

July 26, 2007

EDITORIAL OBSERVER

# I Love Paris on a Bus, a Bike, a Train and in Anything but a Car

By SERGE SCHMEMANN

PARIS

Now that Michael Moore has broken a taboo by holding up France as a model for national health care, maybe it's safe to point out other things France seems to do right. Like how Paris is trying to manage traffic and auto pollution.

What Paris has done right is to make it awful to get around by car and awfully easy to get around by public transportation or by bike. Any tourist in a rent-a-car who's circumnavigated the Arc de Triomphe most likely will never drive in Paris again. But there are plenty of Parisians who do it all the time — far too many, in fact. So Mayor Bertrand Delanoë, a Socialist, vowed in coming to office in 2001 to reduce car traffic by 40 percent by 2020.

He's serious about it. I live near the Boulevard St. Michel, and two years ago the city laid down a granite divider between the bus-only lane and the cars, squeezing private cars from three lanes to two. Taxis and bicycles may use the bus lane.

At the same time, every bus stop was newly equipped with a screen that told you how long the wait was for the bus. During rush hour, when the cars stand still along Boul' Mich, there's nothing better than zooming past them in a bus.

Bus routes reach the most obscure corners of Paris. There's also the Metro — and especially the great Line No. 1, which runs on tires under the Champs-Élysées and beyond. Then there's a nifty new tramway that runs along the southern rim of the city and several suburban train lines that can be used for rapid transport within the city.

In short, public transportation will take you where you want to go, and you can use it all you want on an electronic card that can be paid by the week or by the month (about \$70 these days). Taxis, of course, can also be summoned anywhere by phone.

The lesson for big-city mayors: If you're going to squeeze the cars, first primp the public ride.

Mayor Delanoë's latest front in the anti-car war is the bicycle. Last week, more than 10,000 stolid, gray-painted bicycles (no Tour de France speedsters) became available for rent at 750 self-service locations across Paris. The cost is modest, less than \$1.50 for a one-day pass, about \$7.50 for a week and about \$43.50 for a year — and the bikes can be dropped off at any docking station. The number of bikes is supposed to double by the end of the year. Already in their first week, the bikes are all over central Paris, many carrying commuters — and, yes, some New Yorkers. (An outdoor advertising company paid for everything in return for exclusive use of city-owned billboards.)

Lesson for all big cities: This is an idea whose time has come.

Now, a word about cars. In American cities, it's "big."

Parisians overwhelmingly buy small cars. And it's not because people are petite, but because fuel is drop-dead expensive. Gasoline costs more than twice as much in Paris as in New York.

But the price of diesel fuel is deliberately set far lower. That's because diesel-powered cars produce about 30 percent less greenhouse gas pollution than equivalent gasoline-powered engines. So car-buyers in Paris get small, diesel cars not because the French are virtuous (a separate topic), but because it makes economic good sense.

Many of these small cars have ample room for full-size people and have no trouble maintaining (or seriously exceeding) the 130 kilometers-per-hour (about 80 m.p.h.) limit on the national highways and are as clean and almost as quiet as gasoline engines.

The lesson for the next U.S. president: raise the taxes on fuel. A lot.

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