

Daniel Garrahan and Bethan Staton, “Can bike taxis really compete with Uber? Pedal power v petrol for the morning commute”, Video, *The Financial Times*, December 16th 2019.

<https://www.ft.com/video/167c5c16-15bd-43bb-93d1-cd70bd2c147d>

Hailing a ride has never been easier, thanks to smartphone apps such as Uber. But in congested cities it can often be quicker to walk. A new London start-up reckons it has the answer - a faster, cleaner, cheaper alternative - that doesn't rely on the gig economy. But can pedal power compete? We're going to find out.

So what are the main reasons I should use Pedal Me instead of Uber?

Because it's fun, because it's fast. Around the centre it will be cheaper than any of the competition - Uber, Addison Lee - any of these incumbents.

Pedal Me has just 40-odd electric assist bike taxis in its fleet, and they double up to deliver cargo where Uber can call on thousands of drivers. But Pedal Me is confident that it can beat any car from a standing start.

So the journey time will be quicker. Where we will struggle is getting to people at a time if people call for us to come straight away.

Faster, more fun, and cheaper, Pedal Me make some bold claims and I want to know if they stand up. So my colleague Bethan is here to help me put it to the test. It's Pedal Me versus Uber, the race.

So Bethan, it's 3 o'clock. I'm going to go with Pedal Me. You're going to go with Uber.

Yeah.

I reckon I'm going to win.

I don't know. I think the traffic's pretty light. We might have a clear route all the way back to the office.

But my bike will be able to bob and weave through the traffic. You might get stuck going over the bridge.

We'll see. I'm going to go for the car.

Shall we order and let's see?

Let's do it, yeah.

3, 2, 1, set pick-up. Go.

Go.

Who is going to get here first?

Yeah.

The bike or the car?

The starting line is Elephant and Castle, a couple of miles down the road from the Financial Times.

Did you get an estimated price?

No. I've got a pick-up in approximately six minutes, though, which seems pretty good considering the size of the fleet.

Okay, we're two minutes away apparently.

You're two minutes away. Almost certainly, you've got a bit of a head start.

My driver's now six minutes away.

Oh okay, they're stuck in traffic perhaps.

There's lots that's changeable. Ooh, they're taking different routes. It's also much easier to see when the bike appears. You're not peering at number plates. This is our car.

Uber got here first.

This guy.

You guys have got a head start.

But the Pedal Me bike arrives just seconds after the Uber. We are going to the Financial Times.

Okay.

1 Friday Street.

Okay, yeah.

I'll try and make this as graceful as possible. Pedal Me supplies ponchos to keep passengers dry. But it's a grey, drizzly day in London, and my backside is soaked after I climb onto the wet seat.

Should we wait for those cars?

Why would we do that?

To make it fair? All right.

Yeah, let's go.

So the race is on. And we've already got a head start. We can't blow it from here, can we?

It's Bracken House, Friday Street. Is it just directing you in a circle? I mean, it's basically just north. This is the problem.

The ride's surprisingly smooth, and we glide over speed bumps. It's a lot of fun too, and we turn quite a few heads along the way.

Pedal Me says demand for its taxi service doesn't drop off as much as you would expect in the winter. I'm surprised to hear this. My only real gripe is how cold it is sitting up front. Still, it could be worse.

You've got to understand. Believe me, I'm very stressed now.

Let's get out up here.

It's okay. It's okay. Don't worry about it.

After driving around in circles for more than ten minutes and still south of the river, our Uber driver has had enough. We've got out of the initial Uber. We're probably, I don't know, about 500 metres from our original starting point, and we've got to order another Uber.

So from here, an Uber X is going to be £8 to £10, and we've already spent £6 on that.

Meanwhile, I fail to point out where the right turn to the FT building is, forcing us to go out of our way and do a U-turn. Has my mistake let Uber back into the race?

In a word, no. Yeah, I actually just can't really understand how the app works. Okay, we'll cancel.

And wouldn't you know it, the same Uber driver comes back. Finally, and with the light fading fast, we try Addison Lee.

I arrive back at FT HQ after just 11 minutes, and there's no sign of Bethan.

Okay, third time lucky. Hi.

Alas.

We're back.

What time do you call this?

I've had a bit of an adventure. I'll have a look at how long it took us, about an hour and five minutes.

Because my journey took 11 minutes.

11?

Right. So clearly that wasn't a straightforward taxi journey.

It wasn't a straightforward Uber journey. The taxi driver decided that he'd had enough and threw us out of the taxi.

He threw you out?

We left the taxi under a consensual... I think we decided it was the best way forward...

It was a group decision.

...to end the trip. The final Addison Lee trip took 18 minutes.

Oh, so that's the crucial statistic then, isn't it? So even if you forget about the terrible journey you've just had...

Exactly, all things being equal...

My trip took 11. Yours took 18.

Yeah, it's true.

So there's still a clear winner.

Even discounting the 40 minutes of chaos that we went through. How was your journey?

It was cold, as you'd expect.

And wet?

And a little damp. The crucial thing is just the speed of the journey. I mean, we flew here.

Yeah.

Bethan has spent £7 on her first Uber. Then she had to fork out another £7 cancellation fee for the second, and then £11.50 to Addison Lee.

I was surprised that my rider took just six minutes to arrive. That's because I was within the congestion charge zone. Outside central London, it can take up to an hour.

At the minute our business is overwhelmingly cargo. The issue is that passengers demand immediate service, and they need you to be there at exactly the right time. We can't get people quickly enough. And it's a real frustration to me that we don't quite have the resources that we need to do that job properly, and that's why we're crowdfunding at the minute.

And of course then it's a very different business model to Uber. This is not a gig economy. You employ people. Why did you decide to go down that path instead of operating within the gig economy?

For us there were always going to be huge problems trying to run a contractor model. We felt that for us to offer a contractor model where we were renting out bikes to riders and then they were contractors, that just seemed fraudulent. And we always wanted to have this really close link to the riders because we invest a lot of time in training them. We're a co-operative, and everyone gets shares in the company after working for us for about six months full time.

The cities want less motor traffic but they need to manage the amount of motor traffic for air pollution reasons, and that will create an increasing advantage for us in time.

Pedal Me says its share of London's passenger market could be worth between £250m and £1bn. But it would need a fleet of around 6,000 bikes and it could take years to scale up to meet the demands.

For now, it's a small fish. But Pedal Me can get you places in central London quickly in a vehicle that doesn't contribute to air pollution. Just make sure you wrap up warm and be prepared for a soggy bottom.