The Bicycle Diaries

Is it possible to live in America without a car? Uh, sort of.

By Bill Gifford
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"I can't believe how windy it is today," said the woman in line at the pet store.

"I know," said the cashier. Then, rolling her eyes and nodding meaningfully in my direction, she added, "and some people are riding their bikes."

"Mmmm," said her customer, gathering up her kitty litter and heading for her minivan, studiously avoiding even a glance in my direction, which was difficult because I was holding the door open for her.

After two weeks of riding my bicycle everywhere, I'd gotten used to people treating me as if I were somehow not right in the head. Store clerks ignored me, old men gave me the hard stare, soccer moms avoided eye contact. After all, almost nobody in America rides a bike if they can afford a car.

But after Katrina jacked gas prices toward $4 a gallon, my Volvo station wagon was starting to seem a lot less affordable. It wasn't just the $50 fill-ups, either, but the $400-plus repair bill that resulted from the Volvo's annual state inspection, on top of a $200 insurance payment, and the costly new drive shaft that she still needs, the insatiable beast. In mid-October, under the influence of warm fall weather and a recent visit to Amsterdam, I decided to opt out of humanity's little deal with the Devil, known as the automobile.

Long story short: At least I tried.

It seemed easy enough. I'm what the newspapers call an "avid" cyclist—rhymes with "rabid." I own four bikes, which I rarely use for actual transportation. Like most of the 90 million Americans who swung a leg over a bicycle last year, including our president, I rode for fitness and recreation only.

Then, last month, I went to Amsterdam for a friend's birthday party. I was amazed: Everyone rode bikes, everywhere. I saw 80-year-olds pedaling along beside young mothers with two and even three small children perched on various parts of their bikes, and dads trundling off to work in business suits and nice Italian shoes. The Dutch, I
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In late October, I took a vow of automotive abstinence. I’d go everywhere by bike: daily errands, social events, even the “office” (a Wi-Fi cafe where I often work—4 miles away, over a decent-sized hill). I don’t commute to an actual job, but I would go somewhere every day, rain or shine. I allowed a few exceptions, like emergency vet visits and picking up friends from the train station. Otherwise, I’d be helping to cut down on greenhouse-gas pollution and traffic congestion, while keeping myself in shape. I was well ahead of the curve: According to one survey, gas would have to hit $5 per gallon before a majority of Americans would consider walking or riding bikes as alternative transportation.

I’m not like most Americans: I have no kids to chauffeur to soccer practice, no elderly parents to care for, and I commute in slippers. I would still need to eat, however, and I would continue to go to restaurants and movies and parties and shopping. Although I live in a semirural area, suburbia is closing in on all sides, with more housing developments every year. As in much of suburbia, there are almost no services within easy walking distance: It’s 2 miles to the convenience store where I buy the New York Times, 6 miles to the grocery and pet stores, 4 miles to my favorite bar. The former country roads around here are becoming busier all the time. Luckily, a defunct local railway line had recently been converted to a 17-mile recreation trail that passes fairly close to the stores I most often visit, as well as a couple of pretty good bars and restaurants. I’d be riding a lot of miles, but as it turned out, the mileage wouldn’t be the problem.

That first Sunday, I hopped on a bike to go get the paper, just a couple miles down the rail-trail. I wore jeans, mistake No. 1: By the time I reached the Sunoco, I was profoundly chafed, and worse, my Banana Republic jeans now sported a black, greasy streak at about midcalf, from rubbing against the chain. It was chilly, and I was a tad hung over from a party the night before. By the time I got home, I had a raging tension headache, thanks to my hunched-over riding position.

Three Advils later, I looked at my bike with fresh eyes. It had a skinny little seat that all but required me to wear padded cycling pants when I rode. The handlebars were set forward and low, so a stretchy top was also a must—with a long tail, to avoid showing the cyclist’s equivalent of plumber’s crack. And it had special “clipless” pedals, which required me to wear special stiff-soled shoes with metal cleats on the bottom. Great for riding, not so much for walking. My beloved mountain bike had always seemed so comfortable on the local dirt trails. But like most bikes sold in the United States, it was an exercise machine, and not intended to be used for transportation. (There are some bikes that work well for city/transport use, including the functional Breeze, the retro-stylin’ Electra line of cruisers, and the supremely elegant Bianchi Milano, which is what I’d ride if I actually lived in Milano.)

Years ago, when I commuted by bike to an office job at a magazine, I had established a little routine. It was 6 miles each way, and I made sure to ride at a slow pace so I wouldn’t get too sweaty. Arriving at work before most of my colleagues, I’d shut my office door and read e-mails while I cooled down. Then I’d swab myself with Old Spice Red Zone and change into work clothes, trading my cycling shoes for the old Kenneth Coles I kept under my desk. By the time everyone else arrived, clutching their Dunkin’ Donuts coffee, I was fully dressed, awake, and presentable. Then one morning, while I was locking my bike to a parking meter, I happened to see the publisher, a pudgy-fingered little man who liked French cuffs and hated bike messengers, which is exactly what I resembled at that moment. My career at that magazine ended shortly thereafter.

I’ve got a whole dresser full of cycling clothes. And they work well, for their intended purpose, which is exercising. I actually thought they looked sort of cool, as long as you didn’t venture into the neon-yellow end of the color spectrum (or worse, purple). But as my first week carless progressed I realized that bike clothes only look good when you’re actually riding a bike. The moment you stop, get off, and walk around among normally-dressed people—say, when
you drop by the local Kmart and stroll about, in skintight Spandex, holding a toilet plunger—bike clothes don't seem quite so cool.

As I approached the Kmart cash registers in this early visit, metal cleats clicking on the linoleum tile, the cashier girls stopped comparing their incarcerated boyfriends and stared. Then they looked away. One studied her nails, while the other concentrated on scanning the plunger and counting change. This, I'd come to recognize, was The Silence, the awkward, get-this-over-with tension that often accompanied transactions where one party is clad head-to-toe in stretch synthetics that might not smell so great. I paid, grabbed the plunger, and click-clacked out the automatic sliding doors, to everyone's relief. And as I pedaled away, I realized that bike clothes aren't merely ugly, to normal people: They're transgressive.

So I did an extreme biker makeover: I bought baggy shorts to wear over my padded cycling clothes, to spare the sensibilities of store clerks and my fellow customers. I wore neutral-toned jerseys but kept the bright-gold nylon jacket, because it made me more visible and thus safer. I ditched the fancy pedals for regular, flat pedals, so I could ride in normal shoes. And I attached a rack to one of my racing bikes, an act of utter bike-geek sacrilege. It didn't matter: Sooner or later, I'd need to go get dog food.

Still, by the end of that first shakedown week, I was growing to enjoy my bike-bound, self-propelled life. I'd made an executive decision to ride slowly, because it wasn't fun to get all Lance Armstrong-sweaty and then stand in line at Foodland, sweating all over the broccoli. By necessity, I chose less-traveled roads, which led me to some interesting local discoveries, like a natural-foods market run by the Amish that stocked wild salmon and bison steaks. I got exactly one flat tire, on a 12-mile trek to have my DVD player repaired. Luckily I carried a spare tube—essential for any ride, as is a helmet—and was back on my way in less time than it would have taken to get my Volvo filled up and washed.

Since I couldn't carry more than about two or three bags worth of groceries, I needed to go shopping more often, but as long as the weather held, I didn't mind. In fact, I looked forward to longer trips, like a 10-mile jaunt to a local college library. The fresh air and exercise kept me alert during the afternoons, and after humping an Oven Stuffer Roaster up a 2-mile grade, there was certainly no need to go to the gym. At night, after a beer or two at the bar, I was probably safer riding on the wide, empty rail-trail than driving on the dark, narrow rural roads—and there were certainly no cherry-picking local cops lurking on the bike path.

Best of all, the bike turned out to be the hottest dating vehicle I've ever owned. One Sunday, my girlfriend and I rode to a nearby tavern for burgers and beers. We sat outside, enjoying one of the last of the warm fall afternoons and then wobbled back up the hill to our town. We got home feeling slightly sweaty, a bit tipsy, and full of adrenaline. (She opted out of the grocery-shopping trips, however, and refused to bike home from the Amtrak station at 10 p.m. on Friday nights.)

Slowly but surely, I started running low on dog food. And the thing about dog food is that the more you buy, the cheaper it is: A 5-pound bag of my pups' preferred brand goes for $12, while the 15-pounder costs $25. Plus, the 5-pounder would only last two or three days at the most, which is how I ended up in the pet store, lashing an alarmingly heavy sack of "Cowboy Cookout"-flavored kibble to my bike rack.

Once the load was secured, I set out, navigating the rather tricky strip-mall exit onto a busy state road. It soon became clear, as I pedaled along the gravel-strewn shoulder, that I had failed to anticipate the sketchy handling characteristics of a 19-pound bike laded with 15 pounds of dog food in a 25-mile-an-hour crosswind. One especially nasty gust pushed my top-heavy steed into the busy traffic lane; as I swerved back to the shoulder, the Cowboy Cookout decided to continue in a straight line, and the rear wheel skidded around, nearly tossing me into the guardrail.

That night, I went to watch Monday Night Football in the next town over. It was a beautiful, moonlit night, unseasonably warm (the wind had died down), and bright enough that I didn't even need my headlamp. As I sped home through the woods, I soon forgot about the Eagles' catastrophic loss. I crawled contentedly into bed ... and awoke with a full-blown head cold. It was my third minicold since I'd started this experiment, probably thanks to all the sweating and chilling I'd put myself through.
At any rate, I wanted only one thing: soup. And I had no soup. It was 40 degrees and pouring down rain. Without a second thought, I hopped into the car and raced down to Foodland, where I stocked up on Campbell's Select Savory Chicken and Long-Grain Rice, and other necessities (like ice cream) that I'd been doing without. On the way home, I passed the Sunoco station. $2.49 a gallon for premium, I decided, was a terrific bargain.

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