

'Pioneer' commuters go electric in polluted Mexico City

April 27 2016, by Sofia Miselem



One of the electric motorcycles from the "Econduce" (Edrive) program takes to the roads of Mexico City, a sprawling metropolis with some 21 million people and 5.5 million cars

Martin Vazquez glides silently through the pandemonium of rush hour in Mexico City, drives his sky-blue scooter up to a charging station and plugs it in.

When Vazquez, a 28-year-old professional, moved to the Mexican

capital a year ago, he drove here by car. But the city's notorious traffic soon convinced him to sell it and look for ways to cut through the gridlock.

He tried cycling to work, but eventually settled on the sky-blue electric scooters rented out by the half-hour by a company called Econdue.

"It's the easiest, fastest way for me to get around," said Vazquez.

"I have to go to work in a shirt and tie. When I biked, I would show up all sweaty. On a scooter, you just sit and accelerate. It's like a car, but with the size and ease of a bike."

Electric vehicles are gaining a foothold in this sprawling megacity of 21 million people and 5.5 million cars.

Many early adapters of the technology are, like Vazquez, seeking a less painful commute.

But as an added bonus, these vehicles are not adding to the polluting emissions spewed by fuel-powered vehicles—which have surged back into the headlines just as the city was starting to shed its smog-choked image.

Authorities declared an air pollution alert in Mexico City last month—the first in more than a decade—and have imposed strict limits on car use.



Electric bicycles, such as the "PhantomX" pictured here, can reach 32km per hour

The temporary measures take 20 percent of the city's cars off the road each day.

On April 6, the smog was so bad officials doubled the restriction, ordering 40 percent of cars off the road—as well as, for the first time, 40 percent of motorcycles.

The ban caused chaos on the overstretched public transportation system.



Recent temporary traffic regulation, put in place after authorities declared an air pollution alert in Mexico City in April, have taken 20 percent of the capital's cars off the road each day

Bike-share with vroom

But it was a boon for Eduardo Porta, the entrepreneur behind the Econduce scooters, who says his clients increased by 50 percent.

The 33-year-old industrial engineer launched the company last year, modeling the service on bike-sharing programs in cities like Paris, Berlin, New York and, since 2010, Mexico City itself.

The company has a network of charging stations throughout the city, enabling users to pick up a scooter near home and drop it off near work.



"Econduce" launched in April 2015 and was modelled on bike-sharing programmes in cities such as Paris and New York which allow riders to take and leave electric scooters in different parts of Mexico City

"We are pioneers worldwide. The only similar service is in San Francisco ('Scoot,' which launched in 2012). We wanted to tackle the double problem of traffic and pollution," Porta told AFP.

The scooters go up to 55 kilometers (35 miles) per hour. A half-hour trip costs a little over 50 US cents with a monthly subscription fee of \$11.

In a year, the company has expanded from five charging stations to 37 and tripled its initial fleet of 50 scooters. It now has 1,800 users.



Mexico City, blanketed by smog, issued the first air pollution alert in 14 years in March due to high ozone levels, restricting traffic, encouraging children to stay indoors and ordering factories to cut emissions

Pocketbook test

Then there are [electric bicycles](#), which give users a battery-charged boost as they pedal. They can go up to 30 kilometers per hour and cover up to 60 kilometers with a single battery charge.

"Since the air pollution alert was declared, interest has soared. Sales have doubled," said electric bike salesman Daniel Cruz of a local firm called Prodecotech.

"Electric bicycles don't require an intense physical effort. You don't sweat, you don't get tired and you don't have to inhale so much air."



A new electrical model of Chevrolet called "Volt" is on display at a showroom in Mexico City in April

The mayor's office has launched an e-transport task force. However, officials say more money is needed to make the city's bus fleet electric and expand the number of electric taxis from around 20 to a target of 1,500.

And it is still early days for [electric cars](#).

The infrastructure for recharging cars has expanded, but it is still not enough, said Fausto Cuevas Mesa, head of the Mexican Automobile Industry Association.

And there are no tax incentives for people to buy electric, he said.

"There could be greater interest in electric cars, but the issue is people's pocketbooks. They cost two or three times more," he said.

At a Chevrolet dealership in an upscale neighborhood, electric car specialist Vicente Cuevas admits the typical client reaction upon learning what the vehicles cost—\$22,000 for an entry-level model—"is not favorable."

But "with the new anti-pollution measures, people are starting to view our vehicles with greater interest," he said.

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