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The automotive world is changing quickly. Where before customer choice didn"t extend much beyond ordinary petrol and diesel cars and vans, there are now those plus fully-electric cars and several different types of hybrid cars, too. One that you"ve probably read about is the plug-in hybrid, which we"ll explain more about here.

Examples of plug-in hybrid cars include the Skoda Octavia iV and the Mercedes C 300 e, which are both petrol-electric plug-in hybrids. Diesel-electric plug-ins are much less common, but Mercedes did also offer a C 300 de model, which was a popular company car for several years thanks to its fuel economy on longer trips.

"Traditional" hybrid cars - also known as "full hybrids", or simply "hybrids" - usually have a small battery of under 2kWh in capacity. This is able to hold enough charge to drive the car for only a mile or so on electric power alone so hybrids usually drive on power from the petrol engine with assistance from the electric motor. The engine is used to keep the battery charged, along with some other clever tech that uses the brakes to generate power as well. Examples of full hybrid cars include the Toyota Corolla and Honda Civic.

Plug-in hybrids are also able to self-charge using their petrol or diesel engines, but they usually have a much larger battery pack. The size varies a lot, but the average is about 22kWh, giving an electric range of 25 to 50 miles on electric power alone in most cases. Recently the electric ranges have been increasing, however, with the new Volkswagen Golf GTE able to cover 82 miles on EV power when tested on the WLTP combined cycle.

The size of the battery in a plug-in hybrid means that it would take a lot of fuel - and time - for the engine to charge it up. Instead, plug-in hybrids are intended to be plugged into the mains, hence the name. It will usually take a few hours to charge the battery, and many owners of these cars use lower-cost overnight electricity rates to keep costs down too.

Plug-in hybrids are a halfway house between petrol and diesel vehicles and fully electric ones. While those who exclusively do long journeys will only be interested in combustion power and those doing only short trips can go all-electric easily, PHEVs are great for those who do both.

If you have a short commute of under 30 miles - or however long the range of your chosen PHEV is - then you can use the electric range to do this for a very low cost, just like with an electric car. Yet for long holiday trips where charging an EV is a pain, you can use petrol or diesel to keep things convenient.

Plug-in hybrids aren"t well-suited to those with a varied lifestyle, though. Driving without using electric power tends to be less economical than in a conventional petrol car as the weight of the batteries brings efficiency

down. If you regularly drive a lot of miles you"ll pay more for fuel than you would with a normal petrol or diesel in a lot of cases.

However there"s also the matter of company car tax, which is significantly lower on plug-in vehicles. This means that for certain drivers it can be cheaper to get a company PHEV than a petrol equivalent, despite not being able to make best use the electric range, simply because of the tax savings.

Plug-in hybrids with longer official electric ranges are cheaper to tax. As long as the CO2 emissions are under 50g/km, cars that can do between 70 and 129 miles are taxed at 5% compared to 12% for cars that can do 30 to 39 miles. Full electric cars are taxed at 2% in the Benefit-in-Kind scale.

There"s hardly any difference in normal driving between a plug-in hybrid and any other type of car. All are automatic only - there are no manual gearboxes in hybrid cars these days - so they are really easy to drive, and switching between electric and petrol (or diesel) power is seamless and automatic. You don"t have to do anything other than drive normally.

Most plug-in hybrids have driving modes that let you choose what the engine and electric motors do. You can set them to drive on electric power only, which is great for a short commute as you won"t use a drop of petrol until the battery runs low. The engine will then automatically turn on when needed.

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