

## Happy Birthday Vélib' (Oh dear, what's wrong with you?)

I've taken the decision to organize this piece so that any of you who may wish will now have an opportunity to comment and critique -- with a view into my eventually collecting them and using them to turn this into a more definitive and hopefully useful final piece. But for now sit back and enjoy the ride. And then once you have made your trip, grab your pen and fire away.

Paris, 15 July 2008

Today is the first anniversary of the city of Paris's highly innovative, much sung public bicycle project Vélib', which as pretty much everyone by now knows is a contraction of the French words for bicycle (vélo) and liberty (liberté). Over this first year hundreds of thousands of Parisians and visitors have hopped on a Vélib' and made something on the order of 26 million trips on the streets of this fair city, most of them paying nothing more than a modest subscription fee for what is otherwise a free trip.



There has been a great deal of media coverage and a large number of visitors - and visiting critics. As you can well imagine in a situation where all those people coming from so many places, with such different competences and with so many points of view, there are a wide range of views and opinions about the project, including its high points and shortcomings. These as you will see range wildly from the legitimate to the fanciful.

The purpose of this piece then is to provide you with a sort of Vélib' FAQ, in which I have attempted to take note of the critical observations passed on through personal contacts, press articles, visiting delegations from a number of countries, newsgroups, blogs, e-mail commentaries, woman on the street interviews, etc., as well as daily use of the system myself. Basically then this is a kvetch or complaint list.

In the commentaries that follow I do not pretend to provide "scientific answers", although in a number of cases the feedback you will find here does draw on polls, surveys and other more or less scientific compilations. But basically my specialty is pattern recognition -- and so what you see here is my attempt to spot the overall patterns and give you what I hope is a measure reaction to these complaints, questions and claims.

Finally, I want you to know that while I think Vélib' is a very important project for many reasons, I do not wish to give the impression of defending any aspect of it. This is a new venture and one that is unique and highly innovational. It has many strong points, and things where further work and fine tuning is needed. This kind of open criticism openly discussed, a public critique, is what is needed both here in Paris. And possibly even more so back home if you are thinking about doing a "Vélib'" of your own.

Now on with the show.

Eric Britton

PS. By way of quick reminder, the full series of communications on this will be found at <http://www.citybike.newmobility.org> -- if you click the Forum link on the top menu.

## Happy Birthday Vélib' video

Vélib'

by Elisabeth Press



Before you dig into the following let me invite you take a few minutes to have a look at a second Happy Birthday Vélib' piece -- this a video by the talented Elisabeth Press of StreetFilms in New York. Press spent a week in Paris this Spring researching and turning her film, and spent enough time riding the system to have a good understand of what works, and what works maybe a bit less well. She tells her story at

<http://www.streetfilms.org/archives/velib%E2%80%99/>

## Thirty things that are terribly wrong with Vélib'

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### 1. The bikes are too heavy

They weigh 22 kg, roughly a third more than maybe your own bicycle. And sure! if your intention is to put it on your shoulder and carry it up five flights of stairs to your apartment, you're absolutely right -- it's real heavy. But the fact is that this cycle has been carefully designed in order to do the job that it needs to do. That extra weight turns out to be necessary to provide the full range of support and components necessary for it to do its job. And the necessary robustness -- bear in mind that little bike is going to be ridden by thousands of people of different weights, sizes, cycling skills, etc. over the year. And by and large when you are on the street and peddling away that weight is really no problem (though it can be a drag if you have a steep hill to climb, but you are there for the exercise anyway). In addition the weight and the careful balancing of the bicycle provides good stability, including on the cobblestone Streets which can be a little challenging (see below).

### 2. Paris is not doing enough to make the city safe for cycling

Let's start by bearing in mind that until now there are very few cities in the world which are "safe enough". Paris has doubled the number of safe cycling lanes and protection over the last five years, and is adding on the order of 40-50 km. of additional protection each year. In addition, there are the growing number of "slow speed" projects which are reducing traffic speeds to 30 km/h, and in places, 15 km/h in an extended number of streets and zones. In addition, the city is pushing for a "Street Code" (as opposed to the national "road code" which is oriented to highways and high speed areas, which will among other things require that in the case of an incident the drivers of the heavier vehicles are required to prove their innocence-- as opposed to the present practice which requires a proof of guilt (far harder to do). Bottom line: Paris is today a safe city for informed and prudent city cyclists. And it is getting safer all the time.

### 3. Bike lanes are inconsistent

There are two ways of looking at this. Starting from the pure Paris perspective: the streets and sidewalks widths and surfaces here vary enormously from place to place, meaning that it is out of the question to have the sort of unified cycle paths or lanes as will be seen, for example, in the better North American or other out of town leisure cycling projects. This means that there must be a wide variety of strategies for dealing with the opportunities and problems that arise when it comes to protecting cyclists in such radically different environments. So as you cycle Paris you will see a varied network consisting of painted lanes (which they do extremely well, I might add), longitudinal barriers separating bikes from motorized traffic, provision for one way cycling, a variety of ways of separating bikes from pedestrian traffic on sidewalks, careful signage, bike boxes, and more. There are also places in which you have to rough it out, share the road with the traffic. All of which is to say that this is above all a real world environment for “city cycling” and to do it well knowledge and experience helps. (Just like when you drive your Ferrari.)

If by contrast to Paris your city has been laid out with a uniform grid with wide streets and ample space for making a uniform sets of engineered cycle lanes, well go for it. But that will rarely be the case. So you will almost inevitably have to do as they have in Paris and use your noggin. Sorry.

### 4. Only for young healthy males

In Paris, something like 40% of all cyclists are female. And you will see plenty of older people on the streets, on Vélib's or their own bikes. Moreover there is a strong trend – the more cyclists there are on the streets, the safer they become for cyclists. And as this happens, more women and older people will join the happy fray every day.

### 5. Paris drivers are aggressive and dangerous

More folklore than truth to this. This is a fairly common complaint of visitors who have myths in their mind about the French but who have not spent enough time in a bike on the road even in their own city. It is right to the extent that most people who are in temporary control of a couple of tons of hurtling steel and rubber, and in a hurry (and what driver is not?), such drivers and inevitably is going to constitute a menace to smaller, less visible vehicles, such as you or me on a bike. So, as long as drivers can speed, cycling is going to be a slightly risky venture.



But here in Paris if you spend enough time on the streets you will observe that drivers are being tamed. And the key to this is the greatly increased number of cyclists out on the streets today. The cyclists are de facto following the tried and true strategy: “occuper le terrain”, which can be loosely translated as “safety in numbers”. The more cyclists on the street, the safer it becomes. And that already is a strategy.

#### **6. Can't find a bike/parking slot:**

This can be a problem, especially for people who are not accustomed to “working the system”. The odds are that if you try it enough there are going to be occasions when you can't find a bike in the first (or second) station you go to. Or that if you are in a hurry and show up at your intended destination you may find it full. There are two strategic responses to this two-headed dilemma. The first is to wait. The second is to learn the system, in which event you just head like an arrow to the station you by experience know is more likely to offer what you are looking for (remember with 1451 stations in this small city (105 sq. km) you are unlikely to have to walk or peddle more than five minutes to get to the next station.. There are thousands of practiced users of Vélib', and that's what they do every day. (All while waiting for better times to come).

#### **7: Can't even get good information about bike/parking availability.**

Yes you can, even if it is not yet perfect. You can if before your trip you check out the couple of web sites that provide you with this information with a single click. The one that I use daily is <http://www.parisavelo.net/> (I never leave home without it.). There is also an ‘official’ one from the city of Paris at [http://www.en.velib.paris.fr/trouver\\_une\\_station](http://www.en.velib.paris.fr/trouver_une_station), and another excellent one is at <http://www.unvelovite.com/Velib/>

Of course you are not always at your computer, so what can I tell you to help you avoid bike angst. Well, you will see that the map on each Vélib' station does indeed show the nearest stations, but they do not (yet) provide information on their status. (This already exists in Lyons and there is every reason to think we will be seeing it in Paris.) There is also a still-clunky WAP 1 gizmo that you can use with your mobile phone for which you can find instructions at

[http://www.velib.paris.fr/actualites/decouvrez\\_velib/les\\_stations\\_velib\\_sur\\_votre\\_mobile](http://www.velib.paris.fr/actualites/decouvrez_velib/les_stations_velib_sur_votre_mobile). (I for one have never had the patience, but that's just me.)



The final word on this is that the city and the operators are working on it and we are sure to see continuing improvements, both in Paris and in the other leading city projects. In the meantime, develop your knowledge by using it, and you will see that you will use it every day.

## 8. Many broken bikes at stations

By my own rough calculation, on average I encounter one bike with a problem per ten or so. In most cases the problem is immediately apparent: a loose chain, flat tire, problem with the steering alignment, maybe something with the seat, and more rarely other less visible problems. For a while there has been a fad to cut off the bike baskets but on the basis of daily visual inspection this fad seems to have calmed. If there is something wrong with your bike the etiquette is that when you leave it off or discover the problem, you crank the seat down and turn it in the opposite direction. Then the next person (and the staff) will know immediately. Mechanical problems come with the terrain, and once again point up why managements and maintenance are the keys to the success of any of these systems. .

## 9. My bike doesn't work!

That probably because you failed to apply the 100% no-brain start-up test of the regular user. You start by visually inspecting the bike for damage or malfunction. Then you kick the tires, pick up the bike and spin the rear wheel, squeeze both brakes, and then adjust the seat to your size – all before flashing your smart card and checking it out. Now this does not guarantee 100% glitch free cycling, but it does 98% or better.



## 10. Velib' is not "tourist friendly" – Some tourists credit cards cannot access bikes

Hey. Reality 1: The system is intended as daily transport for Parisians and not tourists (see below). All bank cards with smart chips work just fine, and Amex too. Otherwise no problem, you should most probably be renting a bike anyway.

## 11. Bikes are too expensive for tourists who want to use them to stroll through Paris

That's quite right. If you keep it for an uninterrupted four hour stretch, for example, your bill will quickly run up to 19 Euros. That's more than it would cost you for a full day if you rent it from a bike shop.

## 12. They are killing the bike retail business ()

Wrong. More cyclists on the street attract yet more cyclists. The number of people riding their own bikes has roughly doubled over this first year of Vélib'. And while some of these bikes have come out of the attic, others are coming new from the shops. The bike hire, purchase, and maintenance business is doing well in Paris. (But this did not happen by accident.)

## 13. The stations are not sufficiently visible to cyclists on the move

This is true. In other cities the stations are more visibly marked, but the Paris authorities decided to protect their built environment and not have aggressive signing or lighting of the stations. There is doubtless room for doing better, but the protection of the beauty of the city has to be a high priority.

#### **14. Bus drivers are aggressive and threatening**

I don't observe this in my own cycling here. First of all the drivers are professionally trained, and those in particular who operate on the reserved lanes where cyclists share the right of way with buses and taxis proceed with great caution. I would offer that the onus by and large is on the cyclists (though the taxis drivers could do with better prepping) One nice touch you will see when you get into a bus lane here is that when the bus pulls up behind you to signal its presence, the drivers will ring a bicycle bell. Nice symbol and an agreeable way to share public space.

#### **15 Vélib' cyclists undisciplined and dangerous.**

Performance is uneven here. While I observe that the Parisians by and large are safe cyclists (after all they know the terrain and are not just kidding around), the same is not always true of visitors who may, for lack of prudence or experience on the road, put themselves in the way of trouble. Both the city and the operator of the system are aware that increased efforts and information and education are called for. But it will be up to the tourists to do their part.



#### **16. Vélib' cyclists should be obliged to wear helmets**

On the several occasions in which there have been accidents the media and some of the public suggest that helmets should be mandatory. Now, an ample amount of observation and work have been done on this subject such that it has been concluded by a majority of experts with knowledge of city cycling that this is something that should be vigorously encouraged but not mandated by law. Compulsory helmets would mean an end to city cycling as it is widely practiced today in the leading cycling cities and countries (See [www.ecoplan.org/library/helmets.pdf](http://www.ecoplan.org/library/helmets.pdf) for more on this).

#### **17. No bikes at the top of hills**

They do tend to accumulate at the base of the hills since many folks apparently don't want to pedal or walk their Vélib' up a mountain (of which there are none in Paris of course but there are inclines that can raise a sweat.) So if you are looking for a bike and unless a nice lot of fresh Vélib's has just been delivered to your favorite hilltop station, you may want to walk to the base of the hill to find your steed. (That said, the operator and the city have recently come up with a scheme which provides some incentive for getting your bike up to the top of the hill

#### **18. No rear view mirror on bikes**

Right. And in my view there really should be, but this is not an easy call. In any event, part of being a good cyclist is to profit from your unhindered full field of vision, which also requires the ability to look behind both right and left. But then again, not all or tourists or all our new Vélib' users may have that level of skill. (Moreover we have to bear in mind that this will not be without its fair share of maintenance challenges.)

### **19. Vélib' is not reducing car traffic and pollution.**

It is, but the calculation is a subtle one and can be carried out really only at a basic conceptual level. As a rough rule of thumb, one survey showed that more than 10% of all trips were reported as substituting for car trips. Thus if there were 26 million Vélib' trips performed over the year, for an average trip of 4-5 kms. I.e, more than 100 million (polluting cold start, center city) vehicle kms of which 10% or so are substituting for car trips. Ten million vehicle kms-plus is a number, after all.

Beyond that what we are seeing here is a process: as people start to cross over to non-car solutions for their local transport requirements, the car itself slowly begins to become redundant for many city dwellers. Public bicycles are an important part of this conversion process. More use of bikes, of public transportation, of taxis, rental cars. And finally you go over to carsharing and sell that old banger once and for all. Or hang on to it for as long as it makes sense for your out of town trips.

### **20. They only steal passengers from public transport carriers**

This is interesting, and not entirely baseless. However the synergies are not altogether negative. In Paris a bit more than half of all Velib trips might otherwise have been taken by bus or metro. There are however two, and at time quite considerable advantages of this dynamic trade-off. First of all if the Vélib' user voluntarily takes a bike, it's because she thinks it is quicker and often more agreeable. And since the transit services of Paris, like may other cities, are often pushed to capacity and beyond, so in good weather at least the Vélib' option provide better conditions of transit for all those hoping to find a seat on the bus, train or subway. Win-win, as some insist on saying.

### **21. Bikes take away parking spaces for cars**

They sure do, but given that most of those cars carry only one person most of the time, this modal shift is a good thing not only for the city but also for local commerce. People who come into stores by bike or on foot, come more often and, studies show, tend to spend more money for higher quality produce. Not only that, the Vélib' trip can in most cases in the city be quicker and bring the customer closer to the point of purchase.



### **22. Bikes steal street space from cars.**

Yes, that's right, and so they should. Public bikes need a bit of road space, and if they get what they need it has to be taken from somewhere – that being namely the chaotic street space that is most often used to poor efficiency by high carbon, un-sustainable, high cost (to all concerned), threatening, often dangerous and space-hungry car transport. This needs to be accomplished carefully and with respect to those who up to now have depended on their cars for much or all of the transportation needs. So this needs to be managed as a subtle, strategic process.

### **23. Bus lanes are too wide**

This point has been made on repeated occasions by the adversaries to Vélib', and more generally to the new mobility innovations in Paris. The shared lanes are 4.5 metres wide, which is the size required for safe overtaking and worked out through careful negotiations between all the concerned parties.

#### **24. Paris buses not equipped to carry cycles**

No they are not. And most probably given the size of the service area, the availability of public bikes and the density of the public transportation network, this is not a significant option for Paris. (But this does not mean that this is something that your city should not at the very least be looking into).

#### **25. Vélib's do not like cobblestone streets and intersections**

They do not at all. And if your city has a lot of them you will do well to consider how to work around this problem. In such cases maintenance costs zoom up, and when it rains so too do the accidents. Cobblestones and public bikes are not friends.

#### **26. Too ugly and numerous to position near to historic monuments and plazas**

This is weird, but it is a point that has been made by several groups concerned with the protection of the built patrimony environment in Paris. The irony is that while there is plentiful provision for car parking near to these monuments and public spaces, yet for now the Vélib' stands are required to hide on side streets. This is a situation which surely will not last.

#### **27. Theft and vandalism are threatening the project**

The reported figure is on the order of three thousand bikes stolen or completely trashed in the first year. That's a lot, but think of it as on the order of 300 per month or ten per day. And that out of 15,000-plus bikes on the road every day. Difficult but surely workable. (This should not be taken as encouraging laxity on your part I you are thinking about a PBS in your city. The vandalism and theft challenge is a real one and an indicator among other things of the level of social peace and inclusiveness in your city. From this respect it is every bit as important as climate and topographic considerations, and of course the quality and extent of safe cycling infrastructure.

#### **28. It's a "left wing" project**

Oh dear. This does seem to crop up in certain media from time to time. It's a pure blue herring. Public bicycle systems are social and environmental systems that correspond to our 21<sup>st</sup> century need for low carbon, resource-efficient, high amenity life styles. And that's all there is to it.

#### **29. It is wrong to have street advertising**

This is essentially a pure demagogic position. Each city will have its own policy about outdoor advertising. If a public bicycle project makes use of a partnership of this kind, what is important is to get it right. And the mechanics of that can be quite delicate. That's for sure.

#### **30. The whole project is just a gadget**

This is a very mature challenge actually. The fact is that the Vélib' project in Paris, and indeed in all the other high impact cities with such systems, until now accounts for only a sliver of the total number of trips needed to ensure a healthy economy. But they signal and support an important change to a new way of getting around in cities. And that is at the end of the day probably their major contribution. And BTW, they also work. Including in Paris.

Happy birthday Vélib'. Great going Paris!



**Pointing the way to New Mobility**

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Here you will find several commentaries on this which have been received from the World City Bike forum in the first half day after posting the list of topics filled out above. Further commentary is invited and will selectively be added here to future versions of this piece.

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**On Behalf Of** Morten Lange

**Sent:** Monday, 14 July 2008 01:52

Hi Eric

I am curious : Would you have an opportunity to get a wider readership to this article or points in it ?

In France /Paris or some international newspaper perhaps ?

One thing that you seem not to specifically mention is the (unsurprising) fact that cyclists have been killed on Velib' bicycles, and the reactions and distortions that have surfaced in the press as a reaction to that.

I am not sure about this, but I think at least one user was killed by a large vehicle turning right over the path of a cyclist ( on a Velib' bike). One reaction was to close the system down, another ( I think ) to build more segregated facilities etc.. But how can such accidents most effectively be avoided / reduced in number for the whole of Paris ? My suggestions are :

- More care taken by drivers, especially by drivers of large vehicles. This has been achieved in Denmark and Holland. In part because drivers are used to bicyclists. In part because media also see such accidents from the cyclist view, and because the law is much more favorable to cyclists than in most other places. ( So drivers carry responsibility and insurance burden much more often )

- More care taking by cyclists. Never put oneself in that position beside a large vehicle that may turn right (left in UK/ROI etc) over your path, without having room to move away from the encroaching vehicle. To stay behind through the intersection, or pass on the other side is often the better option.

- In general, cyclists will benefit from cycling vehicularly. Take the whole lane where needed, for instance at junctions. Be assertive but defensive. Be courteous, and let car drivers pass where safe ( move to 1m - 1,5m from curb/edge/parked cars )

- Educating cyclists is what the European Cyclists Federation, ECF put forward as their contribution to European traffic safety. The UK has a really large program running, but perhaps too focused on kids (Bikeability)

- Restrictions on large vehicles, that have drivers that have not taken a course ?

- Mirrors on lorries etc that I think the EU is incorporating, but too slowly

Best Regards,  
Morten Lange

**On Behalf Of** Michael Yeates <michael@yeatesit.biz>

*Date:* Mon Jul 14, 2008 12:16 am

Gee Eric,

It can't be all that bad ...!

It would appear from the following list that quite a lot of the issues involve ...

(i) marketing/promotion/education/awareness of the idea i.e., that it is a "good thing" and why - what I have called "endorsement" by the various authorities involved such as those managing the roads and public transport, road safety, etc but also beyond the Isle de Paris and perhaps including the national government and EU/EC

and

(ii) long(er) term social change i.e. adjustments at the community/social/awareness level of the benefits and of how to better accommodate or adjust to it.

Some are probably right if only as (mis)perceptions ...!

In this category, I would suggest that the bikes being too heavy and cycling on cobbles are "good" examples. Most of the others are also personal opinions and reflect opposition to change. Reminds me of our city Councillor in charge of all transport and traffic who on seeing one of my photos of the hundreds of bikes parked outside one of the major rail stations in a larger city in Germany said they looked ugly ... until I asked her if she thought a much larger car park full of cars looked better and why.

Am I right to recall from memory that the 3 fatalities appeared to involve trucks? If so, and also applies to buses, this suggests that as in London, the circumstances need to be closely examined. It would appear this is often the result of cyclists "undertaking" i.e. overtaking on the drivers blind side ... and if the vehicle then turns that way, the cyclist is trapped against the kerb or any physical objects on the kerbside, or the cyclist overbalances and ends up under the rear wheels. This indicates a likely if not inevitable lack of awareness and/or experience. It has been the subject of an excellent campaign by the London Cycling Campaign and London's traffic/transport authority ... info should be on the LCC website ... an example of category (i) with necessary but inevitable slower longer term effects of change as in (ii) above.

I totally agree this is really important to address especially as other cities are talking about jumping on the CityBike idea ... thanks Eric.

I would be interested to see what others think.

MY . . . .