

Promoting city cycling? Boris Johnson should visit Copenhagen for tips.

Blog by Gwladys Fouché (from the Guardian)



Cycling over the Queen Louise bridge, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Photograph: CuboImages srl/Alamy

Cycling in Copenhagen, the self-proclaimed best biking city in the world, is pure heaven, as Peter Walker recently wrote on this bike blog. If we want to promote cycling in big cities in the UK, we should do as the Danes do.

On a recent afternoon pedalling in the Danish capital, I discovered cyclists easily outnumbered cars in the street – which is no surprise when you consider 36% of commuters used bikes in 2006. All the major roads I rode on had built-up bicycle lanes – in other words, the roads had two pavements on each side, one for cyclists and one for pedestrians. This felt safer than a painted lane and it avoided confusion over where cyclists can ride.

The cycle paths were so wide that they divided into two. On the right rode the cyclists who wanted to take it easy, like me. On the left went the people in a hurry. If a slow cyclist wandered in the left lane, the faster folk would ring their bells until the uninformed soul moved to the right. One bell-less cyclist even made his point by politely saying "ding, ding, ding". Weird, but fun.

Few felt the need to wear helmets, as cycling is not the contact sport it can be in large British cities. Rare also were those dressed up in Lycra. Nearly everyone wore everyday clothes, and most were very, very stylish.

Cycling in Copenhagen was also a lesson in etiquette. Some cyclists raised an arm to tell those behind that he/she was stopping. In the busy pedestrian areas, packed to the brim with people enjoying the sunshine, riders would dismount and push their bikes

rather than zigzag between startled pedestrians. Cyclists everywhere could do this more often, including me.

I saw no one jumping red lights. Instead people waited patiently by the small traffic lights specially built for cycle lanes. At several intersections I saw signs painted on the roads reminding cyclists to mind motorists' blind spots.

Even better, my ride was a public bicycle I picked up at one of the numerous stands dotted around the city for free. All I needed was a 20 kroner (£2.30) coin to release it, which I got back when I returned it, and I could use it for as long as I wanted. The citymap fixed on the handlebars was handy too.

The bottom line is that the Danish authorities have made cycling as easy as it can possibly be, so that it does not feel like a battle for survival, but just a safe, free and enjoyable means of getting from A to B.

Boris Johnson's plan for a public bike scheme in London is a welcome start in the UK, but just as important is building new cycle lanes so that people feel safe riding bikes. According to the London Cycle Campaign, he is slashing cycle lane budgets rather than increasing them. He should visit Copenhagen.