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Renting by hour a cheap alternative to car ownership

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To rent or to buy, Geraldine Herbert looks at options other than having your own vehicle and the growing trend of car pooling, in order to save money.

TOM likes to share, and usually with strangers. So when Tom needed to get to out of the city one day last month he didn't attempt to bike the 12km through traffic, or to find a friend with an open schedule instead he hopped into a car, a Ford Focus parked a few streets away from his apartment, and hit the road.

But Tom Lyons doesn't own a car; he shares the ones he drives with a few hundred other drivers. The Focus he used belongs to GoCar, an Irish owned car-sharing company, whose members literally pay as they go.

"I don't have to worry about the time or cost of maintaining and insuring a car but can instead just hop in one whenever I need it," says Tom, who uses GoCar about twice a month.

Based in an apartment in the city centre and working close to home, Tom uses public transport and the Dublin bikes scheme to get around day-to-day, but occasionally needs the use of a car either for his work as a journalist or for leisure.

"I heard about it from a friend who had given up his job to do postgraduate studies in UCD. He wanted to keep his costs down so sold his old car to use GoCar instead. He gave me a lift a few times in his car so I decided to try it."

Dr John Fitzgibbon, a lecturer in politics at Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK, travels back to Dublin at least twice a month. John, who joined in May, says for him GoCar has removed the need for a second car in both locations, "I use a bicycle in England and a Gocar in Dublin."

GoCar has vehicles parked a five-minute walk from John's home. He uses the service for anything from buying furniture and other big items to trips to the airport.

"You get the benefits of a car without the hassle and long-term sunk costs of car ownership."

"One particularly pleasant experience was a trip to the airport to collect my partner early in the morning. There was no public transport option available at the time (which would have cost between €16-€23) and a round trip in a taxi would have cost at least €50, using GoCar cost €12."

GoCar enables users to log on via a computer or a mobile phone to book vehicles, which are left in designated spaces in easily accessible city centre locations, many close to Luas stops. Once inside, drivers enter a PIN into a device that releases the ignition key. The car must be returned to its start point once the driver is finished with it.

John and other users don't pay for fuel or insurance -- just a membership fee and an hourly rate for using the car. "There is no worrying about tax, NCT, fuel costs, insurance," says John. "You can work out before how much your planned trip is going to cost so you know exactly how much everything will cost you."

GoCar has more than 700 members, who pay a one off admin fee of €50 with hourly charges from €4.99 for a Hyundai i20 to €5.99 for a Ford Connect Van. GoCar has 22 vehicles in Dublin and six in Cork. Members are charged 45c a kilometre to cover the cost of fuel.

"GoCar challenges people to think differently about car ownership and the how a car fits into how we live our lives," says Colm Brady, managing director of GoCar. "Like the bike scheme it will change people's perceptions about their transport options and alter how car ownership is perceived."

The service is ideal for city dwellers or those who do not need a vehicle for routine journeys. For many reasons it may make sense to rent a car -- a carless household, a temporary need for a second vehicle or city dwellers without residential parking spaces.

Other car sharing schemes are open to anyone who owns a car, or anyone looking for a lift. Carpool.ie was set up in 2008 and now has over 2,000 members.

"Sharing a lift has a lot of benefits both for the individual and the community," says founder Alan Field, "however, saving money is the thing people are most concerned about."

"Sharing the cost of the petrol is the bottom line now and of course the green issues are great, but getting a contribution of say €30 to the cost of your monthly petrol cost is what is motivating people to carpool"

Geoff Power, a regular user of carpool.ie, lives in Chapelizod and works as a freelance writer. Based mainly from home, one day a week he works in Co Laois.

"I lived a few years in Australia about a decade ago and a car pool system was already up and running there," says Geoff. "I was on the lookout for something similar here -- despite our traffic problems, it's taken a lot longer than I imagined for the idea to catch on."

Car sharing schemes work best for short hires, measured in hours. For longer-term rentals of a day or more, rates rise quickly and do not always compare favourably with rental firms.

Some companies such as Enterprise, are responding to this need and provide weekend rental rates starting from €15.99 per day. They also have the added advantage of offering a pick up and drop-off service.

Gerry Ryan, a retired native of Limerick, opted for weekend renting when it proved too expensive to own and maintain his own car.

"It was the price that drew me in," says Gerry "but I also like the an added benefit that I can get picked up or dropped back from my house if the weather is bad."

While car sharing or short term rental is not for everyone alternatives to car ownership are flourishing across Europe.

Such schemes reduce congestion and emissions and, for many, they offer a far better idea than owning, running and maintaining a car and then trying to find a place to park it!

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