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Home | Guardian eye | **The Guardian** | Columnists | Talk | Saved stories | Help  
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International

## Italian cities make Sunday a day of rest - for the car

A passion that causes  
15,000 deaths a year is  
being curbed

Rory Carroll in Rome  
Thursday January 13, 2000

Fourteen Italian cities, including Rome, Florence and Milan, will from next month ban cars every Sunday in their boldest effort yet to banish the smog which kills thousands of people every year and destroys ancient monuments.

An army of volunteer traffic guards will seal off city centres and urge residents to walk, bike or use beefed-up public transport, according to a plan unveiled yesterday.

Environmental groups praised the initiative for daring to take on Italy's love affair with the car, which has produced one of the highest ownership ratios in the world: 32m cars for 57.5m people.

The scheme will officially start on February 6, but Milan and Como jumped the gun yesterday by allowing only cars with catalytic converters to enter the city centre between 8am and 8pm.

Daily sections

Weekly sections

Search this  
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Tools

Text-only version ›  
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 Read it later ›  
 See saved stories ›

The Guardian  
 Front page ›  
 Story index ›

In this section

[Russia raises nuclear threat](#)

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Primakov opts for Duma post

In brief

The Observer  
Front page  
Story index

last September, eight cities recorded an average 35% drop in carbon monoxide levels.

More than 15,000 Italians die from smog-related illnesses each year, according to the World Health Organisation. The Europe-wide figure is 80,000. Italy is also estimated to lose 16m working days each year because of related illnesses, such as bronchitis and asthma attacks.

Edo Ronchi, the environment minister, and Leonardo Domenici, the mayor of Florence, promised that trams, buses and underground trains would run more frequently on Sundays. Residents would also be encouraged to try more ecological modes of transport, such as electric scooters or cars that run on methane gas.

The cities joined the experiment on a voluntary basis but the government has offered a £300m honeypot of aid to those that sign up, which includes Naples, Turin and Bologna.

Italy's leading environmental group, Legambiente, praised the initiative but said more should be done to reduce traffic during the week. It will go ahead with its planned one-day blockade to "liberate" 100 streets in April.

Car-free weekends have been mooted for many years but politicians hesitated for fear of angering one of the most car-addicted electorates in the world.

Formula One racing is a national passion, and many Italians are reluctant to walk even short distances. Despite the mayor's pleas for Romans to leave their cars at home on New Year's Eve, people converged on the capital's centre in a 12-mile (20km) traffic jam.

Rome has also banned tour buses from the centre to avert gridlock caused by the more than 20m pilgrims expected for the Vatican's holy year of 2000.

The last concerted attempt to ban vehicles from city centres was during the oil crisis of the early 70s when the government wanted to conserve petrol. It spawned a brief revival of horses and carts.



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