Tourism, Bicycle Mobilities and Cities¹

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Introduction

Modes of transport offer the far-flung transportation of tourists as well as their everyday micro-mobilities within tourist destinations. A key argument in the ‘mobilities literature is that transport is more than displacement and arrival; it is an embodied, multi-sensuous experience and different modes of transport are said to produce different embodied geographies and affective experiences of places (Urry, 2007). Yet the significance of transport to the tourist experience has been largely ignored in tourism studies; being understood as mere linear transportation: a necessary evil for reaching the desired destination (see Larsen, 2001). Larsen (2001) argues that transport is an integral part of the tourist experience; touristic transportation is not only a trivial question of overcoming distances and reaching one’s destination, it is also a way of being in, and experiencing, places. In particular, he shows how trains and cars are also technologies for visually experiencing or consuming those very places through mobile sightseeing. He suggests the notion of the ‘travel glance’ to capture what is characteristic of looking at fleeting landscapes through the window of the speeding car or train.

Yet cars are seldom used for urban exploration; congestion and lack of parking make it slow and expensive. Many urban tourists prefer to use public transport, walking and, as discussed in this article, bikes. This indicates that many car-dominated cities around the world invest in bicycle

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infrastructures to alleviate the pains of car-dependency. This chapter explores how we can understand urban cycling within a tourism context. This is a novel approach. The existing literature on ‘tourism cycling’ tends be concerned with cycling in rural areas (Pesses, 2010), often along designated leisure routes (Meschik, 2012; Cope, Doxford and Hill, 1998). Other articles deal with spectators to bike events such as the Tour de France (Berridge, 2012) and amateur cyclists training to climb mountains on the Tour de France route (Spinney, 2006) or participating in races (Bull, 2006, Coghlan, 2012). Some argue for the importance of making rigid definitions for what constitutes a proper ‘cycling tourist’ (Lamont, 2009).

In contrast, this article is concerned with tourists that use bikes on their vacations without necessarily considering themselves bike tourists. Few – if any – tourists travel to any city ‘just to cycle’ there, but many rent bikes, hire a rickshaw/cyclo or participate on a guided bike tour at some stage to get around and experience the city. Tourism, mobilities or bicycle scholars have not yet analyzed urban tourism cycling; this explorative chapter attempts to fill this void.

The chapter consists of four ethnographic vignettes, from Copenhagen (my home town), Amsterdam, London, and New York, respectively. The Copenhagen case is based on 30 short interviews with groups or pairs of international ‘cycling tourists’, of varied ages, as well as observations around attractions. The interview guide covered motivations for – and the pleasures and pains of – cycling in Copenhagen, and how it compares to cycling at ‘home’. The Amsterdam, London, and New York cases are (auto-)ethnographically based on observations and my cycling (in some instances with my family) as-a-tourist/ethnographer in these places (on auto-ethnography and cycling, see Larsen, 2014). The fieldwork took place between 2012 and 2014: it lasted one week in Amsterdam and four weeks in London and New York. This participatory and multi-sited perspective allows me to highlight differences between bike design and cycling in pro-cycling Copenhagen and Amsterdam and car-dominated – but bicycle aspiring – New York and London.
My partner and son (who was between eight- and nine-years-old during the studies) participated partly on these trips and they occasionally joined me cycling. On those occasions, my bicycle performances changed nature; they became more social and meandering, but also cautious and anxiety-ridden at times.

So, I explore how (different) cities are corporeally performed, sensed and experienced on bikes. What is unique to the ‘bike gaze’? How does it connect with the other senses? What are the emotional and affective pains and pleasures of cycling in pro-cycling cities and low-cycling cities, respectively? What services, designs and ‘place myths’ (Shields, 1991) afford (or hinder) cycling? So, the article contributes to two different sets of literature: on ‘tourism performances’ (Edensor, 1998; Haldrup and Larsen, 2010) and ‘embodied bicycle mobilities’ (Spinney, 2006; Jones, 2005, 2012; Larsen, 2014). Both ‘literatures’ are concerned with how people ‘do’ mobile performances and how objects, ‘systems’ and designed places present certain affordances and not others.

I begin with Copenhagen.

Copenhagen

‘Copenhagen is famously known for being a green capital with myriads of cyclists on our endless miles of bike lanes so why not experience Copenhagen on a bike like a native?’ (Visit Copenhagen)

“If the thought of experiencing a capital city on two wheels scares you, Copenhagen will soon change your mind. The city is built for cyclists and you’ll see more bikes than cars in the city centre …” (Visit Denmark)
I went for a long ride today around the tourist attractions. There is a new breed of cyclists in Copenhagen: tourists on hired bikes with hotel or rental shop logos, pottering about, leisurely. They increase in numbers as I make my way to Amalienborg and later The Little Mermaid. I think to myself: maybe our bike lanes and cycling culture are famous around the world, attractions even? (Diary notes 30 August 2014).

Perhaps only rivaled by Amsterdam, Copenhagen is touted as one of the world’s best big cities for cycling (Buehler and Pucher, 2012; Larsen, 2015). Cycling is common and ‘democratic’, open to less skilled and able-bodied citizens, such as children and elderly people, too. Wide bike lanes make cycling easy and safe, with very few fatal injuries and casualties (Buehler and Pucher, 2012). This is in sharp contrast to most car-dominated western capitals where bicycle infrastructures are few and far between, while the dangers for cyclists are imminent. In these cities, cycling requires physical skills and mental courage, or ‘affective capacity’: cycling is for the ‘hardened few’ (see below; Spinney, 2010, Jones, 2012).

Copenhagen Municipality and tourist organizations’ use bicycling to brand and ‘choreograph’ the extraordinariness of Copenhagen as a tourist destination; cycling is inscribed as safe and authentic. Hotels and rental shops rent out bikes for a minimum fee. In 2013, Copenhagen Municipality launched a new bike-sharing program, with commercials explicitly targeting tourists. Companies began offering guided bike tours that celebrate Copenhagen and cycling with equal enthusiasm. The company Cycling Copenhagen writes that they ‘offer you the chance to experience the city the same way as the Copenhageners’ do. You will visit the major sights and hear a lot of funny anecdotes combined with facts from our local guides that all love Copenhagen and bikes’³⁴.

³⁴ http://www.cycling-copenhagen.dk/about
Urry (2007) argues that ‘mobilities’ are organized in ‘systems’ that make them predictable, desirable and do-able. A ‘bike system’ is in place in Copenhagen due to the bike infrastructure, the numerous cyclists, cheap bike rentals, guided tours, and globally circulating ‘place myths’ about Copenhagen as a ‘cycling paradise’. As my diary above reveals, many tourists corporeally embrace and reproduce this ‘system’. Based on the interviews, a combination of ‘elements’ makes practices of cycling do-able and attractive to tourists, as I now outline.

First, cycling is said to be a practical and flexible way of touring cities, especially in a topographically flat and small capital as Copenhagen. Moreover, as the Copenhagen Metro is still not fully built (with only a few operating lines), tourists will have to use local buses and trains, and they are difficult to navigate, according to the interviewees. The ‘mobilities literature’ has portrayed cars as flexible and affording greater freedom than ‘scheduled’ public transport (Urry, 2007). Yet in cities, the car’s flexibility easily disintegrates into annoying, time-consuming traffic jams and hunts for – often pricey – parking spaces (Hagnam, 2006; Henderson, 2009; Larsen, 2015). None of the interviewees envisage cars as suitable for touring Copenhagen. But one compared cycling to driving – and flying: ‘I think it is just kind of like driving. It’s that freedom and you can really get by going quicker. And you can cut routes. … if I wanna take a side road, I take a side road. It is sort of like flying, I guess’ (man from London, in his thirties). The alternative to cycling is walking and public transport. Bikes are superior to walking as they are faster and allow more places to be covered and seen in a quicker time, and they are said to be faster and easier than public transport because of their flexibility. Many of the interviewees are pleasantly surprised about how many places cycling has allowed them to see in such a little time. There is no need ‘to figure out a schedule and waiting time’ for public transport and ‘walking just takes so long’ (a couple from London). Cycling is time-effective and it does not prevent the pleasures of mobile sightseeing associated with walking. It allows intermittent stops for a quick photograph, window-shopping, refreshments or a
contemplative gaze, with bikes being conveniently parked anywhere on the pavement. Cyclists in Copenhagen seldom waste time in scouting for parking spaces (see Larsen, 2015) (however, the interviewees on the new ‘shared city bikes’ complained that they could not be locked outside the designated stands; hence, they were forced to be constantly on the move). As a German couple said: ‘you can draw your own route. You don’t have to stick to the route of the bus. Or if you see something you can go there and say: oh, very nice. Or if you want a cup of coffee, then you are free to do so’. However, a minor inflexibility is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to read maps while riding, so rhythms become staccato-like: riding, stopping, and way-finding.

Second, tourists can embrace this ‘flexibility’ because they are aware of Copenhagen’s reputation as a safe bike haven. And once they start cycling, they vindicate the myth. The interviewees found it refreshingly easy to cycle here, not difficult and intimidating as ‘at home’. Their experience tells them that the design of the city, and the numerous cyclists, make it safe and legitimate. As two couples from car-based societies said:

I’m cycling here because the city invites you to do that. It’s incredible organized. It’s very respectful of bikers. You can feel safe and you can see much more of the city on bike than walking (London couple, in their thirties).

I’ve been very impressed with the way the city is built for bikes: the separate roads for bikes, the separate signals... This is the best town that I’ve seen for bicycle-friendly infrastructure (US couple, late thirties/early forties).

In contrast, some ‘locals’ complain about crowded bike lanes and aggressive cyclists (Freudendahl-Pedersen and Thorup, 2014). However, these tourists did not share these negative
experiences. The fact that they experience Copenhageners as considerate, law-abiding and mellow-paced cyclists, adds to the feeling of being safe. As one American couple said: ‘The city is more biker-friendly … your bike lanes are much more developed. You ride slower here … with more courtesy’ (American couple, mid fifties). Similarly, a German couple says: ‘People are really nice and they have rules. It is not like they are coming from every side. They really behave and they stop if it is a red traffic light’. The combination of supportive bike lanes and considerate cyclists empowers would-be bike tourists who are usually intimidated, or even completely put off by the idea of cycling in their home city. As a US woman says:

Having that very biking-friendly infrastructure made me feel confident about renting a bike.
Because I knew that I would be safe, as well as safe to others’ … I didn’t have to worry so much about getting run over. Or people moving in the way and hitting them and then being the ugly American that runs people over (US woman, late thirties).

Third, some stress that cycling in Copenhagen is the most authentic way of experiencing a pro-cycling city where cycling is a socially acceptable and not deviant or stigmatized as in many other cities (according to Aldred and Jungnickel 2013) In Copenhagen, the tourists take pleasure from the fact that they are ‘in place’ as cyclists:

I think it’s just nice that there are so many people that do it. It gets more acceptable, because there are not that many people that do it at home (woman, late twenties, Minnesota).

While cycling is perfectly ordinary for Copenhageners, it is extraordinary – as well as authentic – for tourists cowed from riding in their own car-based societies. While cycling in
Copenhagen, tourists can feel safe, enchanted and ‘local’. ‘Authenticity’ and ‘extraordinariness’ are constitutive elements of tourism experiences (MacCannell, 1976; Urry and Larsen, 2011), and this is why cycling in Copenhagen can be enjoyable and memorable, especially for tourists from car-based societies. Authenticity also stems from the fact that bikes make it easier to explore ‘local’ neighbourhoods. Bike lanes cover the length and breadth of Copenhagen and not just islands of (scenic) routes; even off the ‘beaten track’ tourists will be safe and guided all the way.

Fourth, cycling is also said to be sensuously stimulating, more so than ‘underground travel’. The interviewees relish being outdoors, immersed in the ‘weather-world’ (Ingold 2010), and actively moving about: ‘You have the fresh air. It is better than sitting on public transport’ (German man, mid-forties). In addition, cycling gives a much better-embodied feeling of a city’s topography, physical layout and road network. As a Dubliner said: ‘You get to appreciate the topography more than just going into the Metro in the ground’ (Irish man, in his thirties). Metros are seen as boring, mere transport, a method of getting from A to B. Moreover, the safe environment affords time to unwind, relax and ‘tourist gazing’, not just traffic gazing as in car-dominated cities. As a Londoner said: ‘It is easier than cycling in London, which is hectic, busy and with angry motorists’. His partner adds: ‘It is a slow pace, which is nice when you are on holiday’ (London couple, in their thirties). So, the relatively moderate pace of cycling in Copenhagen means that even inexperienced cyclists can potter about and enjoy the scenery – although some find walking slightly better suited, and paced, for gazing.

To sum up, cycling is central to how some independent tourists experience and memorise Copenhagen. It is perceived as inclusive, safe, time-effective and sensuously pleasurable. The interviewees compare cycling in Copenhagen with cycling in Amsterdam, and yet maintain that cycling in car-dominated cities, such as those found in the UK or the USA, are Copenhagen’s polar opposite.
Now I report from some of these places, drawing on my own cycling (with and without my family) and observations.

**Other places**

**Amsterdam**

There are many similarities between Copenhagen and Amsterdam’s bike cultures. This is another city where cycling is socially and spatially ‘in place’. Amsterdam, too, has extensive bike lanes, and people of all ages and from all walks of life ride in their everyday clothes on upright bikes, with moderate pace, sometimes with two or three people on one bike. The perceived safeness of biking in Amsterdam can be seen in relation to the fact that: ‘no one wears helmets (even small children), that children are riding too, and that parents often ride with their kids on their bikes. Riding with a child without a helmet would be frowned upon in Copenhagen, these days’ (diary notes, 17 July 2013). So, we look ‘out of place’ – or touristic – my partner, son and I, on rented orange bikes and wearing our own helmets, embarrassing’ (diary notes, 17 July 2013). But we quickly feel ‘at home’ and at ease, even if we are cycling with a young child. In a mellow pace we ‘potter about’ and: ‘when I later watch the video – that was produced by the Go-pro camera attached to my son’s helmet – I realise that he has been humming most of the day. I take that as a sign that he enjoyed the day, too. However, as I was soon to discover that cycling in Copenhagen and Amsterdam was one thing, and yet cycling in London and New York was another.

**London**

I’m about to ‘do’ London by bike. I hope that the bike will unlock London, its great beauty and geographical grandness, which the underground world of the tube conceals (diary notes

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5 This section draws on material published in the article ‘(Auto)Ethnography and Cycling’ (Larsen, 2014).
15 November 2012).

The speed and flexibility of bikes seems well suited for London. However, London is infamous for being a dangerous place to ride, and few people are brave (or stupid) enough to commute to work on bike. This situation is slowly changing as cycling is a hot topic for politicians, especially the pro-bike Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, with many new bike lanes and a new public bike scheme (Pucher, Lanversin, Takahiro & Whitelegg; 2012; Green, Rebecca, & Datta (2012). And yet, as I now discuss, my ‘Copenhagenized’ cycle body fell short and panicked in London. On departure, ‘travel fever’ kicked in:

*But for the last couple of days the fear has outgrown the excitement. For the first time ever cycling scares me. I might be an experienced rider but my skills are nourished in a pro-cycling city and where I know the traffic rules ... ’ I cannot help but to Google ‘cycle death’ in London ...* (diary notes, 16 November 2012).

As a London friend – who has cycled in Copenhagen – texted me:

I’ll try and give you a ring tomorrow. Address is … There should be a quiet route along the river. Buy a decent map and be fucking careful – it’s very different from CPH.

I’m instructed to be exceptionally cautious: this is not Copenhagen. I wonder: is biking turning London into a potentially lethal place, especially for a naïve ‘tourist’?

*I enjoy the ‘easiness’ of the Underground as I approach London. Walking out of the Tube I’m brutally overwhelmed by the traffic and there is no way I can see myself cycling here. I begin...*
to doubt whether I’m actually a very skillful cyclist anyway. And they drive in the wrong
direction too. Not sure that I have the stomach for this! At least I haven’t brought my family
along (Diary notes, 17 November 2012).

While London is normally perceived as a safe place, with numerous attractions, adventure tourism
is not to be one of them. Or so it appears. For is seeing London by bike a form of adventure tourism
where one puts one own life in danger and the game, ultimately, is ‘to cheat death’? If things go
wrong, the consequences may indeed be fatal.

In *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (Urry and Larsen, 2011), we argue that tourism often involves
combinations of pleasure and pain, risk and danger. Sometimes this is because tourist places are
imagined as places of danger, crime and terror. More central to this chapter, adventure tourism has
developed distinctly active, dangerous and extreme performances such as bungee jumping, off-piste
skiing, paragliding, skydiving, and white-water rafting. In such performances, tourists indulge their
dreams of mastery over the earth; of being adventure heroes starring in their own movies as they
seek to cheat death (Bell and Lyall 2002: 22). I am not an adventure, dare devil-type guy and have
never exposed my body, nerves or will power to such adventures. And yet a part of me is excited
about the sensory overload and risks involved in cycling in London.

The affective intensities of the noisy and compact traffic in London hits me like a hammer. With fear and adrenaline rushing through my body, I venture into the morning rush hour the
following day. I head towards the city on one of the new, blue-painted Cycle Superhighways
(http://www.tfl.gov.uk/roadusers/cycling/11901.aspx). It feels like home, and yet I am constantly
overtaken, unable to keep up with the pace – ‘they are fast these ‘lycra men on ‘racerbikes’ And: I
am out of place in my black leather jacket and hired mountain bike’ (diary notes, 18 November
2012). Suddenly, the cycle lanes stop and I find myself engulfed by cars, buses and lorries: This is
why only two to three percent of Londoners cycle to work, I think to myself (Aldred, 2010; Green, Rebecca and Datta, 2012; Spinney, 2008). Here, my Copenhagen skills – of going slow, hugging the kerbs, and never crossing the lane into the traffic to make a turn – fall short. I witness in awe how cyclists change lanes and mingle with cars when they make turns or when kerb lanes turn left. No wonder that hardly any children cycle or get transported on their parents’ bikes, which is so commonplace in Copenhagen and Amsterdam: I was utterly frightened. Realizing that cyclists have to drive like a car freaked me out as I do not know how to drive a car! Now I understand why cyclists in major UK cities are stigmatized as mad, according to Jones (2005) (Diary notes, 17 November 2012). In London, where cyclists rub shoulders with, and need to keep up with, the speed of cars on busy streets, cycling requires physical abilities, a constant alertness, and nerves of steel. This is what Jones (2012) and Spinney (2006) call ‘affective capacity’.

During the first week, I experienced cycling in London as a form of extreme sport or adventure tourism, where the aim of the game is ‘to cheat death’ and have fun at the same time. London became one big racetrack with real thrills and dangers everywhere. In his discussion of adventure urban tourism, Beedie (2005) makes a distinction between ‘perceived’ and ‘real’ risks. He suggests that adventure risks are mostly ‘perceived’ as adventure tourism being commodified and controlled: they only give an illusion of risk, with objective risks being ‘managed out’. Yet the risks of cycling in London are fatally real: cars and trucks killed six cyclists in the space of two weeks a year later (Guardian, 20136). A part of me enjoyed the affective thrills of racing through London and being part of an affective ‘neo-tribe’ (Maffesoli, 1996) of hardened cyclists. Another was petrified, ‘sighing’ with relief every time a ride was safely completed. On the second week my partner and son joined me, but we never seriously entertained idea of cycling together in London: there were hardly any role models, and London is not Amsterdam.

6 http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/nov/18/sixth-london-cyclist-killed-camberwell-lorry
My ambition of visually consuming London through a ‘mobile glance’ (Larsen, 2001) largely failed, as I had to focus my vision and attention on the traffic and the mobile space at hand – what is there now, and what is coming into being; there were few opportunities for letting the eyes and mind wander. With the exception of cycle paths along canals and parks, it is difficult to potter about and cycle two abreast, as in Copenhagen and Amsterdam. In London: ‘To dither, or to travel aimlessly and deliberately inefficiently, or to travel in large communal groups, or to travel in order to maximize the opportunities’ for spectacle or interaction … (can) not be easily reconciled with cycling as it is currently constituted in practice’ (Green et al., 2012: 286).

However, in this bike-hostile environment there are safe ‘pockets’, in parks and along canals, where tourists hire public bikes and participate in guided bike tours. Cycling tourists are visible around the major attractions and especially parks such as Hyde Park, Regents Park and the Royal Parks where one can indeed dawdle about, enjoy the view and cycle two abreast, with the affective capacity required being very low in comparison to the palpable risks just beyond the park gates. I participated on one specific tour – ‘The Royal Tour’ – and the whole tour took place on bike lanes, at a very leisurely pace, within the Royal Parks. No longer were my eyes nervously fixed on the roadscape but simply enjoying the late autumn delights of a London park on a beautiful sunny day. On the few stretches where we were forced to ride on and cross streets for a minute or two, the guide almost ‘took us by the hand’. We even walked the short stretch from the meeting point to the park. The company aims at ‘designing out’ perceived and real risks, preventing the tour from becoming risky, or overly adventurous.

Issues of risks of cycling are also of paramount importance in New York.

**New York**
Until recently, New York City was not designed for cycling. Very much like London, the streets were packed with cars, there were hardly any bike lanes, and cyclists were perceived as odd and reckless creatures not ‘belonging’ on the streets. The fearless, infamous bicycle messenger on brakeless fixies, moving at great speeds and with a relaxed attitude towards red lights, was, and is, the emblematic icon of US urban cycling – including New York City (Culley, 2001; Kidder, 2005; Fincham, 2006). Risks and edgy-urban-coolness are part of the thrill and aesthetics of cycling here, particularly in Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan where cyclists are style-conscious young adults that imitate the riding style and look of bicycle messengers, with their fixies, vintage bikes, tattoos, rackling keys, U-locks, bike messenger rucksacks, on display (‘Bike Snob’, 2010, 2012, 2013; Larsen, 2015). This distinctively American bicycle culture is ‘on the move’, transported by magazines, films, and Youtube. The New Yorker bicycle writer Bike Snob is bewildered when he comes across a New York City-inspired bike culture of fixed-gear bikes, bike messenger bags, U-locks and Brooklyn caps, in Gothenburg, Sweden (2013: 80-1).

I am also fascinated by, and in awe of, the bike messenger culture. I thought: ‘If one is to get an ‘authentic’ taste of what cycling was all about before New York turns all pro-bike-lanes then one has to ride the busy streets and imitate – no matter how poorly – the bike messengers. And this, for sure, will turn New York – similar to London – into an adventure tourism site’ (diary notes, 20 July 2013). I did not have the stomach or skills for a ‘fixie’, so I purchased a cool second-hand vintage Schwinn racer with proper brakes and a relatively cool New York look (there is a vintage bike craze in New York City). Then I got hold of a bike map, indicating numerous bike lanes. Relieved, and reassured, I set out to explore Brooklyn.

However, in reality the bike lanes:
... do not offer much protection, being simple paint jobs (similar to London), often fading ones, sometimes to the extent that they are hardly recognizable. And the surface quality is poor, uneven, with nasty potholes. They are crying out for repair work. I jump-up-and-down; with the vibrations resonating throughout my entire body – while bouncing trucks and vans make an incredible noise (diary notes, 21 July 2013).

Cars, trucks and cabs weave in and out of the lanes when parking, loading and dealing with customers; therefore being ‘doored’ is an ever present risk (Bike Snob, 2010: 119), and something that one is constantly alerted to – as well as dangerous potholes. Still, one feels safer here than on the congested streets with all the tight-knit vehicles.

After a couple of days, I felt skilled and brave (stupid) enough to take on Manhattan, in search of fellow bike tourists, to try the new Copenhagen-inspired bike lanes, and ‘Bombin’ Broadway’. Brooklyn Bridge is first: the sheer number of (tattooed) cyclists blows me away. It is not light work to ascend it, not the job for an obese or unfit person. Everyone is pushing the pedals with determination; bodies that are standing or leaning slightly forward, sweating, and clenched faces reveal that work is required (diary notes, 24 July 2013). The reward is the ‘visual thrill’ at the top and then freewheeling down: a breathtaking panorama of Lower Manhattan’s iconic glory unfolds before one’s very eyes and tired legs. This is sublime sight-doing. I notice: that I’m not the only tourist here: now and then, cyclists stop, and snap, snap.... (field notes, 24 July 2013).

The intensity of London’s streetscapes somewhat pales in comparison to what I first encounter in Manhattan. If I had not built up my ‘affective capacity’ in London, I would not have thrown myself into this cacophony and unpredictable sensory overload, of cars, cabs, trucks, fumes, sirens, horns, speeding up-and-down, signs, and immense roads. I try to stick to the bike lanes but
they always, suddenly, come to an abrupt end; back on the street my pulse is racing once again. All I care about is propelling myself forward while staying alive, not becoming the next ‘ghost bike’:

*GHOSTBIKES. One cannot help to notice some all-white painted bikes, so-called ghost bikes, erected by a pro-cycling organization to honor, and raise awareness about, traffic-killed cyclists, at that very spot. In 2012, motorists killed 136 pedestrians and 19 cyclists across the city* (field notes, 24 July 2013).

I relish the fact that this ‘survival game’ is not part of my own everyday commute. I pity those that have to ride in such a ‘disabling’ environment. Yet there is also a part of me that is high on adrenalin and the New York smugness. This is *my* kind of adventure tourism and the BIKENYC guidebook persuades me to embark on the ultimate and most authentic bike messenger test in New York: riding the iconic 13-mile Broadway from one end of Manhattan to the other:

So you *wanna* be a bike messenger, huh? In Gotham, the Empire. For Couriers and fixed-gear riders, the ultimate no-brakes velodrome! Or maybe you just want to ride like one (Poser! Faker!), weaving in and out of gridlocked traffic … no other rush can compare (Blackman, Glazer, Green 2011: 151).

Even as a genuine faker, this ride is affectively overwhelming, and its sensations beyond words.

However, this trip – and subsequent ones – also revealed another picture: *Wow! What a change. Approaching the commercial/touristic Times Square I ride along buffer zone bike lanes*

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that separate bikes and cars: I sigh with relief (field notes, 24 July 2013). New York is on a mission to reduce the risks of cycling, to make it safe and legitimate, by installing new bike lanes, bike racks and bike-sharing systems. There are currently 450 miles of cycling lanes in New York, with most having been built within recent years (DOT New York City, 2013; Pucher, Thorwaldson, Buehler, Klein, 2010).

There is a distinctive geography of bike lanes and cycling in New York City. Despite the new investments, there is not yet an all-covering seamless bike lane network, so everyday users have to build up knowledge about safe and dangerous roads and routes, respectively, and how they can arrive quickly at their destination without compromising their safety. ‘Bicycling tourism’ in New York, however, tends be located within small, isolated – although less so than in London – islands, at the most protective bike lanes, inside Hyde Park and up and down the west side of the Hudson River. Numerous (including some illegal) on-street businesses and (some importunate) salesmen rent out bikes for short term lets (as little as three hours). Renting is not cheap though: 35-40 dollars for a day! Many of the protective bike lanes where tourists congregate afford amazing views; they are ‘tourist gaze machines’, aesthetically framing the scenery. There is no worry about the traffic and one can calmly take in the sights. No wonder that they are popular with tourists as well as ‘locals’ – even families with children – enjoying a painless ride (see pictures XXX and XXX). It is, I think to myself, possible to cycle here with my partner and son (field notes, 24 July 2013).

The following week my family arrives, and for the next two weeks, we did all the protective touristic bike lanes as well as some more adventurous rides ‘locally’ in Brooklyn and to museums and attractions in Manhattan. We quickly became ‘lay experts’ in the whereabouts of the bike lanes and in spotting roads with little or heavy traffic. We always rode in a line with my son in the middle, to protect him, and he was instructed to ride on the sidewalks when the traffic became too

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intense (this is legal for children under 12 years of age). When out in the real traffic, I was relentlessly apprehensive about him, alerted to him, and the traffic around us, barking instructions. Now, in the company of my family, I often found cycling in New York stressful and nerve-wrecking, and: ‘I lost the temper a few too many times when he or my partner did something wrong – he was not humming as much as in Amsterdam, instead telling me to relax’ (field notes, 29 July 2013). The adventurous side of cycling became, frankly, too adventurous, too risky, in the company of my family. This reflects, more broadly, that gazing and performing depend upon one’s co-travelling company; they are *relational* practices (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 201). In some situations, tourists will feel safer and better protected in the company of co-travelling others. In others, there will be guilt about submitting one’s loved ones – especially children – to real risks. The actual risks of cycling in New York and the relationality of tourism performances explain why one study found that few (in this case, US) tourists consider the city attractive for ‘bike sightseeing’¹⁰ and the new-shared bike system – the Citi Bike – fails to attract nearly as many tourists as predicted¹¹, despite the widespread claim that it has had negative consequences on independent bike rental companies and shops¹².

**Conclusion**

In this article I have suggested that systems and practices of cycling are increasingly central to how tourists move about, and experience, cities. This reflects that western cities now build better infrastructures for bicycles in order to alleviate the apparent ‘ills’ of excessive auto-mobilities. Infrastructures include bike lanes, shared bike systems, and a myriad of smaller entrepreneurs that rent out bikes or organize sightseeing tours on bike.

¹⁰ [http://brokelyn.com/shocking-new-report-tourists-terrified-bike-nycs-streets/](http://brokelyn.com/shocking-new-report-tourists-terrified-bike-nycs-streets/)
I have argued that it is difficult to ‘gaze’ while cycling among cars. In contrast, bike lanes afford a secure and less demanding space where one’s gaze can often shift from reading the traffic to the wider environment, taking it in aesthetically, as a slow-moving panorama. This is particularly the case when bike lanes – especially in New York – are designed along scenic routes. We may say that bike lanes enable ‘the tourist gaze’.

I have shown that there are striking corporeal and sensuous differences between cycling in long-established pro-cycling cities, like Copenhagen and Amsterdam, and car-dominated cities, like London and New York. In the latter, ‘safe cycling’ is restricted to scenic ‘small islands’ where one is largely out of harm’s way. Outside these ‘tourist enclaves’, cycling is (too) risky. Here the pleasures of cycling resemble those of adventure tourism more than a stroll in the park. With regards to the former cities, I have shown that foreign tourists, with much joy and ease, use bicycles throughout the city, for transport and sightseeing. From a tourist perspective, cycling in Copenhagen is extraordinary and authentic. Tourists from car-dominated societies appreciate that the environment is inclusive and that cyclists are considerate, that cycling is ‘in place’. And on top of that, cycling in Copenhagen is seen as both convenient and fast.

It can be argued that this article has painted a somewhat one-sided, Western picture of the bicycle in tourism. Just after I had finished drafting this article, I went on a vacation to Vietnam, once a country swarmed with bicycles and cyclo taxis. Now, scooters and taxis are everywhere; bicycles are for kids and the poorest of the poor, and the cyclo taxi market is almost exclusively reserved for ‘sightseeing tourists’, to such an extent that cycling has been reduced to a tourism cliché.


Spinney, J. (2010) ‘Improvising rhythms: re-reading urban time and space through everyday
practices of cycling’, Edensor, T. (ed.) Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies. Basingstoke, GB, Ashgate, 113-128
