

# 16139 The cars that ate Paris

Sep 26th 2015 | PARIS | From the print edition of The Economist

*A surprisingly polluted city tries to survive for 24 hours without its Peugeots*

THE French capital gave birth to the *flâneur*, that casual wanderer of the modern town whose “immense joy” is to stroll the streets “amid the ebb and flow of movement”, in the words of Baudelaire. Paris remains a delight on foot, with its narrow alleys and pedestrian bridges across the Seine. But most of the ebb and flow these days comes from traffic roaring along the main boulevards. Now, in an effort to awaken its inhabitants’ inner *flâneurs*, Paris is to hold its first car-free day, on September 27th.

Inspired by similar events elsewhere, notably in Brussels, a group of eco-citizens came up with the idea last year. They petitioned Anne Hidalgo, the capital’s Socialist mayor, who in turn had to lobby the Paris police. The upshot is not the complete car ban that the group originally sought. The car-free zone will cover only the capital’s central neighbourhoods. It will take place on a Sunday. And taxis, buses and residents’ cars will still be allowed on the streets, albeit at crawling pace.

Yet the event may well capture the imagination of Parisians, who the mayor hopes will picnic on the cobblestones and reclaim the streets. The unfamiliar sounds of a car-free day will doubtless underscore how much noise and grime a modern city tolerates. Paris does not suffer from Beijing-style levels of smog. But there are constant worries about toxic fine-particle pollution, particularly from France’s large number of diesel engines. Background levels of fine particles were 50% above target limits in 2014, and up to three times those thresholds by roadsides, according to Paris’s air-quality watchdog. In March, when pollution levels briefly exceeded those in Beijing, the city banned diesel vehicles and half of all cars on alternate days.

The car-free day is not the first step Paris has taken to discourage noxious emissions. The French capital implemented Vélib, the city’s bike-sharing service, long before London copied it; there is now a similar scheme for electric cars. One road along the Seine has been partially closed, leaving it free for walkers, cyclists and joggers. There is no toll to enter the city, but the Paris region this month introduced a reduced-rate pass on public transport to encourage suburb-dwellers to take the train. But some angry Parisian car-owners accuse Ms Hidalgo of an obsessive anti-car mania, prompted by the Socialists’ need for Green party votes at the town hall.

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