

- | ROLE MODEL | +

Battery power may not necessarily make for a humdrum car. Need proof? Drive a Tesla Model S, and you'll know what we mean

Words **Rishad Saam Mehta**



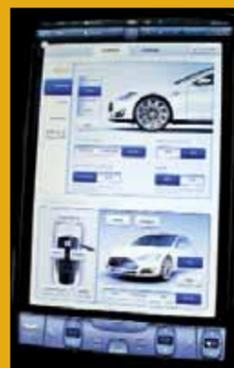
- 1 No engine - one more boot to boot
- 2 Gigantic tablet houses all controls
- 3 Slot into 'D', zoom off silently

Photography: Rishad Saam Mehta, Nityanand Bhat & Tesla

To be honest, Electric Vehicles (EVs) and hybrids don't really set my pulse racing. A zero-emissions car may lighten your burden of guilt, but it'll send your adrenaline levels plummeting. I drove a hybrid once, and it felt like I was riding a sedated donkey. And now, for the very first time in my life, I was about to drive the Tesla Model S, a car that wasn't even helped along by an internal combustion engine. How much fun could that be?

The Tesla features a 17-inch touch screen, which is the 'command centre' of the car. Almost everything is controlled by this massive tablet, and just like you need to get familiar with a new gadget, you need to acquaint yourself with this giant screen and its many functions before you can get the most out of the Tesla. My friend Darius Dadabhoy, the owner of this particular Model S, tells me that the Tesla representative gave him such a thorough and detailed explanation of the car that they needed to break for refreshments at regular intervals.

Looking at the tablet's interface, I get a distinct feeling that Tesla's software is designed by programmers who used to work for Apple,



because the design is reminiscent of the iPhone's and the iPad's user interface. The lights, the sunroof, the locks and the drive settings (steering, suspension and regenerative braking) are all controlled via this touch screen. The on board internet, coupled with voice recognition and internet radio, means you can ask this car to play literally any song. I asked it to play Uriah Heep's Lady in Black, Kishore Kumar's Chalte Chalte and Rossini's The Thieving Magpie - it found and played all three! The built-in browser will let you surf the news, mope through your Facebook or access your email.

The navigation system, which looks very similar to Google Maps, is also voice-operated. Just saying "SFO" results in the car giving you directions to San Francisco International Airport. By default, the map shows charging stations and superchargers, you can add favourites to it and it's quite good at picking up different accents.

With the key fob inside the cabin, the car comes to life with your foot on the brake. I slot the little steering column-mounted gear selector stalk into 'D', touch the throttle, and the car rolls forward. It is silent - eerily so - ambling through residential areas at low speeds. ▶



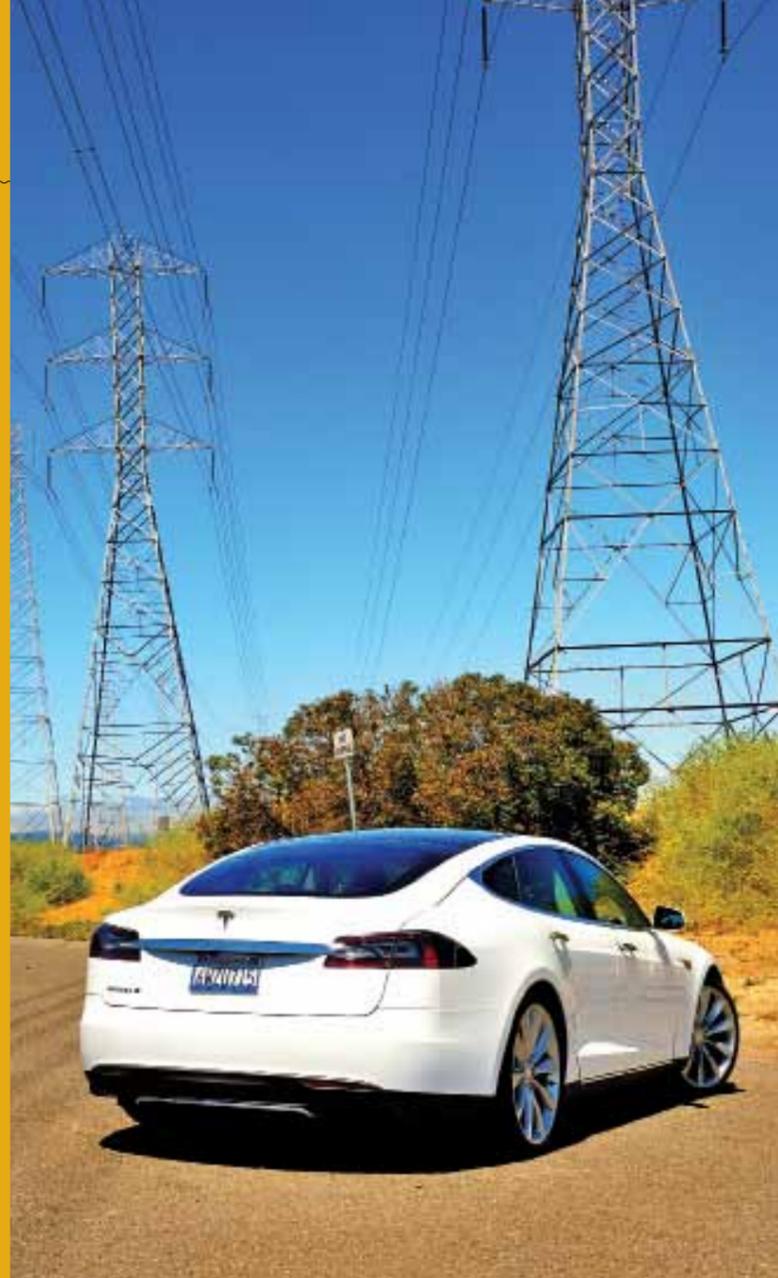
Tesla Model S

On the way to the interstate, we stop at a Tesla dealership. It has charging points where you can plug in and charge your car for free. The floor of the workshop area is spick and span, much like that of a basketball court. And, you don't even need go to the workshop that often – every month or two, the software updates itself through the on board internet, just like on an Android phone. Darius tells me that before the last update, the car, while in D, would roll backwards on a steep slope. The most recent update addressed that issue. So, even though his car was built in January 2013, the software it's running is as recent as that on the cars rolling out today.

Once on the interstate, I stomp on the throttle, and this big two-tonne car surges ahead like a valkyrie out of Bavaria or Stuttgart. It pushes me back into my seat and flashes past

“ON THE WINDING SECTIONS OF THE HIGHWAY, THE DRIVING DYNAMICS OF THE MODEL S ARE COMPARABLE TO A SPORTS SEDAN’S. IT IS POINTY, PRECISE AND POISED”

110kph, 130kph and 145kph, with the creamy and linear acceleration reminiscent of a V12-engined car. I know that the Highway Patrol will take me down with a \$400 speeding ticket before the software reins the car in at 193kph, and so, I lift off. This is the 60kWh version that does 0-96kph in 5.5 seconds, whereas the 85kWh variant does it in 4.2sec. With regenerative braking in place, lifting off is like applying the brake, and it takes a little getting used to. The steering has three modes – Comfort, Standard and Sport, the last of which is what I liked the best, as it provides maximum feedback. On the winding sections of the CA1, the driving dynamics of this car are comparable to a sports sedan's. It is pointy, precise and



GOING GREEN

Using the Tesla as the car of choice for this road trip from San Francisco to the Big Sur was part of the plan to do a Green Driving Holiday. The place I stayed at was the Post Ranch Inn. Besides the many programmes they have in place to reduce their carbon footprint, including open spaces where natural flora and fauna can thrive and measured water usage from renewable sources, their solar system is state-of-the-art, too.

The 990 solar panel supplies about 70 per cent of the hotel electricity. The system is estimated to reduce carbon emissions by 611,000 pounds annually. That is equivalent to removing over 50 vehicles from the road or serving nearly 39 U.S. households' electricity needs.

They use Lexus hybrids to pick up and drop guests, and yes, they also have charging points for Teslas on their premises. Point your cursor at postranchinn.com for more information.

poised, and the beauty is that the power and torque is available instantaneously. Turn off the traction control, and you can have even more fun around the tight bends between Carmel and the Big Sur with this rear-wheel drive brute. A few years ago, I'd spent a few hours with a Porsche Panamera on the quiet country roads through the Cotswolds in England. I remember stepping out of the Porsche with my heart racing and eyes sparkling. Stepping out of the Model S in California, I could sense déjà vu. **173**

TESLA MODEL S 60KWH

ENGINE: 60kWh, lithium-ion battery, **POWER:** 302bhp, **TORQUE:** 430Nm, **0-96KPH:** 5.9sec, **TOP SPEED:** 193kph, **EFFICIENCY:** 335kms (claimed, on a full charge)

PROS: Performance, zero emissions, almost-zero running costs, boot space
CONS: Charging time if there's no access to a Tesla supercharger, not enough interior storage space for knick-knacks, 17-inch screen can be a distraction
BOTTOMLINE: This is an EV that is good-looking, is fun to drive and best of all, is practical to use as an everyday car.

SPECS
8/10