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The lakeside town heaves in a sea of countless, colourful bicycles

MY TOWN

A warm gush hits your nose as the vapours are swept by slow moving winds across the shores of Lake Victoria. Even in the dead silence of the night, one can hear the lake breathing.

Kisumu is a whole new world. As dawn breaks, birds start chirping, bells ring. A new day has begun.

Like the early bird rushing for the late worm, cyclists go for the early risers. It is not a fight. The whole town is turned into a battlefield as the wheeled birds compete for attention, waking even the heaviest of sleepers.

From the East, West, South, North, left, right, the boda bodas criss-cross each other, moving from everywhere to nowhere in particular, sometimes narrowly missing a car or pedestrian. If you have never been here, you would be struck still in wonderment.

The lakeside city was recently celebrated as the cleanest town in Kenya. But its image is far from this. Not with the chaotic traffic, bicycles scattered practically everywhere, and hawkers spread all over.

One 9 O'clock, I wipe my sweat-drenched brow. Yes, it can get real hot by nine in the morning. I am dehydrated and thirsty. By merely stepping out of my house, I look like I need a boda boda.

Choosing one is the biggest problem. They are so many. So after some hussling and negotiating, I climb on a 'souped up' one. We jerk off, the wheels revving against the tarmac.

When I first came to Kisumu, I had very high expectations. This is the hometown of Kenya's most renowned politician, Raila Odinga. Its lake was also famous for the huge masses of the frightening water hyacinth.

I have been so surprised by what I see. This is the only town whose residents speak exclusively in the mother tongue. Every business is conducted in Dholuo. Men in Kisumu prefer Safari boots and slippers while for women the fake hair phenomena has really got into them. Back to the situation at hand. Am almost at the main stage. The bicycle is speedily cruising and I can hardly hold my breath.

Am not so sure I will reach my destination safely. My driver (oops! sorry, pilot), relishes every moment of the air ride. He is making some real *safari rally* moves in as he deftly dodges the piling jam along the Jomo Kenyatta Highway. I sink my palms onto the handle and close my eyes as we miss hitting a maratu at the Kenyatta sports ground roundabout.

When I finally gather courage to open my eyes, a group of bemused boda boda operators are all eyes on me.

I fish into my pockets and give his a shilling, then flee into the passing crowd.

I discover I have reached the heart of town, the pulse of boda bodas. It is known as "Guba."

This is the main entrance to the main bus stage. Another looks at me rather cautiously and I am tempted to ask why.

One, whom I later learn is known as Odoyo, says, "they think you are a police officer. They think you want to arrest them."

"This area is known to be the most dangerous of all the stages. So why is it called Guba? Odoyo tells me that the spot was named after Guba in Iraq."

"Almost exactly what happens in Iraq is what occurs here. You can get killed at anytime, be arrested by Municipal askaris or police. We also fight for customers frequently. A group approaches me and I foolishly say, I will walk."

But I don't know what trouble I am getting myself into. Walking along Kisumu streets is harder than crossing Nairobi's Uhuru Highway.

The emergence of boda boda bicycle transport in Kisumu can be traced to 1994 and even further back to the border town of Busia. It flourished because it supported the smuggling of goods across the Kenya - Uganda border, hence its name.

The low investment and maintenance costs, its convenience in areas not served by regular motorised transport have made it even more popular in smaller village towns across the country.

However, there were no provisions made in the Kisumu Master plan drawn

years ago and hence areas like bicycle tracks, parking bays and bicycle lanes were not provided for.

This oversight has led to mammoth increase of accidents and congestion on the town's roads. A bicycle traffic survey conducted in 2004 by the Sustainable Urban Mobility at selected points and busy roads across the city showed that the highest point of concentration is around the Jomo Kenyatta Highway with 48,610 bodas plying along that route. Other areas are Gumbi road, Nairobi road and Odeco Oyoo road which share a minimum of 9,000 bodas.

The total number by that time was 88,192. However, this higher figure could be more because as far as the Executive secretary of Central Body of Kisumu Bicycle transporters Mr. there are some people who are not registered. This huge influx of bicycle into the town has led major conflicts within the existing transportation challenging both Traffic Police Department and the Municipal Authorities, and even the residents are spared. Rose Alelo who has been a resident of Kisumu for five years shares her distaste. "When these bicycle operators came to town they were friendly and tolerable now they are a nuisance they jam all roads streets and avenues. You

can hardly walk". However Rose is quick to add that they do help but currently their demerits are more than the merits. According to Municipal Council of Kisumu employee who did not wish her name revealed says that Boda has crippled their operation, she adds that the bicycles jam all the entrances to the stage making it hard for vehicles to pass yet the council gets no revenue from them. The same sentiments are shared by the Nyanza Provincial Police Officer Grace Kaindi.

Kaindi who describes the traffic of Kisumu as 'chaotic' says the cyclists have made police work impossible. "The police have really a big problem down here."

Odiambo speaking on behalf of the Traffic Base Commander says the police receives reports on boda boda related accidents on a daily basis.

They cause obstructions, poor coordination and fee flow of traffic. They have invaded highways, they park anywhere. It is not fun walking along the streets of Kisumu anymore.

Boda boda jam

