

Africa Rising in Kigali, Rwanda

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4G Internet service on city buses? Stored fare cards to pay for transit rides? Smartphone apps to hail taxis? Monthly car-free days? These perks may sound like standard fare for cities looking to enhance their sustainable transport bona fides in 2016, but the latest city to take the plunge may surprise those used to stereotypes of chaotic African mega-cities. Over the last decade, Rwandan capital Kigali, population one million, has established itself as the poster child of the African sustainable city.

While the country's reputation was tarnished by the horrific genocide of the early '90s, residents have to a large extent put that tragic history behind them, helped along by the city's youthful energy: 60 percent of Kigalians are under 30. In turn, Kigali has made phenomenal strides. In 2008, it won the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honor Award for its many innovations, like zero tolerance for plastics, improved garbage collection and a substantial reduction in crime.

Flying into the city's modest airport to attend an African Union Conference, I was curious to find out if Kigali would live up to the hype. Was it really as clean, safe and well-planned as I had heard?

My first impression was one of rugged topography. Rwanda is known as the land of a thousand hills and its



Top: Kigali sprawls across four ridges with valleys in between, Rwanda is known as 'the land of a thousand hills'. Bottom left: Kigali's wide sidewalks and safe pedestrian crossings make it a best practice in walking for African cities. Bottom right: Sidewalks along a local shopping street show a people-centered street design.

capital is no exception. Kigali sprawls across four ridges with valleys in between. As a result, like many African cities, motorcycle taxis (motos) are a cheap and effective way to get around. But unlike many of Kigali's neighbors, most motos here are registered and their drivers are law-abiding. I boarded a safeboda* and unlike my experiences

in other African countries, the driver did not overtake with a risky move into oncoming traffic or tailgate the vehicle in front of us. Overall, I felt much safer than I usually do.

These safety norms didn't come out of nowhere. According to the World Health Organization, 80 percent of the traffic accidents in Rwanda are caused

* Safeboda and Safemoto are on-demand motorcycle taxi services that offers professional, trained drivers in African cities through mobile apps.

In addition to cleaner buses, better customer service, and safer driving, more than 500 buses now have free 4G Internet connections for passengers. In another technological innovation, the local transit agency recently introduced the Tap and Go smart fare card. In addition to passenger convenience, the card increases revenue by cutting down on ticket fraud.



Motorcycle taxi drivers wait for fares.



Passengers board buses, the service of which was improved with the Smart Kigali initiative.

by motos. Safemoto*, a social enterprise app, has been working to reduce accidents with a financial incentive tied to safe driving. If the customer gives the driver a good safety ranking, the driver receives a RWF 50 (US\$6) bonus. The app also monitors driver behavior, for example to track whether the drivers are using their phones en route. The best drivers are then connected with bad drivers, who can learn from their colleagues how to improve their safety ratings.

The government also has a hand in ensuring that motos operate safely. The Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA) issues motorbike operational permits to the country's two cooperatives – every motorcycle must belong to one in order to operate legally. Participating drivers get a sticker that displays their number plate, cooperative name, and engine number. If they commit any safety infractions, they must answer to the cooperative's disciplinary team. In order to maintain a close working relationship, the mayor chairs a monthly

steering committee with the cooperatives where the city can discuss any issues directly with the public transport operators.

Motos aren't the only way to navigate Kigali. There is also a bus system, which received a facelift in February with the launch of the Smart Kigali initiative. In addition to cleaner buses, better customer service, and safer driving, more than 500 buses now have free 4G Internet connections for passengers. In another technological innovation, the local transit agency recently introduced the Tap and Go smart fare card. In addition to passenger convenience, the card increases revenue by cutting down on ticket fraud. As of June, Tap and Go was accepted on 200 buses.

Even with an impressive transit system – BRT is on the way – Kigalians still need a respite from the daily grind. One Sunday per month, cars are banned from city streets. Instead, the pavement fills with groups of Rwandans clad in sweats and sneakers, walking, jogging, or stretching. People gather in Amahoro

Stadium for free eye tests and general medical check-ups. Mayor Monique Mukaruliza hopes that these monthly breaks from driving a car will encourage residents to take up cycling and walking as alternative modes of transport during the rest of the week.

Luckily, Kigalians that opt for active transportation have increasingly attractive options. The city has taken great care in adding greenery that serves both aesthetic and functional purposes. Kigali has gone beyond street beautification to implementing functional street designs such as footpaths and cycling lanes. I strolled myself, even at night, and although seeing regular armed policemen first took me by surprise, it ultimately gave me a sense of safety and security.

At the end of my trip, I was nothing but impressed with Kigali. The city has not only survived genocide, but also grown into a modern metropolis as the heart of the emerging Rwandan economy. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens next!