

Vauxhall Ampera

First Drive

By Jim Mc Cauley

General Motors hail the Ampera as introducing a new chapter in the history of the motor car – and they could be right – a plug-in electric that not only takes its owner to his destination, but will also see that he gets back to base again.



The range anxiety associated with plug-in electric vehicles concerns both their range and limited availability of charge points to which they need to be connected for around 8 hours in order to recharge the battery pack. But the Ampera is different, for while it is always electrically driven, it carries its own generator on-board to extend its range, given by Vauxhall to be in excess of 310 miles.

The technology is innovative in that it includes a generator that can supply the electric motor when the battery charge is exhausted. It does not, however, charge the battery pack which has to be

replenished through mains charging – around four hours from a normal household supply which is half the time required by stand alone plug-ins.

Underlying technology apart, the Ampera's styling suggests that the future has arrived for Vauxhall in a car that makes a clear statement of intent, stopping short of flamboyant overkill. The interior is even better enveloping the four occupants in pure luxury in the range-topping model tested, while the power interchanges go unnoticed when driving unless called up on the large central information screen.

Switch the car on and it sits in silence until the muted tyre noise confirms movement and for those who want to explore the near instantaneous delivery of 370Nm of electric motor torque at lower road speeds, then the digital speedometer steps past the 60 mph mark in just 9 seconds.

On the move, the pre-charged battery pack will cover up to 50 miles in EV mode depending on driving style and road conditions before the range extending technologies cut in to continue supplying the electric motor from the generator powered by the 1.4 litre petrol engine. Running costs in EV mode only are as low as £1.00 per 100 km.

Behaviour-wise, the Ampera drives no differently from any other automatic with a well-balanced ride and precise if light steering response. Brakes are part regenerative via the electrics and are firm to the touch but very effective, adding to the confident feel of the car which is always more agile than its 2,000 kg weight would suggest. Seating is 4-only because of the 'T' arrangement of the battery pack which runs centrally down the car and across under the rear seat. The coupé-like roofline would

normally limit rear headroom, but this is cleverly dealt with by extending the rear screen high into the roof and darkening the top segment, providing the necessary comfortable clearance.

Cabin detailing adds to the quality of the car with driver information presented digitally on a large screen in the instrument binnacle and a central touch-screen on which controls for the infotainment, climate control and vehicle efficiency data can be called up.

Overall, the Ampera justifies GM's claim that it launches a new chapter in the history of the motor car, advancing the concept of the plug-in electric vehicle to a new level where the electric motive power is supported by an internal combustion engine in the opposite application to a hybrid where the internal combustion engine is supported by an electric motor. It is the middle rung of Vauxhall's 'E Mobility' range with a smaller electric-only vehicle and a larger fuel cell vehicle due to complete the trio.



Anticipation for the Ampera has seen over 5,000 reservations for it across Europe with the model due to go on sale here around April. Prices start at £28,995 including the government grant

of £5,000, and with a CO2 emissions of less than 40 gms/km, the Ampera is exempt road tax charges and where applicable, congestion charges. For company car users BIK is reduced to just 5 per cent.

The new addition is subjected to the normal servicing intervals of 20,000 miles but with lower servicing costs and it also benefits from Vauxhall's Lifetime / 100,000 mile warranty cover.

Related technology developments include Ampera apps for mobile phones which among other things will advise on nearest charge points and give the best route back to where the car was parked.