

A greener ride: West Africans switch on to electric motorbikes

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For many drivers in Cotonou, electric motorcycles are more a question of cost than pollution.

Beninese hairdresser Edwige Govi makes a point these days of using electric motorbike taxis to get around Cotonou, saying she enjoys a ride

that is quiet and clean.

Motorcycle taxis are a popular and cheap form of transportation in West Africa.

But in Benin and Togo, electric models are gaining the ascendancy over petrol-powered rivals.

Customers are plumping for environmentally-friendlier travel and [taxi drivers](#) are switching to machines that, above all, are less expensive to buy and operate.

"They are very quiet and do not give off smoke," says Govi, 26, who had just completed a half-hour run across Benin's economic hub.

In African cities, road pollution is becoming a major health and environment issue, although for taxi drivers, the big attraction of electric motorcycles is the cost.

"I manage to get by," said Govi's driver, Octave, wearing the green and yellow vest used by Benin's zemidjan taxis—a word meaning "take me quickly" in the local Fon language.

"I make more money than with my fuel [motorcycle](#)."

Local environmentalist Murielle Hozanhekpon said the electric motorbikes do have some disadvantages "but not on an environmental level".

Alain Tossounon, a journalist specialising in environmental issues, said electric bikes were prized by taxi drivers as they were less expensive to maintain or run.

The cost factor has become more and more important in the face of an explosion of fuel prices this year triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.



In Cotonou, two companies have been offering electric models for a few months and both say they are overwhelmed by demand.

Credit carrot

In Benin, an electric motorcycle costs 480,000 CFA (\$737 / euros) against 490,050 CFA (\$752 / euros) for a petrol-driven equivalent.

But this significant price difference is only one factor which explains the trend towards "silent motorcycles," said Tossounon.

Many [taxi](#) drivers are also lured by flexible credit deals—instead of making a hefty one-off purchase, many are able to get loans that they pay off monthly, weekly or even daily.

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"The queue here is from morning to evening. Every hour, at least two roll out of the shop," said vendor Anicet Takalodjou.

Oloufounmi Koucoi, 38, director of another company delivering the models to Cotonou, said they had put thousands of e-motorcycles in circulation.

"The number is growing every day."



To attract more customers, Zed-Motors offers solar panels to facilitate recharging for those without electricity at home.

By assembling the motorcycles locally in Benin, his electric models are cheaper than if they had been imported.

To attract customers, his company, Zed-Motors, offers [solar panels](#) to facilitate recharging for those who do not have electricity at home.

For decades, Benin and its economy have struggled with power cuts. The situation has improved, but outages remain common.

In [rural areas](#), especially, electricity remains largely inaccessible.

Battery change

In Lome, capital of neighbouring Togo, Octave de Souza parades proudly through the streets on his brand-new green electric motorcycle.

One point in particular makes him and his wallet happy: no more fuelling up.

"All you need to do is change the battery," he smiled. "There are sales outlets, you go there and it's exchanged for you."

A recharge costs 1,000 CFA (\$1.50 / euros) and can provide three days' mobility. For the same price, Octave said, he would only be able to ride for one day using petrol, which is subsidised by the government.



Rechargeable batteries used by electric motorcycle drivers are charged in a store in Cotonou.

Local authorities also are encouraging the switch to electric in a bid to replace old, highly polluting motorcycles.

But some drivers remain wary of electric models, citing range anxiety—the worry of coming to a halt with a flat battery.

Taxi driver Koffi Abotsi said he struggled with the "stress" of having to quickly find a charging station so as not to break down.

"This sometimes leads us to swap (the battery) even with 10 percent or 15 percent charge remaining so as not to have any unpleasant surprises

along the way."

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