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SMART CAR — SMART DRIVERS



Strubes' Smart Car is quite a conversation piece

This time of year, scrounging for column topics is a weekly necessity. There certainly aren't many events going on around town to write about, even though my good friend Louis Desguin says "season" is a dirty word.

So, last Tuesday, when my office manager, Janine Smith, said, "I think you're going to want to look out your window," I did a 180 in my chair and took a peek.

Sitting there, as cute as can be, was the first Smart Car I've seen in these parts. In fact, it was the first one I've ever seen, period. And only 10 yards from my office door. I lurked behind my blinds until I saw the owner, Kathy Strube, dutifully shopping local, come out of the The Shoppes on Sullivan Street, and then I pounced. I mean how often does a column topic drop right in your lap?

For those readers who aren't up on Smart Cars, suffice it to say they are about half the size of a regular car and very popular in Europe's congested cities, where roads and parking spaces are in

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.....
short supply.
They seat
only two
adults.



Smart Cars are assembled in France by Daimler AG of Germany (Mercedes Benz), imported into the United States by the Penske Automotive Group and sold through a new U.S. dealer network called Smart USA. Prices start in the low teens.

Penske began selling the cars in January and estimated sales for the first year at 20,000 units. Along came \$4 a gallon gasoline, and now the company is estimating 24,000 to 27,500 Smart Cars will be sold this year and more than 30,000 next year.

Strube didn't seem surprised to see me rush out of my office, camera loaded and ready, like paparazzi on the trail of a Britney Spears scoop. Even though she and husband

Roger had owned the car for just three days, she knew it was already quite the conversation piece around town.

Since she was in a hurry and Roger wasn't along, I convinced her to bring him and the car back Wednesday for more photos and questions.

When the car pulled up the next day and Roger exited it, I had to stifle a laugh. If Roger, at 6 feet 2 inches and 240 pounds, could get in and out of it, I knew what the answers to questions about its roominess would be.

The two of them agreed they had both philosophical and practical reasons for buying the car.

"We're pretty green," Roger said, "and heavily into decreasing our carbon footprint. We lived on our boat for two years and got used to water conservation and electricity conservation."

The Strubes became familiar with the practical advantages of owning a small car when they traveled to Valencia, Spain in April 2007 to watch their son sail in the Louis Vuitton Challenge, an elimination round for the America's Cup race.

"We rented a little diesel Mazda to save gas money. We saw little cars all over the place," Roger said.



The interior of the Smart Car looks like that of any other car and, as Roger Strube demonstrates, can accommodate a larger-than-average male driver or passenger.



A common sight — Kathy Strube, left, answering questions about her new car, this time from passersby Tony Kowalkowski and Debbie Jones.



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HERALD PHOTOS BY
GORDON BOWER



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They enjoyed the Mazda so much that, while still in Spain, they plunked down \$99 via the Internet to get in the queue for the Smart Car.

"We didn't even know the import date," Roger said.

Earlier this year, they got a note from the dealer, Wilde Jaguar in Sarasota, asking them to configure their car, which they did after checking out the various options and giving it a test drive.

"It was really fun to drive," Kathy said. "Just like a sports car."

Roger said, "Then, last Thursday, we got a call from the dealer, who said, 'Your car is in. Would you like to come up and get it?' We went up Sunday, and I gave up my beloved 1995 Caprice Classic. I lost weight and didn't need the big car anymore so I just decided to trade it in."

Although the Strubes haven't even put gas in their Smart Car yet, they've found it a great vehicle to drive around town and an even better one to park.

"We're having fun with it," Kathy said. "It's great to tool around town in."

And at 8 feet 2 1/2 inches long, it's only half the length of a normal-sized car, making all that wheel turning and toing and froing to get into a parallel parking space a thing of the past.

It's also less than 5 feet wide, meaning that three Smart Cars can drive, or back, straight into the curb of a standard parallel parking space.

So far, Kathy has identified just one drawback to the Smart Car.

She said, "Every place you stop, people come up and ask you all kinds of questions. You do have to allow extra time to run errands, and don't buy any frozen food when you go to the grocery store."

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