car, with buyers putting down \$99.

Kiebala says the cars he is selling will become collectors items once Smart moves in to the U.S.

He describes it as a cross between a Mercedes and a Swatch watch.

The Swatch part comes into play with the colors. Customers can swap the body panels and change the car's color, like a watch.

Smart, but is it safe?

Dealers tout various safety features - just don't get run over by a semi.

- The car has a Tridion hemispherical steel safety cell, a hard shell that surrounds the car's occupants like a walnut.
- The steering column electronically retracts telescopically upon impact, minimizing the likelihood of injury.
- In a rear impact, the engine will slide under the seats
- A rear crash box is built of aluminum, which crumples in a rear-end crash.
 - Also comes with anti-lock brakes, and driver and passenger airbags.