

Tesla rolls out its long-awaited electric sports car

By JOHN ROGERS, Associated Press Writer Posted Fri May 2, 2008 1:18pm PDT

The Tesla Roadster electric car sits in a showroom during an event to celebrate the opening of the first Tesla Flagship Store, Thursday, May 1, 2008, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill)

LOS ANGELES - It's safe to say Jeremy Snyder gets a charge out of the two-seat Tesla Roadster whenever he pulls one off the lot — and not because it's equipped with an all-electric engine.

As he pulled one of the sleek new automobiles down a side street Thursday and put the pedal to the metal, its lithium-ion battery-powered engine didn't give off sparks. It just emitted a powerful hum, something like a much quieter version of a jet taking off.

"Accelerate pretty good?" asked Snyder, head of client services for Tesla, who knew the answer.

"I call it a turbine sound," he said of the sound. "Because it's an electric motor it's got 100 percent torque all the time. So it just pulls you like when you're taking off in an airplane."

After several years of development, the Roadster — with sleek lines like a Ferrari or Porsche and a sticker price of \$109,000 — officially moves from the drawing boards to the market next week when Tesla's first store opens. It's near the University of California, Los Angeles, in the city's toney Westwood neighborhood where Beverly Hills, Brentwood and Hollywood practically intersect.

"Because it's Hollywood and glamorous, this is the flagship store," Snyder said.

The next store is to open in a couple months near Tesla's headquarters in the Silicon Valley city of San Carlos, where the car was developed with venture capital of more than \$40 million from such investors as Google Inc. founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin. More stores are planned for Chicago, New York and other cities by early next year.

Although a fully loaded model can set a buyer back as much as \$124,000, that's still cheap compared with a high-end Ferrari. And its 6,831-cell lithium-ion battery pack gives off no emissions.

The car goes from 0 to 60 mph in just under four seconds and tops out at 125 mph. It goes 225 miles on one charge and can be fully recharged in 3.5 hours, which Tesla officials say should allow most people to drive it to work and back and recharge it at night like a cell phone. Driving from Los Angeles to San Francisco, however, would require stopping in, say, Fresno and plugging its adapter cord into a motel room wall socket.

Some critics have expressed concerns about the durability and safety of the lithium-ion battery, which weighs about 1,000 pounds, more than a third of the entire weight of the 2,700-pound Roadster, whose body is made up of carbon fiber materials. Tesla officials respond that the car has passed all required safety tests. They say the battery should last for about 100,000 miles of driving.

The company, formed in 2003, is named for inventor Nikola Tesla, an early pioneer in the field of electricity. The people buying its cars so far, said national sales manager Doreen Allen, are celebrities, early adopters, wealthy people and environmentalists.

Tesla officials say Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, actors George Clooney and Kelsey Grammer and musicians Flea have each ordered a Roadster. It will be awhile before anyone can walk in and drive a Tesla home off a lot, however.

"Delivery is running about 15 months," Allen said, adding the company was surprised by the demand.

Tesla began taking orders last year for the 600 Roadsters it planned to produce in 2008 and had sold all of them by October, Allen said. The first ones began rolling off the production line six weeks ago, and Allen said all of the 2008 models should be delivered to their owners by March of next year. The first ones should begin going out the door later this month.

Meanwhile, orders are being taken for 2009 models, with plans calling for production of about 1,500 cars. Eventually Tesla also plans to produce cheaper, family vehicles.

"There's a model in the works right now, a five-passenger sedan that will be styled comparable to the roadster but a lot roomier to accommodate families, and that is slated for 2010," Snyder said.

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