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# The emerging cyclist culture in Barcelona

## Introduction

Barcelona is not a city traditionally associated with the bicycle. Yet thanks to investment in the "Bicing" bicycle share scheme which began [in 2007](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bicing) - three years before the launch of [London's equivalent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barclays_Cycle_Hire) - and associated bicycle infrastructure this has changed. In 2011, Barcelona was rated as number 3 in the [Copenhagenize](http://copenhagenize.eu/index/index.html) chart of bicycle friendliness (this has since slipped to 12th) and bicycles are now a common sight in the city.

The rate of cycle uptake overall and the effectiveness the Bicing scheme specifically are open to debate, as illustrated by [an article questionning the cost effectiveness](http://barcelonabicycle.blogspot.com/2012/06/barcelona-bicycle-mumbers.html) of the scheme and a [presentation](http://www2.uwe.ac.uk/services/Marketing/research/pdf/ISHEpdfs/ISHE-events/Bike%20sharing%20020713%20M%20Ricci.pdf) criticising the lack of evidence on the subject.

In the grand scheme of things, Barcelona's bicycle hire system is medium sized, comprising around 6,000 bicycles (compared with over 8,000 in London and over 20,000 in Paris)  
spread across over 420 parking bays. The spatial distribution of these parking spaces is quite evenly spread across Barcelona's city centre, as can be seen in a [real time bike availability map](https://www.bicing.cat/es/formmap) of the scheme. (To compare this distribution with that in other cities, please see Oliver O'Brien's amazing 'meta map' of [bicycle share schemes worldwide](http://bikes.oobrien.com/global.php)). The scheme has a relatively high number of bicycles per docking station and appears to be in the top 5 largest rental schemes worldwide, according to data from [a detailed study on the matter by Oliver O'Brien and others](http://www.complexcity.info/files/2013/08/BATTY-JTG-2013.pdf) (see figure below).

Graph of bicycle share schemes

Graph of bicycle share schemes

As the debate about the effectiveness of such schemes rumbles on, and new datasets and analyses trickle out with frustrating slowness, this article takes an altogether more personal approach to cycling in Barcelona. It is proudly subjective, being based on 3 days of pleasant exploration of the city in early March (not a time associated with high bike use by any means) on one weekday (Friday 28th) and the weekend. Pictures can provide insight that words cannot, so I try to keep the description brief. So let's embark on this personal visual exploration of the city's emerging cycling culture. Vamanos!

## The look and feel of the Barcelona cycling experience

Despite it's 'medium' size in international terms, one of the first cyclist-related things one is likely to notice is the Bicing system itself. The docking bays are indeed huge, with dozens of neatly stashed bicycles ready to grab with just the swipe of a card.

bicycle bay

bicycle bay

Beyond the impressive provision of bicycles, the Bicing project planners have clearly gone out of their way to create a space for cyclists across the city as well. The provision of lights with bicycle symbols in them is a good example of this, even though Barcelona's urban cyclists rarely seem to pay attention to traffic lights of any kind!

Bicycle lights in Barcelona

Bicycle lights in Barcelona

The contrast with Copenhagen, where cycling is highly regimented - and where anecdote and personal experience suggest you get hounded if you dare to stray onto the road! - could barely be greater. Bicycles are generally permitted to go where they please, and the bicycle paths tend only to provide general guidance. The above photo is a good example of this: one can choose whether to go in the dedicated bike lane or, because the pavement is wide and relatively empty, can equally meander accross the pedestrian zone. The fact that this is tolerated makes cycling in Barcelona feel liberating compared with other cities where one is corralled into small spaces.

open-space

open-space

Perhaps this feeling is due more to the spacious layout of the city than good cycle infrastructure design: the streets are generally amply wide for pedestrians, cyclists and even cars to rub along quite nicely together, with a level of self-autonomy (red light jumping and jay walking are the norm) that seems to be accepted. This differs from London, where the politics to of traffic lights and road ettiquette seems to generate infinite debate and intrigue. In Barcelona's bicycle culture, I argue (based on admitedly sparse evidence), there is a tendency just to get on with where you are going without worrying too much about the underlying politics of mobility.

## Lessons for elsewhere