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Spin City

By LYDIA POLGREEN

OVER the summer I decided that I was going to bike to work. I had always been a weekend rider, going on epic loops through the city, for 30 or 40 miles in an afternoon. From the vantage point of a bike, the city presents itself as a savorable panorama passing by at a speed somewhere between the blur outside a car window and the plodding pace of walking.

Most of my favorite bits of city life were discovered on my bike - the little smoothie shop I love in Inwood, the ghostly side street in Bedford-Stuyvesant that pleases me with its distinctly urban stillness. But like most New Yorkers, I felt that the streets were probably too dangerous for using a bike as serious transportation.

Now, however, I imagined I would join an intrepid crowd of two-wheeled warriors, elegantly swooping through rows of stalled cars and past flat-footed pedestrians. Sure, mine would be a white-knuckle ride, but it would be worth it.

On my first day out, my vision of going up against the mean streets crumbled. A few blocks from my apartment in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, I found myself riding a broad, well-marked bike path leading directly to my first destination, the Manhattan Bridge. After a smooth East River crossing and a dash west on Canal Street, I hopped on the West Side Highway bike path, and before I knew it I was at my office in Times Square.

The trip was not just painless; it was relaxing and deeply enjoyable. As I locked up my bike, still stunned at how easy the seven-mile ride had been, I wondered: Could New York be on the verge of becoming a bicycle-friendly city? I decided to try to find out by spending one week biking everywhere.

The city has nearly quadrupled the miles of bike paths, from on-street lanes to greenways, since 1997, and more people than ever are cycling. According to the city's Department of Transportation, the number of people riding through Midtown in 2003 had tripled since 1980, to about 15,300. Still, New York is no Amsterdam, where bikes have not only their own lanes but their own traffic signals, or Chicago, which recently opened a bike depot in the heart of downtown. New York's relationship with bicycles has always been complex, from its apex in the late 19th century, when the velocipede set off a craze that spawned 53 bicycle clubs, to its nadir a century later, when Mayor Ed Koch tried to ban bikes from Midtown.

Though New York's topography - flat and compact - is perfectly suited to biking, temperamentally it has never been able to make peace with the bicycle. In the minds of many, bikes are at best a toy trotted out on weekends, and at worst a human-powered missile, often guided by messengers who delight in mowing down little old ladies.

Since 1973, Transportation Alternatives, an advocacy group, has fought to improve conditions for cyclists and won some big victories, like getting bicycle access on all the East River bridges. But Noah Budnick, who runs the group's bicycle programs, said the city still had a long way to go. "I don't know how you can say the city is bicycle-friendly," he said one morning as we dodged traffic. "I am riding on a side street in Midtown, and I am scared out of my mind. And I have been riding in the city for 10 years."

Iris Weinshall, the city's transportation commissioner, sees changing that reality as part of her mission. "It is an integral part of our thinking now," she said. "Every project we begin, we take cycling into consideration. We hope that one day New York will be one of the world's great bicycling cities."

I was about to find out how far it had to go.

The Commute

Commuting was the heart of my bicycle plan. I would save \$4 a day, get in shape, and could cover the distance in less time than it took on the subway. But the idea raised a host of questions. Would I be safe? Where would I keep my bike all day? Would I be a sweaty mess when I got to the office?

Riding a bike in Manhattan traffic requires a peculiar combination of patience, persistence and pluck. On the first day of my experiment, I would need all three.

I wanted to try First Avenue, which several messengers told me is something of a bicycle superhighway. On a good day, a skilled rider can sprint uptown, hitting each light as it turns green.

But this would not be a good day. For starters, it was raining. After I crossed the Manhattan Bridge, I missed the green light at Delancey Street because a delivery van was blocking the bike lane, and a taxi had me boxed in on the other side.

The bike path heading north ends at Houston Street, so from there you are pretty much on your own, dodging lumbering buses and squealing cabs. The rain and the dull patter of traffic lulled me, and I didn't notice when a man with gout-swollen legs and a cane emerged from a town car and stepped an uncertain foot onto the blacktop. I careened to a stop just in time, my back wheel popping off the ground as I slammed on my brake, my feet tumbling out of my toe clips.

Shaken, I got back in the saddle and pedaled slowly to 45th Street, where I cut across town. As I turned onto Seventh Avenue and saw the steam rising from the Cup Noodles sign in Times Square, I felt a surge of relief.

The Night Ride

Getting home late at night can be a drag. There is nothing worse than that long, sticky wait for a train after midnight, or forking over \$10 to \$15 for a cab.

Michael Musto, the Village Voice columnist and an intrepid cyclist, told me that people laugh when he shows up in black tie on his battered bicycle. But, as he pointed out, "It is cheaper than a cab and faster than the subway."

One Tuesday night, I tried it myself. After a Brooklyn Cyclones game in Coney Island, full of hot dogs and cold beer, I decided to return along the Bedford Avenue bike path, from Sheepshead Bay to Atlantic Avenue. Just before midnight, I set off.

As I rolled through Sheepshead Bay and Midwood, I could have been in any small town; big houses sat on well-tended lawns, and a canopy of huge trees drooped over the streets. But crossing Flatbush Avenue gave me a start. Stately houses became chock-a-block tenements. The pavement rapidly deteriorated, and seamless lawns gave way to liquor stores, Laundromats and check cashing shops.

I crossed Atlantic Avenue, and was minding my own business when a woman leaned out of her minivan window and yelled, "Bitch!" This happens sometimes when you're riding a bike. People hate you for no good reason. I sped up my cadence and slipped into the darkness.

Locking Up

In 1999, the Department of City Planning conducted a survey to find out why New Yorkers did not bike to work. The biggest reason was not fear for safety but fear of bike theft.

More than 10,000 bikes are reported stolen in New York every year, and countless more thefts go unreported. Many people try to get around this by buying a beat-up bike. But any bicycle, ugly or not, has value to thieves. "If you buy a bike for \$50 and lock it with a \$10 lock, of course it is going to get stolen," said Will Wood, owner of Spokes and Strings, a Williamsburg bike shop. "But if you have a good lock and are smart about where you lock it, you will probably be fine."

But having a good lock solves just half the problem. You need a secure place to lock your bike. The Department of Transportation has a program to install bike racks around the city, wherever there is demand and enough sidewalk space. There are thousands of racks, but still not nearly enough, something I discovered on many occasions, most surprisingly around Madison Square Garden, which sits atop a transportation hub. I once spent 20 minutes searching for a place to lock my bike, but found only lampposts sternly warning against locking bikes there. I locked mine to one anyway, hoping it would be there when the Prince concert I was headed to was over. Luckily, it was.

To the Beach

No matter what the Metropolitan Transportation Authority says, getting to a quality beach on public transportation is

no picnic, and driving is lousy, too; there's traffic, then parking, then the hike to the bathhouse. One Sunday morning I decided to try it on two wheels with my girlfriend, Candace.

We discovered that the ride to Jacob Riis Park is one of the city's hidden gems. Completed mostly on flat off-street bike paths, it was an irresistible ride through Prospect Park's loop, and along Ocean Parkway, which has a lovely, shaded lane that is the nation's oldest urban bike path, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and built in 1895.

From there we took Neptune Avenue east, and were soon back on a bike path, the Shore Parkway Greenway. At first the path was not promising, with scrub brush to the right and a clogged highway to the left. Then, a twinkling vista of sailboats and glittering waves appeared, and the Marine Parkway Bridge beckoned. Before we knew it, we had crossed Rockaway Inlet, and the ocean air washed over us.

On the way home, Candace had a flat tire, and we discovered that we had left home without some urban-cyclist essentials: a spare inner tube or a patch kit and a pump.

Candace flagged down a cyclist who turned out to be a firefighter. He gave us a tube and even installed it, but it magically deflated near the A train at Rockaway Boulevard. We were deflated, too, and took advantage of one of the great benefits of cycling in the city, the ability to bring your bike on the subway.

To the Bronx Zoo

On the last day of the experiment, only one borough remained unvisited, the Bronx. (I disqualified Staten Island because it is not possible to reach solely by bike; the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge has no bike path.) I had never been to the Bronx Zoo, which is a good 18 miles from my apartment, so that seemed a reasonable destination.

First, Candace and I stopped at Spokes and Strings to make a minor repair on my bike. There we met Nita Zackson, Ann Hall and Joan Redican, three women from Bellerose, Queens, who were deep into a long ride that would take them over several major bridges in the city. "It is amazing how easy it is to ride a bike in New York now," said Ms. Zackson, 59, a Y.M.C.A. wellness coordinator. "It just seems to get better and better. Now you can go practically anywhere."

Inspired, we set off despite threatening clouds. We started at the Williamsburg Bridge, which has a terrific path except for one problem - huge bumps that have caused several cyclists to crash.

The East River path in Manhattan is a sorry mirror image of the Hudson River path. It is rutted, impossibly narrow in spots, and in Midtown it ends abruptly, spilling riders into a chaotic intersection off the F.D.R. Drive. Though the path continues uptown after 59th Street, we never got back on because the signs were confusing. Instead, we took First Avenue to the Willis Avenue Bridge. Here again, signs were sorely needed to help a cyclist cross the bridge safely, and it took considerable trial and error to figure out which side to use.

The bike lane system in the Bronx, as in the rest of the city, can charitably be described as incomplete. We followed a bike path on Prospect Avenue until it ended just past Boston Road, then muddled our way through Crotona Park and over to the zoo.

As we passed the polar bears, it started pouring. Determined to make it home on our bikes, we took Fordham Road to the University Heights Bridge into Inwood, barely escaping being mowed down at the bridge entrance, where again no signs indicated where the bike path was.

Candace gave up when we got to the A train in Inwood. But I pressed on. At first it seemed I had made a terrible mistake. The rain intensified, soaking me as I ground my way down the deserted West Side path. But there were compensations. Sure, I would have been dry on the subway. But I would not have seen how New Jersey floated like a shrouded outline, ethereal across the Hudson, nor the way a blanket of clouds muffled Manhattan's spiky skyline. I had the path to myself, and I sped up.

As I exited on the Brooklyn side of the Manhattan Bridge, my cellphone rang. It was Candace, who had just arrived home. I checked my odometer: I had traveled 42 miles, more than 200 total for the week. I was sopping wet, chilled to the bone and exhausted. I had never felt better. I stashed my phone in my backpack, threw my leg over my bike, and rode home.

Though calling New York bike-friendly would be a stretch, the frosty relationship between city and bike has thawed. Adrian Benepe, the city's parks commissioner and a lifelong cyclist, told me that one day he hoped to see ribbons

of green joining the city's neighborhoods, a seamless network for cycling and nonmotorized forms of transportation.

This is a cyclist's dream. Clearly the city isn't there yet, but it has progressed. Or, as Mr. Benepe put it, pun perhaps intended, "We are on the right path."