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Stranded In Suburbia

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I have seen the future, and it works.

O.K., I know that these days you're supposed to see the future in China or India, not in the heart of "old Europe."

But we're living in a world in which oil prices keep setting records, in which the idea that global oil production will soon peak is rapidly moving from fringe belief to mainstream assumption. And Europeans who have achieved a high standard of living in spite of very high energy prices — gas in Germany costs more than $8 a gallon — have a lot to teach us about how to deal with that world.

If Europe's example is any guide, here are the two secrets of coping with expensive oil: own fuel-efficient cars, and don't drive them too much.

Notice that I said that cars should be fuel-efficient — not that people should do without cars altogether. In Germany, as in the United States, the vast majority of families own cars (although German households are less likely than their U.S. counterparts to be multiple-car owners).

But the average German car uses about a quarter less gas per mile than the average American car. By and large, the Germans don't drive itsy-bitsy toy cars, but they do drive modest-sized passenger vehicles rather than S.U.V.'s and pickup trucks.

In the near future I expect we'll see Americans moving down the same path. We've already done it once: over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the average mileage of U.S. passenger vehicles rose about 50 percent, as Americans switched to smaller, lighter cars.

This improvement stalled with the rise of S.U.V.'s during the cheap-gas 1990s. But now that gas costs more than ever before, even after adjusting for inflation, we can expect to see mileage rise again.

Will Americans start living like Europeans?

Admittedly, the next few years will be rough for families who bought big vehicles when gas was cheap, and now find themselves the owners of white elephants with little trade-in value. But raising fuel efficiency is something we can and will do.

Can we also drive less? Yes — but getting there will be a lot harder.

There have been many news stories in recent weeks about Americans who are changing their behavior in response to expensive gasoline — they're trying to shop locally, they're canceling vacations that involve a lot of driving, they're switching to public transit.

But none of it amounts to much. For example, some major public transit systems are excited about ridership gains of 5 or 10 percent. But fewer than 5 percent of Americans take public transit to work, so this surge of riders takes only a relative handful of drivers off the road.

Any serious reduction in American driving will require more than this — it will mean changing how and where many of us live.

To see what I'm talking about, consider where I am at the moment: in a pleasant, middle-class neighborhood consisting mainly of four- or five-story apartment buildings, with easy access to public transit and plenty of local shopping.

It's the kind of neighborhood in which people don't have to drive a lot, but it's also a kind of neighborhood that barely exists in America, even in big metropolitan areas. Greater Atlanta has roughly the same population as Greater Berlin — but Berlin is a city of trains, buses and bikes, while Atlanta is a city of cars, cars and cars.

And in the face of rising oil prices, which have left many Americans stranded in suburbia — utterly dependent on their cars, yet having a hard time affording gas — it's starting to look as if Berlin had the better idea.

Changing the geography of American metropolitan areas will be hard. For one thing, houses last a lot longer than cars. Long after today's S.U.V.'s have become antique collectors' items, millions of people will still be living in subdivisions built when gas was $1.50 or less a gallon.

Infrastructure is another problem. Public transit, in particular, faces a chicken-and-egg problem: it's hard to justify transit systems unless there's sufficient population density, yet it's hard to persuade people to live in denser neighborhoods unless they come with the advantage of transit access.

And there are, as always in America, the issues of race and class. Despite the gentrification that has taken place in some inner cities, and the plunge in national crime rates to levels not seen in decades, it will be hard to shake the longstanding American association of higher-density living with poverty and personal danger.

Still, if we're heading for a prolonged era of scarce, expensive oil, Americans will face increasingly strong incentives to start living like Europeans — maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of our lives. □