Compassionate & Responsible Tourism

ELECTRIC “HORSELESS” CARRIAGES
THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE
Building New York City Back Better for Business

Compassionate and responsible tourism is a concept that is increasingly gaining more attention, one that touches on both ethics and eco-tourism. It has come about largely because of a growing concern with the environment and our society’s sometimes deliberate, but also sometimes unintended and inadvertent, inhumane treatment of animals. This new awareness and approach have become part of an exciting global movement.

However, in order to make the concept a reality, cities must first put in place alternative attractions to appeal to compassionate and responsible tourists. This includes offering an alternative to urban carriage horses in congested cities.

In 2017, Mexico’s second largest city, Guadalajara, made history by becoming the first city in the world to make the transition from horse-drawn carriages to electric “horseless” carriages as one of its main tourist attractions. Since then, this trend has been catching on around the world. Cologne, Dubai, Istanbul, Mumbai, Santo Domingo and other major cities have also done it. Why not New York?
Responsible Tourism researcher Dr. Clare Weeden of the University of Brighton (UK) notes that tourists are becoming increasingly concerned about the commercialized use of animals in tourism, such as the horse-drawn carriages seen in New York City. “Such concern is likely to increase in line with global welfare trends and thus drive future visitor demands. To be sustainable, tourist destinations must respond proactively to these concerns and ensure animal welfare is at the forefront of tourism policy.”

Prior to the pandemic, tourism was one of the largest economic drivers in New York City. As the city transitions to economic recovery, there is an opportunity to showcase New York as a beacon of compassionate and responsible tourism.
The Alternative: Electric carriages will be a win-win for everyone involved.

An alternative electric carriage program will preserve jobs for carriage horse drivers who choose to work with electric carriages and also create new and better-paying opportunities for those looking to enter this new and exciting industry.

Even pre-pandemic, the New York City carriage horse trade was shrinking. Today, there are only three horse stables left in the city, down from five stables at the turn of the 21st century. Those on West 37th and West 38th Streets are in the Hudson Yards redevelopment area and may very well sell in the next few years. If this happens without any previous planning, jobs will be lost, and horses will be in jeopardy. While some horses may go to homes, others may be sent to slaughter or sold to carriage-horse operations in other states.
Years of controversy could finally become a thing of the past.

For years the New York City urban carriage horse trade has been the subject of controversy arising from accidents, horse deaths and violations. In February 2020, a carriage horse named Aysha collapsed in Central Park and later died. Another horse collapsed in the park on December 21, 2020, but was forced to get up and continue to work.

Tragic incidents involving live horses would not occur with electric “horseless” carriages. Currently there has been little appetite in the New York City Council or Mayor’s Office to make significant changes to the City’s urban carriage horse trade because the loss to drivers’ livelihoods was considered too great. But now, with New York City slowly recovering from a year of loss, we have a chance to build the City back better for business in a more compassionate and responsible way, not through a ban of carriage horses, but by offering a horseless alternative.

In recent years, pedicabs have become serious competition for horse-drawn carriages, often because some tourists prefer not to exploit the horses or because the pedicabs are more nimble. Electric carriages would have the same benefits as pedicabs but offer visitors and residents a new transportation option. In addition, the rapidly increasing popularity of electric scooters and bicycles around the City and Central Park has created a demand for more charging stations that could also be used for electric carriages.

“Cities evolve, cities change,” said Pedro Aguilar, President of the Tourist Carriage Association in Guadalajara, “and the people, as part of the city they live in, have to also change and adapt. Traditions don’t die. They live on because it’s not just the horse. The tradition is going on the ride, the tour we give, how we treat people and getting in a vehicle like this, which is simply a carriage without a horse.”
In 2014, the ASPCA disbanded its Humane Law Enforcement Division. With no qualified replacement by a City agency or specified organization to help enforce humane laws, and with the NYPD mostly not involved, accidents and violations affecting NYC carriage horses often go unreported and unpunished.

New York City streets are extremely congested and competitive. Horses are nervous prey animals who may react to stimuli such as loud noises from vehicles and construction or even from umbrellas opening or closing and as a result could spook and run into traffic. When afraid, they can thus become unwitting weapons, and at 1,500 to 2,000 pounds of solid muscle, dangerous. This is a public safety issue that needs to be addressed.

In 2018, Mayor de Blasio, in an effort to address the public safety issues surrounding horse carriages, moved the Central Park location where horse carriages wait for passengers to three boarding areas within the park. However, this policy has been insufficient to protect horses. Although the carriage-horse hacklines may have moved to just a few feet inside Central Park, the tour loop continues in traffic around Fifth Avenue, Central Park South and Central Park West. One of the new controversial hackline locations on 7th Avenue is situated on an incline.
The welfare of the horses depends on considerate drivers placing a block of wood under the rear wheel. Otherwise, the carriage will move backward, and the horse will strain to keep the carriage in place. Unfortunately, we have documented that such blocks are only rarely used, putting the horses at risk for injury.

Carriage drivers do not only drive their carriages in Central Park, they travel to the park from their stables on the far west side of Manhattan and make the return trip during rush hour. After a certain time, depending on the day, drivers may operate horse-drawn carriages in other areas of the city. Horses are completely exposed in traffic and are always in danger of being hit or grazed by cars, buses, ambulances and other vehicles on crowded city streets.

In addition, we believe that health care for the horses is inadequate. Stalls are too small (ideally they should be 144 square feet for a 1,500-pound horse rather than the 60 square feet required by law), and stables do not provide daily turnout to pasture since the space does not exist.

Photo credit: f11photo / Shutterstock.com

This former NYC carriage horse was found in a kill pen and rescued from slaughter in 2010. Since then, he has been living in a horse sanctuary in upstate New York. This photo was taken at the sanctuary just days after he came off the streets and rescued at a PA slaughter auction. (Photo credit: Jim Craner)
The battery-operated electric-carriage industry enjoys excellent advantages over the urban carriage-horse trade. The transition from horse-drawn carriages to horseless electric carriages in New York City should prove to be a smooth one, as has been the case in cities that have already made the change. Benefits include the following:

The new industry is environmentally sound.

Because of its food, veterinarian and farrier-free operation, it provides considerably more income. Direct interviews with electric-carriage owners in Guadalajara have disclosed that their annual incomes have increased by amounts ranging from 40% to 100%, and they have more “free” time to spend with their families or enjoy other activities.

The electric carriages have a broader window of operation, as they don’t need to comply for a maximum of working hours and are less affected by high or low temperatures.

They eliminate the controversy of using horses, allowing driver/owners to do their jobs freely and safely.
The following are some necessary steps that apply to all cities offering an alternative to carriage horses, along with specific actions that pertain only to New York City:

- Passing new regulations to allow electric-battery-operated carriages to operate and be driven in Central Park and around the city.

- Phasing the electric carriages in gradually.

- Determining whether to fund a city program that will provide incentives to start the electric-carriage industry.

- Determining where the carriages would be parked during the day with access to charging stations while parked.

- Deciding where carriages would be parked and charged overnight.

- Providing training on operation and maintenance of the electric carriages for owners and drivers.

Finally, we have developed a plan to ensure that the remaining horses working the streets of the city will be retired to sanctuaries and selected homes. We are aware that they are “private property” owned by carriage-horse operators. However, we believe that we can work together, with the help of the City, to fashion an agreement that would satisfy everyone.

Many cities around the globe are either shutting down their horse-drawn carriage businesses or have replaced them with electric battery-operated vehicles.

“In April 2015, the Mayor of Puerto Rico’s capital, Carmen Yulín Cruz Soto, signed an executive order to ban horse-drawn carriages in Old San Juan following allegations of animal abuse.”
– Agencia EFE, August 20, 2015

“In June 2015, the Mumbai High Court directed the authorities to ban the Victoria horse-drawn carriages as they were found to violate the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act.”
– The Times of India, July 7, 2017
CITIES THAT HAVE BATTERY-OPERATED ELECTRIC CARRIAGES OR ARE TRANSITIONING TO THEIR USE:

Berlin, Germany
Cologne, Germany
Dubai, UAE
Guadalajara, Mexico
Istanbul, Turkey
Merida, Mexico
Motul, Mexico
Münster, Germany
Mumbai, India
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
Vienna, Austria

CITIES WITH ACTIVE CAMPAIGNS TO SHUT DOWN THE URBAN HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGE TRADE:

Atlanta, GA
Acapulco, Mexico
Ensenada, Mexico
Boston, MA
Charleston, SC
Cincinnati, OH
Dallas, TX
Dublin, Ireland
Florence, Italy
Gili Islands, Indonesia
Innsbruck, Austria
Melbourne, Australia
Mérida, Mexico
Nassau, Bahamas
New Orleans, LA
New York City, NY
Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada
Philadelphia, PA
Prague, Czech Republic
Quebec City, Canada
Rome, Italy
St. Augustine, FL
St. Louis, MO
Salzburg, Austria
Savannah, GA
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
Vienna, Austria

CITIES THAT HAVE BANNED HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGES:

Amsterdam, Netherlands
Asheville, NC
Barcelona, Spain
Biloxi, MS
Camden, NJ
Chicago, IL
Cozumel, Mexico
Delhi, India
Guadalajara, Mexico
Istanbul/Princes’ Islands, Turkey
Key West, FL
Izmir, Turkey
Las Vegas, NV
Montreal, Canada
Mumbai, India
Old San Juan, Puerto Rico
Oxford, England
Palm Beach, FL
Panama City Beach, FL
Salt Lake City, UT
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
In August 2017, the Mexico News Daily reported, “The traditional horse-drawn carriages are disappearing from the streets of Guadalajara as the municipal government follows up on a commitment to put a stop to animal abuse. The carriages that traverse the city’s historic center are being replaced with electric-powered replicas.”

In the words of former Guadalajara Mayor, Enrique Alfaro Ramirez, “The decision to replace horse-drawn carriages followed a year of discussions with local animal rights advocacy groups. We cannot continue to mistake the idea of tradition with animal abuse. That no longer has a place in Guadalajara; we’ve put a stop to it today.”

In August of 2019, the heads of two New York-based animal protection organizations—Susan Wagner, President of Equine Advocates, and Elizabeth Forel, President of The Coalition for New York City Animals—traveled to Guadalajara on a fact-finding mission to investigate the transition as horse-drawn carriages were gradually being replaced by electric “horseless” carriages in Mexico’s second-largest city. The visit included a special meeting at the office of Guadalajara’s current Mayor, Ismael del Toro (who took office on January 2019). Twenty-seven people attended this meeting, including carriage owners, carriage drivers, animal protection advocates, humane officers and government officials, to discuss how the new program was working thus far.
Alfonso Hernández O. is the EV Division Director at Advanced Power Vehicles (APV). He is the designer who developed and manufactured the prototype of the carriages being used in Guadalajara today. He is working with other local governments across Mexico and abroad to help implement electric carriage programs in other cities.

Ana Lorena Pulido, an attorney and head of the animal protection organization Fundación Tierra Nueva Por los Animales, was the main promoter of the idea to transition to motorized vehicles. She was involved in early negotiations in bringing all sides of this issue together, which ultimately led to the successful implementation of electric carriages in that city. She was also the one tasked with placing Guadalajara’s former carriage horses in good homes.
The results were not only positive, but also proof that when people work together, remarkable things can happen. Guadalajara was the first city worldwide to have successfully replaced horse-drawn carriages with electric battery-operated carriages.

The transition in Guadalajara has proven to be highly successful and a win-win situation for everyone involved.

We learned that the electric carriage drivers and owners were more than satisfied with their new vehicles and business model, as they are making a much better living. They no longer have to be responsible for the constant care of their horses, and tourists seemed to understand and appreciate the new electric carriages. In fact, many expressed deep concern over the condition and treatment of urban carriage horses still used elsewhere in Mexico and hoped that other cities would soon follow Guadalajara’s lead.

There is every reason for New York City to take a serious look at how Guadalajara and other progressive cities around the world have, by instituting electric carriages, improved tourism in their respective communities, as well as the quality of life for their residents and for the horses formerly used in the urban carriage horse trade. This is a tremendous opportunity for New York City, the greatest city in the world, to potentially lead the charge and become the first city in the United States to introduce electric carriages.

From 2017, former Mayor Enrique Alfaro Ramírez (third from left) took a ride in an electric carriage when the carriages were officially introduced in Guadalajara. Sitting next to the Mayor was the State Secretary of Transportation, Servando Sepúlveda, shaking hands with APV electric carriage builder/designer Alfonso Hernández O. Merilyn Gómez (front left) was the Director of Animal Protection for the City at the time.

(Photo credit: Grupo Reforma)
In Summary

We agree with the former Mayor of Guadalajara, Enrique Alfaro Ramirez (now the Governor of the State of Jalisco), who was convinced after a year of discussions with local animal-rights advocacy groups, that tradition was not to be equated with animal abuse.

While this belief has always been our underlying motivation, other reasons have manifested themselves since the global pandemic was declared in March 2020. Cities like New York have been forced to close many cultural institutions, restaurants, and hotels, which has severely affected tourism.

According to NYC & Company and the Coalition for NYC Hospitality & Tourism Recovery, New York welcomed 13.5 million international and 53 million domestic visitors in 2019, making it the most popular big-city destination in the U.S. Most of the resulting $4.9 billion in local taxes generated by such numbers went away with the pandemic.

Although we still have a long way to go, there now appears to be light at the end of the pandemic tunnel. The City will reopen fully and when it does, we will have a golden opportunity to create something new — To Build NYC Back Better!
This means ensuring that drivers not only keep their jobs, but actually make better incomes, while at the same time reaching a formal agreement to place former carriage horses in reputable sanctuaries and good homes when they are no longer working in the City.

Such a project would be a sound investment in the City’s future. Although New York State and New York City have suffered huge financial losses in the past year, federal aid to states included in the new stimulus package along with private funding could make this historic endeavor a reality.

We believe this promising new industry could be a real boon to NYC tourism. It would also mark the beginning of a historic turning point for the City. It’s a change that many cities around the world have made or are in the process of making. We think the time is ripe for the Big Apple to join this humane movement by getting carriage horses off of heavily-trafficked NYC streets!

New York City has never shied away from being bold and progressive, especially when the welfare of its residents and all-important tourism industry are concerned. We hope NYC will take the lead as the first American city to bring this new, innovative electric-carriage industry to the United States and set an example for other busy urban centers to do the same.
With sincerest thanks to:

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