



Feature

# STREETS AHEAD



**JULIAN SAYARER**  
Author and world tourer

WHAT DOES A TURKISH ISLAND HAVE IN COMMON WITH DANISH URBAN DESIGN? **JULIAN SAYARER** FOUND OUT ON HEYBELIADA

**O**n the Sea of Marmara, immediately to the south of Istanbul, lies an archipelago whose sense of calm stands in stark contrast to the Turkish megacity. The Princes' Islands have no cars. They're banned, as I discovered when I first visited the tiny island of Heybeliada.

It must be half a dozen times that I have cycled from the UK to Turkey, a country that holds half of my dual nationality. On arrival in Istanbul, I've invariably allowed the bike to gather dust rather than mix it up with the capital's punishing traffic. Then I discovered car-free Heybeliada, whose peaceful streets benefit from attitudes to traffic associated

more with the Dutch and Danish than those of a petrol-dependent Turkey.

## CAR-FREE & CAREFREE

The streets are calm. I have visited numerous times with friends not so confident on bikes. Two abreast, and without fear of car horns, we have hired bikes and spent hours in undisturbed cycling lessons.

The local community benefits even more than the visitors. Children are able to play freely in streets lined only with houses rather than a clutter of big metal boxes. Without acres of real estate given over to storing cars, the streets feel alive. They take on a sense of possibility, the potential for a ball game, or for a small table where an old lady will sell her

jars of homemade honey or bottles of olive oil. Heybeliada is a classic example of what cycling and livability campaigners are forever imploring authorities: take out the cars and civic life returns to the public realm.

In Turkey, this is doubly significant. It's a country where women might feel excluded from many of the establishments where men gather to have tea or play cards, or more conservative Muslims might feel excluded from bars where people drink. Streets themselves are places in which everyone must travel. Where people are able to do so on foot or by bike, it becomes easier to see our commonalities.

Motor vehicles aren't entirely absent. The Princes' Islands have a small bin lorry



**Above & top:**  
Horses haul people, while electric vehicles do deliveries

## “Without real estate given over to storing cars, the streets feel alive”

operated by the municipality. The emergency services have use of petrol vehicles, so that cars and vans are used to serve the public good rather than individual convenience. Any gaps in need are ably filled by smaller vehicles. The snap and hum of connecting electricity is a frequent sound on the streets, as battery-operated vehicles carry goods between shops or make deliveries to houses.

Then there are bikes. Cycling slowly up hills on twisting lanes, a young boy waves playfully as he flashes down in the other direction. Their widespread use and usefulness means bicycles here have taken on a value rare in Turkey. Bicycle rental establishments all do good business. Heybeliada was the first place in Turkey that I saw a secondhand bicycle for sale, a sign attached to it where it had been shackled to a railing. As in many countries, in Turkey, bicycles are seen often as recreational things that have little real world value when new and even less when used. On Heybeliada, none would question the sale of a practical form of transport.

In all respects, the island is a good example of the feasibility of car-free life. It is compact, a total of two square miles,

the residential and commercial districts condensed inside a fraction of that. The actual concentration of life and activity is not unlike many UK villages, and even some small towns, where despite proximity cars are nevertheless seen as being as essential as oxygen and as much a right as free speech.

### HORSE SENSE

The best proof of the popularity of life without cars comes from the many Istanbulites who visit for weekend breaks or who choose to move home to the peace of the islands, commuting by boat to work on the mainland.

The islands also see regular use of *fatyon*, horse-drawn traps, where the driver will take up to half a dozen passengers, particularly on short tours. Riding a bicycle through the hills, you hear the clip-clop of metal-shod hooves coming fast upon asphalt, and then the ringing of the bell that the driver uses to alert oncoming traffic. Coming into view, not troubling to slow speed, it is left to the smaller vehicle to get out of the way of the approaching carriage. Although Heybeliada challenges many of the norms of the road, this one remains firmly intact. Where the larger vehicle is pulled by horses, however, something about it makes this feel a more innocent, and altogether much better, way of doing transport.

**Julian Sayerer is a former record holder for a world circumnavigation by bicycle, a story told in his first book, *Life Cycles*. [C](#)**



## OTHER CAR-FREE ISLANDS

### Venice, Italy

The world's most famous and widely visited car-free island, 25 million people are accommodated in Venice each year without any of them needing a car. Although the old city is famed for its historic art and architecture rather than cutting-edge urban design, it is nevertheless a city where people first notice the tranquillity that results when cars are kept out.

### Sark, UK

Sark, just off France, is perhaps the best-known of the UK car-free islands, (although nearby Herm is also car-free). Horses and small tractors lug loads around the island, and the bicycle is a key part of the transport mix. The fossil-fuel free way of life has also embedded itself in other elements of Sark life: Sark was the first island to be accredited Dark Sky for action on light pollution, and there are advanced plans for the whole island to run on electricity from tidal power.

### Giethoorn, The Netherlands

Is any profile of life without cars complete without mention of the Netherlands? Giethoorn is a small, car-free village where canals and lakes provide the transport infrastructure for canoes, boats and, in winter, ice skating. Although not exactly an island, extensive excavation for peat over the centuries left already low-lying area surrounded by lakes and waterways. These helped Giethoorn earn the nickname 'the Dutch Venice'.