
A LOVE STORY ON TWO WHEELS

For more than a hundred years the bike has been a beloved integral part of life in Denmark, favoured over cars and city buses by young and old, royals as well as factory workers. And with the government's goal of turning Copenhagen into the number one leading bicycle city in the world by 2020, cycling Danes continue to chase that tailwind.

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We Danes, and Copenhageners in particular, love our bikes. So much so that one of our most eternally popular kids' songs aptly goes; '*Jeg er så glad for min cykel, jeg kommer hurtigt langt omkring*'. Which translates into something like: 'I love my bike, I get around quickly'.

A song that everyone riding their bike in Denmark will have hummed at one point or several others in his or her biking life, most likely on a sunny day with a hefty tailwind. But possibly even more than we cherish the familiar construction of iron, chains, and bolts that make up our trusty 'iron horse', we love the sheer freedom of mobility biking provides. A freedom that throughout the past 100 years has had a direct cultural impact on modern Danes' relationship with the surrounding Nordic nature as well as the equality of the sexes.

No less than 63% of all Copenhageners mount their bikes each morning to go to work or school, many transporting their small children on a Christiania Bike – the hugely popular tricycle originating from the eponymous 'free town', built with a sturdy open cargo box in front from where helmet-clad little ones peer out at the city gliding by. And the number of cyclists continues to rise in the capital: young and old, men in suits, and women in designer heels, even the royal family stamp their pedals side-by-side on the bike lanes. A little farther to the south in Europe, Amsterdam may still hold the title as the world's leading bicycle city, but the numerous Copenhagen riders are closing in on the competition fast, cheered on by the Danish government's political aim for Copenhagen to conquer the number one spot by 2020.

LOUISE ALENIUS BOSERUP

Composer, *The Royal Danish Theatre*
Rides a *Cykelfabrikken* gentleman's bike

I break the rules all the time. I get yelled at and I get tickets. But I've also talked my way out of them several times. I'm good at that. The police once ticketed me for breaking five rules in 30 seconds. They followed me while I passed a red light going the wrong way down a one way street on the sidewalk without lights on. And I was on the phone. I talked my way out of two thirds of that fine. Last year I had a really bad accident while biking. I hit a hole in the ground and fell over while I was on the phone. My face was pretty smashed up. I promised myself I would never, ever do that again. So now I use a headset when I talk and bike.

I ride a blue *Cykelfabrikken* gentleman's bike everywhere I go. The bike is completely free of gadgets. Even the gears are hidden inside. I'm quite feminine by nature, but there's also a boyish side to me. I like that in a bike as well. It's a nice balance. The strong culture of biking in Denmark is something to be appreciated. I love when bikers acknowledge each other in the street. You just raise your hand as if to say, 'Hello, brother.'

Riding a bike gives me such a feeling of freedom. It's a bit like flying. I compose a lot while I'm riding my bike. The ideas I get from the changing scenery jumpstart my musical imagination. I think doing something with your body sets your mind free in a way. I often have tense rehearsals and I need a transition between work and other places. I can't just go home. I need to clear my mind. Sometimes I'll take a detour on my bike just to get more of that feeling. One night my friend drove me home on her bike through the city, which is of course illegal. We were completely drunk. It was really funny though. We just had this feeling of flying together on the street. Wow! It was fun.



MARIA FOERLEV

Owner, Etage Projects Gallery
Rides a Raleigh Tourist Deluxe

Riding bike makes you a more comfortable human being. It's meditative. Of course, you need to be aware of what's happening around you, but for me it's a necessary way of clearing my mind. I bike about five kilometres every day. It's such a nice way of starting the day. You see businessmen and parents on their cargo bikes with a load of kids on board.

It can be dangerous riding a bike in Copenhagen because people drive like maniacs. Fortunately, I know how to fix a punctured tire. As a bicyclist you get a much better perspective on the city than you do as a pedestrian or driver. Also, it's much easier and less expensive to find a parking space for your bike than it is for a car.

The most important things I look for in a bike are something that gives me a straight back and offers a bit of storage space. Also, I make sure it has a good lock. I always tell myself, after my bike has been stolen, that the next one will be cheap and trashy. But I think my sense of aesthetics convince me otherwise. Right now I ride a black Raleigh Tourist Deluxe. It's not one of those fancy bikes made of bamboo. It's a classic, no-nonsense bike of good quality that was used by the British troops. It's old school, and it suits me.

And by fast, we mean *really* fast:

"Denmark has a very well-organized cycling culture, whereas in the Netherlands and particularly Amsterdam, cycling can be a bit more of an, err, anarchistic experience," says Klaus Bondam (who is in fact half Dutch himself), the director of the Danish Cyclists' Federation, an organization that dates all the way back to 1905.

"The two countries' cycling cultures are actually vastly different in this way – on average the Danes cycle faster than the Dutch; 16 kilometres per hour to their 15. This probably has something to do with the infamous Danish 'efficiency gene'. We like to view ourselves as an incredibly effective, time-saving lot. If you ask Copenhageners why they choose to take the bike over public transport or cars, they'll simply answer that it is because biking is by far the most efficient way to get around the city," elaborates Bondam.

For this reason most Copenhagen roads today are supplemented by busy bike lanes that blend into the cityscape so seamlessly that hapless tourists from less cycle-friendly nations often mistake them for extra wide pavements – much to the amusement as well as furious bell-sounding annoyance of cycling Danes.

"The greatest victory in turning Denmark into a bicycle nation has been the political insistence on building bike lanes that are separated from the road with curbs, making it safe and easy for cyclists to get from a – z," the director says.

The Danish Cyclists' Federation's offices – which also houses the so called Cycling Embassy of Denmark – in central Copenhagen overlook the square Israels Plads, where on this grey Friday morning about 20 pre-school children in yellow traffic vests cycle around playing catch on their small bikes, cheeks red in the cool wet air.

"Every Friday the day-care institution next door takes the kids out biking. They teach them to bike with one hand, to feel safe on the

bike even though a lot of stuff is going on around them," says Bondam.

"First rule of cycling: you have to be completely bike safe before you are safe in traffic. We believe that a child over the age of five to six should be able to cycle safely in Copenhagen accompanied by a parent. And alone from when they are 11-12 years old."

Before this childhood milestone is reached, though, many Danes' first memory of cycling revolves around the same iconic classic: a small red and white tricycle by the Danish brand Winther, produced since 1935 and still a toddler-staple today. Later on, the two-wheel bike opens new up new worlds, as evidenced right outside of Bondam's office:

"Every Dane recalls that feeling of freedom induced by learning to ride a real bike. To feel mobile and be able to explore the world on your own is hugely important for children's happiness."

Bicycling in Denmark really took off with the introduction of the first 'safety bikes' from 1885, invented by the Englishman John Kemp Starley. Before this, the less-than-safe *velocipede bikes* ('tip-over-Peters', as the Danes dubbed them) had been seen as either circus curiosities or a leisure conveyance for the upper classes, but now bike fever spread through the conveniently, invitingly flat land. Postmen and police were quick to integrate bikes in their daily work (they still use them), and cycling as a sport blossomed. By 1890 there were approximately 3,000 bikes in Copenhagen, while by 1900 the number had increased to more than 30,000. Seven years later there were 80,000 and in 1934 almost half a million bikes toured the streets of Copenhagen, equally popular with men and women. And even though everyday biking for women had initially been seen as somewhat risqué in the early 20th century (all that excitement and rubbing of certain parts against the leather seat!), the cycling Danish girls, wind rustling long hair and skirts, became free-spirited icons of Copenhagen. In 1935, the





SOLFINN DANIELSEN

Chef and co-owner, *Rødder & Vin*
Rides an Omnium cargo bike

Riding a bike becomes a natural part of you, just like walking. If you switch bikes every now and then, it's kind of like reinventing yourself. I use multiple bikes to deliver all the wine that I import and sell directly to restaurants in the city. A favourite is an Omnium cargo bike that was custom built by my friends at Pedal & Co. Not the most practical, but by far the most fun bike.

I was a bike messenger way back, so I've always biked a lot. Many Copenhageners will say that biking makes sense on a higher level. It doesn't pollute the environment, it reduces motor traffic, and it allows you to clear your mind and get some exercise. It also connects you to a community of other bikers. And that's a bonus. But, honestly, it's just the most practical way to get around. I happen to like to bike and I wanted it to be a part of my business. Last year I was out delivering wine in a severe rainstorm. On my way back I took a chance on a blocked road and found myself in water up to my knees. This was in the middle of winter. So imagine having to pedal back when it's two degrees Celsius outside. I stopped at a supermarket and bought the ugliest pair of shoes I've ever had just to make it back home.

Everyone should bike. Copenhagen is the easiest city to bike in. There's no uphill or downhill. It's the complete opposite of biking in San Francisco. I've ridden down Lombard Street and across the Golden Gate Bridge. I've ridden the rolling hills of the Faroe Islands in shitty weather. But if you bike the Faroe Islands, you will have the most scenic views. It's so beautiful and it's so small, which is an advantage when you're riding your bike.

world-famous Danish architect and industrial designer Poul Henningsen (the man behind the classic PH-lamps) even wrote a musical ode to their allure, *Cykelsangen* (The Bike Song)

Not only did the freewheeling cycle girls give tourists something other than medieval architecture and the more sexually subdued Little Mermaid to gawk at in Copenhagen, said cycling culture also aided equalisation between the sexes. Today most Danes will be familiar with old, yellowing family photos showing grandma and grandpa on bikes, heading out to picnics or the beach.

"Biking together, girls and boys, was an acceptable way of socialising and doing something physical with friends back in the day. Furthermore, being outside and enjoying nature has always been part of the Nordic lifestyle. Our long summer days and nights combined with all citizens' relative proximity to water all over the country made it possible for factory workers to cycle to the beach for an evening dip after the daily grind was done," explains Bondam.

Thus jumping on one's bike to escape the city quickly became one of the main incitements for Copenhageners to embrace cycling culture in the first half of the previous century. And though the city has of course since expanded in size, the thousands of kilometres of bike lanes and the possibility of bringing the iron horse along on the S-trains that now connect the city centre to the capital's surrounding suburban areas, still provide Copenhageners with ample opportunities for easy bike getaways.

It is one thing, though, to leisurely roll along on your bike on those never-ending, glorious summer evenings in Denmark, with a swimsuit and white wine stashed in the basket on the steering wheel. Quite

another to brave the elements on a dark, freezing winter morning when snow turns Copenhagen into 50 shades of white mush. Still, a whopping 75% of all cycling Copenhageners do it, however hazardous their journeys may seem in the snowy headwinds. Bike lanes in the capital are therefore almost always well salted in the early hours before the roads are even cleared. And fittingly, the biking Vikings' efforts are celebrated virally on blogs such as [Copenhagenvikingbiking.tumblr.com](https://copenhagenvikingbiking.tumblr.com). Klaus Bondam offers the following explanation for the Danes' weather-indifferent stubbornness:

"Is it amazing to bike in snow and sleet? Not really. But there is something in the Danish mentality that makes us forego choosing the easy way out. And getting to the office after having conquered the elements, dusting snow off your jacket as you finally get inside, makes one feel pretty victorious," he says.

The ever-changing Nordic weather calls for both durable bikes and regular maintenance at the cycle repair shops if one is to avoid shelling out on a new ride every other year. And though in previous decades many Copenhageners seemed happy – even somewhat proud – to bike around on any old, screeching heap of iron with two wheels, riders have become more quality aware in recent years.

"Generally, Copenhageners are increasingly willing to spend more money on a good bike and on maintaining it. It pays off and whatever you have to spend on tuning your bike, the bill will still be next to nothing compared to that of a car repair bill," says Martin, one of the characteristically cool, streetwear-casual store employees at equally hip Copenhagen bike shop Benben Cykler.

HENRIK STORLAND

Owner, Velo Barista

Rides a Velo Barista gentleman's bike

My first total-freedom-forever-moment was while taking my bike on the train 40 kilometres into Copenhagen from the countryside when I was about 13 years old. I don't know why. I guess I was drawn to the city. It got late and the trains stopped running. So about 20 kilometres into this midnight ride home on the highway, I got pulled over by the police. Luckily, they got called away on something more illegal. So I took the next exit, jumped on the train when it started running again, and rode back home. When I don't have any particular route to choose, I just go and see where it leads me. It's about freedom.

I ride one of the bikes that I built myself. It's a grey racing bike made into a touring bike made into a classic gentleman's bike. A wolf in sheep's clothing. It looks super dull, very anonymous, but it's fast as hell. I'm still working on a name for it. But that's the philosophy behind my work. To have something with a soul that's unique to you, but still can be replaced because it will get stolen eventually. The way a bike can be mistreated in Copenhagen is insane. If you go to a big venue and park your bike in a pile, then somebody gets drunk and ends up throwing it ten metres.

Even if you've lived in Copenhagen for 20 years, you still get surprised by electric cargo bikes zooming by, taking up all the space. Psychopaths! If you're new to riding a bike, take a day or two to get used to it before you go out into heavy traffic. People don't always use hand signals. Especially the 'stop' gesture. Nobody does that. It looks weird. It's like doing the Nazi salute except straight upwards instead of bent forward. So just go with the flow until you get a good feel for it.

Add this to many Danes' apparent need for cycling speed, and it begins to make sense why more and more women are even favouring the low maintenance, single speed men's bikes with no gears over traditional feminine models.

"We actually always try to push men's bikes on our female customers. It is the original bike made up of two triangles and just that much stronger than a women's bike model, which is wobblier and requires more effort to wheel to a decent speed," says Martin.

Benben Cykler originally found fame and a loyal clientele thanks to their own custom-built mountain bikes, but in addition to the more sports-oriented customers, the shop now also services, in Martin's words; "everyone from young students to families and 90-year-old Mrs. Olsen down the street."

And just as you can usually tell a lot about a person from his or her dog, so the bikes Copenhageners choose tend to reveal quite a few personal characteristics about their owners. City bike in fresh colours: efficient type – you will know them when they overtake you in a blur. Old fashioned ladies' bike in classic dark green with a straw basket in front: a modern romantic who never breaks a sweat getting to her destination in style. Martin concurs:

"It is true. For instance, architects always want a black bike when they come here. Without fail," he says as he fiddles with a particularly smart-looking city bike for a customer.

As cyclists become more conscious of bike maintenance and brands, so have Copenhagen's newer bike bridges and lanes taken on a dis-

tinct design feel in keeping with Denmark's strong industrial design aesthetics – nowhere more evident than in the historical borough of Christianshavn in Copenhagen, where Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson has dreamt up the striking *Cirkelbroen* (The Circle Bridge) which opened to cyclists last year and has already become a much-loved landmark.

"Building something so aesthetically beautiful for cyclists sends a strong message to those who use the bridge every day; a message that the government values cyclists and want to spend a lot of money on improving cycling conditions for them. It also makes it very obvious for car drivers stuck in traffic that there is a better alternative," says Klaus Bondam.

Improving the cycling infrastructure of Copenhagen continues still, with no less than 28 new super bike highways in the pipeline in coming years, making wheeling to work all the more attractive for cycling regulars, and hopefully ditto for those not naturally inclined to exercise in more traditional ways. As figures from The Capital Region of Denmark shows, biking Copenhageners today save the region a total of one million days of sick leave per year, which, in a country where medical treatment is paid for via taxes, benefits both the economy and general health of the public. Not to mention the environment: 110,000 tons less CO₂ is emitted each year in the capital thanks to Copenhageners choosing bikes over motor transportation.

However, there are obstacles to overcome in the future, such as the fact that the number of young children being driven to school by anxious parents is slowly rising in Copenhagen, to some extent



Cykelsangen

Se, hvad turisten ser,
den navnløse by,
strømmen, som bærer København og dens ry,
de tusind cykelpi'er,
et brus af nikkelstyr,
sikke pi'er,
tag og kys dem alle fra mig!

*See what the tourist sees,
the nameless city,
the current that carries Copenhagen and its reputation,
the thousand cycling girls,
a surge of nickel handlebars,
what girls,
do kiss them all from me!*

due to hot-headed cyclists' aggressive attitudes in rush-hour traffic. And though pictures of Crown Princess Mary wheeling her children to school in a Christiania Bike certainly help inspire other families to do the same, some of the stressed-out cyclists on tight schedules next to them should probably shift gears and ease the pace to avoid swapping Danish efficiency for good old fashioned road rage on the bike lanes. It is a behavioural issue to be dealt with by several parties, surely, but nevertheless one that will have to be tackled soon in order to ensure a safe biking environment for future generations.

"As a cyclist in Denmark, you should not have to settle for less. We need to continuously nurture a cycling culture wherein cyclists can demand to be able to travel safely around the city," stresses Klaus Bondam.

"In other countries you often encounter the belief that cycling requires special equipment, and that it will make you sweat profusely, making it less appealing to cycle to work. But that is simply not true. You can bike in anything. And sweating? Well, unless you have never biked before I would not worry too much," grins the director of The Danish Cyclists' Federation.

"Remember, a little fresh sweat does not smell."

CECILIE THORSMARK

*Head of Press & Communication, Danish Fashion Institute
Rides a Raleigh Tourist Deluxe*

I feel free riding a bike. I can move ahead of the traffic. Also, I meet more people on my bike than I would if I took the car. Although I've seen some Danish people who stop and curse at others because they don't know how to behave on a bike. I think a little more patience would suit the Danish bike culture.

The most extraordinary experiences I have are not on my own bike but on my boyfriend's bike. He has a cargo bike and takes me around Copenhagen on it. We have a daughter in preschool and she comes along, too. When the three of us are on the bike, it's so cosy and intimate. It's our little family love affair.

I ride a Raleigh. It's a very old, rusty bike, but it's perfect. It's black, of course. It has to be black. I'm not a bike nerd. I don't need extra features or gadgets. I've had some bikes that were stolen. I think almost every Copenhagener would say that. But this one, hopefully, is a keeper. More and more, my perfect bike is a used one because there's a lesser chance of it getting stolen. But a perfect bike is a plain, black, simple bike.

I feel guilty when I drive a car instead of biking. Taking the car is such a polluter. As soon as I come home to Copenhagen from abroad, I get back to riding again and feel a lot better.

