
From U-Bahn to e-scooters: Berlin mobility app has it all

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Germany's fast-growing capital Berlin is turning to technology to promote the use of just about every form of urban transport -except the private car- as it races to stop the city from seizing up from increasing traffic congestion.

A new app went fully live on Tuesday, offering travelers a one-stop choice of options ranging from U-Bahn to e-scooters, making the city of 3.6 million one of the first to offer such a joined-up 'mobility as a service'.

The app, called Jelbi, is run by the BVG transport authority and runs on technology from Trafi, a Lithuanian startup that built a similar mobility platform in Vilnius, and has partnered with Prague and Jakarta.

"Jelbi is a solution for people to move to shared forms of mobility – and to avoid a transport collapse," Jelbi head Michel Heider said in an interview. The app's name is a play on the German word for 'yellow' – BVG's livery.

Rollout has been quick: BVG struck an agreement with Trafi in January and a month later drew a strong response when it solicited pitches from mobility providers to join the project, said Heider.

BVG required that partners be fully integrated into the Jelbi app – meaning that users can, with a single registration, book and pay for all of the transport options on the platform.

It did a soft launch in June, featuring its own metro and bus services, rail operator Deutsche Bahn; electric scooters from Emmy; car-sharing service Miles; and bicycles from Nextbike.

Now BVG is completing the Jelbi menu with its own on-demand minibus service Berlkoenig; kick scooters from Tier and conventional taxis from Taxi Berlin. "All forms of mobility will be offered from October," Heider told Reuters.

Catching on

Setting up Jelbi is a bit like opening an account at a smartphone bank: Users need to

upload a selfie along with photos of their passport and driving license, and verify a way to pay online.

So far, 60% of people who have downloaded the app have taken that step. On average, they book 2.3 rides per week, said Heider.

For Trafi, which has so far raised \$14 million in backing from investors, Berlin is a milestone. Its mobility app went live in Vilnius two years ago and is now used by one-fifth of people there.

“Berlin is becoming the world’s largest mobility-as-a-service city,” CEO and co-founder Martynas Gudonavicius told Reuters.

“It’s monumental, and I think is going to start a phase of new deployments,” he said, adding that Trafi was in talks with other European cities, and even countries, on launching mobility applications.

There are competitors in the space, including German startup Wunder Mobility, which is building a mobility solution for the city of Hamburg and recently raised \$60 million from investors.

Jelbi is for now primarily an exercise in scaling technology to help people get quickly and easily from A to B. Trafi licenses its software to BVG, which only charges a service fee but takes no commission from mobility providers.

For Heider, Jelbi is one piece of a jigsaw puzzle that includes setting up mobility hubs – kitted out with charging stations – near metro and railway stations, and dedicating more road space to shared forms of transport.

“People should leave their cars behind and use Jelbi to get around town,” said Heider. “We want Jelbi to be the No.1 interface for shared mobility in Berlin.”

(Reuters)