

Starting up

Cycle rickshaws operating as taxis started in Asia but can now be found in many cities around the world.

- Have you ridden in one?
- What did you think of the experience?
- How efficient was it to get you to your destination?
- Can you see them replacing motor vehicle taxis?

Reading

A new bike taxi service has recently started in London. To find out more, read the article and then answer the questions below.

Reading comprehension 1

Say whether the following statements are true or false, based on the information in the article.

Quote relevant extracts from the article to support your choice.

- 1 Pedal Me has a large fleet of bike taxis.
- 2 Bike taxis are more manoeuvrable than cars.
- 3 Pedal Me bikes can carry up to four adults.
- 4 Pedal Me already operates in several UK cities.
- 5 They have plans to operate in cities abroad.

Reading comprehension 2

Read the article again and find answers to the following questions.

- 1 How are Pedal Me bike taxis different from a traditional rickshaw?
- 2 In what ways does Pedal Me claim to be different from or better than Uber and similar services?
- 3 How can the Pedal Me bike taxis be quicker around London than taxis with a combustion engine?
- 4 How many passengers can a Pedal Me bike carry?
- 5 Is most of Pedal Me's work carrying passengers?
- 6 What does Pedal Me think its potential revenue from the London passenger market could be?
- 7 How much would it need to expand to achieve that?
- 8 What is Pedal Me's strategy to help it grow?
- 9 What are the employment conditions for Pedal Me riders?
- 10 Why has Pedal Me made the qualification test to transport passengers so difficult?

Pedal v petrol: can a London taxi-bike start-up take on Uber?

¹“We’re not going to fit through those traffic cones,” I declare, as my taxi rushes towards a closed road. We make it through a small gap, just. I ask if the manoeuvre was legal. “It’s closed to traffic,” says my rider.

²This is no ordinary taxi. I am riding in an electric-assisted bike taxi from Pedal Me. The London-based start-up is taking on Uber and claims to be cheaper, faster, cleaner and more fun than its petrol competitors.

³There is space for up to two adults, or four children, in the bike’s cargo carriage. Passengers sit up front while the rider behind does the hard work. Some of Pedal Me’s customers are using the service as a quicker, greener alternative to the school run. “We’re doing a journey in 20 to 25 minutes that would have taken an hour. That gives everyone a lie-in.” says Ben Knowles, Pedal Me’s co-founder and chief executive.

⁴With a fleet of just 42 bikes and 50 staff, the bulk of Pedal Me’s business, for now, is delivering cargo, such as food and flowers. The ambition for the future is a passenger service to rival Uber. Knowles says Pedal Me’s potential share of London’s passenger market could be worth between £250m and £1bn, but it would require a fleet of about 6,000 bikes and it could take years to scale up to meet demand.

⁵Mr Knowles says he typically turns down business worth up to £1,000 every day. That is why the company is trying to crowdfund £1m and is recruiting a finance director and chief operations officer. It will also improve efficiency by further developing the technology that organises jobs and allocates rides. It has plans to scale up in London next year and then in 2021 to expand into other cities, such as Bristol and Edinburgh in the UK, as well as Seville and Brussels.

⁶Unlike the gig economy models of Uber or Deliveroo, the food delivery service, Pedal Me’s riders are employees, working shifts or flexibly for national living wage, plus commission.

⁷Riders start with cargo jobs. Then they have to take a passenger qualification to transport people. The test is “extremely hard” according to Pedal Me — those taking it usually fail first time.

⁸There is a pragmatic rationale for this. “There’s a widespread distrust of pedal couriers and cyclists,” according to co-founder Chris Dixon. Pedal Me’s potential for growth could lie in changing that perception.

⁹There is also the fact that cities want less motor traffic. “They need to manage the amount for air pollution reasons,” Mr Knowles says. “That will create an increasing advantage for us in time.”



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Vocabulary

Find words and phrases in the article which match these definitions and explanations.

- 1 pointed plastic objects in orange and yellow used to indicate areas of a road where repair work is going on (para 1)
- 2 a movement requiring some skill (para 1)
- 3 competing against (para 2)
- 4 says that something is true even if there is no proof (para 2)
- 5 the biggest part (para 4)
- 6 to be able to be a strong competitor to another company (para 4)
- 7 to increase in size or resources (para 4)
- 8 refuses to accept a request (para 5)
- 9 to raise money for a project from a large number of people who each contribute a relatively small amount (para 5)
- 10 a labour market characterized by the widespread use of short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs (para 6)

Grammar – comparison

A lot of comparisons are made between Pedal Me and taxi services such as Uber.

Complete these sentences by using the correct comparative form of the adjectives in brackets or by other structures such as '*not as ... as*', '*much/far less ... than*', and '*much/far more ... than*'.

- 1 Travelling in central London by bike taxi can be _____ (fast) than by normal taxi.
- 2 Pedal Me needs to become much _____ (big) to be able to compete effectively with Uber and similar companies.
- 3 Pedal Me claims to be _____ (cheap) and _____ (fun) than its petrol competitors.
- 4 There is no doubt that travelling by bike taxi is far _____ (clean) than by taxis with a combustion engine.
- 5 Bike taxis can go through _____ (small) gaps than cars, which means they can get to their destination _____ (quick).
- 6 Because of its small size, Pedal Me cannot cover _____ much of London _____ Uber or similar taxi services.
- 7 Pedal Me is much _____ (economical) and much _____ (polluting) for delivering small cargo loads than a van.
- 8 Pedal Me's riders probably have _____ (good) working conditions than drivers who work for Uber.

Discussion

- 1 Do you think that bike taxi companies such as Pedal Me can really compete against firms such as Uber, especially if they also start using electric cars, as they will before too long?
- 2 Would you invest in Pedal Me? Why or why not?
- 3 Do you think the so-called Gig Economy models of Uber and Deliveroo, where workers are self-employed, are a good thing because of the flexibility they give? Or is it better to be an employee, which is Pedal Me's model?

ANSWER KEY

Reading comprehension 1

- 1 False. Its current fleet is 42 bikes and 50 staff.
- 2 True. *We make it through a small gap ...*
- 3 False. *There is space for up to two adults, or four children ...*
- 4 False. *It has plans to scale up in London next year and then in 2021 to expand into other cities, such as Bristol and Edinburgh in the UK ...*
- 5 True. *It has plans to expand into other cities ... in the UK, as well as Seville and Brussels.*

Reading comprehension 2

- 1 They are electric-assisted and the rider sits behind the passengers.
- 2 It claims to be cheaper, faster, cleaner and more fun than its petrol competitors.
- 3 Because they can take routes that are closed to car traffic, like normal cycles.
- 4 Up to two adults, or four children.
- 5 No, the bulk of Pedal Me's business, for now, is delivering cargo, such as food and flowers.
- 6 Pedal Me's potential share of London's passenger market could be worth between £250m and £1bn.
- 7 It would require a fleet of about 6,000 bikes and it could take years to scale up to meet demand.
- 8 It is trying to crowdfund £1m and is recruiting a finance director and chief operations officer. It will also improve efficiency by further developing the technology that organises jobs and allocates rides.
- 9 Pedal Me's riders are employees, working shifts or flexibly for the national living wage, plus commission.
- 10 Because as Pedal Me's co-founder, Chris Dixon, explains: "There's a widespread distrust of pedal couriers and cyclists." Potential for growth could lie in changing that perception.

Vocabulary

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1 traffic cones | 6 to rival |
| 2 manoeuvre | 7 to scale up |
| 3 taking on | 8 turns down |
| 4 claims | 9 to crowdfund |
| 5 the bulk | 10 the gig economy |

Grammar

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 faster | 5 smaller ... quicker |
| 2 bigger | 6 as as |
| 3 cheaper ... more fun | 7 more economical ... less polluting |
| 4 cleaner | 8 better |

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