

Get Amped
Tesla Model S Test Drive
July 15, 2012
Gaithersburg, Maryland

Sunday was sunny, hot and humid. Perhaps not the best conditions for a test drive but at least it wasn't pouring rain. The event was held at the Gaithersburg Hilton which is a short distance from I-270's Exit 11. It was a relatively short drive on (mostly) country roads as I was staying with friends.

We approached the hotel from the rear so we sighted Tesla's area right away. Signage leaves a bit to be desired as who knew you needed to take the access road to Sam's Club to get to the Hilton? Certainly not the three other cars that followed us on a tour of the parking lot.

The Get Amped Tour
Yes, you need those stinkin' badges.

When signing up for the event a time slot was chosen for the test drive. I chose an 11:00 slot.

After parking we were directed inside to the Registration Table. Just like any other concert event badges were issued. "All Access" badges were given to the drivers while "Backstage" badges were given to the riders. The driver completed a standard test drive agreement and was given a reservation number.

We then waited in the lounge for our number to be called. Seating was ample. Fruit, cereal, granola bars, pretzels and popcorn were available as was soda, milk, juice and water.

A TV in the corner played Disney's CARS for the kids and an All-in-one computer ran a slide show of Model S production & features. There were two sets of color sample blocks that could be mixed & matched so you could get an idea of how the interior & exterior colors looked.

Plenty of Tesla employees from the DC store and California were on hand to answer questions. The uniform of the day was the red Get Amped Tour t-shirt. Everyone was friendly and as helpful as they could be as one would expect from attending their other events.

When I go to a regular automotive dealership I don't really expect to get solid answers from a salesman. However, when the company's product line is one car and they are asking reservation holders to place orders I'm expecting solid answers. "I don't know" and "We haven't figured that out yet" are perfectly acceptable when discussing a prototype but it's starting to wear thin.

After waiting about an hour my number's up, along with four others. There were probably 20 slots available per hour. Now we are off to the drivers' briefing in the next room. A map of the route is displayed & the ground rules are announced. An employee will ride along demonstrating some features and navigating. The route is on public roads so behave around the cops (if any). Top speed is limited because some drivers scared their passengers by driving excessively fast at an earlier event. The reservation card is turned in & punched. The badges are punched. It's time to queue up for a car.

Five cars are in service. Two are Performance versions. Amongst all of them all of the features can be found. As the cars return from a test drive there's a bit of an opportunity for a photo op & questions as the next driver gets in.

Those in my group wanted to wait for a Performance. I took the “stock” Model S with the cloth interior nobody wanted. Since this is the car I will most likely buy this is what I wanted to drive. Getting in was a bit tight. Part of it may be just that it was a strange car. Most of it is that I’m not exactly 5’9” and 140 pounds. While we were poking around the car powered down. It took a minute or so for my Navigator to realize this & get the seat slid back.

I’m a bit cautious in a strange car so it took me a few minutes to fix the mirrors, find the controls & get comfy then off we go, through the parking lot with (probably) two on my tail. I’m engrossed in my car so I’m not paying any attention to them.

The Model S has several adjustable or selectable modes that affect steering, braking, & ground clearance. We start off in sport mode. The steering is tight. Without pressure on the accelerator the regenerative braking kicks in, the brake lights light, and the car glides like a brick. This will take a lot of getting used to.

The first demo is the suspension. All of these cars have the active suspension, a \$1500 option. The standard suspension will be available in January. The residential street has speed bumps & railroad tracks. Taking them at speed (25mph) is like they aren’t even there.

Now it’s time for the acceleration demo—the on ramp for the Interstate. We hang back to make a large cushion behind the car in front. I punch it a bit and we are on him like white on rice. Great for the track, great for tight spots, but I’m still a hypermiler so not so great for range.

The off ramp is a not so gentle curve. We go into it at 45mph and come out at 50mph. The car’s solid; No body roll.

Returning to the parking lot Standard Mode is selected. This is designed to emulate a “normal” car. The steering feels easier (normal) and the brakes feel like a Prius’. The car now glides. He points out that you’ll lose a lot of regeneration and use the brakes a lot more.

Someone (NOT ME) misses a turn in the parking lot so there is a stray Model S as I pull back in where we started.

There is always a group of Tesla employees “out back” to keep an eye on everything and to keep things moving. The first one to spot a returning car announces the incoming. Everyone claps & cheers as the driver stops & exits the car.

I’ve been driving a Prius for six years so this car has quite a bit to live up to. For the last three plus years it was a picture. It didn’t have many specs so it could fulfill your dreams. It started to take shape with the prototype and Beta build but they were mostly for looking at, certainly not for driving. Now the design details are final (almost) and much like meeting the TV or movie star, it’s not quite what you expected.

The car’s beautiful. Not many say that about the Prius. I like the deck and the trunk. I don’t like the \$250 deck cover. I like the empty space between the front seats—no arch. I didn’t even notice the touchscreen. The USB port & power are on the front of the armrest. The only gauge I really noticed was the speedo. I was paying attention to the big numbers, not the blue bar running up the circumference of the circular display. Balancing that was an orange range bar on the right that was briefly mentioned.

The Prius' sticks on the steering column don't extend past the steering wheel. If your fingers are open you can still turn on the wipers while maneuvering. This never looks cool on the autocross. The Model S cruise control stalk is longer and above the turn signal stock on the left side. I banged it just about every time I signaled. I really don't know where any of the other controls are.

The car is quiet. Deathly quiet. Inside and out. It's a smooth, solid ride and handles well. Corvettes can pull 1G in a turn. I wonder what the Model S can do. I didn't ask at the event. I'll have to add this question to my list for the New York store.

The car I drove had the stock 19" wheels. I didn't get the tire size, make, or specs. I don't know what they cost but I'll bet "a lot". They are not run flats.

Protective film from 3M is a \$950 option. The warranty is unknown. It looks like it covers the front bumper, the forward third (or so) of the hood, the leading section of the front fender, small strips around the wheel wells (that follow the car's contours), a rectangular section around and below the charging port on the left rear fender (the port is behind the red marker lens), and the top of the rear bumper. I thought the covered area is a bit skimpy.

The film was almost completely invisible on the green car. You really had to look for the edges. This was not the case on the white car. The film stood out from a distance. This probably is a "white car problem" rather than a "Tesla problem".

The stock interior is a glossy Piano Black but I didn't see much of it in the car. The bit I saw in the car was about as big as the sample. The car's interior was not obvious in a positive or negative way.

All of the cars had 3G connectivity and displayed Google Maps. The Signature includes one year of 3G service. The provider and cost are undetermined for the stock version. I asked about the in-car nav as free map upgrades for several years are included. They didn't know.

In addition to the price of the car there is a \$180 Final Inspection Fee and a \$990 Destination Fee. This fee is charged regardless of where you pick up the car or where you have it delivered.

The guy I spoke with did not know how titling, registration, and taxes are handled. More questions for the New York store.

It would have been useful to have another car for static display (and maybe to demonstrate the backup camera). This would have allowed us to check out the trunk & deck, fold down rear seats, the slide out door handles, (Touch one & it extends from the body or retracts.), the charging port and cable, as well as the cockpit.

The TPMS displays the tire pressure for each wheel.

The car comes with a cable and three connectors: J1772, 110V, and a 220V. They are working on an adaptor for the Roadster but I don't know if that is a plug for the Roadster to use something else or a plug for the Model S to use a Roadster's charger.

I had questions regarding the range curve published on the Tesla website as well as the expected hit for mountainous driving. How well does the published range curve scale to the smaller batteries? Does the

Model S take a range hit similar to the fuel economy hit a Prius takes on the mountains? I believe I got reasoned guesses, a fair response.

Questions about the fast charger couldn't be answered.

The ability and price to buy or rent a larger battery are undetermined.

The cars were in almost constant use so they didn't power down much. Mine did and the Tesla employee pressed or touched something in the car to bring it back up. I didn't notice what he did.

It was mentioned that production is slow because Elon Musk is inspecting each car before it leaves the factory. I have no way to confirm this but it is a great story showing their commitment to building the best car, not the most cars.

Hopefully Tesla's blogs and website will answer these questions over the next few months. I'll pass along any information I receive from the New York store.