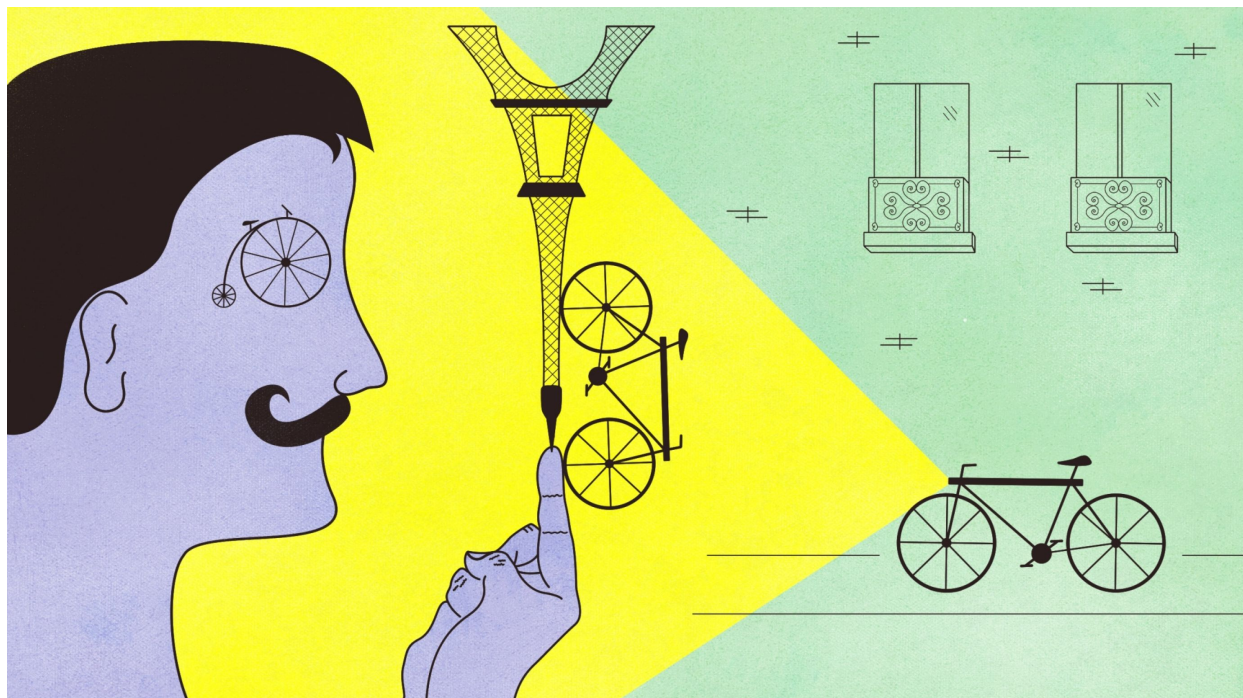


# Between myth and reality: Paris, the cycling city

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Illustrated by Chris Friborg

We all know the cliché of the Parisian on a bike. Baguette/flowers in the basket, free-wheeling along the Seine or down the cobbled streets. From film and television to literature and sporting events, there's plenty of cultural evidence to support France's long-standing love affair with the *vélo*. But how close is this pinky-hued image to reality?

Paris aims to be (petrol) car-free by 2030 and with rising pollution linked to half a million premature deaths in Europe each year, the capital has more than enough of an incentive to get clean. Launching no-car days and pedestrianising the *voies sur berges* (roads bordering the Seine) were just the beginning of Paris's green future. When Paris' Mayor Anne Hidalgo declared that Paris was going to become the next cycling city, she meant it business. The goal? "For the bike to become a fully-fledged mode of transport for commuters, and that getting Parisians back into the saddle will mean public transport is less crowded and will encourage them to abandon individual car travel," said Christophe Najdovski, Deputy to the Mayor of Paris. On paper, the objective is to triple the number of journeys made by bike in Paris by 2020, from 5% to 15%.

## A green plan of action

Launched in April 2015, Plan Vélo will cost an estimated €150 million to complete. Not only is Plan Vélo a bid to conserve the efforts made by the Paris Climate Agreement, but it is the best alternative to the current bottlenecks and bursting metro carriages. "Car is by far the least mobile mode of transport: a maximum of 800 vehicles can circulate on one lane of traffic, which, with an average occupancy rate of only 1.2 persons per vehicle, represents

960 people. A single bus lane with a maximum frequency of 1 bus every 1.5 minutes can transport 3,600 people. A bike path can transport 60 bicycles per minute, therefore, 3,600 people per hour. So it's just common sense!", Najdovski continued.

So, the intentions are clear but how is Plan Vélo moving? Police concern for pedestrian safety, enraged drivers, bitching politicians... Camp Hidalgo is facing problems. With mounting clashes between Parisians and the council, it's a war between cars and bikes, and left and right-wing politics. Can the City of Light really become the City on Two Wheels, or is the biker's Paris just a projection of *la vie en rose*? Or, has Paris - as many diehard fans would say - always been a biking city at heart?



## A legacy on two wheels

With its current structure, Paris can't be classified as a cycling city in the way that Amsterdam or Copenhagen are. But socially, the bike has influenced several important moments in French history and culture, resulting in a prominent relationship.

Although its creation is varied and often disputed, in 1866, when the bicycle was only two wheels and a saddle, French carriage-maker Pierre Lallemand nabbed the first US patent to add pedals on it - giving us the model we know today. In Paris, the bike became the latest accessory, with the upper classes scrambling to be seen on one from around 1895 to the beginning of the First World War. Approximately 300,000 bikes were active in France during 1895, swelling to 3.5 million under 20 years later in 1914.

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Paris became the trailblazer for all things bike, setting the trend for the sport and style of the era. Needless to say how significant the first Tour de France in 1903 was for the capital and the nation as a whole. Representing a modern era with a newfound image of freedom, the bike became a suffragette symbol. Used by French women during the 1880s, riding a bike was the ultimate two-fingers to constrictive clothing and a significant tool in the quest for gender equality.

The bike's popularity continued throughout the 1930s, 40s and 50s. According to Hugh Dauncey, author of *French Cycling. A social and cultural history*, in the latter, "an early version of mountain biking was invented in the suburbs of Paris" as well as the integration of "long-distance tourist cycle routes."

Transportation, tourism, technology — the bicycle had it all. Even with the arrival of the car, "The two were perceived as belonging to the same mechanical universe," said Philippe Gaboriau, a sociologist and historian specialising in France's cycling heritage. He continued; "There have been two 'moments', historically, when cycling was trendy and massively used...Why not a third period, today?"

## The myth, the reality

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The bohemian image of cycling through Paris, is far more problematic in present day. Bikes and buses often share lanes, markings are worn out, roads are thin and cyclists are forced into oncoming traffic. Then there's the cobbled streets. And as for personal safety, there's rarely a helmet seen on heads and back in 2015 bikes got the green light to run reds. The rebellious Parisian nature seeps into more than just literature and art.

Gaboriau, elaborated: "The bike symbolises another entity. It causes a problem in the city center amongst the well-off circles (who live there) and tourists who visit. The more crowded suburbs where bikes are more frequently used are often forced to take the car or public transport to enter the city. There's a separation between Paris and Greater Paris." Geographically, there's a disparity between where people are cycling and where people want to cycle — something that Hidalgo wants to change.

For Frédérique Jastrzebski, the third generation owner of historic Parisian biking company, Maison Tamboite, "Paris is a cycling city because the bike is in the heart of all true Parisians." A heritage brand making made-to-measure bikes, Frédérique's great grandfather saw clients including Edith Piaf, Marlene Dietrich and Josephine Baker step through his door. Maison Tamboite attest through the customers, famous or not, that the cycling spirit that has always been a part of the urban fabric. However, Jastrzebski continued, "Thanks to the efforts of the Mairie, Parisians are progressively re-finding the pleasure of cycling...to use it as a natural method of transport and a component of their identity."

So while Paris *la ville à vélo* might be a long way off, many would affirm that Paris's cycling soul never left.



Other large French cities are proof that cycling isn't just a Nordic thing. Strasbourg has 16% of its population cycling to work, and 11% in Bordeaux. So while Paris's diminutive 4% has room to grow, there's plenty of evidence to say that it can be done.

Cycling cities given to us by the Nords have become a blueprint, because they've proven to work well. However, Paris has examples of architecture that dates back more a millennium, a population of 3 million (triple that of Amsterdam), and strict urban regulations. Even with Plan Vélo finished, Paris is far from having the makeup of a cycling city... as we know them.

But who says the rulebook can't be rewritten? Paris has always done things a little differently.



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*Illustrated by Chris Fiborg.*