

Biking

words & photos by Elwin Tan

Riding a bike as a kid was my first encounter with unadulterated freedom. It is no wonder that the same liberating feeling still washes over me when I'm pedalling away, twenty long years later. I've done a decent amount of travelling since my passion for cycling was reignited; here is an excerpt of my experiences.

Seattle, WA

A little over a year ago, I took the opportunity, like a considerable number of students in Singapore, to go on a university exchange programme. I was finally able to visit this youthful and progressive city. And like all progressive cities in the US, Seattle has a raging bike culture to be proud of.

This was immediately apparent on the LINK Light Rail from Seattle/Tacoma airport all the way through to Downtown Seattle, where there were designated areas for baggage and/or bicycles. I was impressed to see rows upon rows of bike racks gracing the façade of every building on campus. A good number of them were even sheltered from the elements. I felt as if I had struck commuting gold. As I became used to the good news, I was not surprised to discover that the university had a bike shop on campus. Their list of services ranged from fixing a flat to a full tune-up. They even held basic classes and ask-a-mechanic sessions at extremely 'student' prices.

I scouted a few local bike shops (LBS), but since I was on a budget and wasn't staying permanently, I wasted little time in getting myself an affordable Mercier track bike from a web-based wholesaler (thank you interweb, sorry LBS). An experienced bike-commuter in Singapore, I learnt the major roads in my area and quickly adapted to the colder weather and oft-damp roads of the Emerald City. I felt pampered with designated bike lanes on major commuting routes, and the very long Burke-Gilman trail (not unlike our Park Connectors). With winter mostly gloomy, days when the sun decided to make its presence filled every pedalhead with the urge to rush out and hop on a bike.

I had the pleasure of befriending a fellow Singaporean, Jerome, a full-time student who also raced for the school team. A call came one perfect spring morning and he asked if I'd be interested in visiting the Marymoor Velodrome in

Redmond. Without hesitation, I decided I could afford to miss a day of class and hurried over to Jerome's. He had just acquired a bike for the track events he was considering competing in, and wanted to clock a few miles to make sure the bike was properly set up. I wish not to exaggerate but it was ecstasy, enjoying the rare opportunity of riding on a 'drome. Experimenting with the best line was a completely new experience: riding down the steepest banks meant not hitting the apex of the curve; a balance had to be struck for maximum acceleration.

Seattle, as a whole, had easily the most patient and considerate motorists I have since encountered and it is this general attitude that made my commutes an absolute delight.





San Francisco, CA

Like Seattle, the charming San Francisco sits near the Cascade Range. The gnarly hills in the heart of the Bay Area would intimidate even seasoned New York messengers. A quick brief by the friendly people at the rental shop illuminated the best routes around the city. Conveniently, these were also the roads graced with bike lanes. Unforgiving inclines damn near killed me during winter visit, but the convenience of getting around on pedal-power meant not dealing with expensive fares and waiting for public transport. This translated to squeezing more sights into a day.

As part of a stopover during a road trip in spring, I pitched an admittedly ambitious expedition to my companions. We started from Golden Gate Park, climbed the scenic Lincoln Boulevard coastal route, and zoomed across the Golden Gate Bridge, down into the little town of Sausalito (thirty kilometres both ways with two hundred

metre climbs). The rentals took as much as my thighs could dish out, but some climbs were just a tad too challenging. Occasionally dismounting and walking the coastal roads gave us time to catch our breaths and take some pictures.

Across the bridge, we coasted downhill with blind corners alongside fast moving traffic. This was perhaps the most dangerous part of the ride, and the wide berth given us by considerate motorists was extremely welcome. After a decent lunch to refuel and a quick nap by the pier to recharge, we headed back the way we came, struggling up the same slopes we so joyously sped down before. The cars weren't doing much better as traffic out of the city clogged the famed Highway 101. Heavy bikes, teamed with the cursed inclines, seemed to try and deny us from returning to the rental booth on time. We definitely spent every calorie gained from the delectable handmade ice cream in Sausalito to make it back five minutes before closing.

Although San Francisco was the city with the most torturous inclines I have ever ridden, the majestic views of the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay would have failed to be even half as impressive from inside a car or tour bus. That experience was more than worth the effort. ►





New York, NY

They say that being a bike messenger is one of the most dangerous gigs in New York, second only to being a policeman or firefighter. First, there is almost always a ceaseless movement of tight traffic in Midtown. Second, the grid system ensures maximum utility of space, but this also means a high frequency of taxis stopping unexpectedly on the curbside, with passengers carelessly swinging open yellow doors of death. Heavy vehicles are practically everywhere, and road works are commonplace every summer. These factors add up to making New York (especially Manhattan) a pretty tough place for cyclists.

Having missed the opportunity to experience these conditions on my first visit two years ago, I tried out the recently implemented Citi Bike, a bike-sharing system sponsored by Citibank. A bike-share system essentially means you get to rent a bike, ride it to your destination, and return it at the nearest station. This was unprecedented convenience in a city that demands efficiency.

Familiar with Manhattan from my last trip, I revisited my favourite neighbourhoods on bike paths and bike lanes, checking the bike in and taking a new one out every now and then to avoid incurring surcharges. Main streets were awash with yellow (cabs) and blue (Citi bikes) as I found my flow in the veins of the throbbing city.



I recently read that people tend to be friendlier while on bikes. The impossible density of New York meant that it wasn't long before you were waiting at the lights and chatting with the most random of commuters. Even better was bumping into fellow visitors and exchanging pointers on what the must-sees were and which places to pass up on. This was especially spontaneous because even if you had started the day with only one destination in mind, you'd soon be struggling with an overflowing itinerary of things to see and places to eat. It was like an awesome Travelocity on wheels.

With my love for mobility, I appreciated the convenience of not having to plan for sustenance because a food cart/truck was never far away. And even if you were looking for a sit-down meal, NYC is foodie heaven anyway. So if you're ever in NYC, conquer the parks, museums, theatres, and restaurants by bike. Worry not about navigation, because the numbered streets are idiot-proof.

Huế

Cut back to six months before Seattle. I took a trip to Vietnam with a few friends. We arrived at the ancient city of Huế on an overnight bus ride. A quick and homely lunch later, we decided to take an aimless little walk. It wasn't even twenty minutes later that we all ended up on rental bikes, each paying just a dollar for the next four hours. Of course the bikes were heavy and squeaky, but they were surprisingly practical: five speeds for the climbs, dynamo headlight for when it got dark, and even a rear disc brake for awesome stopping power. As my personal mantra goes, there's no way being on a bike can ever make an experience worse.

If you have ever seen Vietnamese rush hour, you would know that even the roughest traffic in Singapore could never have prepared me for what we were about to face. With motorcycles and scooters packed on practically every usable inch of tarmac, there was complete disregard for the concept of lanes. Notice how I didn't even bother mentioning bicycle infrastructure. Strangely, with the absence of strict traffic regulations, there was a sort of camaraderie amongst all the road users. There was mutual respect for space, and no one was being overly selfish – the urgency of one person was never a nuisance to everyone else. It did not take long for us

to understand that the essence was to be predictable to others and alert in case others were not predictable. Confidence was key. There was a sort of fluidity to the idea of traffic when you removed cars and replaced them with a truckload of two-wheelers.

We returned the bikes after visiting Huế Citadel, and realised our plans for a bus tour of the various imperial tombs had fallen through. At first, we only joked about going by bicycle, but as the reasons against it were sequentially shot down, we felt that this would be the perfect course of action. We rented the bikes from the same place and headed southwest out of Huế. Our initial apprehension of riding on the expressway soon dissolved as we cruised the nearly empty roads, undulating along the fringes of the hills. The serene vistas were a treat. We soon arrived at the tomb of Emperor Khải Định. After the visit, we continued on to the tomb of Emperor Minh Mạng, but after a few unintentional 'detours', had to ask for directions at a little village eatery. The hospitable owners showed us a dirt path that could take us to the entrance of the grounds, and offered to take care of our bicycles. We eventually returned the bikes at night (clocking more than forty kilometres in two days), and rewarded ourselves with buckets of ice-cold beer.

If you remain unconvinced that cycling is the best way to explore a city, I definitely urge you to try it before writing it off. Cycling is perhaps the highest form of transportation: honest, but at the same time potentially exciting. Of course, adequate preparation never hurts. That means studying the roads thoroughly and seeking advice, always having sufficient food and water when in rural areas, and dressing right for maximum comfort. Lastly, keep an open mind and be considerate.

Cycle widely. 🚲

Elwin spends a disproportionate amount of time either behind a camera or on a bike. He likes to use travel as an excuse to stretch his quads and go trigger-happy in a new environment. Together, these hobbies counterbalance his education in biological research.

