Toyota Mirai

Phil Curry finds out if the hydrogen-fuelled UK spec model really is the future

LAST YEAR hydrogen vehicles made up 0.1% of new car sales. The reason behind this is clear; it is not just for a lack of vehicle available but also a lack of infrastructure. Sales of electric vehicles were also slow to pick up, thanks to the low number of charging points and the awful line-up of cars. It wasn't until the Nissan Leaf came along that the EV seemed 'cool' enough to buy.

The lack of sellable cars will not be an impedance to hydrogen however, thanks to the efforts of Hyundai and Toyota. Both have vehicle available to sell in the UK but it is perhaps the latter with the best, a hatchback fuel cell vehicle (FCV) called the Mirai, Japanese for 'Future'. With the aftermarket surely going to have to adapt to another new fuel system, I took the car out to see whether it really will catch on.

Looks

For a car called the future it has to look like it would be at home in it. The Mirai ticks this box, at least with its front bumper featuring two large air inlets either side of the car. The rest is pretty conventional; following it, you wouldn't guess it was anything other than a standard Toyota. The car keeps the manufacturer's current trend for narrow headlights that are seen on the new Prius but the rest of the car looks boxy in comparison. Big side panels flare out over the wheels but these seem small in comparison to the rest of the car. However, when this was launched as a concept in 2013, the car looked almost exactly the same as it does now, with only the usual road safety aspects added to the translation.

Inside and you could be sitting in any car, almost. The instruments are on an LED panel sitting at the top centre of the dashboard. Driving it without the regular speedometer in front of you takes some getting used to and it can be a bit of a distraction, much like checking a sat nav affixed to the centre of your windscreen. It does look good however and gives all the information, such as power generation, speed, range and so forth in an easy to read and understand way, without having to cycle through multiple screens. Of course there are multiple screens, should you want to go through your fuel economy history or look at other information such as where the power you're using is coming from but for the basics this is a nice addition.

The cabin itself is pleasant and certainly a cut above what you would normally get from a Toyota. With an automatic gearbox, the same as other electrically driven vehicles, the lever is planted in the middle of the dashboard and simply requires flicking over to switch driving mode. The touch screen sat nav and radio screen swoop out from the middle of the dashboard while the centre console is high enough to be comfortable, with the whole affair finished in smooth plastics.

Performance

You are not going to be getting into supercar territory with an FCV any time soon so in comparison to a standard road-going car, the

Mirai comes out rather well. I tested the car during an event at the Millbrook Proving Ground in Bedfordshire and was surprised to be told I could take it out on the high-speed bowl, a steeply-banked two-mile circle of track where I was limited to 100mph. The Mirai got up to that speed quickly enough, and with a 0-60mph time of just over nine seconds it certainly puts itself on par with the 1.5-litre EcoBoost powered Ford Mondeo, a car it competes with in size and class. This acceleration is helped by what is effectively a power output of 152bhp and 335Nm of torque, provided almost instantly thanks to the electric motor.

You're also likely to get around 300 miles to a tank of hydrogen and the car is powered rather silently. Accelerating at low speed did produce a little of the gentle whine you get from an electric car as the battery powers the wheels but when the fuel cell takes over that stops. 100mph in deathly silence is an experience that may take some getting used to.

Ride and handling

This is a section that I would describe as simply 'pretty average' with nothing to write home about. The dampers have a long travel that you could expect on what is a family saloon; however it does tend to wallow a little on tight and twisty corners, not that you notice too much thanks to the comfortable interior. However, it is not enough to feel dangerous, you must wonder however, with such a long and soft travel, how the car will perform when fully loaded.

The steering is slight and on a city course the Mirai coped easily, especially given that it is as long as other family saloon vehicles. At speed there was a slight hint of understeer if corners are taken too quickly, while the braking is responsive, although not at first. You have to push the pedal a little deeper before you get a response you may be akin to, thanks to the vehicle's regenerative braking set-up. If you catch a bend unawares, it is easy to miss the corner completely before making the turn.

Verdict

As regular readers will know, I'm a big fan of hydrogen powered vehicles, seeing them as a more sustainable and beneficial AFV than electric cars. I've wanted to get my hands on the Mirai since it was

launched and it didn't disappoint. The looks are a bit odd and I would have liked to see that front bumper matched with some equally outlandish styling cues around the rest of the car, but the interior is comfortable and not too OTT futuristic, while the drive itself is on par with other petrol and diesel powered vehicles in its class – just with less noise.

The price tag of £66,000 is very steep, especially given that the infrastructure of the hydrogen network is almost non-existent in the UK at the moment, yet EVs were launched at rather outlandish prices when charging points were few and far between, and today prices are coming down while plug-in zones are going up. By the time hydrogen is on the forecourt next to petrol and diesel, prices may be at an acceptable level whereby the Toyota Mirai could be a credible option for someone looking to drive an AFV a long distance.