

Amid pandemic, mopeds have a moment in car-loving US

August 2 2020, by Thomas Urbain and Peter Hutchison



A Revel ridesharing moped is seen parked in midtown New York City July 28, 2020, after the company announced today it is suspending its service in New York City following the death of a second rider in Queens

Long associated with narrow, cobbled streets in Europe and congested

Asian megacities, scooters are now becoming a common sight in car-loving America as commuters shun public transport because of the coronavirus pandemic.

New Yorkers turned to the turquoise-blue rental mopeds of ride sharing company Revel in huge numbers in recent weeks, while scooter retailers are reporting a big uptick in sales.

"I decided a few months ago during all this craziness to start running a scooter," said 30-year-old Alan Taledia, who bought a 150 cc Vespa.

"I don't have to do any public transportation, so it's better for me. I feel more comfortable," the insurance worker added.

Sales of motorcycles and electric two-wheelers—popular amongst the Big Apple's army of food delivery drivers—are also booming as residents plump for cheaper alternatives to four wheels.

Andrew Hadjiminis—president of a Vespa, Piaggio, Aprilia and Moto Guzzi retailer in Brooklyn—says the store has sold more than 200 vehicles in the last three months.

"We are experiencing a positive sales growth over last year," he told AFP.

"As people start to think about their commute and mobility during and after this pandemic, they are searching for ways to get around that are safe and fun," Hadjiminis added.

At Unik Moto in Long Island City, demand has tripled compared to July 2019, with some weeks seeing about 20 scooters being sold, according to general manager Chris Benson.



Chris Benson, general manager of the Unik Moto shop in Long Island City on June 30, 2020

The shop, which has struggled to keep its inventory stocked, mainly sells models by the Taiwanese manufacturers Sanyang Motor company and Kymco.

"There was a big boom, up to now," Benson told AFP.

Riding in America's most populated city, where car ownership is high and traffic can be bumper-to-bumper, comes with risks though.

Revel, which has done much to popularize mopeds, paused its New York services this week following the deaths of two riders, including a 26-year-old CBS reporter, in separate crashes.

Revel, founded by two American entrepreneurs, launched a pilot program in 2018 with 68 electric mopeds in Brooklyn.

Before suspending operations on Tuesday, its New York fleet had grown to 3,000 vehicles, each with a top speed of 30 mph, clocking 100,000 miles (160,000 kilometers) a day.

Revel suspension

There were just over 4,000 trips on Revel scooters in the two weeks before New York City shut down in March, the company said.

In the last fortnight of June, rides were up to almost 18,000 daily, a spokeswoman for Revel said.



Scooters are seen in the Unik Moto shop on July 30, 2020 in Long Island City

Critics, though, say the near silent vehicles are a safety hazard, pointing out that they are often driven by inexperienced riders.

The company requires that users have a valid driver's license to book a moped, but doesn't ask them to take a test.

Revel has suspended 2,000 riders in the past six weeks for violating safety guidelines, such as refusing to wear the helmets that are provided with each trip.

The spokeswoman said Revel is toughening its safety measures, including riders having to confirm that they are wearing helmets and safety exam built into its smartphone app.

Its operations are continuing in Washington, Austin and Oakland and the service is launching in San Francisco in August.

Revel riders hope they will be able to scoot around New York's streets again soon.

"It's unfortunate that there's always people who want to ruin the service for everyone," said Emma Rogers, a comedian.

"It's all electric so it's good for the environment. (And) I wouldn't say it's more dangerous than a bicycle or a car."

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Citation: Amid pandemic, mopeds have a moment in car-loving US (2020, August 2) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-08-pandemic-mopeds-moment-car-loving.html>

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