

# Havana: A Bike-Friendly City?

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The abrupt breakup of the USSR and socialist bloc in the early 1990s dealt a devastating blow to the island's economy. Almost overnight, beneficial aid and trade provided by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance ground to a halt, including 80% of foreign trade previously conducted as barter and sales of 13 million tons of oil per year at preferential prices. When the Cuban economy bottomed out in 1993, oil imports had dropped from 13 to 4 million tons annually. At the time, Cuba depended almost entirely on imported oil and the dramatic decline in imports created massive blackouts, leaving most Cuban homes without electricity 12 hours a day.

Additionally, the fuel shortage, combined with lack of replacement parts, crippled the public transportation system: in three years, circulation of buses in Havana dropped from 1500 to just 300. The few government and private cars that circulated were subject to severe gas rationing. At the flick of a switch, the city was plunged into silence.

To alleviate the transportation crisis, the government imported almost a million Chinese bicycles, selling them at low prices to the population (10.8 million in 1993). All of a sudden, bicycles were Cubans' main means of transport and became an integral part of Havana's urban landscape. Bike lanes started appearing around town, including along the Malecón, Havana's four-mile-long seaside drive, allowing people to pedal from Old Havana, through Central Havana, to the western end of Vedado safely and efficiently. A dedicated bike route was also established to the eastern beaches, some 11 miles from the city center.

Overnight, Havana's residents found themselves forced to cycle up to 10 miles between work and home, to take their kids to music lessons, school or a baseball game. This exercise, coupled with a diet too low in calories, led to generalized weight loss, but also had positive health effects, including lower cholesterol levels and lower rates of high blood pressure.

However, the city was even less prepared for this change than the people living here. It was a bit of a shock to have so many bicycles sharing roads once reserved for cars, ridden by people with little or no knowledge of traffic laws. Night lighting was virtually nonexistent, leading to not a few accidents where cyclists were injured. Bicycle "parking lots" were another challenge, since they were urgently needed at office buildings, shopping centers, universities and near city parks. Equally important were bike repair shops and spare parts, neither of which were readily available. People innovated to make do.

Today, visitors to Havana often ask me: 'where are all those bicycles we've heard so much about? Where are they?' They're abandoned. Once public transport improved slightly, thanks to buses originally donated from Canada and Europe and the appearance of 'camels'—buses with two humps in the middle pulled by trucks—the denizens of Havana left their bikes behind. Even though the bus system was unstable and unreliable, Cubans were loathe to expend their meager calories cycling for miles on the heavy Chinese bikes. Most of the imported bicycles were the *Forever* brand, which Cubans

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Both the government and people were of the same mind: bikes were a band-aid, not a cure. Unlike in

developed countries where bicycles are considered an environmentally conscious, responsible and healthy alternative, in Cuba, bicycles were viewed as a necessity imposed by dire economic circumstances. It's ironic—but understandable—that the bicycle movement is strongest (and growing) in countries that historically have caused the most environmental damage from cars' carbon emissions. This movement represents grassroots efforts demanding more bike-friendly cities, where the natural and man-made environments can complement each other and bicycles are prioritized. In many of these cities, buses are equipped to carry bikes so cyclists can combine pedaling with public transport to cover greater distances, cutting down on traffic jams and pollution. Meanwhile, in developing countries, cars are sought-after status symbols, regardless of environmental cost—and in Havana, often seen as the "solution" to a still-inefficient bus system. Even China, a country with a strong bicycle tradition, has been ceding ground fast and furiously to car culture.

When the Cuban government recently suggested reviving bicycles as alternative transport, Cubans asked: 'again with the bicycles?! Are we moving backwards?' Despite this resistance, government is trying to implement a plan incorporating bicycles as part of a larger sustainable development model. This won't be easy after so many years of sacrifice and material scarcity; and Cubans, like other people in developing contexts, want cars. For this plan to work, the citizenry will have to be convinced of the value of sustainability and environmental protection over the convenience of cars; people will have to take to bicycles voluntarily, for the ease of transport and health benefits they provide—not as transport of last resort like in the nineties.

Unfortunately, there are practical factors working against this change of perspective: bicycles are banned from some major Havana thoroughfares including sections of the Malecón and Fifth Avenue, few bike lanes or parking lots survived the nineties' economic crisis, and bikes now sold in stores are expensive. Not to mention the aging population that includes many people simply afraid or unable to ride; by 2030, older adults will be 30% of Havana's population.

Havana lost a golden opportunity to become a truly bike-friendly city when the streets were virtually devoid of cars back in the 1990s. The lesson therein? Only once a comprehensive, holistic plan is in place prioritizing cycling and the benefits it provides will Havana once again be a safe, healthy and efficient city to ride on two wheels. 

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Disclosures: None

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