

Shades of Green...or Brown, rather

A lot of the content of this blog seeks to discuss how 'Green' the City of Freiburg is. How sustainable is the city? How much do the people really care about environmental problems? Is Freiburg on the right track to becoming a truly Green city, if it's not already?

Having now spent a month in Cairo I can tell you that a lot of these discussions seem nothing short of absurd, no better encapsulated than by the ridiculous discussion about tree roots and bike paths. Just in case you missed it, this was a complaint raised by one disgruntled MEG student that the roots of trees adjacent to the bicycle lanes in Freiburg slowed down his desired speedy journeys around the town, as he had to slow down to over the bumps that the roots had created on the path.



For a start, the average Cairoean would probably consider it something of a luxury to be able to cycle in his or her city in the first place. There are a few brave souls that try this, most notably bread delivery boys with massive trays of freshly baked bread stacked on their heads and also the odd small child here and there. I did once see a European/North American riding amongst the traffic in downtown Cairo but I do not think that he was long for this world.

The problem is, is that Cairo's traffic is notoriously bad. Cars fill up almost every street and there aren't many places in the centre that are free from cars for longer than a minute or two. And it's not that the cars are ever travelling at a particularly fast speed: there's seldom much opportunity to travel at more than 30 kilometers per hour before another approaching car will block the way ahead or move in from the 'lane' next to yours to grab the prized car-free space just in front of you.

Driving in Cairo is like a war. This was how it was explained to me during my first week here and there's without a doubt no better way to describe it. You have to fight for your space, to get ahead. It doesn't matter how you do it, you just do it. Having said that it's mostly a rather civil war. You can steal space, barge into other lanes, stop the car for 10 minutes whilst you argue with a passenger (this happens rather often) but once you just carry on moving and put your hand out of the window to make a conciliatory gesture then everything's ok after that. "That obnoxious scoundrel just stole the space in front of me even though he skipped the queue behind me to jam into this lane but never mind, he made the sign of peace after doing so" seems to be the predominant attitude. There are fights of course, mostly between microbus drivers, driving all day like that would probably make you very angry too, but considering the outrageous levels of space-thievery and what a European mentality would consider downright rudeness, the system functions. It doesn't function well, but it somehow chudders along, defying the state of chaos that seems destined to engulf it but never actually does.

It's this constant game of dodgems (dodgems are a popular fairground ride, see below) which makes cycling almost impossible. Almost impossible without injury at least. Having lots of cars on the road would, if anything, aid cycling because the cars are never able to generate enough speed thus making it a bit safer for you to cycle. When the cars continuously fight for free bits of concrete right in front of them though, is when it gets dangerous for the modest cyclist.

The alternative to the car or bus is the metro. This is certainly a large network that stretches from North to South of the city and from the centre to the West but in a place as huge as Cairo it's not enough for most commuters, making some part of their journey by road all but inevitable. The amount of time lost in traffic is tremendous. Perhaps much worse, the pollution is terrible. Breathing in Cairo air is like being constantly reminded of your mortality. You can feel the death around you. Once, I was in the unfortunate position of having to run after my microbus and there was *no traffic* in the way to slow it down! This happens rarely, I can assure you. Anyway, after a decent effort that I'm sure Mo Farah would have been

proud of I was forced to give up. The bus was long gone and my lungs felt like they were stuffed with feather dusters. Feather dusters that had just cleaned the average student's apartment at that. As a consequence of having been born in London I have asthma but luckily it's barely noticeable in my day to day life. After this bus chase though, I shamefully had to sit down and take my inhaler, like a fat kid that had stuffed his face with sweets but through the necessity of survival was finally forced to inhale. I felt old and unfit. Perhaps upon my return my fellow students will have noticed a remarkable ageing in me. Ha! No longer shall I look like a youthful, joyful idealist but instead like a grey, hollow-eyed Grampa, which is actually a much truer representation of my character.

Let's get a broader perspective on this, away from my own anecdotal evidence. In 2007 there were 6 deaths from road traffic deaths per 100,000 people in Germany. In Egypt it was 41.6.^[1] The mortality rate for children due to respiratory diseases is 120.86 in Egypt per 100,000 people and 0.51 in Germany. ^[2] A direct comparison between Freiburg and Cairo would be even worse I expect, as Cairo is worse than average for Egypt and Freiburg better than average for Germany. Different shades of Green indeed.

None of what I've written here has really captured the awfulness that is Cairo's traffic. Professional writers/talented people have no doubt attempted this somewhere on the web. What I wanted to make clear however, is just how luxurious it is to live in a city with good public transport and the possibility to cycle everywhere without fear of mutilation. How glorious it is indeed to breath in clean air, almost as pure as when nature herself first made it all those millions or billions of years ago. To not spend 2 hours stuck in traffic for what should really be a 45 minute journey is a reason for celebration. To discuss how Green Freiburg is in comparison to cities such as Cairo seems almost pointless.

But this isn't a pointless discussion. Humanity's evolution has often followed the path of progress. In Freiburg there is still much room for this. As that now famous quote from the Mayor of Bogota goes, "A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It's where the rich use public transportation". Freiburg does not yet match this vision, but it's closer to it than many places. Let us be critical of Freiburg's environmental failings and support the city in attaining this beautiful vision of sustainability and equality. Let's not lose our sense of perspective however, and remain thankful for the blessings that we have.

photo by: [martynsmith500](#)

