



## CONSUMER NEWS

## Cruising on a Current

Electric Two-Wheelers Offer a Way to Cut Back and Cut Loose

BY MICHAEL PRAGER .....

**M**otorheads with an environmental streak might drool over the \$100,000 Tesla roadster, or dream of where the Chevy Volt will take them once it hits the market in a couple of years. But you needn't wait, or break the bank, if you want to go electric. Companies such as eGO Vehicles LLC of Somerville, Mass., EVTAMERICA of Miami, and Veloteq of Houston can put you in the saddle of serious, street-legal electric two-wheelers for between \$1,500 and \$2,900.

The big question is, do you want to go fast, go far, or strike a balance between the two?

If speed's your thing, you might want to start with three vehicles in EVTAMERICA's line, all of which can reach 45 miles per hour (mph), according to Fernando Pruna, who owns the company with his brother, Andres.

"People want to go at least 40 mph," Pruna said. "Everything built before could only do 25 or 30." EVTAMERICA has been selling its scooter-esque electric vehicles exclusively since 2000, but has been in business since 1993.

Veloteq has six vehicles for sale, all of which will go between 40 and 50 miles without recharging, depending on road



Veloteq Cavalier

surface and the driver's weight, says Barbara McDonald, an authorized dealer in Quincy, Mass. But its motor is governed at 20 mph; in most jurisdictions, that's low enough to be exempted from licensing, registration and insurance regulations.

eGO, meanwhile, says its range is either 18 or 24 miles, depending on which mode you select: "go fast" or "go far." All three models will hit 25 mph, according to Michael Houlihan, who works in operations and sales.

Kevin Kazlauskas, eGO's operations manager, also touts the bike's strength. "Our bikes are powerful enough to tow a car," he says. "These are not toys, and customers aren't treating them like toys."

## The New Power Search

For now, all three product lines rely on lead-acid batteries, the same type used in conventional cars. But new power strategies are a key issue for these manufacturers, just as on the worldwide power grid. Among the bikes filling the warehouse space of eGO's headquarters is a model with a solar array behind the seat. "That's our Frankenstein bike,"

says Houlihan. Solar wouldn't make the range unlimited, but it would extend it, and owners wouldn't have to plug their bike in to recharge. "Now we just have to move from prototype to marketable product," he says.

The company plans to offer lithium-ion batteries in all its models, including a new tricycle version called the ThreeGO, this fall. eGO's products now sell for between \$1,550 and \$2,150, but lithium batteries will roughly double those prices while trimming bike weight by a third and providing a lot more distance per charge.

Jim Wood, CEO of Veloteq, said his company is pursuing nickel zinc technology with Powergenix, a California company, but can't estimate its arrival in the market. "We're working on something different than most others, but we think it can be realized in a shorter period of time," Wood says.

## Bring on the Competition

A number of other electric bikes can be found on the Internet, and many cost less than \$1,000. But they are generally made by overseas firms without any service structure in the U.S. "I've had a couple people call and say their bikes broke down, and the factory closed and

eGO-13



EVTAMERICA Z-35



Veloteq Ranger 196



they can't get parts," McDonald says.

All the brands are moving toward dealership-only sales. Houlihan says eGO has about 65 dealers, the most of the three. Says Kazlauskas: "We're making an industry. We welcome competition." He insists that more companies will foster a stronger service network, and reassure people about buying. "The American psyche is slightly twisted," he says. "They try the product, they like the product, they see how it fits into their life. But they think that something's wrong because there's nothing to compare it to."

Pruna and Kazlauskas admit they initially misjudged would-be buyers. "We thought these were going to golf cart communities, to a higher income demographic," Kazlauskas says. "But it's been just the opposite—very resourceful people who are educated, who do research, who are making drastic measures to reduce their carbon footprint."

These buyers are passionate. Pruna reports that all 250 electric scooters in EVTAMERICA's first production run sold mostly on advance orders. "Young people are excited about the ecological effects of electric transportation," he says. "They are green, they want this to happen."

Cost considerations still play a big role in buying decisions. eGO offers the least expensive bike from this trio—the \$1,550 Classic—but together, it and Veloteq offer nine models under \$2,200. The three homegrown models that EVTAMERICA sells are on the market for \$2,500 plus shipping, and Pruna says that will rise about 10% in the 2009-model production run.

But the manufacturers say another cost factor is drawing growing numbers of customers. "It's amazing what \$4 gas prices will do," Houlihan says. "We have an e-mail form on our website and we've been getting 10-20 submissions a day, and the phone's been ringing off the hook."

How much do manufacturers say a typical commuter would spend per day on an electric bike? No more than 25 cents.

CONTACTS: eGO Vehicles, [www.egovehicles.com](http://www.egovehicles.com); EVTAMERICA, [www.evtamerica.com](http://www.evtamerica.com); Veloteq, [www.veloteq.com](http://www.veloteq.com). **E**

**MICHAEL PRAGER** is an environmental writer and a former editor at the Boston Globe.

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