

[<< back to story >>](#)

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Gas prices too high? Ride a bike to work

With the longest day of the year fast approaching, it's really time to think about bicycle commuting.

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With the longest day of the year fast approaching, it's really time to think about bicycle commuting. If you're ever going to ride your bike to work, now's the time.

Don't worry, I'm not going to preach or proselytize. I just thought I'd share some tips from seasoned bike commuters, pass along pointers and give some resources, just in case you need a little push to get started, and you missed National Bike to Work Day in May.

It makes sense, after all. The economic (what are gas prices now?), health and environmental benefits are hard to ignore. And odds are, if you're reading this, you're interested in biking or, even more likely, you're already a recreational bicyclist. And that's more than John Brooking could say when he decided to use a bike as his mode of transportation.

Brooking lives in Westbrook and commutes 5 miles to an office near the Maine Mall in South Portland. About five years ago, his concerns for the environment and his carbon dioxide footprint pushed him to consider bicycle commuting.

"I wanted to get away from single-occupancy car commuting," he says. He was not a cyclist nor, he says, was he particularly athletic. He took it on as a personal challenge to bike commute year-round. About a year ago, he says, his family went from owning two cars to one.

"You don't have to be a great athlete," he says. That's part of his message to others. "My mission, if you like," he says, "is to help people realize that they can bike commute, and to help them do it." That's why Brooking started a Portland-area bicycle commuter club last year.

JOIN THE COMMUTER CLUB

The club, which now has about 75 members, is primarily an online network hosted at meetup.com (<http://bike.meetup.com/132/>). People can ask questions and share tips, concerns, advice and information. The club has monthly themed meetings, does bike valet parking at events, and also does an occasional group ride where they will ride the commuting route of one of the members. This month's meeting, scheduled for June 20, will be basic bike maintenance.

At the May meeting aimed specifically at beginners, Brooking says, there were a few folks who were -- like he was -- not recreational cyclists, but just people who wanted to try bike commuting. What tips did he offer? One thing that is near and dear to his heart is that you don't need special gear and a fancy bike.

"I don't wear cycling-specific clothing," he says. "I don't have special shorts or shoes or pedals. I do wear a high visibility jacket or jersey, but that's it. You don't need to spend a lot of money to do it."

He says any bike will do as long as it fits you properly, has good working brakes and is appropriate for the mileage you are going to do. The Bicycle Coalition of Maine agrees. Its first tip for bicycle commuters is to make sure your bike is in good working order; also, consider an annual tune-up.

DON'T FORGET A HELMET

Helmets are essential. After that, the BCM also recommends: wearing bright, comfortable clothing; choosing a safe route; finding good bike parking options at work; and locating changing and showering facilities at or near work.

Safety issues, rules of the road, riding in traffic and the pending biking legislation (aka the Bike Law Bill) are subjects that concern all cyclists; BCM is the best resource for information on these topics (visit www.bikemaine.org). If riding in traffic is your primary concern, consider taking the BCM's nine-hour class in bike driving.

Another great resource is Go Maine (www.GoMaine.org), which provides statewide transportation options for commuters. Register as a bike commuter with Go Maine (it's free) and you'll get the Emergency Ride Home Guarantee -- a free (or reimbursed) taxi ride or car rental if something comes up and the bike just won't cut it.

"Don't be a purist." That's the advice from seasoned bike commuter Matthew Bampton, who lives in Portland and commutes year-round to Gorham.

"Consider putting your bike on the bus for part of your journey, or driving part way and riding the rest," he says. He also brings out the tried and true "there's no such thing as bad weather, only improper outerwear" line. The right gear for you will make the whole experience more enjoyable.

"Ease into it," advises Derek Wilbraham. Wilbraham lives in Bath and works in Freeport. His strategy, especially at the start of his bike commuting season, is to drive in one day, bringing his bicycle, work clothes, gear and anything else he might need at the office. Then he'll cycle home that day, and cycle in the next day. Then he'll drive home. It's sort of like a knitting pattern: Drive 2, Ride 2 and repeat.

"Know how to change a flat," says Blake Strack. Strack has a short Portland commute that he turns into a long ride to combine exercise with transportation. Having a flat tire on the way to work, he says, will turn you right off commuting. He recommends carrying spare tubes and a carbon dioxide inflator (a small, light pump that uses cartridges filled with compressed carbon dioxide gas). This is probably the fastest way to fix a flat.

If you don't know anything about bike maintenance, try the Bicycle Commuting club's June 20 meeting (check the Web site for details) or take a class at a bike shop or club near you.

"Don't sweat it." Literally. This is my best advice. If you just want transportation and there's no shower at your office, then choose the flattest route you can and ride at a leisurely pace. Drive in once a week to leave extra shoes and clothes at your office. Fit your bike out with a rack and get a basket or panniers, rather than carry a backpack or bike messenger bag (again, too sweaty).

I like using a handlebar bag and/or a bag that attaches to the top of my rear rack. It comes off quickly and the shoulder strap makes it easier to carry than a pannier.

In most other countries in the world, the bike is an accepted, popular, common, everyday, even mundane form of transportation. I've seen housewives in Amsterdam carry two children and the day's groceries on a bike with ease. Here, it seems we have to pass laws, wear special clothes, duke it out with cars and have special days to encourage it. When I bike-commuted regularly to an office in London through rotaries clogged with snarled traffic, sucking in diesel bus fumes, I always marveled at a Scotswoman who would glide in to work on an old sit-up-and-beg bike, her long skirt swirling on one side, her accessories matching and her handbag in a wire handlebar basket. So don't sweat it. Just do it.

Melissa Kim, a free-ance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). Her biking blog is online at

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