The Guardian

'For me, this is paradise': life in the Spanish city that banned cars

In Pontevedra, the usual soundtrack of a Spanish city has been replaced by the tweeting of birds and the chatter of humans

Calle Mellado before and after the implementation of the scheme. Photograph: Concello de Pontevedra

Stephen Burgen *in Pontevedra*

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People don't shout in Pontevedra - or they shout less. With all but the most essential traffic banished, there are no revving engines or honking horns, no metallic snarl of motorbikes or the roar of people trying make themselves heard above the din - none of the usual soundtrack of a Spanish city.

What you hear in the street instead are the tweeting of birds in the camellias, the tinkle of coffee spoons and the sound of human voices. Teachers herd crocodiles of small children across town without the constant fear that one of them will stray into traffic.

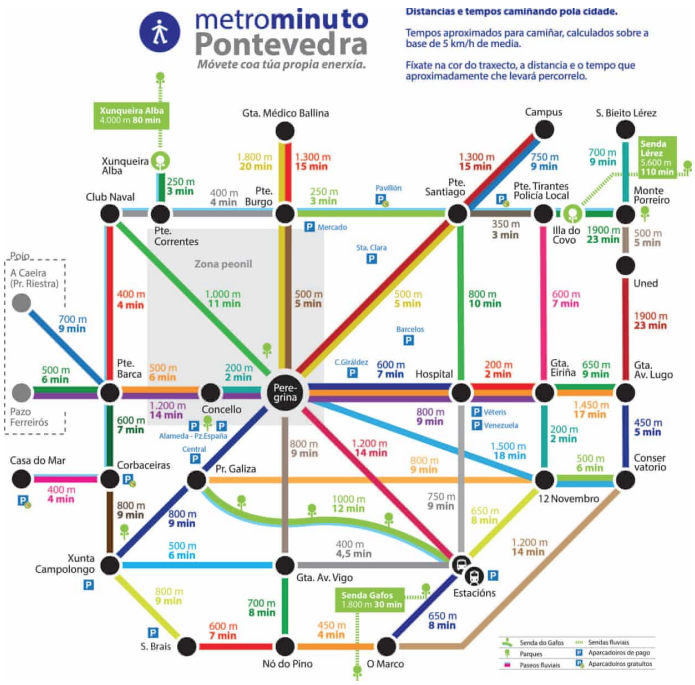
“Listen,” says the mayor, opening the windows of his office. From the street below rises the sound of human voices. “Before I became mayor 14,000 cars passed along this street every day. More cars passed through the city in a day than there are people living here.”

Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores has been mayor of the Galician city since 1999. His philosophy is simple: owning a car doesn’t give you the right to occupy the public space.

“How can it be that the elderly or children aren’t able to use the street because of cars?” asks César Mosquera, the city’s head of infrastructures. “How can it be that private property - the car - occupies the public space?”

Lores became mayor after 12 years in opposition, and within a month had pedestrianised all 300,000 sq m of the medieval centre, paving the streets with granite flagstones.

“The historical centre was dead,” he says. “There were a lot of drugs, it was full of cars - it was a marginal zone. It was a city in decline, polluted, and there were a lot of traffic accidents. It was stagnant. Most people who had a chance to leave did so. At first we thought of improving traffic conditions but couldn’t come up with a workable plan. Instead we decided to take back the public space for the residents and to do this we decided to get rid of cars.”



A metro-style map of Pontevedra shows typical walking times

They stopped cars crossing the city and got rid of street parking, as people looking for a place to park is what causes the most congestion. They closed all surface car parks in the city centre and opened underground ones and others on the periphery, with 1,686 free places. They got rid of traffic lights in favour of roundabouts, extended the car-free zone

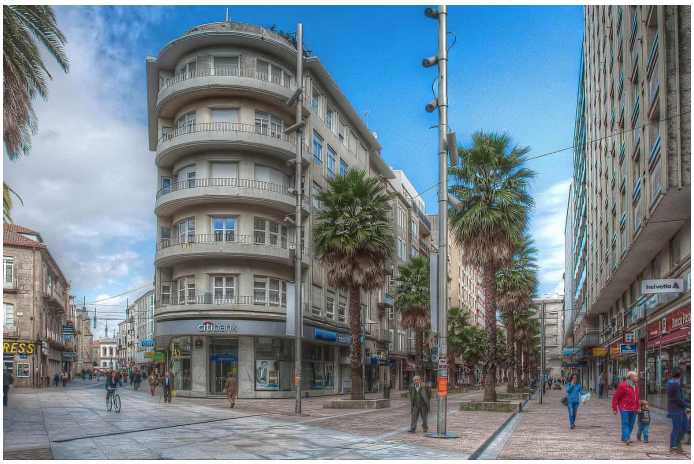
from the old city to the 18th-century area, and used traffic calming in the outer zones to bring the speed limit down to 30km/h.

The benefits are numerous. On the same streets where 30 people died in traffic accidents from 1996 to 2006, only three died in the subsequent 10 years, and none since 2009. CO2 emissions are down 70%, nearly three-quarters of what were car journeys are now made on foot or by bicycle, and, while other towns in the region are shrinking, central Pontevedra has gained 12,000 new inhabitants. Also, withholding planning permission for big shopping centres has meant that small businesses - which elsewhere have been unable to withstand Spain's prolonged economic crisis - have managed to stay afloat.

Lores, a member of the leftwing Galician Nationalist Bloc, is a rarity in the solidly conservative northwestern region. Pontevedra, population 80,000, is the birthplace of Mariano Rajoy, the former Spanish prime minister and leader of the rightwing People's party. However, the mayor says Rajoy has never shown any interest in an urban scheme that has earned his native city numerous awards.

Naturally, it hasn't all gone off without a hitch. People don't like being told they can't drive wherever they want, but Lores says that while people claim it as a right, in fact what they want are privileges.

"If someone wants to get married in the car-free zone, the bride and groom can come in a car, but everyone else walks," he says. "Same with funerals."



Central Pontevedra after the changes. Photograph: Luis Pereiro Gomez

The main grumble is that the scheme has led to congestion on the periphery of the zone and that there aren't enough parking spaces.

"The city is the perfect size for pedestrianisation," says local architect Rogelio Carballo Soler. "You can cross the entire city in 25 minutes. There are things you could criticise, but there's nothing that would make you reject this model."

Later, at a children's birthday party, a group of parents discuss the pros and cons of the car-free city. "The problem is first thing in the morning in the few streets where cars are permitted there are traffic jams," says Ramiro Armesto. "There's no public transport from

the peripheral car parks into the centre. On the other hand, I've lived in Valencia and Toledo but I've never lived in a city as easy to live in as this one."

Raquel García says: "I've lived in Madrid and many other places and for me this is paradise. Even if it's raining, I walk everywhere. And the same shopkeepers who complain are the ones who have survived in spite of the crisis. It's also a great place to have kids."

"What's needed is more areas where you can park for five minutes so that you can take the kids to school when it's raining," says Víctor Prieto. "Here, if it's raining - and it rains a lot - people get in their car to buy bread. They do it less now. I hardly use my car at all now."

The works were all financed locally and received no aid from regional or central government.

"In effect, these are everyday public works that have been carried out in the context of a global project, but they cost the same or even less," says Lores. "We've haven't undertaken grand projects. We've done what was within our grasp."

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