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WHERE CAN YOU BOOK A LUXURY MINICAB?

As London's taxi trade knows only too well, a number of vehicles are being licensed as minicabs to avoid congestion charging. Has anyone been picked by up by a £117,500 Bentley Continental, or a £77,100 Maserati Quattroporte when they have booked a minicab? According to figures obtained by Clean Green Cars, there are two Quattroportes registered as minicabs, 17 Bentley Continentals, not to mention three Maybach 62s and an Aston Martin DB7. For anyone who has not heard of Clean Green Cars, they are a motoring website which aims to provide clear, easily understood advice about choosing and using cars in a more environmentally considerate way. Their goal is to advise which cars are the best of their type, whether that is a small hatchback or something that can carry seven people.

SUITABILITY OF A VEHICLE TO BE A PHV

In the taxi trade press the problem of licensing vehicles obviously unsuited to a minicab has been on going for months. The trade has been asking for months and months why these vehicles are being allowed to register and enjoy the benefits of no congestion charging. Transport for London (TfL) has no criteria for suitability apart from an MOT certificate - as proven by the eight Mercedes SL models registered as private hire vehicles. Clean Green Cars asks: "How can a car which has no back seat possibly qualify as a private hire vehicle?" Clean Green Cars questioned TfL about the list of cars and say that the reply they received bordered on the surreal! A spokesperson for TfL said: "Having looked through the list...there are a couple of vehicles which might seem surprising - e.g. Transit vans." Clean Green Cars disagree; a Transit is one of the least surprising vehicles on the list, considering that Ford markets a specific private hire version of the Transit called Tourneo. How could a Transit be more surprising than a Rolls Royce Phantom in the eyes of TfL? A spokesperson went on to say: "The Public Carriage Office (PCO), in conjunction with the Congestion Charging unit, undertakes regular checks to verify that licensed vehicles are being used for the purposes for which they were licensed. If information were brought to light to suggest abuse of the

system, Transport for London and the Public Carriage Office would investigate this fully."

SIMPLE CRITERIA TO STOP THE PROBLEM

Clean Green Cars say that by simply introducing two criteria for minicabs to be licensed as a private hire vehicle would help. Firstly, all cars must have at least four doors and secondly all private hire cars registered since 2001 (when CO2 banding was introduced) must be in emission bands A-F, i.e. no higher than 225 g/km of CO2. Given that even a Jaguar XJ6 2.7D comes into Band F that is not much of a hardship. Why should a 383 g/km Cadillac be given exemption from a charge that is supposed to cut pollution? Cars that do not meet these criteria could remain as private hire vehicles, but they would have to pay the charge.

Why would a minicab operator choose a vehicle that is heavier, thirstier and more expensive than a conventional saloon with the same amount of space? Simple - financial incentives. Registering as a phv costs £82 for the application and inspection, plus £27 per year for the license. All private hire vehicles over 12 months have to pass an MOT every six months. Compare these costs with £8 per day for the Congestion Charge, which will be £25 per day in 2008 for cars emitting over 225 g/km of CO2.

ABSURD EXEMPTION SAYS CLEAN GREEN CARS

Jay Nagley, Publisher of Clean Green Cars, says: "The Congestion Charge is presented as an environmental measure, yet exceptions are being granted to some of the highest-polluting vehicles on the road. While we have no objection to exemption for minicabs in principle, it is absurd that a private hire vehicle with a V12 engine has to pay nothing, when a family doing the school run with a Renault Espace 2.0T Auto will be liable for the full £25. The logical move would be to stop exemptions for any minicabs that fall into Band G - that way no-one would have an incentive to register their luxury car as a minicab."



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