

# A LANE OF THEIR OWN

With Doha gradually installing cycling facilities all over town, could the sport become a larger part of Qatar daily life?

BY CONNOR SEARS

**I**t doesn't take long living in Doha to realise that traffic is an ever-present issue in the city. Whether it's on the morning drive to work or heading to a popular meet-up location at night, everyone is familiar with the sight of a Doha traffic jam. Seeing several lanes of cars packed bumper to bumper, releasing harmful exhaust as they all wait for a light to change, is a regular experience around these parts. But with the right combination of government initiative and popular support, we could slowly start seeing some of these huge, polluting vehicles swapped out for something a bit less imposing.

Cycling is steadily gaining traction in Qatar. Many different cycling groups in the country coordinate rides in and around Doha for people of all ages and nationalities. The government, too, is helping to encourage this movement by slowly rolling

out bike lanes across the city. Back in 2010, the Ministry of Municipality and Urban Planning announced the Qatar National Bicycle Master Plan, with a goal of becoming a regional trendsetter for bicycle accessibility. Ashghal President HE Nasser bin Ali Al Mawlawi then stated in 2011 that each new Ashghal road project would involve the incorporation of dedicated cycling lanes along the road. Since then, small areas around Doha like Aspire Zone and the airport arrival area have been retrofitted with cycling facilities, which are already seeing some use.

"The cycle lane on Al Waab goes on both sides of the road up past Villaggio," says Ben Keane, a member of Qatar Chain Reaction, one of the country's cycling groups. "In the morning time and in the evening time, you can see people making use of these facilities, which is very good. And it's not just



**"We should not treat the whole of Doha as one thing. We can start to look at different regions of the city that have different characteristics, different identities, different styles."**

**DR YASSER MAHGOUR**  
Associate Professor, Department of Architecture  
and Urban Planning  
Qatar University



Europeans, Americans, Canadians or Australians. There's Filipinos; there's Indians. In our group, in Qatar Chain Reaction, we've had 27 different nationalities in the group that all go riding."

It's no surprise that cycling seems like such an attractive option for Qatar residents. At its core, it's a relatively inexpensive recreational activity that keeps the rider physically fit, perfect for a country trying to encourage its residents to live a more active lifestyle. Bicycles are also very friendly to the environment, requiring no fuel at all.

In other cities across the world, cycling is even becoming a regular mode of transportation, providing a viable alternative to congested automobile traffic. In many European countries, bicycles have even begun outselling cars as more and more people opt for this cheaper, healthier alternative to driving. Finding a way to circumvent the traffic in Doha would certainly be an advantage for cyclists, but with only a few areas set up with cycling lanes at this point, getting around the city only by bicycle is problematic.

"We don't recommend riding around on bicycles inside the city proper, especially without helmets, lights and visible reflective vests," says Ramon Munoz, a member of Pinoy Roadies Qatar, an all-Filipino cycling group. "What we recommend is for them to at least have a group and ride around the city proper as a group so it will be easier to identify that they are riders."

The danger posed by cars is an important reason why cycling is not yet a viable transportation method for Doha. Even riding on roads with dedicated cycling paths can be

hazardous, says Keane. He points out an example on Al Refa road, where cars will sometimes illegally speed down the cycling track, trying to shave some time off their commute. As a result, these cycling groups often prefer to ride out of the city, onto more northern roads by Lusail or Al Khor, where they have much more room to ride and less traffic to deal with. Also standing in the way of cycling becoming a reliable mode of transit is the weather. Though cycling can be a very enjoyable sport during the cooler months, the summer heat renders bicycle travel around the city very impractical, if not outright impossible.

#### **A city built for cars**

However, according to Dr Yasser Mahgoub, an associate professor in the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at Qatar University, the most basic reason why cycling is not a reliable mode of transportation for Doha is the layout of the city itself. Because the city has done all of its growth and was planned largely in the 20th century, it was designed with cars in mind as the major source of transportation. Like many cities in the region, this led to a city map spread over a large area with wide roads connecting far-flung neighbourhoods.

"And people started to realise the negative impact of the car planning on the city: the urban sprawl, the urban spread, the traffic jams, the difficulty moving from one part to another, this large space that is occupied by streets and parking areas," Mahgoub says. "Actually, now to start to transform this city into a bicycle-friendly city is a very difficult task and very challenging. European cities and older cities that started before the automobile are easier to implement or encourage people to use bicycles, because the streets are narrow, the buildings are not very high and the traffic is already slow. So they are people-friendly and bicycle-friendly and pedestrian-friendly, but cities that depended in their planning on automobiles are very hard to transform."

Because of this, and considering the harsh weather as well, Mahgoub says cycling will probably not become the dependable mode of transportation in Qatar that it is in other countries. Bicycling remains a viable recreational activity, however, and the city can still do much to help make cycling a safer and more enjoyable experience for those who want to try it.

Mahgoub says the challenge of encouraging biking in the city should not be attempted with costly long-term goals like



**"It would be very convenient for all riders to have dedicated bicycle lanes inside the city itself. There are already bicycle lanes on Salwa road, which are located parallel to the road. If they can do this all around Doha, interconnecting cities and towns, that would be very nice also."**

**RAMON MUNOZ**  
Pinoy Roadies Qatar



installing cycle lanes along every road. Instead, the focus should be on smaller, more manageable goals that can, over time, create a more bicycle-friendly environment in Doha. These smaller ideas include allowing bicycles to be available for rent along the Corniche so riders can pick one up at the Sheraton then drop it off at the Museum of Islamic Art before a day in the park. Mahgoub also suggests closing roads to cars in certain districts at the weekend to allow cyclists to ride on the streets without worrying about keeping their distance from vehicles. With these smaller goals, Doha could become friendlier toward bicycles without needing to break the bank on infrastructure.

#### **Still pedalling**

Moving forward, both Mahgoub and Keane say that to really make Qatar a regional leader in cycling, the sport needs to be introduced to the younger generation. No matter how much infrastructure the city invests in this healthy and eco-friendly sport, it will require passionate members of the community to keep cycling alive in Qatar.

"If you can bring cycling to school for the young kids and bring them out to these areas where they can go cycling – the Corniche or airport road or any of these areas – start them at a young age and get them interested in cycling, for sure it will help Qatar no end," Keane says.

Of course, expanding the existing network of cycling lanes to make riding around the city safer would also encourage more

people to get involved, while expanding the range of more experienced cyclists. "It would be very convenient for all riders to have dedicated bicycle lanes inside the city itself," Munoz says. "There are already bicycle lanes on Salwa Road, which are located parallel to the road itself. If they can do this all around Doha, interconnecting cities and towns, that would be very nice also."

Qatar also has opportunities to integrate cycle facilities from the beginning in new developments like Msheireb Downtown Doha and Lusail that are being constructed from the ground up. What the city should aim for, however, is not necessarily a fully bicycle-friendly city, Mahgoub says. Rather, more focus should be put on making bicycle-friendly areas throughout the city, picking out certain districts to turn into safe havens for cyclists and equipping them with lanes, parking and other facilities specifically for bicycles. Though the city as a whole might not become bicycle-friendly, he says, what's important is that cyclists still have somewhere they can go, which is a much more feasible goal.

"We need to look at the city as multiple cities within the city," Mahgoub says. "We should not treat the whole of Doha as one thing. We can start to look at different regions of the city that have different characteristics, different identities, different styles. One area can be bicycle-friendly. Another area can be pedestrian-friendly. Another can be car-friendly. When a metropolis or large city starts to grow, it does not grow as one entity. And this is healthy." ■



**"If you can bring cycling to school for the young kids and bring them out to these areas where they can go cycling – the Corniche or airport road or any of these areas – start them at a young age and get them interested in cycling, for sure it will help Qatar no end."**

**BEN KEANE**  
Qatar Chain Reaction