

Five reasons Belgium has the worst traffic in Europe

Brussels hosts the giant bureaucracy of the EU ... yet its roads, and those in Antwerp, are the most traffic-snarled in Europe. What is Belgium doing so wrong?

Laurent Vermeersch

Thursday 28 August 2014 10.38 BST

Traffic congestion analysis consistently shows a surprising fact: Brussels and Antwerp, the two largest cities in Belgium, are the two most congested cities in Europe and North America. This was confirmed in the latest ranking from Inrix, a traffic data organisation (in which Milan temporarily took top spot). It is estimated that drivers in Brussels waste 83 hours a year in traffic. Things are so dire on Belgium's roads, that the OECD has urged local authorities to take action. How did the administrative heart of the European Union get into this traffic mess?

1. Company cars

In most cities, only top managers are offered a car by their employer. Not in Belgium. "Up to 15% of all cars and about 50% of new cars are company cars," says Cathy Macharis, a mobility professor at the Free University of Brussels (VUB).

In many cases, people with a company car don't even need their vehicle for work. Many employers simply prefer giving a car instead of a raise or a bonus. Why? Because they pay less tax that way.

And of course those who don't have to pay for their car, or even for fuel, have no incentive to look for alternative transport. So they tend to drive much more than anyone else.

2. People live too far from work

Belgium is a small country, but every Belgian probably knows somebody who commutes more than 100km every day. That's because jobs are concentrated in the large cities, but most people won't move there. "People landing a job in London or Paris are likely to move there. If they have to go there for a meeting, they will sleep in a hotel to be on time," says Steven Logghe, head of traffic at Be-Mobile, which provides traffic information. "Belgians, however, prefer to wake up a little earlier and drive across the country."

The OECD blames this on a rigid housing market, caused by the high transaction costs of buying a house. There's also a strong anti-urban mentality. For many Belgians, owning a detached house with some green space in the neighbourhood where they grew up is worth all those hours on the road.

3. Unattractive alternatives

Because of widespread suburbanisation, many Belgians are car-dependent. Those who do

have other transport options will often prefer to use their car, because the alternatives are not well designed. There is a lack of park-and-ride facilities, for example, and inner-city parking is relatively cheap and abundant, encouraging people to drive all the way into the city centre. Cycle infrastructure has improved, notably in Antwerp, but is still very poor in many suburban areas and in hilly Brussels.

At first sight, trains have been doing better. Passengers numbers have increased more than 40% since 2000. But the national railway company is struggling to cope with surging demand. Overcrowding, frequent delays and the occasional general strike are all part of the train experience. Trains are actually travelling at slower speeds than previously, in an attempt to improve on-time-records. And a long-promised high-frequency suburban network around Brussels is postponed every year.

4. A healthy economy

“As the economy grows, speed goes down,” according to a report by Inrix. In this sense, congestion is a sign of good economic fortune. Brussels has a strong service economy that is relatively immune to market fluctuations because it is anchored on public institutions, notably those of the EU. Indeed, traffic is never worse than during EU summits. Antwerp, with its large port, is an important logistic hub, attracting a lot of heavy truck traffic from across Europe.

“One could conclude that all this congestion is due to the success of our economy, rather than the failure of mobility policies,” says Kris Peeters, author of several books on the subject. “This should make us question the need for constant economic expansion, and think about economic activity that doesn’t bring about more traffic.”

5. An ill-conceived road network

The ring roads of Antwerp and Brussels are the twin centres of a spider web of highways that is impossible to evade. “People travelling across the country have no options but to pass at least one or both cities, even if they don’t need to be there,” says Logghe. “The same is true for the rail network. Half of all trains go through Brussels.”

Because most of the country is heavily suburbanised, highways also have many entrances and exits, mixing local with long-distance traffic, and causing more collisions, which in turn clog traffic up even more.

So what’s the solution?

Advocates of road building say that capacity has barely increased in 30 years. But Belgium already has one of the densest road networks in the world. “Building more roads is absolutely not the solution,” says Peeters. “It is proven to bring only temporary relief, and in the long run, simply attracts more traffic.”

Most experts, including the OECD, expect better results from some kind of congestion charge or road pricing. This has been under discussion by national and regional government for years. Until now, however, there has been no sign of a political deal. Meanwhile, the public seems even less convinced. When a study on the issue made headlines earlier this year, an online petition against road pricing gathered more than 170,000 signatures in just 10 days. Perhaps Belgians just like their traffic jams.

Laurent Vermeersch (@thecitygeek) is a journalist for Brusselnieuws and part of the Guardian Cities global city writers network

Buses are the future of city transport. No, really

More features

Topics

City transport

Belgium

Europe

Congestion charging

Transport

Transport policy

Save for later Article saved

Reuse this content