

# Cycling in Havana: Green Transportation by Default

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Cuba's political response to a changing world elicits strong emotions from its friends and enemies. Its streets appear to be trapped in time and its people constrained by forces beyond their control. At the peak of its alliance with the former USSR and its Eastern European allies, Cuba received nearly \$5 million in foreign aid daily. The collapse of the USSR in the late 1980s however, triggered draconian measures that now dominate Cuba's development and planning agendas.

This austere time, called the "Special Period in a Time of Peace," challenges the island's transportation system. Cuba must triage its use of petroleum -- usually of high sulphur content bought on the spot market-- because domestic supplies satisfy just one percent of its domestic oil needs. Petroleum requires hard currency which is in scarce supply. Although it is only too willing to exchange sugar for oil (it continues to do so with Russia, but at increasingly unfavourable terms for the island) most petroleum purchases are targeted to public utilities, factories, and fuelling tractors for sugar-cane harvests. Cuba's transportation system is indicative of the radical turn the country has taken. Automobile and bus travel receive low priority during these dire times.

If Cuba elicits strong emotions from most readers who hold polarized views of the Revolution, the beauty of Havana is sure to be a point of consensus. Situated on the Straits of Florida where 16th and 17th century garrisons guard a harbour that was once coveted by corsairs and pirates, the Malecon seaside promenade figures prominently in postcard images of this tropical city. Havana's splendid colonial, modern, and Art Deco architectural styles have earned it a variety of names: The Nice of the Caribbean," "The Paris of the Antilles, and the "City of Columns," and Old Havana has been immortalized by Cuban writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Reinaldo Arenas, and Jose Lezama Lima. Havana had a special allure to foreigners who visited the city after the 1959 Revolution, with its old '57 Chevys ,49 Buicks, and other classics from an era when Elvis actually wore blue suede shoes.

Today, the four lane Malecon carries **more cyclists than automobiles**. Bicycle commuters fret more about strong North-easterly Trade Winds and the occasional wave that breaks over the sea wall than about bumper to bumper car traffic and air pollution which afflicts most Latin American cities. The Special Period has cleared Havana's streets of most of those gas guzzling 8 cylinder 'road hogs'; not by choice, mind you, but by the demands of the socialist system for fuel rationing, combined with Cuba's reinsertion into the global economy.

Just over 2 million residents call Havana home in a country of 11 million. Like many capital cities, Havana generates a disproportionate amount of the island's industrial output and holds the lion's share of the island's service economy. Once it was crisscrossed with a streetcar network that greatly expended during the U.S. occupation (1898-1902) following the Spanish-American War. Preference for the automobile led to the demise of the streetcar in the 1950s, and since then automobile and diesel engine buses came to dominate. Since the 1960s Eastern European-designed buses have run through Havana's streets. By 1990, however, the number of bus trips and routes began declining.

In 1986, Havana's buses accounted for 86% of total trips by motorized transport, and automobiles--never a significant mode of transportation, accounted for just 6%. Roughly half of the 200 buses in Havana are now out of circulation, and many bus routes have been eliminated, consolidated or cut back, making lengthy waits at crowded bus stops a multi-hour endeavour.

In the wake of this transportation crisis has come a **huge increase in bicycles**. In 1990, Habaneros used their roughly 70,000 bicycles mostly for recreation and sport. By 1993, Havana had 700,000 bicycles and 1000 cargo tricycles, mostly purchased from China. Today, bicycles are used mainly for commuting. Unlike in China, though, Cuba has not had a bicycle culture. No road space had been dedicated to non-motorized vehicles before the 'Special Period,' nor were there traffic signs or data.

With the Special Period, however, all this began to change. The Chinese models Phoenix, Forever, and Flying Pigeon can now be bought on instalment plans for from between \$60 pesos for students to \$120 pesos for workers. In deflated 1995 real dollars, this ranges from \$1 to \$2 USD.

Some of the side-effects of the shift to the bicycle include **less air pollution** in Havana, **greater commuting time** for workers, and a **proliferation of private sector bicycle repair and parking services**. When Fidel Castro legalized more than 100 private sector occupations in July of 1993, employment in bicycle cottage industries grew rapidly. Tire repair services, bicycling parking lots, and mechanical repair shops continue to proliferate throughout Havana, and employ many workers idled by public down-sizing and factory closings. Last year the kind of bicycle taxis common in South Asia surfaced in the Vedado tourist district for foreigners seeking a ride along the Malecon or the tree-covered side streets of Vedado and Miramar. Tourists can also rent bicycles and jump into the fray themselves.

The big increase in demand for bicycles has had considerable spill-over effects on the Cuban economy. Although China has been the main supplier of bicycles to Cuba, **Cuba is increasingly building more of its own bicycles and components**. In 1990 the Giron bus factory in Havana was refit and retooled for the manufacture of bicycles. After its first year of operation it produced approximately 20,000 bicycles. Projected production for 1995 is 100,000 bicycles. Cubans can now manufacture all components except spokes, bearings, the rear hub and chains, and heavy-gauge seamless pipe, which comes from Mexico. The Cuban 26" wheeled bicycle is about 15 pounds lighter than the 57 lb. Chinese models and better suited for multiple purposes than the 28" Asian wheel. Cuban bikes also come in a variety of colours (now in 12 tropical varieties), and most use the all-terrain type straight handlebar.

Habaneros are only slowly adjusting to bicycle transportation. Until recently, most had not used the bicycle for other than recreational purposes. Riding in traffic--usually with hundreds of other cyclists rather than in automobile-clogged streets--has meant learning a whole new set of skills. Ignored stop signs, pot hole-ridden streets, tropical downpours, and other obstacles have produced numerous bicycle accidents and even a few casualties. In 1990, for instance, about 1/3 of the 306 road fatalities in Havana were non-motorized vehicle-related.

City officials, however, are working towards making Havana **a safer city for cyclists**. Today there are at least 26 kms. of non-motorized vehicle-dedicated lanes and cycle paths throughout Havana.

Havana's beauty is even more striking when seen gliding along on a two-wheeler. Although the City's roads were never heavily bogged down with automobile traffic, travelling around the city by bicycle for the foreigner is a beautiful experience. In the eyes of most Cubans, however, it is a mixed blessing. Most Cubans begrudgingly accept it as the only way to get around.

On the one hand, the rise in cycling is a rational coping mechanism during the Special Period, is environmentally friendly, and provides excellent exercise. On the other hand, commuting time has increased as many household heads drop off spouse and children, all packed onto one bike, at their various destinations. Bicycle theft has also increased, partly because of the new 'liberties' that Cuba's free market economy has brought, and partly because locks are scarce.

Finally, Habaneros are exerting more physical energy on their commute at a time of food rationing when belt sizes are being ratcheted down. There is growing concern about productivity among labourers who on average confront a decreasing caloric intake. A taxing commute in a torrid climate can weaken some cyclists, especially the elderly. Some Habaneros who arrive at work hot, tired, and at a job site with few co-workers are unwilling to sacrifice so much for jobs that pay in pesos. Transportation difficulties and falling worker productivity only irritate the city's broader economic problems.

The rise of this new, green, and ecologically sound means of transportation, however, brings other rewards. Havana officials offer a 'ciclo-bus', or bicycle bus that carries commuters from the huge post revolutionary suburb of Habana del Este (Eastern Havana) and their bikes to and from the central city. This is a **safety** measure to carry cyclists who would otherwise have to travel next to cars in a narrow and dimly lit tunnel running under the Bay of Havana. Flat bed trailers assist the ciclo-bus by shuttling thousands of cyclists through in 'rush' hours.

Havana's turn to the two-wheel machine is not a policy of choice, but neither were the 1973 OPEC oil price increases that forced American car manufacturers to produce more economically and environmentally friendly cars. Will Havana maintain its use of non-motorized transport once economic recovery sets in? The 34-year old U.S. boycott continues to make any imminent economic bonanza highly unlikely, especially considering the increasingly hostile U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba. Will the bicycle permanently replace the automobile? This seems unlikely. Regardless of how Cuba navigates its present economic storm, it is improbable that either the nation or its capital will revert back to the pre- Special Period levels of subsidized fossil-fuel driven transportation.

Politics and shifts in global political alliances often produce unintended outcomes. Cycling through the rolling hills of Havana reveals the tenacity of Cubans in the face of extreme adversity. It also highlights the practical aspects of simple, sustainable transportation. Bicycle lanes continue to be added, and after six years of bicycle commuting, Habaneros are as likely to welcome lightweight alloy bicycles as cheap gasoline vouchers--even if they could get spare parts for those old '57 Chevys.

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