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Comment

Scourge of the scooters

Electric scooters are a nightmare: they clog up pavements and are an ungainly eyesore. But we still need them, says **Donna Lu**

BACK in Brisbane, Australia, for the Christmas break, I found myself in a public transport dead zone. Bikeless, 7 kilometres from where I was meeting friends and unwilling to get a taxi, I resorted to borrowing an electric scooter.

"You'll have such a good scoot!" a friend told me before I left, as if such a thing were possible while zooming around with the ungainliness of an overgrown child. The trip took far longer than it would have by bike, not least because of a major spill halfway there. A stray rock, hit at speed, is a terrible thing: weeks later, I still had the scabbed-up knees of a primary schooler.

E-scooters have cropped up in Brisbane like a rash. In the UK, they are legal only on private land, but the Department for Transport is opening consultation on how to regulate them on public roads and pathways, with the potential for legalisation later this year.

The idea of having to dodge e-scooters on streets and pavements is anathema to me. I have seen enough close calls involving pedestrians who cross roads without looking up from their phones to think that adding e-scooters to the mix will be dangerous—at least at first.

Other cities that have e-scooter rental schemes have had teething problems. In Paris, mayor Anne Hidalgo described the situation last year as close to anarchy. She has announced that the city is reducing its fleet of e-scooters



to 15,000 and plans to create laws banning them from pavements. France has enacted laws limiting e-scooter speeds to 25 kilometres per hour.

Similarly to dockless hire bicycles, e-scooters can clog up pavements and people toss them up trees or into rivers. Vandalism and rough handling shortens their lifespan, which is bad for both profitability and environmental impact. Analysis suggests the average e-scooter's lifespan is just three months.

Unfortunately, I think they are also an essential part of the effort to green city transport.

E-scooters are seen as a solution to the "last mile" problem—a potential way to reduce traffic congestion by rapidly getting someone to their final destination. Compactness is a factor: cars can take up 28 times the space of a person riding a bicycle, which is similar in footprint to an e-scooter, if not larger.

As far as environmental impact goes, recent research suggests that e-scooters aren't as green as walking, cycling or travelling by moped—but they are still better than cars. And despite numerous reports of fatal accidents, scooting is about as safe as cycling.



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Introducing e-scooters safely will require planning for storage infrastructure and potentially a rethink of road space. To avoid interfering with traffic, integrating scooters into existing streets is most effective when their speeds are limited to 25 kilometres per hour, which is a similar speed to cyclists.

More radically, Stefan Gössling at Lund University in Sweden has suggested we build car-free "micromobility" streets, where cyclists, pedestrians and e-scooters could share the road. He thinks this will reduce accident risk and "invite more vulnerable traffic participants, such as children, to become active transport users".

If more e-scooters means fewer cars on roads, an improvement in local air quality is also a likely outcome. When 20 kilometres of roads in central London closed for World Car-Free Day last September, a temporary air quality monitor in Regent Street reportedly registered a 60 per cent drop in nitrogen dioxide.

Given the choice between bathing in exhaust fumes and watching out for maniac riders, I must begrudgingly admit that e-scooters are the lesser evil. Like many, I welcome any government regulation that allows e-scooters onto UK streets. But I won't be getting back on one soon. ■