

Clue: A major city

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To Greece, by car, on grease

Carbon-conscious enthusiasts beg restaurants and cafes for waste vegetable oil to power their European journey, converting an estimated 350 litres of oil into fuel on their 11 day trip

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The 'Grease to Greece' rally makes its way to central Athens to promote awareness of alternative biofuels. Photograph: Yiorgos Karahalidis/Reuters

A group of British eco-enthusiasts have just pulled off the greenest and grubbiest car rally ever, driving from London to Athens in vehicles powered exclusively on waste vegetable oil.

The team motored with unexpected ease across Europe on the proceeds of the grease thrown away by restaurants and cafes along the way. Their hope is that the 2,500-mile feat will help a drive to create a commodity out of cooking oils that otherwise end up in landfills or the sea. Unlike ethanol and other controversial biofuels, recycled cooking fat does not impact on food production.

"I think we can safely say that this is the first long-distance car journey in Europe that has relied on restaurants and burger bars as an informal network of filling stations," said Andy Pag, a 34-year-old Londoner, who organised the rally.

"It's true we spent a lot of time fat-finding, knocking on the doors of restaurants begging for their waste, but it worked. And the beauty, of course, is that when such supplies are collected straight from a restaurant and used as fuel they have a zero-carbon footprint," he told the Guardian, after an awards ceremony highlighting alternatives to fossil fuels at the British embassy in Athens.

Eight teams took part, driving cars that ranged from a brand new Renault to, in Pag's case, a 13-year-old former taxi. They estimate that 350 litres of cooking oil were used to fuel the 11-day expedition.

Some of the vehicles had been converted to run on vegetable oil. Those driving "unconverted" cars brewed up biodiesel using a portable "fuel pod" processor – a 2,500lb (1,134kg) contraption carried in a transit van that they described as being "as easy as a washing machine to use."

Pag conducted his first carbon neutral trip in 2007, driving from London to Timbuktu in a lorry powered by diesel made from cocoa butter, produced by a chocolate factory in the UK. He said he was amazed at the curiosity the rally engendered, with crowds invariably gathering to witness the re-fuelling process.

"We used what is known as an oily bits centrifuge system, the world's first mobile purification system for cars, to filter the waste en route," said Pag's co-driver, secondary school teacher Esther Obiri-Darko. "It gets rid of all the crud." Manufactured in the UK, the system costs around £500 and includes a pump.

The group's overarching aim is to encourage people to look at alternatives to fossil fuels. "I think we made quite a lot of converts along the way," said Pag. "There's a whole trail out there of restaurant owners who are now looking at their waste products with different eyes. Our hope is that others will start to realise the energy that is in waste, too."

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