



Pedalling around Paris

Wide boulevards, tourist attractions, and pavement cafés make Paris a pleasant city to explore by bike. Journalist **Graham Barker** did so by Vélib'



There's no yellow jersey in sight. The pavements are busy with shoppers and office workers, not lined with flag-waving crowds. But as I cycle along the wide boulevards and head cautiously around the Place de la Bastille, I feel a thrill. On Sunday 24th July, some 200 Tour de France cyclists will be zipping through here, on their final dash through south-east Paris from Créteil towards the Champs-Élysées.

After a quick Eurostar trip, I'm here for a weekend to explore the city's fringes on a Vélib' hire bike. The Vélib' – a fusion of vélo (bicycle) and liberté (freedom) – has been enthusiastically embraced by Parisians since it was introduced in 2007. Over 80 million bike trips have been made, there's a steady base of 160,000 annual subscribers, and the network of docking stations is currently being extended into the suburbs. I'm keen to find out what makes it such a 'succès formidable.'

Exploring on one Euro

I start at Porte Dorée, one of around 1,800 Vélib' docking stations scattered throughout the city. Registering takes a few minutes; the terminals provide step-by-step instructions in French, English and other languages. For a one-day €1 pass, I'm prompted to insert a credit card (chip and pin only) to cover the €150 deposit, and create another pin for additional security. A ticket pokes out, the terminal offers a selection of six bikes, and I'm ready to begin.

To get to grips with riding a Vélib', I head first into the Bois de Vincennes. Known as the 'lungs of Paris', this immense park was once a favourite royal hunting ground. These days it's a popular destination for dog-walkers, joggers, horse-riders and cyclists. I pedal beside the fairground ferris wheels and skirt the perimeter of Lac Daumesnil, before forking off past the Buddhist temple. The bike is heavy but functional – built for reliability rather than speed – with three gears, a useful front basket and dynamo lights.

By the Velodrome, I spot a Vélib' van and in fractured French chat with Maxim, one of about 40 operatives based at the Nation depot nearby. 'We take away any bikes to be repaired, and shuffle others

between stations where there are gaps,' he explains. In the early days, theft was a big problem with over 9,000 bikes stolen – 'some were found as far away as Africa,' Maxim continues – but nowadays security has improved. He demonstrates the lock cable on my bike.

Green transport

Across Avenue Saint-Maurice the terrain becomes more rugged. I weave through the woods – mostly on gravelled lanes, sometimes on heavily rutted mud – and arrive at the Château de Vincennes, with its fairytale donjon tower and gothic chapel.

Ready to head towards central Paris, I curve underneath the Périphérique ring road and join the Promenade Plantée. This former train line has been re-landscaped to create a 4.5 kilometre green corridor through the XIIth arrondissement. It's a tranquil space enjoyed by in-the-know locals and commuting cyclists, with tree-lined avenues and wild corners.

En route, I pass an unusually desolate docking station in Bel Air, where users have reversed all five saddles to indicate a repair is needed. One bike has a flat tyre, others perhaps suffer with dodgy gears or a broken dynamo. With a heavily-used fleet of over 25,000 bikes, Maxim and his colleagues are kept busy with maintenance.

In the elevated sections of the Promenade Plantée, cycling is not permitted so I take the opportunity to dock on Allée Vivaldi and explore the Jardin de Reuilly on foot. With a determined shove, the bike clicks back in and the green light confirms it's locked. It's the place to discover La Pétillante – literally, 'she who sparkles' – a novel drinking fountain that dispenses carbonated Paris tap water. I refill my bottle, and take a few refreshing gulps.

Cafés and canals

I hire my next Vélib' by Avenue Daumesnil. The red-brick railway viaduct stretches ahead, topped with lime trees and bamboo. And below, some 70 arches form the Viaduc des Arts, a procession of chic boutiques, artisans' workshops and the occasional café.

It's my first busy road. But



Photos by Graham Barker

thankfully the enlightened Paris transport planners have made the most of the city's broad boulevards by configuring a 645-kilometre network of dedicated bike lanes, mostly segregated from traffic by a raised concrete kerb. Clear road markings help me nip confidently from one section to another.

By the Canal St Martin, I'm ready for the waterside leg of my trip. Cycling isn't officially permitted on many Paris towpaths – and in any case the cobbles don't make for a comfortable ride – but the adjacent cycle lanes still offer good views across the waterways. On Sundays, there's even more space thanks to the mayor's car-free Paris Respire initiative.

Opened in 1825 as a short-cut between the snaking Seine, the Canal St Martin runs for 4.5 kilometres from Porte de l'Arsenal. For about half its length it's underground, as Napoleon was keen to allow military manoeuvres free from the attentions of any revolutionaries. Place de la Bastille is a political hotspot – the focus for the 1789 and 1830 revolutions and still a rallying point for demonstrations today. It's a cycling hotspot too, with a certain nerve needed to negotiate a way through the traffic.

Travelling up Boulevard Richard Lenoir is a safer and more relaxing experience. I pedal past office workers snacking on lunchtime baguettes and youngsters playing open-air table tennis. Annoyingly, the market traders' vans by Rue Oberkampf block the cycle lane, but it's an excuse to hop off and wheel my way beside locals stocking up on saucisson, oozing cheeses and plump vine tomatoes.

Liberating Paris

Back in the saddle, there's a fleeting glimpse of Place de la République before the canal finally emerges from its tunnel. A series of iron footbridges arch their way over the water, and the neighbourhood is a magnet for a bohemian crowd. Feeling peckish, I dock and take a break at Chez Prune, a friendly café on the corner of Rue Beaurepaire. It's a good spot to people watch whilst enjoying an indulgent lunch.

Refreshed, I head over the swing-bridge and scoop up my third Vélib'



outside Hotel du Nord. My route slopes gently upwards, past the white modernist Clairefontaine stationery office, the Valmy Cycle shop, and under the high-level Metro bridge into Jaures station.

Spray from the fountains provides a welcome cool at the Basin de la Villette. This was once the city's principal trading port for corn, stone and wood, and these days hosts more recreational pursuits. I switch west-side along the Quai de Seine and, beyond the cinema and puppet barge, old men playing boules and dominoes with great concentration. Beyond the Pont de Crimée – an unusual 1885 hydraulic drawbridge – graffiti-covered walls add a little urban grittiness.

Within 20 minutes, I'm at the Parc de la Villette, my final destination. Spliced by the canal, the park is a visual feast, dotted with 26 red 'folies' that serve variously as climbing frames, water features and ticket offices. The garden trail snakes me through sycamore groves and beside sunken bamboo gardens. Along the way, the Géode – a giant mirrored hemispherical cinema – glints outside the science museum.

I can't resist a chuckle at Claes Oldenburg's 'La Bicyclette Ensevelie' sculpture – a half-buried cluster of bicycle parts. Children clamber over the saddle, families picnic under the spoked wheel and couples chat beside the giant pedal. Thankfully, my bike and I have arrived safely, in one piece, at the end of this 21-kilometre ride. As I dock back beside the Metro at Porte de Pantin, I can now appreciate first-hand how the Vélib' – the freedom bicycle – is giving Parisians and tourists alike a liberating way to see the city afresh.



(Left) Velib station by Canal St Martin. There are 1,800 docking stations in Paris (Right) Part of La Bicyclette Ensevelie ('the buried bicycle') in Parc de la Villette

Fact file Paris by Vélib'

Vélib' hire: Register at any docking station. Day membership costs €1, the first half-hour is free, and it ratchets up at €1, €2 then €4 for every half-hour thereafter. Visit www.velib.paris.fr for details.

Cycling conditions: Paris is cycling-friendly, with dedicated lanes, clear road markings and flat terrain.

Maps and guides: Free street maps are available at mainline stations and tourists offices. Try 'Secret Paris' for unusual sights and 'Time Out Paris' for hotels, cafés and shops.

Visit: Explore Graham's route in eastern Paris, or in the west investigate the Bois de Boulogne, La Défense and Château de Malmaison.

Avoid: Approach busy junctions with care. Some parks and towpaths are cycle-free – look for signs.

Getting there: Eurostar provides a frequent and quick service from St Pancras to Gare du Nord, with return fares from £69. Visit www.eurostar.com

Taking your own bike: Free, if dismantled and placed in a compact bike bag. Or £22 each way as registered baggage. Handy hints at www.seat6l.com

Tour de France: Visit www.letour.fr/us/homepage_horscourseTDEhtml