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ATHENS JOURNAL

Running Out of Space to Park, and Places to Walk



Yannis Kontos/Polaris for The New York Times

The Streetpanthers, a band of thirtysomethings who prowl the streets of Athens at night, slapped the vehicles of parking violators with orange stickers depicting a donkey in a car above the message, "I park wherever I want." More than 250,000 stickers have been distributed.

By ANTHEE CARASSAVA
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ATHENS, Nov. 8 — Wandering along a walkway in central Athens, Tassos Pouliasis found a sport utility vehicle blocking his path.

The vehicle — parked illegally with its boxy body positioned squarely across the pavement — left no space for pedestrians to squeeze past, and like most Athenians who face the same predicament daily, Mr. Pouliasis was about to step into the street to go around it.

But then, he thought, why not go over it? And on the spur of the moment he decided to engage in a form of activism, popular elsewhere in Europe, called car vaulting.

No one saw this protest, and perhaps nothing would have happened, but Mr. Pouliasis' stunt — unusual even for this city's agitated pedestrians — backfired.

By planting one hand on the hood and the other on the windshield, Mr. Pouliasis set off the car alarm. The hood was dented. The vehicle's owner, a shop owner, was furious. And soon, the police arrived.

Mr. Pouliasis, 29, was accused of vandalism. He was locked up in a detention center then released pending trial next year on a string of offenses that could send him to prison for four years.

"All I did was exercise my right as a pedestrian," he said in an interview. "No one, neither the police, the car driver or even a single bystander, could see beyond my action to realize that there was a blatant traffic violation to begin with."

In many other countries, Mr. Pouliasis, a graphic designer, might have found some sympathy from the authorities, and the car's owner would have received a ticket for

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parking illegally.

But in Greece, the concerns and rights of pedestrians are widely disregarded.

“Step on a sidewalk or try crossing any street here, and chances are you’ll instantly feel like the prey of a safari hunt,” said Vassilis Theodorou of the Hellenic Association of Road Traffic Victim Support. “This is the only place in Europe where the golden traffic rule — that pedestrians have the unconditional right of way — is so brazenly disrespected.”

In Athens alone, swarms of scooters race down crowded sidewalks. Pedestrians struggle to circumnavigate construction debris, torn-up pavement and mounds of refuse. The greatest impediment, however, is the fleet of vehicles that each day mount the city’s approximately 1,200 miles of tree-lined sidewalks or other walkways to park.

To deter violators, the authorities blocked off the sidewalks with some 50,000 steel columns in preparation for the 2004 Olympics. But since then, drivers complaining of not enough parking places have rammed, removed or ruined most of them.

“The drivers aren’t to blame,” said Christos Akritidis, the deputy mayor of Athens. “We, the authorities, are responsible for applying Band-Aid solutions, than setting up a coordinating commission to effectively deal with the city’s traffic problem.”

With an estimated two million vehicles in the city, Athens has the [European Union’s](#) highest per capita car ownership, Mr. Akritidis said, with 450 cars registered for every 1,000 residents.

A string of new traffic measures, including high fines, designated parking areas and campaigns to discourage driving in favor of mass transit, biking and walking, have eased the plight of pedestrians somewhat.

Still, activists argue, no solution can succeed without effective enforcement of traffic regulations, and a change in the Greeks’ lackadaisical mind-set.

“Athenians never really learned to be urbane,” said Elsa Tsekoura, head of the Pezee pedestrians’ rights association, referring to the 1950s population boom in which millions of rural and island Greeks came to the capital in search of work, prompting decades of rapid and unplanned growth.

Today, however, groups like Pezee, whose 50 members plan to take to the streets of Athens this month, pushing baby carriages and wheelchairs, are increasingly demanding that pedestrians’ rights be recognized.

In the last year alone, the most innovative display of activism has sprung from the Streetpanthers, a band of thirtysomethings who under cover of night prowl the streets of Athens slapping the vehicles of egregious parking violators with Day-Glo orange stickers depicting a donkey in a car above the message, “I park wherever I want.”

More than 250,000 stickers have been distributed nationwide since the group’s Web site began operation (www.streetpanthers.gr) in July.

“With so many people fed up, aggravated and downright mad at the state’s indifference toward them, we couldn’t have chosen a better time to boost public awareness for pedestrians’ rights,” said the chief Streetpanther, Panayiotis Panopoulos, who is an architect.

Mr. Panopoulos recently guided four new members, including a blind physical therapist and a surgeon in training, through a district awash with illegally parked cars, explaining the group’s rules.

“We’re not subversive. We’re not confrontational. And we don’t want to cause damage to anyone’s property,” he said, slapping a sticker on the windshield of a Jeep squeezed across a sidewalk on a narrow passageway called Arahovis Street.

The driver was nowhere to be seen. But a few feet ahead on Arahovis Street, they spotted a red Peugeot backing over a strip of ribbed paving that helps blind people with canes navigate sidewalks. The middle-aged motorist, who had just emerged from the car, was aghast when a pair of Streetpanthers swooped down, pasting a donkey sticker on his windshield.

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“That same stunt cost my fiancée a broken rib cage over the summer,” the blind Streetpanther, Stathis Zachariades, said to the driver, as a handful of bystanders cheered him on before asking the Streetpanthers for some of their stickers.

Across Europe, other activists have turned to imaginative, and legal, means to fight indifferent motorists.

Two years ago, a French group known as the Deflated discovered that letting the air out of tires was legal so long as no damage was caused. Other forms of protest have included mud smearing and car vaulting — which first took hold in Germany and eventually inspired Mr. Pouliasis to try to throw himself over the S.U.V.

“We’re definitely supporting him,” said Mrs. Tsekoura of Pezee, which helped him find a lawyer and publicized his case. “A court ruling in his favor will mark the first major victory for us. We need that to keep on walking.”

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