

Two Wheels Are Better Than Four

Written by Jim W. Harper

Bicycle culture in Miami? Don't laugh, it's happening



The end is near! The end is near because people around the world are following the consumption patterns of the U.S. The end is near because the almighty automobile is conquering the world. Don't be fooled by sour economic news. Car sales worldwide are heading for a record this year, according to a recent, terrifying special report in *The Economist*. The difference is that purchasing has shifted from the West to the East. If everyone in China acquires a car, this planet is toast.

Speaking of China, this column is supposed to be about riding bicycles. I'm just slightly distracted by the prediction of 3 billion cars by 2050, although the current number, 700 million, is disconcerting, too.

Bikes. In Miami. Are you crazy?

Here in Miami, bikes should be outlawed. They are dangerous obstacles for irate drivers trying to get to work in the morning, and they are practically invisible at night. Children could be hit by them! These two-wheeled pests are a menace on our streets. Friends don't let friends ride bikes.

That is the car-crazed logic in Miami. In other parts of the world, bikes and pedestrians rule the road and cars have to get out of the way. The people are healthier and the air is cleaner. In Miami, we call that communism. Regardless, the bicycle is a viable solution for local, individual transportation that also helps save the planet and save your health. Bikes are even better alternatives than scooters, which I previously advocated in this column. With bikes, the human body is the only source of emissions.

Besides sweating, people have other mental blocks against biking around town. Number one would be the danger factor, which is impossible to eliminate where bikes and cars share the road. But 30-year-old cyclist-around-town Pedro Di Nezio says Miami is much safer than Buenos Aires, where the streets are treacherous, although his Omni neighborhood is no picnic.

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“We really need bike paths, of course, especially on Biscayne Boulevard. From Omni to the Julia Tuttle, cars go like crazy,” says Di Nezio. He regrets that recently upgraded parts of the Boulevard did not add bike paths. “It was a crime.” (It *could* be a crime now, because a new Florida regulation requires paths for all new or reconstructed state roads.)

Statistically bicyclists in Miami-Dade County experience few traffic accidents in comparison to motorcyclists and pedestrians, according to the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. In 2006 the 347 traffic-related fatalities in Miami-Dade County included 8 cyclists, 61 motorcyclists, and 90 pedestrians. So for safety’s sake, stop walking or driving and hop on a bike.

Like Di Nezio, local blogger Daniel Perez owns a car but chooses to bike daily. He believes that flat, warm Miami is optimal for cycling. “Having been to Europe a couple of times, especially on my visits to Amsterdam, I was familiar and in love with the idea of the bike as a primary means of transportation,” says Perez. “After bemoaning the fact that Miami was a place that could have such a great bike scene but didn’t, my wife and I both decided to be the change we wanted to see. Riding our bikes has made us connect more with the city, with our surroundings, and made us feel good about doing our little part toward the conservation of our environment.”

In our hemisphere, the epicenter of bicycle culture is Bogotá, Colombia, where former mayor Enrique Peñalosa put parks and cycling at the foreground of development. Entire suburbs were created with narrow bike paths instead of wide streets. And every Sunday this city and others in Colombia transform into Bike-opolises. Known as Ciclovía, the weekly event shuts down the streets and hands them over to bikers. Bogotá closes more than 70 miles of roads and counts well over a million participants every Sunday.

By comparison, the “Bike Miami” event in downtown on Sunday, November 9, drew 2000 participants. Miami Mayor Manny Diaz has strapped on his bike helmet and made a point to support initiatives like Bike Miami, which closed streets to traffic in downtown for a few hours. With enough support, this event could become a regular occurrence. In fact, a second Bike Miami Sunday is scheduled for December 14.

“Bike Miami was a fantastic event that made a huge statement about the commitment of Mayor Manny Diaz and the City of Miami toward making this wonderful city a better place for cyclists of all stripes,” says Perez.

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Biking once a week, or even once a month, would be a step in the right direction. Choosing to bike daily instead of driving is a major lifestyle decision, but it would go a long way toward achieving a carbon-neutral existence. Imagine those 3 billion cars melting into 3 billion bikes. It could happen if we put a priority on health and balance instead of convenience and consumption. We have some lessons to learn from our neighbors in Bogotá

For details about the Bike Miami event on December 14, visit www.bike-miami.com

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