



Photo shows jeepneys during rush hour in Manila. — AFP photos



Custom artwork on the side of a jeepney as a driver's assistant (right) calls for passengers during rush hour in Manila.



Vic Capuno, 52-year-old jeepney artist, working a stencil sketch over a jeepney body panel.



Vic Capuno, 52-year-old jeepney artist, painting in the side of one of the vehicles at a workshop in San Pablo.

Philippine 'jeepney' artists stalked by extinction

Bernardo de la Cruz casts his eyes around the nearly silent workshop where he used to toil overtime hand-painting custom decor on jeepneys, the singularly Philippine minibuses facing the scrapheap. These rolling art galleries adorned with images of everything from Batman to babies, as well as disco lights and chrome wheels, have for decades provided cheap transport for millions. But pollution and safety concerns have led to a modernization program, with jeepneys 15 years or older to be taken off the streets by 2020. "This is an act of treachery against fellow Filipinos," said de la Cruz. "This is a uniquely Filipino product. We were born with it."

When he began 45 years ago, there were hundreds of artists giving the vehicles their famously boisterous paint jobs. Now there are estimated to be fewer than a dozen left. He has seen orders decline from a high of up to 80 a month in the 1980s to just one or two now.

His canvas is being replaced by eco-jeepneys, powered by electricity or lower-polluting diesel motors. Riders of old jeepneys currently have to climb in through a hatch in the rear, cramming into the benches inside with no respite from the heat and roadside pollution.

On borrowed time

The jeepney's successor is being billed as a big improvement. It has doors, individual seats, air-conditioning, and enough height to stand up. But it will be mass-produced and look just like a public bus. Skipping over



This picture shows jeepneys during rush hour in Manila.

the jeepney's bespoke production process in small workshops means a loss of the individual style and flair that made them global symbols of the Philippines. "It's one of the most genuine forms of modern folk art that we have," Bernie Sim, a Manila-based graphic designer and co-author of a 2014 book on jeepney art, told AFP.

French fashion designer Christian Louboutin launched a jeepney-themed handbag collection last year, while Swedish furniture giant Ikea painted a jeepney in its signature blue and yellow to announce plans to open a Philippine store. But the vehicles, which were first made from leftover US jeeps after World War II, have been on



Custom artwork on the side of a jeepney as a driver's assistant waits for passengers during rush hour in Manila.

borrowed time for years. Jeepneys are highly polluting, and the Philippines is desperate to improve air quality in its traffic-clogged cities.

Their drivers are also notorious for ignoring traffic rules, and the vehicles have few safety features. On top of that, Manila ushered in internet-based ride-sharing services in 2014, and three years later President Rodrigo Duterte said the jeepney must evolve or disappear.

'I cry quietly'

"They have all but stopped making jeepneys," said 52-year-old jeepney artist Vic Capuno, based in San Pablo

town south of Manila. As a result he and a colleague at Armak Motors now paint just three of four jeepneys a month. De la Cruz worked on nine in the last year. He's the only painter left at Manila's Sarao Motors, once the country's biggest producer. Two of his siblings were also jeepney artists, but they died from diseases he believes were caused by years inhaling fumes from the paint. Yet he is still passionate about the vehicle's importance in Philippine history. "When the jeepney disappears a piece of Filipino culture will also die," de la Cruz warned.

A self-taught painter, he was inspired by the work of renowned local artists such as Carlos Francisco and Fernando Amorsolo. His jeepney designs, still seen on the streets for now, chronicle the rapidly changing landscape of his home-Las Pinas—from a farming and salt-making backwater into a highly urbanised area. "It's a pleasing sight. It brings us back to a time and place that is no more," said de la Cruz. After raising four children on the pay earned painting, he now also creates canvases and makes storefront signs as a sideline.

He conceded he could have a decent life without the jeepneys, but was heartbroken by the government's decision. "I would like to appeal to the authorities not to outlaw it," de la Cruz said. "At times I cry quietly when I think about what is happening." — AFP



People work out on a bridge near the township of Emakhandeni, outside the Zimbabwean city of Bulawayo.

At dawn, a township road in Zimbabwe turns into a fitness club

On a road over a railway track outside the Zimbabwean city of Bulawayo, about 30 people from surrounding townships go through their morning exercise routines. The wide stretch of road is a well-known gathering spot each morning from 5 to 7 am for fitness enthusiasts who stretch, jog, shadow-box, plank and do squats, push-ups, sit-ups and jumps. The nearby townships of Emakhandeni and Cowdray Park have scant health facilities, and the bridge is a safe, social spot for anyone looking to burn some calories at the start of the day.

On Sunday, two young footballers did warm-up drills under the eye of their coach, groups of men worked out together and a couple shared a laugh as they exercised while small children joined in. "I come with my sisters as early as we can, like at 5 am, and we come every day," said Sidumsile Mthethwa, a 20-year-old arts student. "On Sundays we come before church. "It keeps kids busy, and it allows us to spend time together—others come from different places around so we meet here. "We connect as young people and we get to know each other better."



A man shadow boxes during a morning workout session.



Emmanuel Sibanda, a 25-year-old mechanical engineer, does pushups early in the morning.

"Fitness is key to a healthy life" "There's a local gym but there's no equipment," said Emmanuel Sibanda, 25, a keen bodybuilder. "We come here because it is a way to lose weight and look good. People want to be healthy." The fitness "club" has no name, members or structure, and each group does its own routines, with some bringing along music on mobile phones or small hand-held stereos. They use the road curbs for step exercises and drainage holes for their feet when doing sit-ups, or they sprint up and down the steep embankment from the bridge down to the railway tracks.

Some also jog along the railway, from one concrete sleeper to the next. "That's not the best exercise—it could lead to injury," warned amateur football coach Julius Ndlovu, who brought two young players from a local side for pre-season training before matches start in March. "Many kids take drugs but if they come here in the morning they avoid that," he said. "Fitness is the key to a healthy life—you have to fight against high blood pressure and diabetes."

As the morning progresses, traffic picks up and the small crowd clears off the road to allow cars, trucks and buses to hurtle past on their way to and from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city. The session ends with a coordinated exercise when about eight pairs run towards each other from either side of the road. They jump in the air 10 times, clapping their partner's hand each time in a final burst of energy. — AFP



People go through their morning exercise routine.



Youths go through their morning exercise routine near the township of Emakhandeni, outside the Zimbabwean city of Bulawayo.



People go through their morning exercise routine along a railway track. — AFP photos