TWO WHEELS GOOD —*Groningen*

Preface
Some 58 per cent of all journeys made in Groningen are on a bicycle. And its 180,000 residents own an amazing 300,000 bikes. The small Dutch city is now seen as a living manifesto for how to get people in the saddle. This is how it became Europe's two-wheeled capital.

Monocle cycle survey
Is the bicycle the future of travel? *Monocle* certainly thinks so. We are always happy to get on our Skeppshult or Arrow bikes and dodge our way through the London traffic - cycling to work is one thing that the city has actually begun to tackle with success. But isn't it time the whole world began to realise that cycling is a simple way to protect the environment and improve our health? This month, in each section of *Monocle,* we look at the bicycle pioneers out to change the world, from town planners to industrial designers, but discover why China is now favouring the car over pedal power.

WRITER
Nick Duerden

PHOTOGRAPHER
Lard Buurman

Nestling in the far northeastern corner of the Netherlands, two and a half hours by train from Amsterdam, sits the tidy city of Groningen, capital of the flat green province that shares its name. It is not much to look at, Groningen, its dull, urban uniformity like something out of a Douglas Coupland novel, but within minutes of arriving, you begin to notice the bicycles, thousands of them. This isn't unusual in itself, of course, given that the bicycle is a constant all over the Netherlands but here there are somehow, well, more.

Buses and taxis coast by, either underpopulated or empty, and everybody, but everybody, is making their way from A-z on two wheels. There is the elderly gentleman, the pregnant woman and the prepubescent whose feet don't quite touch the ground. There is the couple who ride side-by-side the better to hold hands, and the young mother with a wooden box out front in which she carts two children, one dog and a week's worth of shopping. And then there are the disaffected teens who mooch around draped heavily over their handlebars, the weight of adolescence upon them and pedalling as slowly as gravity will permit.

Welcome, then, to the World Cycling City, as it has been dubbed, a place where bicycles outnumber humans by a ratio of two to one. "We are a city of 180,000 people and something like 300,000 bikes," says Cor van der Klaauw, a transport and traffic planner at the local planning department. "This is because many people have more than one bicycle. I myself have two, but I know people with three, maybe four: one for daily use, another for the weekend, and others perhaps for special occasions..."

These special occasions aren't immediately clear to the visitor but later I meet a man, himself a multiple owner, who likes to use a unicycle at the weekend, "or whenever the mood takes me," he says, grinning. "But then what did you expect? This is the Netherlands."

This is indeed the Netherlands, a country of robustly handsome blond folk, a language that relies heavily on an abundance of vowels and a perennially underperforming, but frequently brilliant, football team. The jewel in its crown, of course, is Amsterdam - and this despite its popularity as a mecca for sex, drugs and general iniquity.

There is no animosity between the different factions as every driver here is also a cyclist himself

Mostly, however, the Netherlands is a country of pedal power, an invitingly flat land that has developed into a veritable bicycling Utopia for its six million inhabitants.

"You receive your first bicycle, a three-wheeler, when you are four years old," says Van der Klaauw, "and by the age of six, you move on to two wheels, and you never really look back. Almost all children travel to school by bicycle. After that, we are conditioned for life."

While Amsterdam throngs with bikes, it also still suffers from gridlocked traffic, unnecessary suvs and high pollution, something its northeastern neighbour became adamant it wouldn't allow to happen. It took proactive action a full three decades ago and is now reaping the results.

"Groningen is the way it is today because of particularly forward-thinking town planners in the 1970s," says Peter van der Wal, a government-sponsored mobility manager, whose job it is to tempt people away from cars by informing them of certain tax breaks on offer to cyclists (those who cycle to work get to replace their old bikes every three years with a 30 per cent discount, plus free theft insurance) as well as the health-promoting properties of two wheels over four. "It was 1977 when we decided that we would need to revolutionise the city

Eddy te Rietstap (30)
Bicycle courier

"I've been doing this for six years now, and I love it, although in a city like Groningen, there are problems. The place is full of students and they are so slow, and never watch out. They drove me crazy at first, but I'm used to them now. Bicycles are my obsession: 1 race them, and I also have another with a tray for my Jack Russell."

Fleur Wesselynk (21)
Medical student

"I cycle everyday, between home, the hospital, the library and university. In fact, I go everywhere on my bike, even to the pub and clubs. I'm perfectly safe riding drunk - I've had a lot of practice! As you can see, my bicycle is pretty old, it cost me just €30, but I do love the freedom it brings. Do I walk much? No. Why would I? I have a bicycle."

Leon Werkman (13)
Student

"I got my first bike when I was four years old - it was a Christmas present from my parents. Now I use one every day, whenever possible. I don't live far from the centre, so I ride to school, and after school I ride it to football practice, or to visit friends at their houses. It's much better than the bus. When I'm on it, it's like being free."

and save it from permanent congestion by closing the centre to all car use. It made the national news, there was a big drama over it, and a lot of opposition, but the planners insisted that a town this size simply wouldn't be able to cope with a massive growth in motor cars."

As a result, the city centre - which is tiny, all of one square kilometre - is now off-limits to vehicles after 11.00. Meanwhile, immediately outside this zone, parking remains both limited and prohibitively costly. The local public-transport company, Arriva, is doing its best to counteract Van der Wal's efforts by offering cheap tickets to woo potential passengers back, but with little luck. "I myself travel by bus maybe twice, three times a year," he says. "It's not something we give much consideration to here." Just 5 to 7 per cent of Groningeners use public transport each day, while 58 per cent travel by bicycle. An impressive statistic, maybe, but one that Van der Wal, for one, thinks gives the misleading impression that the Dutch really are more healthy, and more green, than the rest of us.

"Trust me," he says, "we are just as lazy as anybody else. If, for example, a company here has 100 employees and 50 live within a distance of 10km from work [judged a reasonable bike ride for many in the Netherlands], then only 25 will actually bother. My task is to double this figure, but it isn't easy. People still want to use their cars - for work, for the school run, shopping, and so on. Just like everybody else. If we do use our bicycles instead, it is mostly because it is practical to do so, not because we want to stay healthy." And don't expect company MDS ever to cycle to work. "No," he says, "people in suits don't tend to use bicycles. They prefer Mercedes."

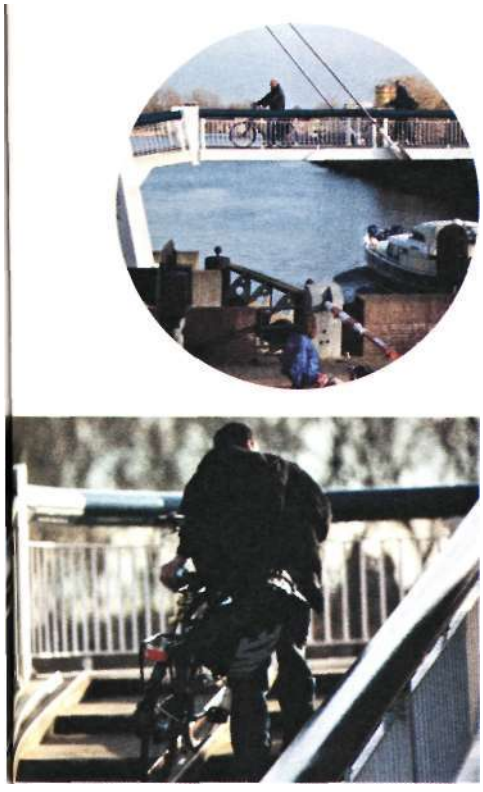
Not quite perfect then, but Groningen is nevertheless a model city in terms of its attitude to transport, and one from which we can all surely learn. As Klaas Dik, owner of Dik, one of the centre's many bicycle stores, says: "Employers the world over should encourage what we encourage here, or else we will all become fatter and fatter. And who wants that?"

It is early morning in Groningen, the height of rush hour. Within the city's vehicle exclusion zone, the streets are silently humming with bicycles as cyclists crisscross one another with an impressive dexterity whose very insouciance is nevertheless exquisitely Dutch. Few people here ride mountain or racing bikes, opting instead for the upright models once favoured by grandmothers and still popular today due to maximum comfort and minimum exertion.

Hand signals are not exercised with buckled elbows and stiff fingers, but rather mere suggestion: if somebody wants to turn left, they simply point a crooked finger, and the whole mass magically opens up to allow free passage. It's like watching never-ending schools of fish. And while there may be the occasional wheel wobble and the melodic tinkle of bells, there are few accidents and an absolute absence of ride rage. This is largely, says student Fleur Wesselynk, 21, because Groningen is a university town. "We are like Oxford and Cambridge combined," she says, "with something like 46,000 students in this one small space. And, yes, we are mostly very relaxed, and chilled. We like to take it easy."

Riding out to the town's perimeter to witness how cyclists coexist alongside their motorised enemies, meanwhile, throws other cities' street systems into stark contrast. The €6m Groningen spends every four years on the maintenance of bicycle lanes and related facilities is clearly well spent.

They are everywhere, flanking every main road, and even circling what would otherwise be deadly ring roads. Here, every motorised vehicle, no matter the size or heft, defers to the cyclist with a benevolence that, to anyone who has ever cycled in London or New York, frankly beggars belief. "Very few cyclists - if any - are ever killed on the roads here," Van



der Klaauw says. "If anything, you are safer on a bicycle than you are in a car." Furthermore, he insists, there is absolutely no animosity between the differing factions, for the simple reason that every driver here is also a cyclist himself.

So evident is the city's road safety that no one outside the local police force even bothers with crash helmets.Yes, says Van der Klaauw, helmets are given out free to children at schools but no one wears them because such cautious measures are simply considered superfluous to needs.

It is now midnight in Groningen and the pubs are beginning to empty, disgorging a steady stream of mildly drunken students who clamber onto bicycles and head back to campus, weaving in and out of each other's paths with the air of a people for whom wheels are mere extensions of their bodies. It is a warming sight, and an enviable one. They pedal until the night swallows them whole, calf muscles pumping, metabolisms thriving, and every last one of them distinctly not fat, but fighting fit. — (M)

View from China

A street thronged with bicycles is one of the classic images of Communist China. But the humble two-wheeler is out of favour with the new rich, who are shifting their affections to the car at a frightening rate. Car ownership is seen as a symbol of economic wellbeing, just as it was in the US in the 1950s.

The number of privately • owned vehicles in the country as a whole increased by nearly 20 per cent last year to 22 million, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Car ownership is encouraged with low petrol prices and the huge network of motorways and urban ring roads that are being built.

There were 500 million cyclists in China right up until a decade ago. Just a few years ago, cycling in Beijing was an exhilarating if claustrophic experience, as cyclists a dozen abreast thronged the wide cycle lanes at peak times and cycling commuters could cross the wide thoroughfares of the capital at a fair clip. No longer.

Back in the 1990s, two thirds of families would travel by bike, these days it is just 20 per cent, while bike ownership in the cities has fallen by 25 per cent in the past five years. In Beijing it has fallen to seven million - still a figure that many western cities would envy. — cc