

I hail the eco-friendly cab



ANDREW NEATHER

TAXIS are for me a guilty pleasure. Black cabs still seem special — maybe because of their satisfying chunkiness, maybe because, even though

I've lived in the capital more than a decade, a black cab still feels like a London luxury for a boy from Devon.

But they're expensive. And they're not the transport of choice for any self-respecting green. A standard TXII black cab puts out a whopping 206 grams of carbon dioxide per kilometre, as much as a large people carrier; 243 grams if it's an automatic, and more still if the car is old.

So I was heartened by the news that Radio Taxis, London's largest cab firm, is switching some of its cars over to biofuel. Riding in the back of Steve Williams's cab, you wouldn't notice the difference made by the fact that almost a third of the fuel in the tank is vegetable oil. But Steve insists that it's a smoother ride — "a bit more zip".

He fills up with the fuel, a mixture of diesel and 30 per cent British-grown rapeseed oil, at a fuel depot in north London; any black cab can run on it. That cuts the car's CO₂ emissions by seven per cent, as well as giving around 10 per cent more miles per gallon.

Until the black cab manufacturers fundamentally change their engine technology, biofuels are probably the best hope for greening this London icon. It helps, too, if cab companies pay to offset the carbon their cars put out, as Radio Taxis does. Carbon offsetting, with the money used to pay for

With more biofuel and hybrid taxis on the road, you can cut your carbon when you flag a cab

forestry or renewable energy projects in the developing world, isn't the panacea that some of its providers claim, but it certainly can't hurt.

However, for a really green alternative, I choose one of the growing number of cab companies that use the Toyota Prius. With its hybrid petrol-electric engine, the Prius emits just 104 grams/kilometre of CO₂, the lowest of any car on the road except all-electric ones.

The two biggest such firms, Green Tomato Cars and Ecoigo, have around 50 Priuses each. The smaller Climatecars offers a similar service — but with one tempting extra for any fair-weather cyclist: a bike rescue service. All of their cars carry bike racks: if it has started raining, or you're just too exhausted at the end of the day, they can get you and your bike home. All the green companies offset or double-offset their carbon, too. Prices are similar to a normal minicab service.

But aside from being greener, I just like Priuses. The petrol motor kicks in at about 20mph; at lower speeds, the electric engine powers you silently through the streets. It's a peaceful ride: so peaceful, in fact, that I fell asleep in the back of a Green Tomato Cars cab on my way home from a friend's leaving do last week. But that may have been as much red wine as green technology.



Low-carbon cab: Andrew Neather using Climatecars, which can also carry your bike

ECO CARS THAT GO THE EXTRA MILE

Climatecars
www.climatecars.com,
020 8968 0440

The newest service, running since June; uses leather-seated Priuses.

Ecoigo
www.ecoigo.co.uk,
08000 326446

Ecoigo uses a rather luxurious model Prius, also with leather seats. Double offsetting on forestry projects.

Green Tomato Cars
www.greentomatocars.com,
020 8568 0022

Funky livery — green tomatoes on silver cars — and every journey is

double-carbon offset, mostly on energy saving projects.

Radio Taxis
www.radiotaxis.co.uk,
020 7272 0299

The UK's biggest black cab firm, running 3,000 of London's 20,000 black cabs.