

Going native

Cyclists in Paris are few and far between, as I discovered on a recent eight-day visit there. A curb-to-curb mass of compact cars rushes down the boulevards and squeezes through the narrow side streets. Meanwhile, riders on mopeds, scooters and motorcycles weave deftly in and out of traffic like a team of hockey players nearing their goal. There isn't much room left for cyclists.

I went to Paris to join my husband, who was on business in the city. I took a folding bicycle for the hours when he would be working and I would be on my own. As a native New Yorker, I thought I knew all about cycling in heavy traffic. Little did I anticipate the quantity of cars in Paris, or that I would be one of so few "drivers" on two wheels. Once I had adapted to this situation, I found the city surprisingly enjoyable "a velo."

To get from New York to Paris I took a flight to Brussels via London, reaching Paris by train. This round-about route was economical; it also gave me a chance to test how well my bicycle would survive various forms of transportation and whether it could travel as hand luggage.

The journey took 24 hours, from one evening to the next, including: the "train-to-the-plane" from Manhattan to Kennedy Airport, a trans-Atlantic flight to Brussels with a change of planes in London, a short-line train from the Brussels airport to the downtown railroad station, and a four-hour train to Paris. Thank heaven for little folding bikes!

I carried mine like a suitcase from one terminal to the next or wheeled it as a convenient cart for my luggage. Regulations for the train to Paris required that all bicycles, even foldable ones, be carried in the baggage car. As it turned out, mine rode comfortably in an empty luggage compartment while I stood in the corridor of a crowded passenger coach.

Paris by Night

On reaching Paris, the bicycle was ready for riding—a blessing since I was running late and my husband was waiting at our hotel half-way across the city. Outside the station night had fallen; the rush-hour traffic was in full swing. Bracing myself for a baptism of fire, I launched my bicycle near the curb. I was swept along, a leaf in a swift current. I wanted to stop under street lights or near lighted shop windows to read my map, but this was dangerous and time-consuming. I proceeded by dead-reckoning and my memory of Paris topography from years gone by.

As I grew accustomed to the cadence of the traffic, I noticed more and more ways in which Paris favors the cyclist, and New York does not. The traffic was orderly in spite of its density and speed. I found that drivers in Paris observed red lights more often than New Yorkers. They drove faster, but they stayed in their lanes more consistently. No one honked or shouted at me. Most streets were so smoothly paved that I was coasting much of the time. At major intersections large illuminated signs pointed the way to other important intersections—"L'Opera" to the right, "Le

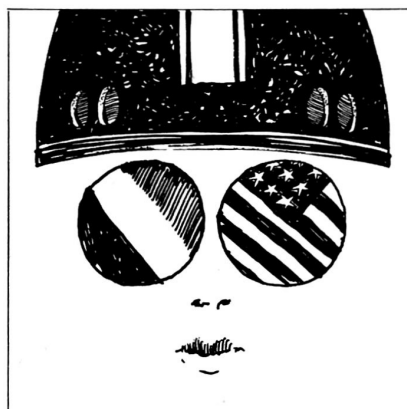


Illustration by Greg Sible

Forum des Halles" to the left, "Le Louvre" straight ahead. I followed the main stream to the street of our hotel in less time than I had thought possible. My husband was waiting on the corner. I was late, but I was in one piece.

Paris by Day

During my first days in Paris I was happy to see that the city cares for cyclists. Bicycle lanes are everywhere. They are clearly outlined in vivid green paint, and further highlighted by one-way arrows down the middle. The lanes continue across broad plazas, such as the Place de la Concorde, guiding cyclists through the vortex of traffic to the other side. Pictographic signs posted at eye level warn drivers to expect bicycles.

To my chagrin I also noticed that cars fill the lanes instead of bicycles. Later, I heard from friends that the lanes had been tried for a year, but were no longer in effect. Planners had miscalculated the number of cyclists in Paris, or Parisian cyclists had failed to give the lanes a chance for success. I admired the optimism of the lobby that had achieved so many lanes for so few cyclists and I hoped that some day more bicycles and fewer cars in Paris would revive their use. In the meantime, I ceased to rely on lanes for protective identity. I felt

better about my bright orange windbreaker; it was not *tres chic*, but it was conspicuous.

When we toured together, my husband and I used public transportation. Metro trains are fast, frequent, comfortable, and silent. Stations are clean and attractively decorated. There are escalators for deep stations and conveyor-belt walkways for long connections. Paris buses are equally convenient and the fares for both transit systems are reasonable. Considering these factors, I understood the demise of bicycles, but why so many Parisians prefer driving in traffic to relaxing on a metro or omnibus is still a mystery.

The Practicality of Foldability

The foldability of my bicycle and its compact size were a boon in Paris. The bicycle could fit in the small elevator of our hotel and I could store it in our garret room on the sixth floor. Its quick-adjust saddle, a feature of folding bicycles, was ideal for variations in traffic conditions. In slow traffic with frequent stops I rode with the saddle low. This way I could sit comfortably with both feet on the ground while waiting behind halted cars. It was easy to hop off the bicycle to walk it across busy intersections or to circumvent a block of traffic by using the sidewalk. In lighter traffic I raised the saddle for more pedaling power.

To take a bicycle all the way to Paris for such a short time was more ambitious than sensible, but I'm glad I did it. I accomplished more, with less fatigue, by cycling than I could have on foot. Because I had my own transportation, my touring schedule was flexible. If something unexpected caught my eye—a flower market or public mime performance—I paused to enjoy it. If it rained, I changed from outdoor touring to visiting museums and shops. I daydreamed in front of Rousseau's fantasy jungles on exhibit at the Grand Palais. I strolled through the Galleries Lafayette, a fairyland masterpiece of department store architecture. I browsed in bookstores and ate patisseries in Paris' trendy salons.

By the time I left Paris, I felt at home in the traffic. I disapproved of so many cars, but as I cycled beside them, I felt that I was a part of modern Paris. I was seeing the city as many Parisians see it every day. Like keeping house in a foreign country, riding a bicycle was a means to "go native." In eight days I learned to cycle "in French" and to share in a street sport called Parisian traffic. I was not just a tourist; I was a Parisienne.

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On The Cover:

In 1944, a cyclist could find adventure of quite a different sort in Europe. Cover illustration by Joseph Shoopack.

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