

Biking in Florence

Good for your health, bad for your nerves

OPINION by Julie Butterfield

With the nation's unemployment at a record 10.7 percent and facing the prospect of deepening austerity cuts and rising inflation, many Italians are trading in their more costly cars for cheaper two-wheelers. Recent statistics on Italy's automobile market show that it contracted 24.7 percent in September 2012 compared to 2011, with new car sales falling below bike sales in Italy for the first time since World War II. At the same time, bike sales are higher than ever, climbing 10 percent last year to 1.75 million units sold, compared to the 1.748 million cars registered the same year. There are many reasons why biking is better than driving, but there is still room for improvement. Biking in Florence (and other Italian cities) is still a far cry from the high safety levels of pedalling in more bike-friendly cities across the Atlantic, such as Portland, Oregon. Julie Butterfield reflects on her experience biking in Florence and the trials and tribulations of getting from point A to point B on two wheels—and arriving in one piece.



To ride or not to ride. Environmentalists tell us we should be using bikes instead of cars to cut down on pollution. Health experts say we should ride to improve our health. City planners report less traffic congestion when more people bike. But what do psychiatrists say? I suspect psychiatry patients who travel by bike communicate a ratcheting toll of trauma to their therapists.

I imagine that, like me, other expatriates in Florence are proud the day they become one of the glamorous *ciclisti* in the city, breezing through piazzas on their two-wheelers. But after the romance fades, riders are faced with a quandary. That is, the quandary of riding one's bike versus, in the spirit of recognizing one's mortality, not riding it and opting for an alternative means of transport. Because it's easy to get cold feet after dueling with the pedestrians in borgo La Croce. It's difficult to forget the experience of that beeping C2 bus bearing down on you on a street the width of a Kit Kat. Who can forget the first time a speeding cab forced you to scramble onto a jam-packed side-

walk, where the lady with the stroller then yelled at you for using her path? It's those countless unforgettable moments, the times when one's blood turned to ice, that remind us of the glories of public transportation.

Smart cities paint bike paths to make it safer for bikers to get around. Florence has some (disconnected) red-painted bike paths that are supposed to be designated lanes for bikers only. Yet indifferent and oblivious, tourists use the red paths for strolling and ignore the manic shrill pitch of bikers' bells. I've tried whistling to move people out of the path, which can be effective, but it embarrasses anyone I'm with. Sometimes I have no choice but to wade on foot through the mass of people getting off a luxury cruiser, which heightens the risk of my handlebars snagging on someone's oversized floral blouse. However, the most common headache is caused by schizophrenic walkers: the people who walk in a slow and predictable manner but who, as soon as a biker comes within a nano-inch behind them, they cut off the biker's path by darting blithely toward a storefront.

It's fortunate that there are bodyguards to protect the important people, the ones that need saving from Florentine cyclists. Megan, a frequent cyclist, was riding home from the train station one afternoon, 'going really fast, headphones in, listening to an old Talking Heads album.' She turned a corner and suddenly, 'Huge man hands grabbed onto my handlebars and picked up the front end of my bike!' Before she could give the guy a piece of her mind, she saw Snooki from *Jersey Shore* standing behind him. She almost ran the reality show star over. Megan said that the bodyguard was shouting to her—maybe about slowing down—but she's not sure what he was saying because she was still listening to Talking Heads.

Expatriate Terese says riding is stressful to her because 'other people, cars and bikers never seem to make any attempt to accommodate anyone coming in the opposite direction.' She adds, 'It's as if they just know I will always give way!' Games like chicken can be fun. But I'm not sure if it should be requisite for riding our bikes in Florence.

Terese also brings up a disappointing realization about those cute baskets some of us use in front of our bikes. She said her bike feels 'wobbly' when she puts groceries in it. No one tells you that when you buy your bike basket, that it's just for looks. That the only thing it's good for is woven silk flowers. Weight in the basket throws off the bike's equilibrium, as if the handlebars have taken on a bowling ball. I myself had grand visions of toting baguettes and wine in my bicycle basket. But a baguette is too long and a wine bottle too fragile, and both threaten to launch from the basket over cobblestones.

In a telling example of the animosity between drivers and bikes, International School of Florence student Gabriel tells the story about the day he was forced to slam on his brakes to dodge a driver who didn't stop at the crosswalk. He avoided crashing into the car but ended up flipping over his bike, slamming into the driver's car door. At first, perhaps out of compassion, the driver

was apologetic, worried about Gabriel's condition. However, the motorist soon changed his mind and decided instead to be angry, blaming Gabriel for the accident as he stood there, bleeding from his arm.

Perhaps because my riding style is grandmotherly, hypercautious and snaillike, after a year of riding my bike in Florence, I haven't had a serious accident. Cynically, I assume motorists want nothing more than to turn bikers into road kill, so I never give them the benefit of the doubt. But the secret to avoiding bicycling accidents, the unquestionable method of deterring danger, the indisputable way to ensure safety from the hazards of riding your bike on a Florence street is perfectly foolproof: take ATAF.

Julie Butterfield is a woman of average height with brown hair and doesn't think people who wear Birkenstocks should be judged poorly. She also thinks it's okay to accomplish very little in the day, and she changes out of her pajama pants when expecting a package.

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