

That commute-by-bike thing. Habit, not lifestyle.



Back in the day, I got around by bike. It was what you did when growing up in the 60s. Your bike was your freedom. Why would you expect your parents to haul you around? And school? 4 or 5 miles by bus from the Redwood City hills to San Carlos High School, way up on Melendy? Yeah, rode there too. You know how kids are often defined by the car they drive? Well I was defined by my bike. I didn't even get a driver's license until 18, at which point the advantages of driving myself to bike races and seeing a girlfriend outweighed... well, everything. From then on you kind of get caught up in "normal" life, with a long commute not practical by bike (Redwood City to Campbell, when I worked for Heathkit Electronics) and later, when Chain Reaction Bicycles got off the ground, a truck was required to drive between home and the shop to transport bikes that would be built in my garage each night and then driven to the store the next morning.

Commuting to work was replaced by the conveniences offered by driving for a very long time. Cycling was still part of my lifestyle; the regular Tuesday/Thursday-morning ride, longer Sunday rides to the coast, never a break from that routine. But commuting as a habit disappeared, until a few years ago.

What changed? The first of the shop's two Dodge Caravans died. Transmission issues, common to late-90s Dodge vehicles. With just one vehicle left to transfer product between our two locations, you couldn't depend upon one being available for commuting, and truth be told, I've never actually owned a car myself. My wife has a car, my daughter has a car, but not me. For a while it worked out that I could hitch a ride with one of them, but my wife only works part time and not every day, and Becky (my daughter) commuted to Santa Cruz for school twice a week. Then the second Dodge Caravan began to die (it's still in the process; each trip between our two stores could very well be its last). So about a year ago I became pretty much a full-time bike commuter, out of necessity. If it had strictly been choice, why wouldn't I have done so much earlier? Because with a car available, there was always some way to rationalize that it made sense to drive.

But in fact, there's really not much you can't do when commuting by bike. No problem at all stopping for coffee on the way to work (and no feeding the parking meters!). And if you have to pick up dinner on the way home, as long as it's something you can put into a backpack (burritos), no problem. Safe? I've had more close-calls driving than riding, even riding home at night. Of course, I'm lit up like the proverbial Christmas Tree, even in the daytime. Two separate headlights plus one lower-power blinking front light, and two blinking tail lights. 9 minutes to get to work (can maybe shave a minute off that by car), and 13 to 20 minutes home. The variable time for the return is caused by either riding slowly enough so I don't have to take a shower before dinner or riding with Becky, who's not quite up to the sort of speeds Kevin (my son) and I can manage. But she's getting there.

Hopefully I'll keep this up, even if conditions change and we have a new shop vehicle available for use. But it's really good for the shop's bottom line not having the expense of a van to deal with, and there's something nice about arrive home out of breath, adrenalin pumping, and feeling like you've earned dinner.

Wish I could claim the high ground and say that commuting by bike is part of my lifestyle, but I can't. It just happens to work out

best for finances, and it feels like a way to connect the dots in a cycling-centric manner. Hopefully, it's also becoming a habit that will be hard to break! But if it ever does rain again, it's not too likely I'll turn down the offer of a ride home in a 4-wheeled steel cage. --Mike--