

## Velo Vision Sample Article

This PDF is a sample of the material in *Velo Vision* Issue 22, June 2006. The contents page is shown right.

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If you have any problems or suggestions about the magazine in general, or this PDF article in particular, please email me at

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I hope you enjoy the read.

Peter Eland  
Editor and Publisher,  
*Velo Vision*

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### Small print

I don't much like copy protection and legalese, but a few things need saying:

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*Velo Vision* is published quarterly by Velo Vision Ltd. Daily news and updates can be found on [www.velovision.co.uk](http://www.velovision.co.uk)

ISSN 1475-4312

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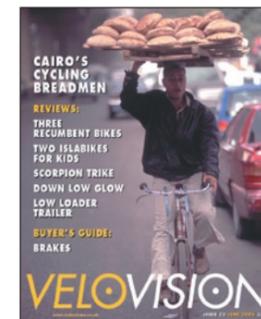
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PUBLISHING SCHEDULE:  
Issue 23: early September 2006  
Issue 24: early December 2006  
Issue 25: early March 2007  
Issue 26: early June 2007

*Velo Vision* is a member of INK, trade association of the alternative press in the UK. [www.ink.uk.com](http://www.ink.uk.com)

VELO VISION AND VELO-VISION We weren't first with the name. Velo-Vision (note the hyphen) is a progressive HPV-friendly bike shop in Körten, near Bergisch-Gladbach, Germany, who also make their own recumbents. *Velo Vision* magazine is working in friendly harmony with Velo-Vision in Germany.

*Velo Vision* is printed on paper produced from sustainable forests to Nordic Swan standards.



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### SWINGS AND ROUNDABOUTS

Regular readers will know that *Velo Vision's* content isn't exactly planned and 'themed' several issues in advance. Instead each magazine seems to sort of self-assemble just in time, from whatever eclectic articles end up being ready on deadline.

That does keep the magazine fresh, but it also runs the risk that it can swing off balance. Issue 22 is rather a recumbent-heavy issue, with three bikes and a trike tested, plus more recumbent content elsewhere in the magazine.

I do try to bear in mind the different 'constituencies' amongst the readership, and I know that some are most interested in folding bikes, some want more velomobiles, others like 'normal' city bikes, and many also like the more non-technical content. I do hope that the majority enjoy reading about all sorts of innovative bike,

is a smooth performer – can it sting the competition? Find out in our thorough test.

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whether directly relevant to a personal interest or not.

In any case, recumbent non-enthusiasts need not despair. The pendulum will swing the other way next issue as we have mostly upright reviews planned, with a Landescape tandem, Kronan town bike and a child-carrying triplet lined up so far.

I don't think I should be too apologetic anyway. Recumbents are fun, and if you haven't yet tried a few modern bikes and trikes, maybe this issue will inspire you to give it a go!

**Peter Eland**

PS: With 22 issues now taking up space in the *Velo Vision* stores, we're becoming seriously short of space. Visit the York Cycle Show (see events listing, page 9) if you'd like to pick up some back issues at extremely low clearance prices!

# RIDING WITH THE BREADMEN

Claude Marthaler meets the breadmen, hard-working cyclists on the chaotic streets of Cairo

Covered by the dust of the *khamsin* (the wind from the Sahara) and suddenly immersed in a Nile of cars, we reached Cairo in March 2006, and were all set to leave this raucous metropolis as soon possible. Then we met the breadmen. Fascinated by their unique floating silhouettes, we stayed on to discover more.

These remarkable cyclists ride balancing a wooden-slatted frame on their heads, or sometimes even two lashed together, holding a good hundred *baladis* – about 50 kg of flat bread. They ride with even less respect than Egyptian drivers, circumventing the numerous police and defying bullying buses. Whatever right-of-way powerful motor cars impose (using horn instead of brakes), the nimble breadmen take back through sheer skill. Like shooting stars, they ride on both right and wrong sides of the road, through the unending lines of cars, slip between the chairs of coffee-shops or disappear through bazaars of clothing.

A breadman appeared suddenly at a corner of the street with his daughter on the cross-bar, holding a tray of bread in one hand, his head in a turban surmounted by an even larger tray full of bread, and was gone in an instant. We later saw another, less skilful or just less lucky, hit a car and jump off with his load of *baladis* flying in all directions. People around spontaneously collected them.

Steadying their aromatic cargo with one hand and grasping the handlebar with the other, they deliver thousands of flat breads daily from the *forn baladi* (bakeries) to shops and to legal and illegal street stalls. Streets sellers with their improvised stalls must often flee like birds to avoid paying fines. We saw a pack of policemen arguing with one woman selling flat breads illegally. They snatched her boards of bread away, leaving her with just a single loaf.

To force their way through the Babylonian traffic jam chaos, experienced breadmen use and abuse their bell system: often no less than four bells activated by a brake lever. Like Indian rickshaw-drivers, they alert pedestrians, at the bottom of the traffic food chain, to their approach.

Though the acrobatic bread-delivery men of Cairo zigzag daily through its overcrowded streets, the city's 14 million inhabitants have no pithy, colourful description for them. They simply call them *bahia alaheich*, the breadmen.

## A STAPLE BY CYCLE

The land of the pharaohs has enjoyed a long love-story with bread. While the pyramids were built some 4500 years ago, unleavened flat bread has been eaten since Neolithic times (10,000 years BC). The discovery of fermentation is attributed to the Egyptians, as is the invention of the baking

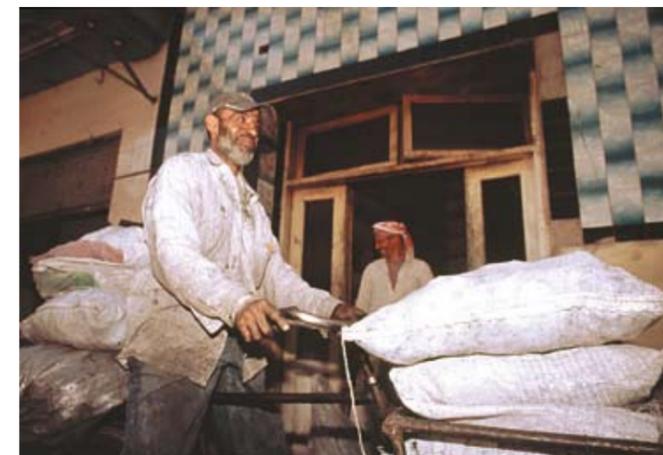


oven. Today, while the international average for annual *per capita* consumption of bread is 90 kg, the Egyptian average is twice that. A *baladi* bread cut in two makes a perfect accompaniment for Arab fast-food such as falafel. Bread in all its forms remains sacred to any Muslim and represents the staple food of the entire African continent.

The bicycle, by contrast, touched northern Africa only at the turn of last century. Before that the handmade flat bread, eaten in each and every family home, would have been delivered on foot. Flat like Cairo and round as a wheel, the loaves eventually found, in the *bahia alaheich*, a perfect form of transport, moving with unparalleled mobility and at the perfect speed (the bread would fall off at the higher speed of a motorbike) to reach Egyptians' stomachs as fresh as is humanly possible. The breadmen's harsh existence remains essential to Cairo's daily bread supply, a vital spoke in the economic wheel of the city.

**ABOVE:** Cairo's breadmen weave through the traffic with balletic grace, carrying one or even two trays of bread, moving the fresh loaves quickly and economically from bakeries to the shops and street sellers.

**RIGHT:** Proud of their skill and strength, but baffled at his interest in their trade, breadmen and flour delivery riders posed for Claude's camera.



## MEETING THE BREADMEN

Being a breadman requires many skills: a pair of good lungs, a camel's endurance and a bull's neck. These dancers on two wheels seemed to have inherited an incredible sense of balance and to have swallowed a compass for direction.

We went to the Bulaq area of Cairo to meet some breadmen. Jakob, a Swedish expat involved in a Cairo children's theatre, and fluent in Arabic, offered to accompany us as a translator.

Mohamed Gul is in his thirties and delivers bread from one o'clock in the morning until four in the afternoon. He was the third generation of breadmen in his family. Standing beside him, his father added that he had done the job himself since 1965. They were not accustomed to speaking about themselves and were uncomfortable answering my questions in front of the sudden crowd.

He said that he was selling the bread he carried for between seven and ten *piastres* each, but he wouldn't disclose his income. The price of bread from the bakeries has been artificially maintained by the government since 1987 at five *piastres* a loaf, and so there is a brisk flow, from small kids to old women, of people who carry a few flat breads from the bakeries to wherever they will make a better price. A *piastre* is worth about one sixth of a US or Euro cent. There are 100 *piastres* to the Egyptian Pound, and a new Atlas bicycle as ridden by many breadmen is worth 200 Egyptian Pounds, around the monthly salary of a state worker.

Soon we realised that the breadmen's reluctance to be pictured was because they were ashamed of their poverty. Nobody in the street could understand why two foreigners were showing such great interest in this profession. But two days later, when we came back to bring them prints of our photos, we were invited in for tea and everyone was most insistent on receiving a copy of his portrait!

In the Arab world, the middleman is essential in any transaction. In poor countries, any service creates job opportunities for an long chain of people of modest means. So in Cairo, Africa's biggest city, a rich Egyptian woman can order almost any foodstuff and it will be delivered quickly in a simple basket lifted by rope from street level direct to her window. I noticed that at least one entrepreneurial breadman was using a mobile phone to coordinate his movements and to extend his own business network.

## BREAD: FOOD OF THE GODS

Riding their poorly-maintained Atlas Goldline one-gear bicycles, these working-class heroes sometimes seemed to me to be avatars of Atlas, the Greek god who carries the whole world on his shoulders – as pictured in the logo of their Indian-made foodcycles, fixed to the rear mudguard.

But in Cairo's permanent chaos, riding a bicycle with bread on your head has nothing to do with myth or legend. Drawing tyre tracks on the tarmac is simply an efficient way to survive – if you are illiterate and have a good pair of legs.

If first-world bike messengers carry documents which may nourish the mind, Cairo's bread-messengers carry bread to feed the body. In the smog and cacophony of the city called the 'Mother of the world' their humble presence delivers the stuff of life: cleanly and in near silence.



## CLAUDE'S LATEST JOURNEY

The Swiss cyclonaut Claude Marthaler is currently travelling through Egypt with his girlfriend Nathalie Pellegrinelli. You can read about their journey at [www.yaksite.org](http://www.yaksite.org)

Claude's book about his seven-year journey around the world by bike, *Le Chant des Roues*, was reviewed in Issue 7 and his beautiful picture-book *Dans la roue du monde* was reviewed in Issue 16. Articles from Claude have appeared in *Velo Vision* Issues 1 to 5, 13 and 15, and in many other publications.

## FURTHER READING

- The Egyptian female photographer Hala Elkoussy, in collaboration with Graham Waite, exhibited 13 large format photographs of breadmen in down-town Cairo as part of the Nitaq Art Festival in January 2000. See: <http://aucegypt.edu/faculty/halaelkoussy/photography/breadmen.html>
- The French writer Paul Fournel, passionate cyclist and author of numerous books, lived in Cairo for four years. In the humorous *Poils de Cairotes* of 2004 he describes the bread men on pages 34-35.



**The breadmen typically ride Atlas bicycles from India, often equipped with elaborate bell systems to signal their approach to pedestrians. The investment made in the bicycle is repaid by the profits: breadmen sell the loaves for a few piastres more to their customers than they must pay to the bakeries. On the dusty, busy streets of Cairo it's a hard way to make a living.**

Claude Marthaler