World's Cheapest 'Nano' Car Readied For U.S. Sale

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — The world's cheapest car is being readied for sale in the U.S., but by the time India's Tata Nano is retrofitted to meet emissions and safety standards, it won't be that cheap.

Tata Technologies Ltd., the global engineering arm of the Tata group conglomerate, brought the tiny car to Detroit as a publicity stunt for the engineering group.

Tata officials, while maintaining that they couldn't speak for Tata Motors, maker of the $2,500 Nano, said they were involved with the Nano from concept until it launched last July in Mumbai.

They wouldn't say when the Nano might arrive in the U.S. or how much it might cost here, although Ratan Tata, chairman of the group of Tata companies, has said it should be ready for U.S. distribution in about three years.

Tata Motors already has made a European version of the four-seat car that will cost about $8,000 when it debuts in 2011, and a Tata Technologies official said privately that the U.S. version is expected to have a comparable price. The official did not want to be identified because the price has not been made public.

Warren Harris, Tata Technologies president, would only say that the price would be more than the roughly $2,500 charged in India.

"The structural changes that would need to be made, the changes that would be required as far as emissions are concerned, and some of the features that would be appropriate to add to the vehicle for the North American market, obviously that would drive up the price point," he said.

Tata Technologies could be involved in bringing the car up to U.S. standards, said Tony Jones, associate vice president of the global automotive practice.

Before it can be sold here, the car's two-cylinder, 623cc engine would have to be engineered to meet stronger U.S. pollution standards, he said. Airbags would have to be added, the roof strengthened and the front bumper lengthened to meet U.S. requirements to limit damage in a 5-mph crash.

The Spartan interior, with flat bucket seats, three knobs, a horizontal switch and a steering wheel, also would have to be changed to comply with U.S. safety standards that limit movement of passengers not wearing seat belts.

Jones said the Nano Europa has airbags and has passed European safety tests with

flying colors.

The Nano, with 12-inch diameter tires, electric windows in the front and crank windows in the back, gets 50 mpg on the highway and has a top speed of 65 mph.

If the $8,000 price tag holds true, it would cost far less than the $9,970 Hyundai Accent, currently the car with the lowest base sticker price in the U.S., according to the Edmunds.com automotive Web site. The price excludes shipping.

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