

Pedal power: the rise of cargo bikes in Germany

May 2 2018, by Coralie Febvre



Modern cargo bikes offer lighter frames and more spacious carriers, while electrically assisted ones allow the less physically active or those living in hilly areas to also jump in the saddle

Whether they're hauling parcels or children, cargo bikes are becoming a familiar sight in German cities as the nippy, clean alternative to cars and

delivery vans—and shaking up urban transport in the process.

A desire to go green has been key to the rise of [cargo](#) bikes in a country where dozens of smog-choked cities are considering diesel driving bans to combat air pollution.

"The diesel scandal is a major incentive," said Arne Behrensen, one of the top promoters of cargo bikes in Germany, a mode of transport as old as the bicycle itself which refers to a two- or three-wheeled bike with a fixed load carrier, usually at the front.

Financial incentives, more choice in models and the promise of zipping past rush-hour traffic in the bike lane have added to the appeal.

"In the '90s, we were happy to sell one a year," said Gaya Schuetze of Berlin's Mehringhof bicycle shop, one of the capital's leading cargo bike centres.

"Then we noticed more and more interest, first from families and then companies."

Commonplace in northern Europe until the mid-20th century, freight bikes were used to deliver everyday essentials such as milk, bread and newspapers.

But these heavy, unwieldy bikes quickly fell out of favour and into oblivion as motorised vehicles gained ground.

The cargo bike's revival began some two decades ago in cycling-mad Denmark and the Netherlands, blessed with flat landscapes and comfortable bike lanes, before reaching Germany.



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No sweat

Over the years, cargo bikes have evolved from bulky two-wheelers that required serious leg muscle.

Modern upgrades offer lighter frames and more spacious carriers, while e-cargo bikes have allowed the less physically active or those living in hilly areas to also jump in the saddle.

Cargo bikes "now reach a wider audience, people who don't want to arrive at work sweaty or aren't especially sporty," said Sophia Becker, a researcher at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam near Berlin.

According to the European CycleLogistics project, a staggering 174 models of cargo bikes are now available, while some 50 brands vied for attention at Berlin's International Cargo Bike Festival in April.

Industry observers say the cargo bike craze has yet to run its course because "they can handle situations where a car previously seemed indispensable", says Becker.

"In an average European city, half of all motorised trips related to goods transport could be shifted to bicycle or cargo bikes," Karl Reiter of the CycleLogistics project calculated in a 2014 study, based on journeys of a maximum of seven kilometres (4.3 miles) with loads of less than 200 kilos (440 pounds).

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