

TEXT AND PICS: MIRIAM MANNAK

Chronic rush hour in Guangzhou

China isn't only about bicycles any more. In Guangzhou, China's third-largest city and the beating heart of the country's garment and clothing industry, bicycles are fighting for road space with cars, motorcycles and other forms of motorised transport.



Every hour is rush hour in Guangzhou. Whether it is 6 am or 3 pm – the highways around and leading into the city are always crammed with slow moving, fuming and hooting cars.

Travelling to the city from one of the suburbs is not something for those who are in a hurry. A one-way trip from the Jade Green Island to the city centre, a distance of 40 km, will take you 45 minutes to an hour – if you are lucky. (That's quicker, though, than a rush-hour trip of the same distance in Cape Town – perhaps it's time we re-thought our smug belief that congestion hasn't hit our cities yet.)

The fact that the highways comprise separate lanes for cars and heavy vehicles does not seem to improve the traffic congestion much. In Guangzhou, motorists drive where they please at all times, despite the risk of a hefty fine.

There seems to be no data about the exact number of cars in the city, either. 'There are many,' says Chris, who works as a driver for a large multinational. 'My brother, who works for the municipality's transport division, says that every day 300 new cars end up on our city's roads.'

Foreigners and expats in China are advised not to drive themselves, due to the high accident rate.

'The city centre accounts for 100 to 150 crashes a day, from fender benders to serious collisions,' Chris adds. 'Regardless of who is to blame, the foreigner always ends up paying the fine.'

In town, apart from driving or being driven, there are various ways to get about. There is a subway, a bus network, and a system of buses that like the trams in Europe are connected to electricity cables overhead. The fares are cheap: a bus trip from Jade Green Island to town costs between R4 and R6 for a one-way ticket.

I ask Chris where all the bicycles are. Although I have seen some bicycles in town, the number is disappointing. 'A lot of people prefer mopeds these days, as it takes less time to get from A to B,' he explains. 'Scooters and mopeds above 150CC are not allowed. The cops are driving 250CC motorcycles, and they want to be assured they can chase you when you are breaking the law.'

Most scooters are electric. 'They used to run on petrol, but have been converted. Many people prefer this because it is cheaper. You simply plug your scooter in the wall for the battery to recharge!' 



