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In search of Australia's best cycling city

As bike riding surges in popularity, transport planners are pedalling furiously to keep up

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A cyclist in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. Melbourne's cycling culture embraces vintage bikes, wicker baskets and meet-ups that crowd coffee into proceedings. Photograph: Thomas Cockrem/AAP

Melbourne city council recently did something astonishing – at least to those unfamiliar with cities such as Copenhagen or Amsterdam. It removed a vehicle lane as part of a trial to make more room for cyclists on Princes Bridge.

It's the latest sign that Melbourne is starting to live up to the lord mayor's pledge of being "a true cycling city". A four-year plan aims to increase the number of cyclists by 50%, while in the past two years \$8m has been invested in cycle paths and the launch of a bike hire scheme (which has admittedly come with a few helmet-related issues).

While the Victorian government still appears to think that transport strategy should be about moving cars around, rather than people, Melbourne has undergone a cycling surge.

I've cycled in the city for five years and noticed a gradual shift from Lycra-clad powerhouses to skinny jean-wearing fixie riders. The city's cycling culture embraces

vintage bikes, wicker baskets and meet-ups that, being Melbourne, crowd coffee into proceedings.

Fortunately, there's plenty to attract riders without sculpted facial hair – the cycling trails along the Yarra are a meandering joy for all, with the diverse Capital City Trail taking in everything from the Docklands to the Collingwood Children's Farm.

Of course, it's not perfect. Bike lanes are still fragmented, I've been sent tumbling painfully down a hill in St Kilda because a driver happily opened a car door without looking, and people waiting for trams on Swanston Street now have to share their space with cyclists.

Despite this, Melbourne might just be Australia's best cycling city. But what of the other contenders?

Sydney

If Sydney's vertiginous hills are off-putting to potential cyclists, the figures don't show it. The Australian Bicycle Council last month released figures showing that 19% of Sydney residents jump on a bike at least once a week – double the national average and a huge increase on 4% in 2011.

Saskia Howard, the founder of Sydney Cycle Chic, says: "When I started the blog three years ago, it was at the start of the wave and usage has increased hugely since then. It's become normal to cycle."

Sydney's lord mayor, Clover Moore, has been supportive of grassroots ventures, according to Howard. "There's the Bike Film Festival and network community bike groups. It's really been a nice couple of years."



A cyclist in a bike lane on Elizabeth Street in central Sydney. Nineteen per cent of Sydneysiders jump on a bike at least once a week. Photograph: Christopher Samuel/AAP

But what about those hills? "Doesn't really matter," Howard says. "There's lots of cycling

in San Francisco and it's bloody hilly there."

Hobart

A verdant, compact city, Hobart lends itself well to non-car transport – it has the highest proportion of people walking to work among the capitals, although also the second lowest rate of people cycling to work.

There are pleasant stretches of cycle path, including a route along an old railway track in the northern suburbs, and a scenic 10km lane that hugs the waterfront.

"Hobart is a pretty city with some high-quality bike paths," says Mary McParland, executive officer of Cycling South. "Tourists are happy to ride out to Mona and some of the best paths are completely separated from roads."

But there is work to be done: "If you don't live near the bike routes things aren't so great. Plus there are the hills, but that's where electric bikes come in, I suppose."

Brisbane

Paul French from Brisbane's Bicycle User Group doesn't pull any punches when it comes to the city's progress on cycling. "Words that spring to mind include hopeless, woeful, inadequate," he says. "You can go through the thesaurus on that one, really."

There is a south-east Queensland cycle network plan but French says it is moving at a "snail's pace" and has so far failed to deliver the promised 600km of bike paths.



Public bicycles for

hire in Brisbane. Photograph: Dan Peled/AAP

A 2011 goal to double cycling by 2016 has "simply stagnated", says French, while the pathway infrastructure put in place is prone to flooding.

"Brisbane is one of most car-dependent places on Earth – with only 2% of the transport budget going on footpaths and cycling," he says.

As well as a strategy to make cycling a default mode of transport, French wants side slush guards fitted to trucks to prevent cyclist deaths.

On the plus side, Brisbane has some great rides to be tackled beside the river, there's a bike hire scheme and the climate is conducive to year-round cycling.

Canberra

As a relatively new city surrounded by nature, Canberra has forged a largely harmonious relationship with its cyclists.

"There's a fantastic amount of infrastructure for the everyday commuter – you can be on a country road in 10 minutes and there are a couple of great cycling and community groups," says Nathan Edmondson, secretary of the Canberra Cycling Club.

"People might not like the weather here, but I think it's perfect cycling weather."

The challenge for the city, like many others, is to ensure that bike paths keep pace with growth. "The on-road path option can suddenly run out, leaving you right next to a truck, which is the same for other cities," Edmondson says. "There's continual improvement that needs to be done, but I think the ACT government does a lot compared to others."

Does Edmondson have to continually dodge frantically pedalling politicians? "Not really. They have a habit of getting into a car to go three metres. The only time I see one on a bike is when Tony Abbott spots a camera."

Perth

Perth is the third windiest city in the world. Wobbly cyclists beware. But for those not fussed by a stiff breeze, Perth is an agreeable place for cycling – it has long stretches of coastline and a flat landscape with hilly rides out of town if the mood takes you.



Cycling over the

Narrows Bridge in Perth. The city has long stretches of coastline and a flat landscape.

Photograph: Nicola Wells/Lonely Planet Images

The WA government has committed an extra \$10m to upgrading key routes, such as the Perth-to-Fremantle path that varies wildly in quality. There's also [Cycle Instead Bikeweek](#) to get people saddled up.

"Car is still king here – I personally don't have issues with angsty drivers but I know others do," says Jeremy Murray, chief executive of [Bicycling WA](#).

"The number of people cycling to work is growing all the time. I rode to work today and I stopped at a set of lights and there were bikes spilling out of the lane. It showed that we are getting there."

Adelaide

The pros may have the [Tour Down Under](#) but Adelaide offers plenty to the less lithe among the cycling fraternity. The city has copious bicycle lanes, a pleasant climate, nearby hills and is pancake flat. It's also getting a bit of Melbourne-style bike culture.



Riders prepare for the

start of the final stage of the Tour Down Under in Adelaide. Photograph: David Mariuz/AAP

"We're seeing people expand the types of bikes they ride, from just road bikes to mountain bikes and fixies," says Christian Haag, chief executive of [Bike SA](#).

"The cycling community is growing every year. We're seeing young urban males and female choosing bikes that say something about their lives."

This culture is boosted by a free [bike hire scheme](#) that is operated by local businesses, rather than fixed kiosks. Tourists can therefore get helpful tips from a human, as well as a bike, helmet and chain.

Darwin

If you don't mind torrential rain, Darwin is a perfect year-round cycling destination. The balmy temperatures help, as does the flat terrain and the 70km of cycle lanes that weave throughout the Northern Territory's capital.

"I'd say as much as 80% of the population of Darwin cycles for commuting or for fun – it's huge up here," says Paul Bennett, founder of [Spokes NT](#).

"There's a young population in Darwin that likes cycling and it's very popular with women in particular. While the rest of the country is freezing, it's 28 or 29 degrees here without a cloud in the sky."

Bennett says there are seven cycle shops in the city and they are all "flat out" with work, mainly on mountain bikes. Fixies haven't caught on with Territorians as yet, it seems.

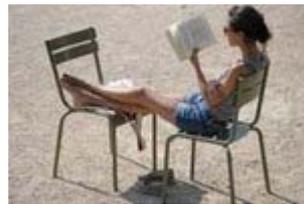
For my money, Melbourne and Adelaide are vying to be Australia's top cycling city, with Sydney and Darwin making late surges for the title. But what do you think? And what of other cities such as Geelong, Newcastle and Cairns? Is there an Australian cycling paradise that we've missed?

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