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Subject: [BATN] Michael Palin: The world tells us to take the train

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THE WORLD TELLS US TO TAKE THE TRAIN

Michael Palin's globetrotting has shown him the full toll the car is taking. Hit the brakes, he says

I care deeply about the environment but, over the past 17 years of making travel programmes for the BBC, I have been busy polluting this environment on almost every conceivable form of carbon-emitting vehicle, apart perhaps from camels and elephants.

Travelling has given me an opportunity to see transport solutions and transport problems all over the world, in rich and poor countries. What comes across loud and clear is that there is no short cut, no magic solution to the problems of increasing car use across the world.

Improved transport is to most people part of an improved quality of life. Mobility helps people to find better work and better living conditions. It keeps families in touch. It helps in the creation of better facilities such as schools, houses and workplaces.

The history of Homo sapiens has been one of huge journeys and epic migrations: from Africa into southern Asia and Europe, from central Asia into China, and from Asia across the Bering land bridge into America. Today's people are moving from Africa into Europe and from South America into North America.

The most advanced and prosperous country in the world -- the USA -- is still one of the most inwardly mobile. I have American friends who are quite astonished that I've lived in the same house in the same city for 38 years.

Since the industrial revolution, though, there has been a price to pay for these nomadic tendencies. And that is a dramatic change in the environmental conditions on our planet. Causes can be argued over but certain facts are undeniable.

Scientists working with material from ice sheets estimate that the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere stabilised at about 270 parts per million for some 12,000 years. In the 200 years since the industrial revolution, this figure has leapt to 380 parts per million and is still rising.

Our government, like many others, recognises the problem. While it was still in opposition it pledged to reduce Britain's emissions of carbon dioxide by 20% by the year 2010. About 20-25% of these emissions are from motor vehicles, and if this figure were to include aircraft travel -- rising at 9% a year -- it would show just how significant a share of the responsibility for pollution falls on transport.

From my recent journeys I can see few crumbs of comfort. Wherever I've been, however remote, it's clear that the love affair with the internal combustion engine is deep, lasting and universal.



On the Khyber Pass two years ago, unbroken ranges of bleak, bare, towering mountains all around me were matched only by an almost equally unbroken line of trucks laden with people and possessions returning to post-Taliban Afghanistan from the refugee camps of Peshawar.

In China, where roads used to be jammed with bicycles, they're now jammed with bicycles and cars; and if they follow the model of almost every other advanced country, they will in 20 years be jammed entirely with cars.

If, as the French philosopher Pascal once famously wrote, "The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room", then we are indeed a highly unhappy planet. Outside of Alcatraz, I've seen very little evidence of anyone staying quietly in their room, even when it would have been much easier to do so.

The Shandur Pass in the north of Pakistan is a barren plateau 3,750 metres above sea level, where the wind howls and snow and ice cover the ground for two-thirds of the year. One place, one would have thought, from which human beings would want to stay well away. But every summer a polo match takes place in this inimical wilderness which attracts upwards of 15,000 people.

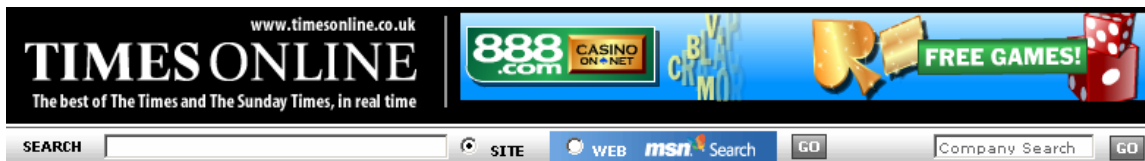
They call it freestyle polo and, though not quite as free as it used to be in the days when the game was played with sheep's carcasses or the heads of one's enemy, it is one of the toughest sports I've ever seen -- matched only in its toughness by the demands made on those who have to get there. Most still walk, taking two days or more to climb up from their villages. But every year a few more vehicles rattle up the dirt track to the top of the pass. It surely won't be long before they need a car park on the Shandur Pass.

In the desert of northern Sudan, another of the more remote parts of the planet, there are no roads but the railway running from the southern end of Lake Nasser to Khartoum is always packed. I reckoned there were 3,000 people on the train they optimistically call the Nile Valley Express on the day I was there, with a further 1,000 being allowed to travel on the roof for free.

I spent some time on the top of one of the coaches. The passengers were courteous and tea was served by a man walking precipitously from coach to coach with a huge kettle. Indeed, most people I spoke to were quite surprised to hear that people in Britain weren't allowed to travel on the roofs of trains. I had to explain about bridges.

It's easy but misleading to romanticise those who still travel slowly and simply. I've spent time with the yak herders of Tibet who move from winter to summer pastures walking beside their livestock and occasionally redirecting their animals with shouts and the odd lump of earth thrown at the head. I've accompanied the camel drivers of the Sahara who take three months to carry salt across the hottest part of the desert. Believe me, if they could afford four-wheel-drives or motorbikes, I'm pretty certain they'd jump at them.

The image of old and new transport solutions was nowhere better summed up than when we were driving one of the pitted, hard-top roads across Mali when we were overtaken by a pick-up truck. In the back were six camels. So there we are. Whichever way you look at it, barring some catastrophic disruption of oil supplies, the number of exhausts, accelerators, carburettors and toxic particulates will continue to increase across the globe.



But there is evidence that fuel consumption can be cut without losing personal freedom or productivity. In the UK, Transport 2000 has had impressive results from consulting employers about ways of reducing car commuting; by offering the cheaper alternative of subsidised public transport, the healthier alternative of cycle facilities and the practical alternative of car sharing. Among 20 big employers implementing such plans, car commuting journeys fell by 18%.

Reducing the necessity for car travel can be achieved by locating businesses closer to home. It's much more feasible when our economy is turning from heavy industry, well away from residential areas, towards service, high-tech industries in smaller units often near urban centres where public transport can do the brunt of the work.

The government has a role to play in this and has gone some way to help matters by increasing the tax penalties on company cars and encouraging the use of biofuels. And I'm told that road charging and not just road building is a growing element in future transport policy.

But as fast as car commuting schemes are cutting private car journeys, the ever-increasing numbers of shopping malls and out-of-town retail parks are increasing them. We live in a country that gets steamed up about increased fuel prices yet has the highest proportion of four-wheel-drive SUVs in Europe. Do people just not make the connection? I would advise the owners of some of the great tanks that I see toiling up to the 132- metre summit of Highgate Hill in London to send them to Pakistan, where they're actually needed, and take a bus instead.

Commercial sense and common sense demand continuing and generous investment to increase the capacity of the railways. Longer, more frequent trains, longer platforms, more user-friendly and well-staffed stations, and continued improvements in signalling, will pay off handsomely, both commercially and environmentally.

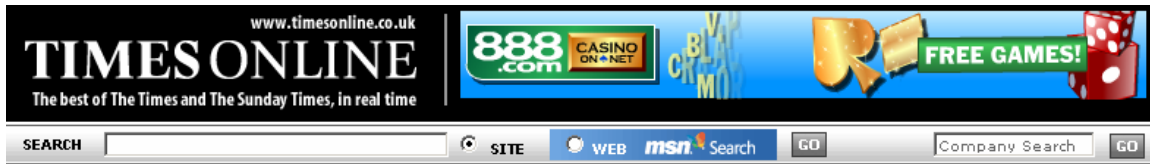
The success of the Channel tunnel link in capturing the lion's share of the London-Paris traffic has shown that better railways can not only take cars off the roads, but planes from the skies as well. The government would do well to look at a high-speed rail link between London and Edinburgh, which could do the same for the flights between London and Scotland.

London has shown that a combination of road pricing and better integrated public transport can deliver environmental benefits despite all the doomsday predictions. Since the congestion charge was introduced, traffic in central London is down 18% and carbon dioxide emissions are down 19%.

Sadly, what is working in London may be too late for cities such as Los Angeles, Beijing and Bangkok, all either built for the car or building for the car.

Which brings me to the development of clean, fuel-efficient, environmentally friendly vehicles. I can't believe we're taking so long to get round to this. Could it be that the internal combustion engine has hypnotised us all for so long that it will require not only engineering expertise but also the creation of a whole new mindset to come up with effective and commercial alternatives?

Finding a way of propelling cars and trucks without the side effects of damaging emissions must surely be the holy grail of transport planning and our greatest hope for the future. I only hope that all those who profit from the internal combustion engine will be unselfish in this and realise that a debased environment is good for none of us.



We may have to call into question the glamorisation of the car, its association with speed, freedom and self-expression. In the future it may be something a little less sexy and a little more functional, but at least there might be a future. And a future that may well look back at the pollution we tolerate now as the equivalent of the stench of Victorian London before the sewers were laid.

Can all this be left to market forces? I would like to think so, but the pace up to now has been dreadfully slow and I think we shall need guidance, incentives and investment from the very top of government. Politicians must be brave and realise that the quest for cleaner, safer vehicles is possibly one of the greatest, most inspiring challenges facing our world.

As for me, I shall continue to make travel programmes, secure in the knowledge that the food I'm seen eating, the sanitary arrangements I'm seen experiencing and the coughing attacks that strike me halfway up high mountains are doing more than any government could to persuade people to stay at home.

[Extracted from a speech by Michael Palin, who is president of Transport 2000, to the recent Environmentally Friendly Vehicles conference.]

For more information, visit <http://www.transport2000.org.uk/>

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