

2013 Fisker Karma Extended-range electric luxury car faces uncertain future.

Overview

The Fisker Karma is a new plug-in hybrid luxury sedan launched as a 2013 model. The Karma is the first, and perhaps the last, car from the company started by Henrik Fisker who made his name in automotive design. One look at the Karma, inside or out, shows how stylish a car can be when the designer is in charge, not an accountant. In retrospect, perhaps an accountant should have been in charge.

Things have not gone well for Fisker. After accepting a loan of \$192 million ordered by the Obama administration to support clean air technologies, Fisker now appears headed for bankruptcy. Henrik Fisker has left the company, the company has laid off 75 percent of its workforce, and the U.S. Energy Department has seized the company's emergency funds. All of this follows a series of recalls and service actions to fix teething problems on the Karma. We asked the company whether shoppers should be concerned about buying a Karma and where they might get one serviced. Fisker did not respond except to provide an April 5 statement saying it was considering strategic alternatives. We recommend taking a good look at your dealer before proceeding with a Karma purchase. A lot of dealers, particularly in the premium segments, are more interested in repeat customers than any one sale, and a solid multi-franchise dealer will likely support his or her customers with service and trade-in no matter what happens to the manufacturer.

Fisker calls the Karma an extended-range electric vehicle; you can also call it a plug-in hybrid. It has a large battery pack and two electric motors that drive the car, and carries a gasoline-engine generator to supply the battery pack as it is depleted. It always starts out on battery only and the driver can use the gasoline generator, either to save battery power for later use in certain conditions or restricted zones, or to maximize performance.

Karma is propelled by a pair of longitudinally mounted electric motors in back, supplied by a lithium-ion battery. The battery is recharged by plugging in to a 120- or 240-volt AC power supply, and by a 175-kW generator driven by a 2-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine in front. It is rear-wheel drive, with a single-speed (plus reverse) transmission.

Plugging it in is a simple process and many public charging stations require nothing more than waving a card in front to power you up. How much energy you use, in what forms, and how efficiency is perfected will depend on your driving style, geography, power supplier and so on. During our weeklong test drive in Southern California, a charge usually lasted 47 miles, and that charge used about \$3 in electricity. Rather than a high-mileage green car, the Karma is a greener car for drivers who demand more in terms of performance, luxury or driving enjoyment.

Karma is quite nice to drive with excellent steering and brakes, effortless deceptive propulsion, a fine blend of smooth ride and good handling, and a view over the hood that rivals Corvette and 911. Disclaimers such as "for an electric car" or "for a 5300-pound four-door" are not necessary here.

The Karma cabin is cozy and bisected by a tall, full-length console. Front seat space is fine for six-plus footers but the rear seats are best for kids or clients of lesser stature. In many respects the cabin reminds us of a big luxury coupe, such as the Mercedes CL, but with the addition of rear doors. Materials are unusual in texture and appearance, avant-gard luxury we'll call it, and soft-touch is the name of the game. Trunk space is definitely sports-car size, not four-door sedan size, a common compromise in hybrid and electric cars.

Karma comes with a typical assortment of premium sedan gear, but more advanced features such as forward collision warning and mitigation and adaptive cruise control are not on the menu. The options list is short. Buyers essentially choose colors, cabin finishes and get on with the driving.

Although none have the style and exclusivity of the Karma and all have a more capacious cabin and trunk, green alternates include the BMW 7 Series hybrid, Lexus LS600h hybrid, Mercedes-Benz S400 hybrid, or the Audi A8 TDI diesel or Mercedes-Benz S350 diesel.

Model Lineup

Fisker Karma is offered in two trim levels: EcoSport (\$110,000) and EcoChic (\$115,000). Only the cabin materials and finishes vary between the two; all the running gear, exterior cosmetics and features are the same.

The EcoSport cabin is leather and suede, said to be from a 100-percent sustaining facility. The upholstery is offered in two monochrome palettes and two three-color arrangements (\$2,400).

EcoChic interiors use EcoSuede upholstery, an environmentally friendly 100-percent post-industrial textile. This comes in two different three-color schemes.

Every Karma comes with dual-zone climate control, 6-way power front seats with driver memory, power tilt/telescoping steering column, reclaimed wood and acrylic trim, 22-inch alloy wheels, heated seats front and rear, bi-Xenon headlamps, LED exterior lighting, pushbutton on/off, HZ sound generator, HomeLink, power windows/locks/mirrors, cruise control, and a 10.2-inch haptic multifunction touch-screen that controls most of the car's features beyond lights and wipers: mirror-fold, traction control, vehicle settings, voice-recognition navigation, Bluetooth, climate, and rear-view camera. A 295-watt, 6-channel, 8-speaker AM/FM/MP3/XM-ready audio system has auxiliary and USB inputs front and rear. The only option is special paint (two Premium, four Diamond Dust, \$3200).

Walkaround

One look from any angle emphasizes the Karma came from a company headed by a designer. Everyone shows big wheels on concept cars at auto shows but on the Karma they appear on the production car as well. At 22 inches in diameter they are larger even than a Rolls-Royce Phantom, a blunt nosed battleship a full foot taller.

In profile the stretch from the massive front wheel arch to the tautly wrapped cabin reminds of the Maybach Exelero, a one-of-one research test bed. Front fenders are draped over the wheels like a Corvette, while the rear has hips as wide as an old Porsche turbo.

There's some jewelry low in the front fenders, exhaust outlet notches right below, small chrome fixed door handles (squeeze the button inside to release) and a little bright-work around windows and in the front lamp housings. Otherwise it's the flowing curves and three-dimensional aspects that dominate the side view.

On top there are 80 solar cells to help with climate control and battery charging. It's another attention-garnering element where style and function coincide, and the reason no sunroof is offered.

The low and wide look is intensified by a nearly full-width split grille that one might argue is the grown-up handlebar version of a Fiat 500 moustache. It's supplemented with a horizontal lower element flanked by diamond shape duct openings. LED daytime running lights curl around the chrome headlight washer plate, and run all the way up the side as parking lights.

Things are no different in back, the broad hips almost as wide as the rear-view mirrors. The lower trim strip and angled light elements closely mirror those at the front, while the chrome diamond inserts in the lower flanks are decorative, not exhaust outlets.

The trunklid is conventional, the space beneath it more sports car than luxury sedan. It should fit one set of golf clubs or a couple of mid-size soft-sides. The 110-volt battery charger cable is under the floor with the tire repair kit.

Interior Features

The Karma cabin exudes flowing luxury just like the exterior and there's an elegant simplicity to it suggesting it won't be out of style in ten years. Indeed, some Ford and GM dashboards are wilder than this one, often no easier to live with.

Although the car is low the driving position is quite good. Supportive seats are usually upholstered in leather and suede-like materials in an unusual asymmetric pattern. Definitely stylish, it also adds function because the outer edges you have to slide in and out over are smoother, while the center section's grippier fabric helps keep you from moving around in the seat if you're slight. Otherwise the seat bolsters keep you comfortably contained, and the high center console your elbow will use is the primary constraint point.

The rear seat is much cozier, like a two-plus-two coupe with your own doors. If you fit, and foot room or headroom could be the deciding factor, the seats are very comfortable and echo the design up front. The console has metallic seat heat and window switches, cupholders and USB and power ports on the aft edge.

Regardless of interior materials appear first-rate. Apart from steering wheel stalks and switches from GM every panel and touch point has a nice feel. The only place we found hard plastic was the lower inside lip of the metallic door scuff plates. Woodwork is minimal and recovered from fallen or burned trees, while the door panels and center console have acrylic panels with lighting underneath.

Instruments provide speed, range and levels for battery and gasoline, and power regeneration displays. There are no trees or leaves to grow, nor graphic logs, but an occasional eye on the panel and driving habits will maximize your efficiency.

Most controls run through the big center touch-screen: climate, phone, sound, navigation and so on. Controls are relatively intuitive, but their operation is slow, markedly so for an advanced automobile, and the screen isn't bright enough. Switch lights above for door locks, hazard lights and a gloved hand for the glovebox release have similar visibility issues. The shifter appears modeled after the Louvre's Dome, with pushbuttons for PRND; with no gears it needs no more buttons.

The sound system offers satellite radio, USB and Bluetooth, and for a system described as 295 watts, eight speakers and a subwoofer, it sounds much more than that and compares to some rated twice that. It does need a better antenna if broadcast radio is on your listening list.

Forward the view is classic front-engine performance car, a long, wavy hood that allows excellent forward sightlines and fenders that clearly delineate the sides of the car. Mirrors provide a better view to the sides than directly behind because of the big hips, and the rear window is fairly small, but parking sensors and a rear camera make reversing easy.

Driving Impressions

The Karma will wake up as you walk up to it. Once inside, pushing the one button is much like booting up your computer. It always defaults to Stealth mode (battery only) and moves off very quietly, generating a synthetic sound at slow speeds to get the attention of pedestrians and cyclists nearby.

An extended-range electric vehicle, the Karma could be considered a plug-in hybrid in that it stores energy in two ways, gasoline and battery. However, unlike the Chevrolet Volt and most plug-in hybrids, the Fisker's gasoline powerplant never connects to the drive wheels.

The basics: A big battery down low in the middle where a driveshaft or exhaust pipe would normally be feeds voltage to two electric motors, one in front and one behind the rear axle differential.

In Stealth mode they drive the car an EPA-rated 33 miles, though this varies greatly with weather and driving habits. We consistently achieved 46-48 miles on a \$3 electricity charge.

In Sport mode, engaged by the left steering wheel paddle, the gasoline engine in front drives a 175-kW generator to feed and recharge the battery. If you want to save electric power for later use, simply engage Sport at startup and maintain the charge using the gasoline generator, then engage Stealth when you need it.

Total range on a full charge (overnight on 120VAC, about 6 hours with the 240VAC charger) is estimated at 300 miles. German authorities rate it 51.6 miles at a steady 31-mph urban speed, and with a little planning you can regenerate most of it approaching stops. On gasoline, the EPA rates the Karma at 20/21 mpg City/Highway, but if you never drive it more than battery range, you could conceivably only need gas because that in the 9.5-gallon tank expired.

A spreadsheet is the only way to determine the most efficient method for you. Any environmental benefit will also require how clean your electricity production and transmission is.

Peak performance in Sport mode is 0-60 mph in less than six seconds charged and a bit more than 7 seconds with a depleted battery; in Stealth mode, 0-60 acceleration performance is just less than eight seconds when fully charged. That's not best in class for gasoline or electric luxury sports cars but it's acceptably quick. It feels quicker than it is because of the effortlessness of electric-motor torque (959 lb-ft of it) and the fact that mashing the pedal brings instant response: there is no transmission downshift to wait for.

The pedal feel and transitions from on-throttle to cruise to regenerative braking are all very good. The major difference between this and a conventional car is it slows a bit more when you take your foot off the accelerator.

Using the steering wheel's right paddle you can call up more regenerative braking action in two degrees in Hill (1 or 2) mode. These slow the car faster when you lift your foot off the accelerator, in essence adding braking action without adding braking effort to the front wheels.

With a little foresight you can be quite efficient and very smooth. We took a winding road littered with hairpins up and over 2500 feet and never touched the brake pedal for half an hour.

If you do need more braking power the Karma does not disappoint. Big discs framed by 6-piston front and 4-piston rear brakes combine with those big tires to stop the car impressively, more sports-car territory than luxury car.

Steering is by electrically driven hydraulic assist and very good. It has good feel and feedback, nice weighting and points the car precisely, and none of the numbness that characterizes a lot of adjustable systems.

Coupled with the rear-biased weight distribution, low center of gravity because all the heavy masses are close to the ground, and minimal body motion fore and aft or side to side, the Karma is good fun to drive. In an area many alternate-propulsion vehicles are not very good, the Karma's balance of ride comfort, handling, and fun-to-drive spirit are hard to match.

Summary

The Fisker Karma isn't for everyone given its cost, rear seat and trunk room, attention garnering looks and thirst when out of electric range that belies its green-ness. But if you want exclusivity, heavy style inside and out, a nice drive, and want to cover less than 50 miles a day (or between charges) there are few alternatives. The biggest questions may revolve around service and parts.

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