

METRO MONEY

Bike, Boat or Board. How to Hack Your New York Commute.

Metro-area residents have a long history of seeking a better, faster way to get to work and many find creative ways to handle the grind



By

Anne Kadet

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Over a decade of experimentation with his 5.5-mile commute between Brooklyn and Manhattan, architect Brendan McNee has “explored numerous ways of avoiding the subway,” as he puts it.

He crossed the Williamsburg Bridge for several years on a bicycle before switching to a Honda scooter and then a motorcycle. Each method had major drawbacks.

But now he thinks he’s found the best solution. For two years, he’s been zipping to work on an electric skateboard that can top 20 miles an hour.

The 37-year-old rides in the bike lanes whenever possible between Greenpoint in Brooklyn and Soho in Manhattan. The commute takes exactly 20 minutes, he says, compared with 40 on the train.

And it’s economical. So far he has spent \$3,280 on gear including \$2,300 for his custom board, \$870 for upgrades and fixes, \$90 for a helmet and \$20 for lights. That averages out to \$126 a month, he notes, compared with \$127 for a 30-day unlimited ride MetroCard.

Mr. McNee’s solution is just the latest in a long history of New Yorkers seeking a better, faster way to commute.

For two decades, Rob Kotch has been making the trek between Ridgewood, N.J., and his Midtown Manhattan office by bicycle—25 miles each way.

“I got tired of the train ride and just started riding in,” says Mr. Kotch, who is 62 and owns a Manhattan delivery company, Breakaway Courier Systems.



Architect Brendan McNee makes his daily commute by electric skateboard over the Williamsburg Bridge. (Kevin Hagen for The Wall Street Journal) **PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

He often joins fellow members of the Ridgewood Commuter Group, a band of cyclists who meet at dawn to beat the traffic. They ride over the George Washington Bridge, even in the rain and the snow.

“It’s all about having the right equipment,” Mr. Kotch says.

Participants say the ride takes about 90 minutes compared with an hour by train. Cycling times, however, are more consistent. While the train ride can vary 30 minutes or more depending on the day’s glitches, “nothing that nature or traffic can throw at me changes my cycling arrival time by more than a few minutes,” says 43-year-old designer Aaron Deutsch.

The cyclists debate whether their strategy saves money. An unlimited train pass between Ridgewood and New York Penn Station costs \$298 a month, or \$3,576 a year. But cycling costs can also add up. Members have spent anywhere from \$1,000 to \$8,000 for their bicycles. One spends \$65 a month on a Manhattan gym membership so he can shower and change his clothes, plus \$6 a day to park his bike in a garage. Some admit to spending more on a head-and-tail-light set than many people would spend on a bicycle.

But they agree on the benefits: fresh air, camaraderie, improved mood, and exercise. “Any money savings is secondary to the peace of mind I get,” says Steve Kang, a 49-year-old NBC executive.

A bicycle commute, of course, is one of the more popular alternatives. The number of cycling commuters grew from 15,000 in 2000 to 48,800 in 2017, according to the city’s transportation department.

More unusual modes of commuting attempted in recent years include a software engineer who took to crossing the Hudson River on a homemade folding boat, an app developer who rode an electric unicycle 11 miles from Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, to Manhattan’s Union Square, and a



Rob Kotch took a break recently during his commute at Sixth Avenue and Central Park South on the way home from Manhattan to New Jersey. PHOTO: ALEXANDER COHN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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startup founder who paddled between Hoboken, N.J., and Midtown in a kayak.

It's no wonder people keep experimenting. According fleet-management firm Geotab, New York City's 3,287,000 commuters endure the nation's longest average travel time: 43 minutes, compared with 32 for Los Angeles.



David Pike recently tended to his jet ski at a dock in Jersey City where he lives. PHOTO: DAVID PIKE

One of the most dramatic short cuts accomplished in New York City commuting history must belong to David Pike, who crosses New York Harbor on a jet ski.

Before he started motoring from Jersey City to Red Hook in Brooklyn,

his daily commute by shuttle bus, PATH train, F train and B57 bus took more than 90 minutes each way. “It was unreal,” he says.

The Sea-Doo trip takes 15 minutes, “and it’s the best feeling in the world,” Mr. Pike says.

Because he owns a business, the New York Trolley Company, based in the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal, he docks his craft for free. Costs include \$1,000 for the used Sea-Doo amortized over three years and \$6 a day for gas. He estimates his commute costs \$47 a week compared with the \$85 a week he spent on public transit.

The cheapest commuting method, of course, is walking. Not surprisingly, considering the city’s density, 5.9% of New Yorkers walk to work compared with 2.7% nationwide, according to CityLab.

To save time, some pick up the pace. Meg Lappe has taken to running the 4.5 miles between Cobble Hill in Brooklyn and her office at Gear Patrol near Madison Square Park in Manhattan. The 27-year-old editorial coordinator enjoys the challenge of weaving around the pedestrians crowding the Brooklyn Bridge and Broadway.

Her running commute takes 40 minutes—same as the F train. But compared with the subway, which leaves her feeling squished and squeezed, the journey is exhilarating, she says. “And I don’t have to work out the rest of the day.”



Meg Lappe runs over the Brooklyn Bridge with her work backpack on her 4.5-mile commute from her Brooklyn home to her Manhattan office. (Kevin Hagen for The Wall Street Journal) **PHOTO:KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

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