

Pontevedra

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The city that pioneered Europe's car-free future

Pontevedra banned cars decades before most cities started to think about reclaiming streets for pedestrians.



There used to be cars here but now there aren't | Photo by City of Pontevedra
By Aitor Hernández-Morales, July 27, 2022, 1:05 pm CET

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Every year, [thousands of people](#) are killed in road-related accidents in cities across Europe. None of those deaths are happening in Pontevedra.

Over the past two decades, cars have been responsible for less than a dozen fatalities in the northwestern Spanish city of 85,000 inhabitants; the [last recorded death](#) took place in 2011, when an 81-year-old man was run over by a delivery van.

The explanation for Pontevedra's track record is simple: It banned cars from [most of the city](#) in 1999.

"We decided to redesign the city for people instead of cars and we've been reaping the rewards ever since," said Pontevedra's mayor Miguel Anxo Fernández Lores, who came into office with plans for a car-free city more than 20 years ago.

"Not only have we not had a single road-related death in over a decade, but air pollution has been [reduced by 67 percent](#) and our overall quality of life in the city has dramatically improved," he said. Some 15,000 people have moved to the city since it became car-free, he added.



Pontevedra banned cars throughout most of the city in 1999 | Photo by City of Pontevedra

As cities look to meet ambitious climate goals, many are considering or already implementing measures to kick out cars as a way both to cut down on emissions and to protect residents from pollution.

During the pandemic, cities like London, Paris and Brussels built new bike path networks and made more space for pedestrians. Between 2019 and 2022, the number of low-emissions zones — limiting access to certain types of polluting traffic — in European cities increased by 40 percent, according to the [Clean Cities Campaign](#). And in 2020, over 960 EU cities participated in [International Car-Free Day](#), with dozens later instituting policies banning cars from city centers once a month.

Still, in a majority of these places, cars are deeply ingrained in city life — and in many cases, including in Brussels, huge parts of the city were specifically designed with the car in mind.

Undoing that type of urban planning is a challenge but Fernández Lores insists that it doesn't have to be an election-losing proposition.

"Adopting these kind of measures initially requires political courage," said Fernández Lores, a member of the left-wing regionalist Bloque Nacionalista Galego who was reelected for the sixth time in 2019. "But fear of losing elections shouldn't condition the actions that responsible politicians take, and it looks like designing the city for people can actually be quite good at the electoral level."

1. Cars out, people in

A stop-off point on the [Way of Saint James pilgrimage route](#) located between the Galician port city of Vigo and the regional capital of Santiago, Pontevedra has always been a bustling commercial hub in northwestern Spain.

By the late 1990s, an average of 80,000 cars drove through the city center on a daily basis. It registered an average of 140 road-related accidents with serious injuries each year.

"This city was basically a giant warehouse for cars, full of private vehicles that filled our public space, generated noise and emissions, and stopped our citizens — especially children and the elderly — from having true autonomy in the place in which they lived," said Fernández Lores, who won Pontevedra's 1999 mayoral campaign promising to reclaim the streets.

The changes he introduced transformed Pontevedra. The city's 30,000-square-meter historic core was pedestrianized and all on-street parking spaces were eliminated. Through-traffic was redirected to avoid the center altogether and commuters into the city were directed to parking lots located in its periphery.

While cars could still access the center to make drop-offs or pickups, they were subject to a 30-kilometer-per-hour speed limit and caps on the amount of time they could remain stationary.

It took time to get locals on board, the mayor recalled. "It's normal to fear changes, especially during the first two years of a project, when the transformation is still underway and people can't fully see the final benefits."

The local business community in particular was divided over the scheme, with some fearing that blocking access for cars would discourage customers from shopping in the city.



Pontevedra's 30,000-square-meter historic core was pedestrianized and all on-street parking spaces were eliminated | Image via iStock

"Some people got it immediately: I had a bookseller tell me he backed pedestrianization because in all his years in business he had never had a car come into his shop to buy a book," the mayor said, laughing. "But to get something like this done you have to talk to everyone, listen to their concerns and work at explaining the positives."

Fernández Lores said he took to invoking the figure of billionaire Amancio Ortega, the Galician owner of the Zara clothing chain, a revered figure in the region.

"I pointed out that Zara stores are usually found on pedestrianized shopping streets, not four-lane ring roads," he said. "I think many naysayers reconsidered their position when I asked them if they thought they knew more about business than Amancio Ortega."

Initial opposition disappeared once local shops saw business increase with pedestrianization. "Instead of driving out to malls on the periphery, people shop in the city center: The city is our mall."

Fernández Lores insists that he's not anti-car, but that motor vehicles largely belong outside cities. Instead, he advocates for urban policies that favor more local living in which commutes can be carried out [on foot or by bike](#).

"The city should not be seen as a road, but as a space for coexistence," he said.

2. Listening mode

More than two decades after Pontevedra ditched cars, cities from across the bloc are beginning to institute similar measures.

For a growing number of mayors, cars have become "the villains of the story," said Barbara Stoll, director of the Clean Cities Campaign.

They are responding to the "double whammy" of the climate emergency and a health crisis caused by air pollution by restricting access for polluting cars or blocking traffic altogether — measures that Stoll said she expects will become increasingly popular across the Continent because they also make cities more attractive and improve quality of life.

The notoriously car-choked region of Brussels is among those planning to undergo drastic changes. A new mobility plan, dubbed [Good Move](#), aims to reduce overall car traffic by 24 percent by the end of the decade.

As part of the scheme, the [city of Brussels](#) is set to adopt many of the same measures implemented in Pontevedra: Through-traffic will be redirected onto the small ring road; in some parts of the city, motor-vehicle access will only be permitted for residents; and the number of parking spots in the city — which currently outnumber its residents — will be reduced.

"If you look at the numbers, only 20 to 25 percent of the people who live or come to work here use cars, but the impact of the car on the city is incredible nonetheless," said Bart Dhondt, alderman for mobility in the city of Brussels. "With Good Move we're creating small pedestrian zones, car-free zones, areas where car access is limited, always with the objective of giving more space to people."

Unsurprisingly, concerns about the impact of slashing car access — on business, on personal convenience — remain the same. According to Dhondt, in Brussels much of the pushback has come from shop owners worried about a loss of revenue. His team has doubled down on its communication with the business community to get them on board, he said.

"I've gone so far as to give people my personal number so that they can reach out with concerns, and we've listened and altered the parts of the plan when people have shown us other ways to achieve the same objective on a particular street," he said.

"We'll keep listening because we have to be pragmatic and honest enough to address side effects that might arise," he added.

But ultimately, the trend is clear, Dhont said: EU cities are all moving in the same direction — toward more sustainable urban landscapes with fewer cars.

"In Brussels, that means safer streets with cleaner air for us, for our kids," he said. "People don't want to live in cities designed for cars: They want cities for people."