

PHOTOS DAVID SHARP



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FAHRRAD IN BERLIN

We are the traffic. In Britain, that sounds like a battlecry. In Germany's capital city, it's a statement of fact. Journalist **Graeme Fife** was amazed

I'm sitting on the steps of Saint Martins-in-the-Field in London: rush hour, daylight, a young woman riding down towards Trafalgar Square. A man walks out straight in front of her, knocking her down. She's up, cursing, and off before I can assist. I remonstrate with the man. He gives me a faceful – 'She was in the way!' In London, it's a fact of life: wherever we are, even rightfully on the road, we're in the way. Not in Berlin.

My friend David, a Berlin resident, and I set off for our first tour of the city. It's bitterly cold but the sun is radiant in a clear robin's egg blue sky. We pedal off on our large-framed Dutch machines, which are perfect for urban cruising.

TRANSPORT EQUALITY

Even bowling down the first relatively traffic-free, wide, old streets, some stone-paved, of Prenzlauerberg, formerly in the East, I feel the pleasure of riding combined with sightseeing. All is calm enough to allow me to look round about me as we ride past apartment blocks, some quite ornate, built in the early 1900s to

house an influx of workers in expanding Berlin.

Added to the easy flow of cycling, there's the quiet of the machine. Ah, and my first taste of the unwritten highway code in Berlin, the shared space principle: motor vehicles and bicycles, all equal. Imagine! After London's truculence, this is stunning, unimaginable but, in Berlin, a joyous reality. True, Berlin has bags of space, the public transportation is wonderfully efficient, and there is less density of traffic. Even so...

A few turnings on along Friedrichstrasse, one of the busier roads, picking our way unfussed through the temporary halt of cars, we come to the grand boulevard of Unter den Linden, heading for the majestic Brandenburger Tor and a potentially deadly road feature: a roundabout. It's easy peasy here. To my happy surprise, the traffic flowed pretty steadily in all the time we

cycled round, and, most wonderfully, cars, lorries, buses, ceded ground to bicycles. There is a politeness, a sympathy, for the two-wheeler in Berlin that is more marked, even, than that I encountered in Holland. Partly, I'm sure, it's because so many Berliners cycle.

CYCLING DRIVERS

As many as 70% of Berliners own and use a bike – mostly the familiar Dutch bike. (I spotted no more than a handful of racers that week.) I can't vouch for the statistics, but it was apparent that a big chunk of Berlin's population was out on two wheels. The sight of so many cyclists peaceably riding the city's thoroughfares is both reassuring and attractive, part of a wider sense that the frantic millrace of English streets, whether in the bigger conurbations or the small market town where I live, is quite alien. Here all wheeled vehicles are accorded the same respect, and it is so obviously benign.

There's a stately and grand quality, too, >>>



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FEATURE
City cycling
snapshot

“HERE ALL WHEELED VEHICLES ARE ACCORDED THE SAME RESPECT, AND IT IS SO OBVIOUSLY BENIGN”

» an elegance pleasing to the eye, of a high bicycle at cruising speed on a city street, its rider taking in the view without that shifty, nervous, twitchy, forever apprehensive glance of the cyclist whose very presence on the road embodies an affront to the motor-vehicular lobby. Thus Matthew Parris: ‘What’s smug and deserves to be decapitated? A festive custom we could do worse than foster would be stringing piano wire across country lanes to decapitate cyclists.’ Called it a joke, taken out of context (such a smooth disclaimer). This puts him, as a humorist, on a par with Lance Armstrong (who joked about drugs testing on Twitter).

SHARED SPACE

The city is, by and large, flat. There are, reportedly, 620km of bike paths including some 150km that are mandatory, 190km of off-road bicycle routes through a number of public parks and woodland areas, 60km of bike lanes on roads, 70km of bus lanes shared by cyclists, 100km of combined pedestrian/bike paths and 50km of marked bike lanes on the pavements. Even if the numbers are not wholly accurate, this is still impressive, and the overall effect is palpable: motorists do pay attention and, as far as I saw, cyclists do not try anyone’s patience.

On the major avenues where there is no cycle lane indicated, the code is simple and honoured on both sides: bikes to the right, cars etc to the left. It’s a genuine example of highway common sense, making the roads and thoroughfares a site for cooperation, not an open battleground, weakest to the gutter or under the speeding four wheels. Riding



along past bustling Alexanderplatz, in the early evening dark, the road as busy as I ever saw it in my time in Berlin, the sense of being safe on a bike – welcome, even – was, quite simply, astonishing.

I haven’t ridden a roadster for many years but it’s a total delight: lofty position, sitting upright, long wheelbase, twist gears on the handlebar, a gliding movement, a very different sort of transmission but most comfortable. Plus the in-built handy back-wheel lock – add a portable chain for tethering to a bike stand and, bingo, pretty secure.

Berlin has numerous bike-hire establishments as well as city rental bikes, sponsored by Deutsche-Bahn, the national railways – that in itself speaks of a genuine, unified approach to transport. The city thoroughfares as civic amenity rather than racing grid? Wow. 🌀

- 1 Berlin has 620km of bike paths
- 2 Cyclists are exempt from some ‘no entries’
- 3 Berlin’s hire bikes
- 4 Roadsters not racers
- 5 Prenzlauerberg bike shop
- 6 Everyone rides

ICH BIN IN BERLIN

TRAVEL

Train: ferry to Hoek van Holland and on Deutsche Bahn tel: +44 8718 80 80 66, www.bahn.com. A great way to travel, with plenty of space for bikes, but pricy.

Air: Easyjet to Schönefeld. Cheap, quick and budget airline. www.easyjet.com

In Berlin: trams, buses, under and overground trains accommodate bikes.

THINGS TO SEE

Mitte Berlin, Museumsinsel and the nearby gathering of galleries, museums, cathedral. Reichstag, spacious avenues by the Tiergarten.

The Holocaust Denkmal (Memorial). **The East Side Gallery** – longest stretch of Wall remaining, used for memorial graffiti by artists from round the world. **Topographie des Terrors** – brilliant and chilling exhibition of photographs depicting the rise of Nazi power.