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Cycle the Seine, thanks to a mayor's initiative

The Boston Globe

By **Stephanie Ager Kirz, Globe Correspondent** | **May 15, 2005**

PARIS -- The mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoe, has a love affair with cycling, which is very good news for all other cyclists in the city.

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Designated bicycle lanes and bike rentals that offer five-speed bikes as well as helmets, locks, baskets, water bottles, and even shoes are springing up all over the city. Picture yourself cycling along the Seine past the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame Cathedral, the Musée d'Orsay, and the Louvre.

Thanks to Delanoe, roads along the Seine are closed to auto traffic Sundays and holidays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. for the convenience of walkers, skaters, and cyclers. Instead of looking out for cars, you can keep your eyes focused on the sights. Easy-to-follow routes have large signs posted showing the designated streets that alternate along the Right and Left banks of the river, going through tunnels, over historic bridges, and passing monuments along the way. There is something quite exhilarating about cycling next to a passing barge or bateau-mouche as it chugs up the river carrying a full load of tourists waving at you, and probably wishing they were on a bike, too.

Renting is easy with the city's Roue Libre (Free Wheeling) bike shops. In a partnership with the Mairie de Paris (City Hall) and the RATP (public transit system), multiple Roue Libre locations offer about 1,500 bikes to rent. The shops are open year round for hardy cyclists who don't want to wait for warm weather. Paris has some 160 miles of well-marked, designated bicycle lanes. Pick up a free map that includes the routes, rental locations, and information (in French only) at any Roue Libre location. Dedicated bike lanes are being upgraded weekly, and for an added bonus, the bus lanes are accessible to bicycles.

"Bicycling in the heart of our city preserves our environment, reduces pollution, and improves the quality of life," Delanoe has said.

Most helpful is a small brochure called Bike Rental and Guided Bike Tours, available in English and French. Produced by Roue Libre, it has a smaller version of the bike map tucked inside.

The Roue Libre locations are open 9 a.m.-7 p.m. daily unless otherwise indicated. Some locations offer guided rides. Several free rides of 2½-three hours each are scheduled. For night owls, Friday evening rides occur all year, except during rain. They leave at 9:30 p.m. from the Hotel de Ville. You can rent your bike at the Les

Halles shop before 7 p.m. for about \$11.50 and return it by noon Saturday.

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Other free group rides are scheduled every third Sunday by the Paris Rando Velo Association and are appropriately called Sunday Rides. They leave from the Hotel de Ville at 10:30 a.m. The closest rental location is at Les Halles, with special discounts for various events, such as the last Friday of the month.

The greatest number of guided tours are scheduled during summer. Roue Libre also has guided bike rides outside Paris based on the themes of Royal Towns and Gardens and Chateaux around Paris. Tours offered inside the city include exploring the Right and Left banks, the Marais and Montmartre, and the Paris of Haussmann, as well as the Chocolate ride, the Pompadour ride, and the Bargeman ride, which includes riding your bike onto a barge.

Finally, Roue Libre has retrofitted old RATP buses into what are called cyclobuses, capable of transporting as many as 60 rental bicycles to two locations, the grand Bois de Boulogne and the Bois de Vincennes, on the outskirts of the city. Take the Metro to either location and rent a bicycle to ride on the paths inside those huge parks.

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