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## Solar LifePod's Day in the Sun

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Story by Stephanie Olsen

Envision Solar, a company that converts parking lots into solar-electricity shade structures, is quickly becoming Hollywood's newest green darling. Next to the Prius, of course.

The La Jolla, Calif.-based company is in the spotlight for its so-called LifePod, a steel structure outfitted with photovoltaic solar cells so it can generate electricity for the home or an electric car. At 10x13 feet, the LifePod might look like a backyard outhouse, but it can use its solar array to generate up to 1.5 kilowatts of electricity, or a small fraction of the power sucked up by the average-size home, according the company's CEO Bob Noble. It costs \$17,000.

The LifePod will be featured on the upcoming television show *BattleGround Earth*, airing August 3 on Discovery's *Planet Green*. The show pits rock-star Tommy Lee against rapper Chris "Ludacris" Bridges to build his own LifePod and then light up a moniker of his name with its solar power--before the other one does.

The Discovery Channel's *Renovation Nation* will also showcase one owned by David Gottfried, the founder of the World Green Building Council, in an upcoming show this fall, according to Noble. In that case, the LifePod is used as a personal office, or "man cave," as Noble said. Those two shows took their cue from this year's Oscar "green" carpet, a party for eco-minded celebrities, which demonstrated the LifePod.

"That was our opportunity to present the concept, and electric car companies put their vehicles in there," said Noble. "But it furthered our mission to get solar out there in every arena dealing with transportation."

Envision Solar got into developing LifePods for consumers because of its work in sustainable design for parking lots. In 2005, when it was founded, the fledgling company partnered with Kyocera, a Japan-based manufacturer of solar panels, to design a carport with a photovoltaic solar array, or a solar "tree."

Out of that partnership, Envision built a so-called solar grove, or an integrated system of 25 solar trees, to cover 150 cars in Kyocera's parking lot and power the electricity of its La Jolla headquarters. That installment produced 427,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity, or the equivalent of energy required to power 67 average-size homes annually, Noble said.

More than electricity for the facility itself, Envision designed the solar grove to power plug-in hybrids or electric cars, Noble said. He also found that the shade structure produced other benefits, such as reducing evaporation of fuel when a car sits in the heat or reducing the need for heavy air conditioning in the same heat.

At least one of Envision's customers, a theme park in California, has found that the shaded solar parking is worth more than its 1 megawatt of electricity (worth about \$320,000 annually). Charging drivers \$4 a day for a shaded parking spot, in contrast, produced \$730,000 a year in revenues, Noble said.

"Solar, shaded parking is a wonderful amenity," Noble said.

Envision Solar, which employs 17 people in La Jolla, is now working with several clients to build solar parking structures, including San Diego's Wild Animal Park and the University of California at San Diego, which is turning two campus parking lots solar. In December, it also



*A LifePod decked out as a pool house. (Credit: Envision Solar)*

completed a solar parking infrastructure for hybrid cars at the National Renewable Energy Labs in Golden, Colo.

Its work with solar parking prompted outsiders to ask for a consumer application. Its first was the LifePort, the larger cousin to the LifePod designed to power electric vehicles.

The LifePort is also made of a light-gauge steel frame with solar arrays on top, but at 23x23 feet, it's large enough to house two cars. (The company first demonstrated the prototype at the desert festival Burning Man.) The LifePort can generate approximately 35 kilowatt-hours of electricity a day, enough to provide electricity for the average-size home. The model costs a little more than \$50,000, according to Noble.



A "solar grove" built by Envision Solar for Kyocera's offices in San Diego. (Credit: Envision Solar)

A Bay Area customer is using one as a garage and another customer in Ramona, Calif., is using it as a horse barn, Noble said. While it's made for cars, the LifePort could be compared to the PowerPod, a modular green building from Powerhouse Enterprises.

As for the smaller LifePod, sales could jump after its upcoming television debut.

Lee and Ludacris will battle to build their own solar house, and the loser must play second act to the winner at a concert this fall in Los Angeles. As part of the show, Envision Solar will donate the two celebrity-built LifePods to a Baptist Church in New Orleans' Ninth Ward, where the show was filmed and an area hit hard by Hurricane Katrina.

"It will give the church about 3 kilowatts of energy, enough to offset some of their electricity needs."