



Daniel Xerri

OPINION

Daniel Xerri is an educator

The human cost of Malta's traffic fiasco

ON a Friday in March, a van drove out of a side street and smashed into my leg as I was riding my motorcycle. That was the start of a painful journey of recovery and an evaluation of whether my preferred mode of transport was reasonable in the chaotic traffic scenario that prevails in this country.

I used my motorcycle to commute to work every morning. My decision to learn how to ride a bike and get the full licence was mainly prompted by the need to reduce commuting times and facilitate my search for parking. It was my small way of doing something about the traffic problem, even though I was not really doing it for altruistic purposes.

Besides making commuting easier, riding a motorcycle is an enjoyable activity for many other reasons. The sense of freedom it gives you and the connection you establish with the outside environment are priceless. This is why I preferred using my bike whenever I could.

Travelling up to Italy for a week on my motorcycle was an experience that I valued because it freed me from the massive amount of traffic that chokes Maltese roads on a daily basis. It also meant being able to enjoy the countryside and seaside views from a prime seat, landscapes that in Malta have become the domain of frenzied construction.

But despite the eyesores that spoil many of the Maltese places we journey through and leisure or reside in, there are still a few gems I can appreciate for now. One of these is a seaside cafe at Qawra Point.

I had long made it a habit to wake up early and ride to this cafe for an hour's reading before I started my workday. While the demands of work meant that I could only afford to do this once or twice a week, it was something I looked forward to. Simple pleasures have always gone a long way towards making me happy.

I was not interested in expensive cappuccinos or flat whites from the coffee shop chains. I was not impressed by a shop's decor, trendy music playlist, or fan-



cy couches. What I sought was a quiet seat in the open air with a view of the sea. And of course, riding to the cafe and back were a major part of the pleasure of these morning outings.

Ironically, my accident took place on one of these outings. Not during my daily commute to work through some of the busiest roads in this country. Not while filtering in between cars driven mainly by single occupants. Not while defying death as a result of the senseless manoeuvres of drivers who seem oblivious to bikers. Being a biker entails accepting the fact that for the most part you are invisible. The Maltese obsession with cars means that motorcycles remain a niche vehicle used by those bold or foolish enough to cut through the anarchic traffic that exists on most roads. But why should it be this way if bikes are part of the solution rather than the problem?

My choice to ride a motorcycle does not seem to be properly

supported by traffic enforcement mechanisms and car drivers' adherence to road etiquette.

When I am on my bike, I lose track of the number of drivers I see using their phones or changing lanes without indicating. The fines for such violations are still insignificant, but the cost to the biker who is on the receiving end of such utter disrespect can be life altering if not fatal.

Of course, bikers can be just as bad when it comes to infringements, but the crucial difference is that their errors are ones they normally only pay for themselves.

The lack of discipline on Maltese roads is leading to an excessive number of fatalities and injuries. Just last year there were more than 15,700 traffic accidents, with 1,341 resulting in injuries and 28 in fatalities. A significant proportion of these figures involved bikers. Behind the anonymous statistics are the stories of men and women who lost their lives, were maimed or

grievously injured.

What is stopping the authorities from adequately addressing this national crisis? Why do we keep building new roads but not reforming the way people use them? Could it be that once you are important enough to be chauffeured around you lose sight of the everyday realities of those citizens who are being robbed of their time, energy, health and lives because the traffic conditions in this country have been allowed to degenerate into a morass of despair?

As I contemplate the long journey that I have just embarked upon, I cannot help but experience misgivings about whether I should go back to riding my motorcycle once I am fully recovered.

I am angered by the fact that this country's traffic fiasco has not only impacted my wellbeing but also made me consider giving up something I love just because keeping at it might prove much worse next time.



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