



Delivering the goods

As Royal Mail prepares to scrap the post bike, cargo cycles are booming in popularity in big cities like London. **Rob Ainsley** finds out why



Photography by Rob Ainsley

(Main photo) Domino's Pizza delivery in London. Bike look familiar?

(Others) Green Workforce; AV2Hire; Smylee's Ice Lollies; Nicolas wine shop; Pret a Manger

People ask me if I'm carrying ice-cream, sandwiches, or pornography!' laughs Joe Henry. The wardrobe-sized box on his custard-yellow cargo bike contains something more prosaic: projectors, big sound systems and thick cables. His company, AV2Hire.com, rents out equipment for presentations, and 80% of their deliveries are made by Joe riding the 8 Freight bike up to nine miles each way across London.

'Bikes can get to places quicker,' says Joe. 'A van might take an hour to get to the West End; I'll take 20 minutes. There are no parking worries, and clients find it easier – at football grounds, for example, I can wheel straight up to the side of the pitch and be gone within ten minutes.'

Such bikes are increasingly common in the capital's congestion-charged centre. You see them every day, transporting flowers, cakes, wine, pizzas, magazines, coffee machines, heavy-duty office supplies, builder's and plumber's equipment – and yes, ice-cream and sandwiches too.

It's easy being green

Will Mobsby runs Green Workforce, a bike-based London handyman business. He was inspired to start it during a six-month bike tour of India, amazed by the vast loads he saw transported on two wheels. 'I wanted to cycle for a living, and I knew I'd never make the Tour de France!' he jokes.

His off-the-peg Kona cargo bike carries all the heavy-duty equipment he needs – Will even has a special folding ladder if needed – and the bike's speed and mobility enable him (and his two cycling staff) to pick up business uneconomic for car-based builders.

'We can pick up the small jobs that van-based builders don't want to because of parking, journey time, and a meter to feed,' he says. 'Things like taps, toilets, valves, leaks, changing a washer. Thanks to the efficiency of the bike I can charge 30% less than my rivals, but still pay my staff more – and do three more jobs per day than a van.'

It's an efficiency any business can capitalise on, thanks to the growing number of cargo-cycle couriers – such as Pedals, powered by London cycle messenger Simon Searle and co-couriers Duncan and Julian. 'They're a way forward,' says Simon. 'They offer the green perk for customers, and are environmentally friendly.'

Much of their work is for florists. I join Julian [Sayerer, who cycled round the world last year and featured in the June-July issue] on a brief delivery sortie across central London. He's on a Christiana with a front box. The Danish-made trike is a favourite with London's cycling families-with-

toddlers; one is often parked next door to the Blair household in Connaught Square, where the 24/7 police guard makes locks irrelevant.

I try out Julian's: it's like cycling and pushing a wheelbarrow at the same time, with some entertainingly fugitive momentum round corners. 'You get used to it,' he laughs. (Yes, cargo-cycle couriers laugh a lot. They clearly enjoy their job.)

In a floral boutique off Haymarket, he stops to load up the box with high-end bouquets – some are £80 each – and a couple of tropical trees. Peering through his miniature rainforest, he trundles easily past queues of traffic, by Buckingham Palace and through St James's Park, where I take my leave.

Loads better

Cargo couriers are not restricted to London. In Cambridge, Outspoken Couriers use a fleet of five 8 Freights to deliver up to six miles outside the centre of England's cycling capital.

'Compared to the car, some things can be cheaper delivered by bike, if there are no time constraints or they're small items,' says Outspoken's Rob King. The company's niche is to offer 1-, 2- or 4-hour services with clear price lists, whereas van-based couriers tend only to deliver 'asap'. Ninety per cent of their work is A4 size or less, and under 10kg. Much of it is for printers: 'multidrop' deliveries – ten copies of a magazine to a shop here, eight there, nine round the corner and so on – which can be done conveniently by bike.

8 Freights are the work of English design guru Mike Burrows. 'They're versatile and light, handle a variety of loads well, and for me are psychologically preferable to front-boxes – you're "pulling" not "pushing" the load,' says Rob. 'There's good visibility, they're stable, and you're on top of the steering. But they're a bit twitchy on 20" wheels, and turning them round's not easy – not so much three-point turns as eight-point!' Their riders – who are cycle-trained to Level 3 – can nevertheless cover 60 miles per day.

The cargo cycle market, mainly small or niche companies in London, is growing daily, according to Lee Pillinger of English manufacturers Pashley. 'The cargo bike, delivery bike, industry bike, whatever you call it, is the backbone of our business. It's why we're still here,' he says.

However, you're unlikely to see many of the cargo bikes they make. A huge invisible chunk of their market is fleets for use by staff on large sites where motor vehicles might present a safety issue: MoD establishments, chemical plants, factories, or refineries such as ConocoPhillips on the Humber.

The modern delivery bike might look like

CARGO CYCLES

the one used to deliver Hovis bread to the top of Shaftesbury's Gold Hill in the famous 1970s television ads. And, indeed, quite a few small businesses buy the traditional small-front-wheel Pashleys to use mainly as nostalgia-advertising or branding. But the butcher's boy of the pre-motorway age would be amazed at how much better delivery bikes handle these days.

'The intention is to keep the look and feel of traditional delivery bike – we don't make it funky or trendy for the sake of it – but we've made many subtle changes over the years,' says Lee. 'Modern geometry is better: we can use computer-aided design to play with angles, and refine where and how the load is mounted. We have better components and better steel, lighter and stronger.' They don't wobble or shake any more, even down cobbled Dorset lanes.

Fast and safe

New types of bike and trike are being developed too, for carrying jumbo loads. Office Depot, a global supplier of office products to businesses, have invested in a fleet of electric-assist cargo trikes. Eight of them were recently straight-swapped for diesel vans in central London, following a trial last year.

The impetus originally came from corporate responsibility – to enhance the 'green factor' of the company, and enable clients to do the same – but careful planning ensured that this didn't come at a cost of reduced efficiency. The trikes, made in France by La Petite Reine, can carry up to 180kg, and the riders can make up to 45 deliveries a day: the same productivity

“Darwin's Deli use 120 cargo bikes every day. In 17 years they've had four major incidents, none serious”

as a van, but without the parking or access problems of the City's twisting back lanes.

Office Depot worked closely with the Greater London Authority during their trial, ensuring, for example, the trikes really would be regarded as cycles and hence not liable for parking tickets. London's mayor, Boris Johnson, was said to be very enthusiastic about the project. They're now looking to expand the scheme to other British cities.

So, about those sandwiches. The quick journey times a cargo cycle offers through gridlocked city streets makes it an obvious choice to keep your lunch as tasty as when it was made. No surprise, then, that fresh-food chain Pret a Manger has a fleet of ten delivery bikes in London, doing 5-10 drops per trip,



carrying up to 30kg of food platters. The friendly, green-and-wholesome image of the bicycle does the company – and their clients – no harm either.

And the delivery bikes you're most likely to see on London streets come from another sandwich company, Darwin's Deli. They have 170 bikes – Pashley Prontos with trailers – of which 120 are in use on any one weekday. They carry the whole day's load in one go, delivering to businesses and offices on a typical round of 4-5 miles.

Darwin's have been doing this for 17 years, so they're good people to ask about the safety angle – the reason Royal Mail say they are discontinuing their own use of delivery bikes. According to Steve Brown of Darwin's Deli, in all that time – involving perhaps

two million person-miles of cycling – they've had only 'four major incidents, none of them very serious. Our bikes are very visible, and people give us a wide berth,' he says.

It was a similar story elsewhere: couriers reported the odd bump, but nobody had any scare stories. (Simon Searle was once cut up by a coach. Luckily the cargo box took the hit; he was unscathed.)

Add to that fresh air; flexibility to avoid traffic; control over your schedule; constant exercise; and relatively low stress... no wonder delivery bike riders always seem to be smiling, and looking good. Would you get the same sheer job enthusiasm shown by people such as Joe, Will, Simon, Julian or Rob, from a van driver stuck in a jam? Deliver us from all that.



(Top) A Copenhagen postie on her rounds with a very large – Christiania? – cargo trike in the historic district of Nyboder

(Above) Julian Sayarer delivering bouquets and trees in London on Pedal Couriers' Christiania trike