

Feature

BETTER BY BIKE

TRAVELLING FROM A TO B FOR TRANSPORT IS SELDOM FUN – UNLESS YOU GO BY BIKE. **JOSIE DEW, ROB AINSLEY, ROLAND SEBER, AND DAN JOYCE** DESCRIBE THEIR ENJOYABLE EVERYDAY JOURNEYS

IN THE SCENE
On a bike, you're immersed in your surroundings, with sounds, smells and wraparound vision





Transport cycling is healthy, it saves money, it's good for the environment, and you're almost never late. Yet there's another good

reason to go by bike that's easily forgotten in the day-to-day routine: it's fun. Not as much fun as weekend leisure riding, perhaps, but more fun than drumming your fingers on a steering wheel in a traffic jam or standing at a draughty bus stop. You're still riding your bike, and most of the time riding a bike is enjoyable.

You need a bike that suits your preferred route. You need clothing that's comfortable for the way you ride. You need the right accessories. You need the skills to cope with any traffic you'll encounter. But you know all this. So rather than going over 'how' of transport cycling, we're instead going to consider the 'why'.

THE SCHOOL RUN

Cycling UK Vice President Josie Dew doesn't pile her kids into a car to get them to the school gates

For many parents the school run is a bind and a bore. To those who drive, it means

driving back and forth to school ad infinitum. I've now been doing the school run every day by bike for over seven years, and it's one of the highlights of my day. I'm outside, whipping along on my wheels, having fun with my young brood.

My eldest daughter Molly started school, two-and-a-half miles away, aged four. As she was such a tiny thing, for the first few weeks of the school run Molly went in a bike trailer (a Burley d'Lite). She soon progressed onto a trailer cycle and then a FollowMe. As she got older, Molly mostly rode her own bike (an Islabikes Cnoc), but if the weather was icy or stormy, I'd put her in the big bulbous bathtub-of-a-box on my Nihola cargo trike.

As time passed and I gave birth to two more potential cyclists, a trailer-pulling Circe Helios tandem joined my fleet, then a Circe Helios triplet. On several occasions, we've even done the school run by wheelbarrow...

Last September, Molly started at secondary school (she travels there by bus along a busy A-road) but the bicycling school run is still going strong with Daisy (7) and Jack (4). As I've lived and cycled in this village all my life, I know well all the roads and narrow high-hedged lanes, the dips, the bends, and the drain covers. The roads are busier today than

those I explored by bike as a child, with bigger vehicles and more impatient drivers. So we try to be as visible as we can. On the rear of our 14-foot long Circe triplet-trailer combo, I now have two high-rise flag-poles, two flying fish, a big bright orange wind-sock, a potty, and the best lights I've ever used (from Exposure).

There are 100 children at our village primary school, and in the seven-and-a-half years that I've been cycling there and back, we have been the only ones who cycle to school year round in all weathers. 'I would love to do it,' some of the parents say to me, 'but the roads are too dangerous.'

'But if you cycle,' I say, 'you're making the roads safer for us all, and then more people would cycle, which makes it even safer!'

Some children see us turning up on our ➤

"I cycle to school because it's fun, it's free, and I want my children to get some exercise"

Opposite: Seb Rogers. Right: Josie Dew



(L to R) Jack, Daisy and Josie on Jack's first day at school

“Shopping’ for most means a trudge in the car to a soulless ring-road retail park”

➤ bike everyday and say to me, ‘Don’t you have a car?’

I say, ‘Yes – well, a camper van.’

And they say, ‘Why don’t you drive then?’

And I say, ‘Because cycling to school is much more fun than sitting in a car!’

If I had to do the school run by car, I think I would lose the will to live. I cycle to school because it’s fun, it’s free, and I want my children to do some exercise and get fresh air in their lungs before being shut up in school. It clears their heads and lightens their moods. I think the health and happy-making benefits far outweigh the risks.

The build-up to the school run can be a race against time. But once we’ve finally piled out of the door, riding off on the bikes is suddenly calming and lovely. We have sing-songs and silly rhymes, learn spellings and times-tables, or just sit in lovely silence as we spin along. We see amazing skies and interesting animals – deer, owls, kingfishers, snakes, badgers, buzzards, frogs, and red kites.

We experience a wild assortment of weather – sun, snow, wind, hail, rain, gales. We smell the air. Every so often one of my pedalling offspring will emit the occasional observance of nature: ‘Looks like rain, mummy!’ ‘Bit windy!’ ‘Nice clouds!’ ‘Lots of slugs out on the road this morning, mum!’ ‘Sheep!’ ‘Squashed squirrel!’ ‘Bit thick this fog!’ ‘Heavy rain!’ It’s like cycling with Michael Fish on board.

For more on Josie’s school run, visit the website: cyclinguk.org/blog/josie-dew-why-we-love-cycling-school

SHOPPING

For writer Rob Ainsley and his partner in York, every shopping trip is a cycle tour

In the list of reasons to ride, ‘shopping’ hardly catches the romantic imagination. We’ve regaled dinner parties with our anecdotes of cycling to all the places called Bath in the world, but rarely get asked about our daily runs to WH Smith or the post office. Yet we must do 2,000 miles a year shopping, the equivalent of two End-to-Ends, and cumulatively we enjoy it as much as any double-LEJOG.

Here in York, with the historic centre given over ever more to bars, restaurant



Pannier means ‘bread carrier’. Rob’s hold groceries and more

Heavier haulage
 Too much stuff? Try a cargo bike. See our guide: bit.ly/cycle-cargobikes.

chains, and twee boutiques, ‘shopping’ for most means a trudge in the car to a soulless ring-road retail park. But on bikes, any trip is an excuse for a micro-tour: the little nature reserve that leads to PC World; the rail-trail past Homebase; the scale model of the solar system that provides an epic approach to Tesco Extra; the riverside path’s glorious route to Aldi, maybe celebrated with a seated picnic on the lovely Millennium Bridge, watching swans and scullers over a cornet from the ice-cream boat...

Our touring bikes’ cavernous Ortlieb panniers take enough for a three-month camping trip abroad, so there’s plenty of space for a weekend’s groceries. And picnics.

Patterns are changing, we’re told: the weekly ‘big shop’ is giving way to more trips to different supermarkets, whether for bargain-hunting or last-minute convenience. Well, we’re ahead of the game. A multi-store day by car, finding a parking place at each, would be unimaginably tedious – but bikes are ideal for such short hops,

bringing out our inner hunter-gatherer.

Cycle-shopping roots us in our local community too. We bump into people we know, and get talking to ones we don’t, in a way that doesn’t happen when you drive. (Wearing everyday-cycling garb – normal trousers, no helmet but high-vis – we’re used to being mistaken for supermarket staff by customers peevishly asking where the frozen chips are.) We build a little ‘first’ into every trip – an interesting back lane, a new coffee shop, or attempting outdoor table tennis in Rowtree Park in a Force 7 gale.

High street retail is struggling, in York as everywhere. For me, cycle-shopping, not ‘more car parking’, is part of the solution. It’s no quaint, developing-country thing: Germany’s dead keen on it, and in 21st-century towns such as Bremen, over 20% of all shopping is done on two wheels. The best place for jams is inside panniers.

Internet schminternet. Who needs online grocery deliveries? Cycle-shopping fills our fridge already, as well as giving us 365 tours a year.

Left: Rob Ainsley. Right: by Julie Rand



Thinking outside the (metal) box, Roland got to work off-road

COMMUTING

Roland Seber devised an on/off-road route to work that became an intimate journey through the seasons

My working day was recently bookended morning and night by mountain biking. I shared my journey not with nose-to-tail drivers but with rabbits, squirrels, deer, pheasants, horses, hawks, and sheep. The seven-mile each way trip took me through the seasons: green leaves gradually became golden brown, then fell to softly carpet the trail.

I've always loved squeezing mountain bike rides into daily life wherever possible, so a temporary job at Beyond Mountain Bikes near Cranleigh in Surrey was too good an opportunity to miss. The journey was ideal: a 50/50 mix of road and off-road, with the roads being quiet lanes scattered with sand, gravel, and leaf litter.

I started the job and the commute in September, when it still felt like summer was in full swing. (One day hit 30 degrees!) The going was firm, the leaves green; T-shirt and shorts were fine to ride in. As September gave way to October, autumn transformed

the countryside, and the comfortable warmth left over from summer began to segue into the chilly darkness of winter.

My working day finished at 6pm, so from November onwards it was dark all the way home. I've been doing off-road night rides for years so have good lighting. It seems like you're going faster in the dark. The feel of the trail and the places I was riding through changed at night, becoming a bit more spooky. Pheasants were replaced by owls, squirrels by the occasional badger.

Riding a Surly Krampus, the big wheels and plus-size tyres soaked up the trail undulations and skimmed over the debris on the roads and tracks. Where the trees on both sides of the road meet in the middle, there was a tunnel effect, branches silhouetted against the moonlit sky on clear nights.

The last section of track before I hit civilisation on the outskirts of Godalming was a fast, stony, sandy, and sinuous descent. It's a track I know well but riding it three times a week meant I get to know it intimately: that first little drop at the top where you could get both wheels airborne; the twisty rut that followed, just wide enough

“From November, it was dark all the way home. But I've been night riding off-road for years”

for pedals not to hit the sides; a root halfway down big enough to stop you dead if you hit it; some loose sand and a small fallen tree to jink around; a sudden wooden post smack in the middle of the track near the bottom; then safely past that and onto the tarmac again.

Back at home, I always felt like I'd had a mini adventure.

BUSINESS TRIPS

Whether it's a bike show or an editorial meeting, Dan Joyce always travels by bike and train

The downside of living in a lovely part of the world like the Yorkshire Coast is that it's a long way from the rest of the country, or at least the country that the bike industry



Dan's predawn ride to the station: no traffic, no rush

Which folder?
 For a comparative review of the Brompton and Birdy, visit the website: bit.ly/cycle-bromptonbirdy.

inhabits. London is 240 miles away, Birmingham 160, Milton Keynes almost 200, the Cycling UK office 260.

They're distances it's possible to drive, and when I had a car I did so once or twice – which was enough to remind me how much more pleasant it is to travel by bike and train. Several hours in a car means a stressful mix of dual carriageways, motorways, impatient drivers, tailbacks, lorries swinging out into the middle lane, and service station coffee sipped in desolate dawn car parks to stave off tiredness. It means never knowing how long the journey will take.

So for the 17 years I've been editing Cycle, I've made almost every long-distance work trip by train and folding bike – initially a Cresswell Micro, latterly a Brompton. The bike legs are predictable: home to station, 7 minutes; King's Cross to Waterloo, 15 minutes... or 12½ when chasing a connection. The train legs are pretty reliable too. Overall journey times are similar to or lower than driving, and I can spend that time tapping away on my

laptop or reading a book. I arrive feeling ready for work rather than frazzled.

I'm always surprised at bike shows to see how few have arrived by bike. Why, when you're a cyclist, wouldn't you ride at least part way if you could? Because trains are expensive? Perhaps, but less so when you book far enough in advance. Because it's scary to cycle in London? Nope. Cyclists are everywhere in the capital, so drivers have been forced to learn to deal with us better. Infrastructure has sprung up, with bike lanes being carved out of the carriageway of roads like Tavistock Place. It's no Dutch nirvana but it's way better than, say, Leeds.

It's easier to navigate nowadays even if you're not a native. All you need is a handlebar-mounted smartphone. Then you can wiggle through the backstreets, past newsagents, pavement cafés, and theatres, rather than hammering along Euston Road or Kingsway with the buses and taxis.

Each journey's start and end in Scarborough is nicer still, taking place in the dark before the dawn or late at night

“I spin along near-deserted streets. The town is always just waking up as I'm riding by”

before the pubs kick out. I could travel to and from the station mostly on the Cinder Track, but its tarmac is bumpy in places for a small-wheeled Brompton. So I spin along near-deserted streets instead, taking a convenient but forbidden left turn between the cemetery and some garages (an access road that's unused at 6.15am). The town is always just waking up as I'm riding by. A bus might drone past, light spilling from vacant windows. Cats returning home for breakfast check their saunters on seeing me and crouch underneath parked cars.

At the station, I stroll across the platform unhurried, fold up the Brompton (which still draws occasional stares), slot it in the luggage rack, and sit back. **Q**