

# Eco-friendly bicycle taxis find the road to success in Europe

Yenni Kwok in Hamburg



Michael Weidner of Hamburg shows off his Velotaxi. Photo: Yenni Kwok

Bicycle rickshaws might be losing their appeal in the developing world, but in Europe the human-powered three-wheelers are all the rage.

Far from being regarded as an inhumane traffic nuisance, "bicycle taxis" are considered a politically correct and environmentally sound alternative to the car.

They have become popular in Berlin, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Vienna, Milan, Barcelona and Athens among tourists who want to cruise those cities in slow motion.

The booming business of Berlin-based Velotaxi, a leading manufacturer and supplier of bicycle taxis, reflects their new-found status. It started with 30 Velotaxis in 1997 in the German capital, but in the past three years, business has quickly expanded.

Velotaxis are now rolling in some 35 cities in 13 countries, largely in Europe but also in the Middle East and Asia.

The people-powered vehicles have even made a comeback in Japan, the birthplace of the rickshaw. Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka and some other cities have

the aerodynamically designed pedicabs running on their streets. Seoul will follow suit next year, as well as Warsaw and Prague.

"Cities all over the world have the same problem: traffic," said Velotaxi spokeswoman Sandrina Koemm. "Having bicycle taxis is an eco-friendly solution to the traffic problem."

The bicycle taxis, often assisted with battery power, produce no air or noise pollution.

They also provide an alternative job for students and unemployed young people.

Michael Weidner of Hamburg said he can earn some 100 euro per day driving tourists on the weekend, and he likes it better than menial office jobs. "The job is fun because I have chances to talk with people from around the world," he said.

"I don't mind the physical work," said Mr Weidner, 34. "I like doing sports, and this is like getting paid to do some exercise."

Apart from selling and leasing bicycle taxis, Velotaxi is largely financed through advertising. The vehicles serve as eye-catching billboards.

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