



**TRANSPORTATION  
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## Guide to Streetwise Cycling in New York City (Part I)

Story by Tom Hart / Drawings by Kyle Shrink

*Beginning with this issue, City Cyclist is serializing a new city cycling guide written by T.A. member Tom Hart. The complete guide will cover the basics of urban riding, including traffic skills and tactics, vehicle law, security and repair, and cycling routes. Although no two cyclists think alike about every aspect of riding in NYC, we think Tom's take on the subject is as good as any we've seen. Please view the guide as a work in progress, intended not only to inform but to provoke a dialogue with you.*



Riding a bicycle in New York City is different from riding in most other places. This guide concentrates on the skills needed to ride in Manhattan, though much of it may apply to any other crowded environment.



### Why Ride in NYC?

Despite New York City's crowds, pollution, and world-famous nastiness, a bicycle is a great way to get around. Sure, bikes don't get much respect, but what does? A bike can save the messenger or commuter an enormous amount of time, and New York's fine transit system gives the cyclist a back-up means of traveling. The city and surrounding areas offer a host of pleasurable riding opportunities for both the

road and off-road cyclist. Good city riding skills make these much more accessible. Here's what you should know to get started.

### Equipment

**The Bike.** First you'll need a bicycle - within reason, the sturdier the better. NYC roads can



be rough on fragile machines. If you already have a decent road bike and are skilled in handling it, you can probably make it last a tolerably long time. Still, you might consider investing in heavier wheels with thicker, more flat-proof tires.

Sport/touring bikes can make great city bikes. But if you don't use the bike for open road riding, consider changing the drop handlebars to straight, upright bars. Drop bars put the rider in a more forward, aero-dynamic position. That's great on the open road, but in the city it's control that counts, not speed. The upright position of the mountain bike was developed for maximum control and to give the rider a good view of oncoming terrain - both essential for a safe city rider. Mountain bike-style straight bars can be modified with aerodynamic bar ends to make them nearly as efficient as drop bars. These bar ends also help protect your brakes and hands from close encounters with car mirrors.



Be extra picky about brake quality. Those that feel mushy on the shop floor are usually the same on the street. You might also lean toward sturdier wheels and tires. The wider the tire and stronger the wheel the more traction and protection you and your bike will have on the city's patchwork streets. (As riders already know, funding for the city's "pothole patrol" was trimmed in the most recent budget cuts.) Don't look for big rubber knobs for traction. On pavement, traction is largely determined by the area of rubber in contact with the pavement. Many bike shops will swap the gnarly knobbies that come on all-terrain bikes for a smoother tire - a good idea. Some cycling enthusiasts keep a couple of sets of tires, wheels, or even bikes - a "lock outside" bike, a sturdy mountain bike, and/or a pedigree road racing bike.

If you have no place to store your bike at home or building, you may want to consider purchasing a [folding bike](#). New York City is the biggest market in the U.S. for folding bikes for good reason.

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### Find The Time

Begin riding in the city during the mellower times. Early Saturday or Sunday is probably best. Next best is weekdays, as early as you can bear (dawn to pre-rush hour), followed by weekday midday. Weekend afternoons and early evenings, when most people make their first (and occasionally last) attempt at riding in midtown, is worst, as large numbers of non-NYC drivers invade the city.



New York drivers can be rude to cyclists, but they usually possess more city driving skills as well as more respect for the cyclist's right to the road than the scared, stoned, enraged, or simply confused out-of-towners. Weekend afternoons and evenings in Manhattan can be a chaotic free-for-all, trying for even experienced city cyclists.



It makes sense to invest in a good quality bike. This means going to a [bike shop](#) with a decent reputation and avoiding toy and

department stores. A good bike shop will advise you on fit. Insist on a minimum of one inch of clearance above the top tube (standing flat-footed in low shoes); make sure that your leg can extend fully when you pedal, and that you feel comfortable riding the bike. Often women are more comfortable on smaller-than-needed frames. Some shops will change the stems to get a more appropriate reach.

Be careful buying used; in NYC you can all too easily pick up a bike the previous owner was not quite ready to give up. If you're caught in possession of a stolen bike and can't prove you bought it from someone who presented it to you as not stolen, you are in possession of stolen property - a felony. Insist on a signed receipt, complete serial number, and good identification. Often, good used bikes can be picked up for next to nothing at flea markets and yard sales outside the city where their utilitarian value is no longer appreciated.

**Necessities.** Think seriously about getting a helmet. A helmet isn't legally required - yet. But it is the single most important piece of safety equipment you can have. Make sure yours is approved by either the "Snell" or "ANSI" organizations. This means the helmet meets established test criteria for impact protection in a crash. Helmets can be expensive (partly because helmet companies must carry considerable liability insurance). Remember - the brain you are buying a helmet to protect is the only brain you'll ever have. Chances are you may never use the helmet, but it only takes once. In a bad fall, the rider may come down hard on hands, arms, and head. All but the brain can usually be repaired.



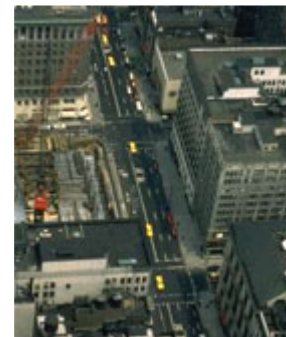
Of course, if you plan to park your bike or leave it unattended for even a brief moment, a sturdy **lock** is essential.

**Accessories.** Also consider buying a pair of leather-palmed cycling gloves. They'll cushion your hands from handlebar vibration and protect them if you fall. A bell is also helpful in city riding; it says to pedestrians: "Bike coming through. Nothing to worry about, as long as you don't move erratically." In the absence of a bell, or in pressure situations, there is no substitute for using your voice. Many cyclists find mirrors useful for helping them track what's happening behind them, aiding both safety and sense of security in traffic. But quality mirrors that can withstand the rigors of city riding are scarce, and all mirrors leave blind spots. Car drivers are taught to peek over their shoulder before changing lanes and cyclists should, too. Front and rear lights are also required under NYC law for night riding, so if your commute sometimes occurs after dark (which it almost certainly will during the shorter days of winter), buy a set of lights that meet your budget.



### Basic Bike-Handling Skills

Midtown traffic is **not** the place to learn to ride, brush up on skills long dormant, or even orient yourself to a new bike. Before venturing into heavy traffic, the rusty cyclist should practice riding in a park, a large parking lot, or almost anywhere in town early in the morning, especially on weekends (though on nice weekends Central Park can get pretty crazy). Another way to learn to ride in traffic is to take a group ride, such as one of the shorter ones listed in the City




Cyclist and [Transportation Alternatives magazine](#). Group rides give you valuable pointers and also safety in numbers; cars that might squeak close to a single cyclist will give a group a wider berth.

Practice sessions are especially important for working on braking and turning - practice quickly slamming on the brakes, and doing a series of quick turns. Try riding the bike on a variety of pavements, including gravel and potholed roads, and even up and down small curbs. Also practice slow-speed maneuvers, including right-angle turns (for getting through stalled traffic) and "trackstands" (standing nearly still, without falling!).

When you're comfortable and confident, practice looking behind you while riding straight ahead. If traffic is moving faster than you, danger will probably be coming from the rear, so you'd better be able to check it out. Although a mirror can be useful, you will still want to be able to look over your shoulder to get a complete view of what's going on behind you. Learning to glance behind without swerving is a useful but difficult skill, and best practiced where there isn't much to hit.

Next, try taking one hand off the handlebar so that you can signal. Learn to do this with either hand; most drivers won't figure out that a bent left arm means a right turn, but most understand an arm pointed to one side. Practice signaling while glancing behind you, since you may need to do both at the same time. Practice signaling when riding with friends, who will appreciate knowing where you are going.

### **Cycling In Traffic**

 Riding in New York City traffic is surprisingly easy - until something frightening or dangerous happens. The best way to keep from getting hurt is to avoid dangerous situations in the first place. This means paying attention and being careful. The unexpected will happen. Car doors open, taxis cut across lanes, nobody signals, pedestrians are off on cloud nine, and sometimes even other cyclists come at you from all directions.

Long articles and whole books have been written about riding safely in traffic. Rather than provide detailed guidelines, I have tried to distill this material into something you can use right away. There is no magic formula or set of rigid rules that will work in every situation. Instead, here are ways to think about working with urban traffic to improve your sense of confidence, comfort, and safety on the streets.

Try riding in traffic with more experienced friends at first. Still, though you can learn a lot by watching what skilled cyclists do, please be careful imitating them. Remember that you don't have the years of experience and haven't learned the many lessons, through hard knocks or close calls, that allow these street artists to make it look so easy. Unless you're an experienced racer, don't try to follow another cyclist closely through heavy traffic. If you're too close behind, you may not see what's happening in time. A gap may disappear before you can get through it.

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### **Support Your Local Bike Store**

Be careful about saving a few dollars by buying a helmet or other accessories from a discount house or through a catalogue. In the short run you may save some money, but you may wind up with inferior



merchandise. You certainly will not be investing in a long- term relationship with your local bicycle shop - one which helps build a stronger bicycling community and which also may help you get your wheels trued the day before a big ride.

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