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Choked by Cars: How Malta is Trying to Breathe Again

By: Zack Spiteri

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Age: 11

Every morning when I wake up , I hear cars honking before I even hear the birds chirping. Our roads are full of traffic jams, and the air sometimes smells like smoke instead of the fresh sea breeze I remember from when I was younger. Malta is such a small and beautiful island, but there are too many cars everywhere. We have more cars than people, and the number keeps growing every day. Sometimes it feels like there's no space left for us kids to run around and play. This makes me worried about the air we breathe, the nature we love, and the future of our island. If we don't do something soon, Malta could become a place where it's hard to enjoy the things that make it special—like playing outside, swimming in clean seas, or walking through our towns without breathing in car exhaust. But I believe we can change that. If we all work together, we can make Malta a greener and healthier place to live.

I learned that by the end of last year, Malta had almost 446,000 vehicles registered on the road. That's crazy for such a small country! Every day, 27 more cars are added to our already crowded streets. And a lot of these cars are really old—about 45,000 of them are over 20 years old. These old cars make the air dirty because they pollute more than new ones. Even though the government gives people money to get rid of their old cars, not enough people are doing it. I think some people don't want to give up their cars because they feel they don't

have other choices. That's why Malta needs more safe and easy ways for people to get where they need to go.

Now, there's a new idea. The government wants to give €25,000 to drivers who agree to give up their driving licence for five years. That's €5,000 every year! It sounds like a lot of money, but the goal is to get people to stop driving and help the environment. I think it's a good idea, but it might not work unless we also have better buses, ferries, and bike lanes. People need to feel like they can still move around without a car.

There's also talk about electric cars. They reduce air pollution unlike petrol or diesel cars, but there are still not many in Malta. Only 3% of all vehicles are electric! The government is trying to encourage more people to buy electric cars by giving grants and building charging stations. I think that's really important because electric cars are better for our planet. Public transport is another option. Buses are free for Maltese residents now, which is great! But not everyone uses them because they're sometimes late or don't go to the right places. In 2019, there were 57 million trips on public buses, but in 2021, that dropped to 35 million. We need more reliable buses and safer roads for bikes and scooters, so people feel safer leaving their cars at home.

With so many cars, there are more people breaking the rules, too. In 2021, police gave out about 238 traffic fines every single day! Speeding and dangerous driving are becoming big problems. Some people don't follow the rules because they think they're in a rush, but they don't realize how dangerous that can be for everyone else on the road.

I think the government is trying its best. They're also talking about building a metro system and adding more ferries between Malta and Gozo. They even have ideas about licence plates that only let you drive on certain days. But all of

these things will take time, and we need to start making changes now if we want things to get better.

Malta is standing at an important moment. We can keep filling our roads with more cars and more pollution, or we can choose a better way. I believe we can make a difference if we all do something small. We can walk or ride our bikes instead of always asking for a ride in the car. We can take the bus when we can, and if our families are thinking about getting a new car, we can talk to them about electric ones. It's not just up to the government—it's up to all of us to care about our island. If we don't act now, Malta could lose the things that make it special. But if we do, I believe Malta can breathe again, and we will have a cleaner, healthier island to enjoy. I hope that one day soon, when I wake up in the morning, I will hear birds singing instead of car horns, and I will know that we made the right choice for Malta.



Image from: <https://thinkmagazine.mt/bad-traffic-bad-air/>

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