

A City Without Cars Is Already Here, and It's Idyllic

Slovenia's capital Ljubljana has been car-free for over a decade. Is it time to export their model?



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PARIS, FR

In an increasingly environmentally unstable world, there's a sense that car-owning city dwellers across the globe have to start thinking very seriously about just how important driving is to them. It's a question, too, for the civic authorities who oversee day to day life of everywhere from Athens to Zurich.

On the 19th of September, Parisians took to the street — on foot — to celebrate the seventh iteration of “*Paris respire sans voiture*” (Paris “breathes without cars” in French), an initiative that transforms both the Place de L'Etoile and Avenue des Champs-Élysées into no-go zones for cars between 11AM and 6PM.



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This drive – pardon to pun – to make cities cleaner and more liveable in the longterm by limiting how many vehicles have unrestricted access to certain areas, isn't entirely uncommon. Other cities across Europe have attempted similar actions and adopted similar schemes. Even small British cities like Norwich have pedestrianised enclaves in the centres.

The Spanish city of Pontevedra, located in the south-west of Galicia, began pedestrianising both its old town and city centre in 1999. In 2011, it became the first city in the world to devise and publish a schematic map known as a Metrominuto, which looks like a standard transit map but actually shows tourists and residents alike how long it takes to walk between points of interest, encouraging them to travel on foot instead of setting off in the car. The popular scheme has since been rolled out to European cities including Poznan, Toulouse and Zaragoza.

But perhaps the best example of how direct, positive change can go from the planning document to lived experience is a small city in Central Europe. In 2007 the city of Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, published “Vision 2025”, an incredibly thorough set of proposals for a greener, cleaner, and more sustainable city. The hope was that their plans for the near-future would be emulated by other cities across Europe.

Central to Ljubljana's proposal for creating an environmentally responsible metropolis was turning the city centre into a car-free zone.

The pedestrianisation was bolstered by improvements to both cycling networks and public transport. Noise pollution and gas emissions dropped in the area in question, and in 2016, the European Commission crowned Ljubljana the continent's green capital.

The scheme wasn't always so well-received by Slovenians. "There were protests," says Saša Poljak Istenič, an academic who has written several papers on the impact that pedestrianisation has had on the city.

"Residents living in the city centre thought that the transformations would make access to their homes impossible. We held several debates on the topic but the then-mayor, Zoran Jankovic, didn't back down in the face of opposition. Gradually the city's residents began to adapt to the changes and adopted new routines to fit around them. They swapped their cars for bikes or took public transport."

One of the major challenges facing the Vision 2025 team was how best to go about rethinking Slovenska Cesta, a main road that runs right through the middle of Ljubljana's tourist district. The difficulty was compounded by the fact that since 1993, the street has been protected as a monument of cultural and national heritage and has long-since played a major role in the city's day-to-day life. It was as if "the mayor was proposing to turn the city's busiest street into a sort of living room", Istenič says.

A living room festooned with electric vehicles, that is. In addition to classic sustainability policies and pledges like promoting the use of bikes and pre-existing forms of transport, the city introduced "Kavalir", a small fleet of electric vehicles that are free to use and slow enough to be hailed with ease. Ljubljana's small size — with a population of around 300,000 compared to Paris's two million — means such a scheme only requires a handful of vehicles to be operational at any time.

Despite initial misgivings about the long-term sustainability of cordoning off a section of the city from privately owned vehicles — some detractors still argued that a lack of cars has led to a cleaner, tidier, but less "authentic" and increasingly gentrified city centre — Istenič is of the opinion that "it's been a decade now and none of us can really imagine cars ever staging a comeback in the city centre".

Istenič is adamant that other local authorities who are looking towards Ljubljana as a model for the (relatively) car-free city of the future have to bear one thing particularly in mind. “It is crucial that you outline to residents exactly what the plans are and why they’re being proposed,” she says. “People are hesitant about change at first but it becomes easier to accept a situation if you’re made aware of positives.”

She argues – and the award of the green capital status in 2016 surely confirms – that the scheme has created a welcoming environment for tourists and residents alike. Everyone’s got that bit more space to socialise or even exercise.

“In short, it has improved the standard of living in Ljubljana,” she says. “Getting to this point took a bit of courage and common sense, but in the end, the right decisions were made.”

Paris may breathe better without cars on Sundays, but whether it, or other major cities across Europe, make similar decisions remains to be seen.