

London gears up for two-wheeled revolution

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London Cycle Hire bicycles are parked at a docking point in central London. The sprawling, congested city of London speeds towards a greener, nimbler future Friday with the launch of a new bike hire scheme aimed at kick-starting a cycling revolution ahead of the 2012 Olympics.

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Commuters and tourists infuriated by [heavy traffic](#) and often overcrowded, unreliable public transport finally have a two-wheeled alternative, similar to schemes already in place in Paris, Shanghai and dozens of cities worldwide.

From Friday, they can pick up one of 6,000 bicycles from 400 docking stations in central London -- including at the British Museum and Buckingham Palace -- then pedal to their destination and drop it off, all

for a small fee.

At least that's the plan. In Paris, a similar scheme is hugely popular but has also been marred by vandalism and theft, with organisers having to replace the entire bike fleet just two years after its launch.

Introduced by Mayor of London Boris Johnson, a keen cyclist himself, the project is intended to boost the number of [bicycle](#) journeys ahead of the 2012 Olympic Games in the capital.

"It's part of a programme of things that are going to change the [urban landscape](#), what it's like to live in and move around in London," Johnson told reporters earlier this month.

"In the run-up to the Olympics, it's part of our vision of a cleaner, greener, safer city, where you have a cycling revolution."

The London 2012 organisers want 100 percent of the spectators attending the Games to arrive having taken public transport, walked or cycled, and are investing heavily in the subway network and trains to make it happen.

A congestion charge introduced in 2003 has helped ease the pressure on city roads, but International Olympic Committee official Denis Oswald warned this month that despite progress in preparations so far, "traffic is an issue".

Introduced alongside the new cycle scheme will be a spider-like network of "superhighways" to carry cyclists safely in and out of central London from the suburbs. The route that will pass the Olympic site is due to open next year.

The programme has been dubbed the Barclays Cycle Hire scheme after

its main sponsor, but organisers hope the city's residents will come up with something a little more imaginative when it gets going.

More than 10,000 people had signed up for a subscription to the bike hire scheme before it went live, and the mayor's transport advisor, Kulveer Ranger, told AFP: "We think the scheme is going to be very popular."

The mayor wants to increase the percentage of journeys made by bicycle in the city from the current level of about two percent to five percent, and cycle campaigner Tom Bogdanovicz said this was easily achievable.

"There is an appetite out there, it's just the conditions need to be right," Bogdanovicz, campaigns manager at the [London](#) Cycle Campaign, told AFP.

Surveys have suggested a third of Londoners would like to try cycling, he said, adding that they just needed a push -- the new scheme was "a great step".

Customers can chose from either a daily, weekly or monthly subscription, costing one pound (1.5 dollars, 1.1 euros), five pounds or 45 pounds respectively, and the first 30 minutes of any journey they make is free.

Thereafter they will be charged on a rapidly increasing scale, while they must leave a deposit in case they do not return the bike or they leave it damaged -- a problem that has hit the Paris scheme.

Advertising giant JCDecaux, which runs the Paris scheme along with more than 60 across the world, was forced to replace 16,000 bicycles after they were returned with twisted handlebars, torn baskets and crushed wheels.

Another 8,000 disappeared, some of them turning up in eastern Europe.

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