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# OTTAWA CITIZEN

ESTABLISHED IN 1845

## ARTS & LIFE

### LIVING LIGHTLY



JEFF PACHOUD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

In Lyon, France, bikes are available 24/7 from stations around the city. The first half-hour of every ride is free, so few riders pay the city more than \$10 a year.

## SPIN CITY

**DAVID CHERNUSHENKO** explains  
how a revolution in thinking is turning  
Lyon into a city of cyclists



### Online

Ottawa sustainability advocate David Chernushenko is visiting a number of European countries this spring, in search of inspiring examples of 'living lightly' in all walks of life. 'I am especially interested in the role people and their choices play in this,' he explains. 'I want to understand what works, and how it works, with a view to imagining how my home town, and everybody's home town, might be a better place, and what we would need to do to make this possible.' For more, see his website, [livinglightly.ca](http://livinglightly.ca)

I'll begin with a confession: I've been blowing by historical landmarks and bypassing tourist attractions in Europe in search of bikestands. Let me explain.

I recently tagged along to Lyon, France, with my wife, a professor of linguistics. While she was in lecture halls, I spent my time filming trams and photographing bicycles. But not just any kind of bicycle. I was on the hunt for the Velo'v, one of the

roughly 3,000 bikes that can be found 24/7 at 345 stations in the city of 1.7 million.

The name is a French/English pun — as in "love your bike" or "a bicycle to love." (What can I say? I'm married to a linguist.) For almost three years, tens of thousands in the city have been learning to do just that.

The great thing about the Velo'v, according to the many Lyon riders with whom I spoke — students and older white-collar workers — is that

you can use it when and how it is most convenient for you. All you need do is sign out the bike at the kiosk at each station, putting a deposit of about \$240 on a credit card, or by swiping your annual membership card. The first half-hour of each ride is free. Since most rides are shorter than that, few riders pay the city more than \$10 per year.

I had assumed I'd have to search for the bikes. But within seconds of parting from my wife at the lecture

hall, I was in standing in front of a Velo'v stand. For 30 minutes I watched students and professors roll in on bikes obtained at another Velo'v location farther away.

It was a comical scene: Cyclists pulled in only to discover the station was full. And so it remained. Bikes had outstripped parking spots! So just like impatient motorists, cyclists circled in search of a place to "check in" their wheels.

Cyclocity, the company that runs

the city's program, is working on the problem. They're setting up digital displays that inform riders if a kiosk is full (or empty) and identify the next closest parking spots. The company is also working to increase the number of spaces at universities, train stations and tram interchanges.

Getting more people pedalling makes for fitter citizens, cleaner air, quieter and more vibrant streets, and lower costs to the taxpayer — benefits experienced in cities with similar systems, such as Berlin, Strasbourg and, since last year, Paris.

It's not all been easy coasting, of course. The system has been troubled by theft and vandalism, but still the concept is gaining momentum.

The public bikes are part of an urban revival movement in Lyon committed to effective public transit, car-free shopping sectors, reserved bike lanes, advance traffic lights and the opening of waterfront parks and trails such as those that line the Rhone River.

In Lyon, car traffic declined by four per cent in the first two years of the bike program. And in Copenhagen, there's been a 20 per cent decline in

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accidents since promoting bike initiatives. There have been spinoff benefits for bicycle stores in Lyon: As cycling becomes more popular, more people are buying their own velos.

What makes Lyon's bike venture such a success is that it does not treat the bike as an "all or nothing" mode of transport. Many users travel part way by train, tram, foot or car before hopping on a bicycle to finish their journey.

These are not slick racing machines, nor are they one-speed clunkers. The Velo'v model was selected and customized to be as versatile and comfortable — and safe — for as many people as possible. The upright, sturdy bikes come with soft and adjustable seats, a carrying basket, five speeds, a large fender and chain guard, and front and rear lights. There's no high crossbar, so the rider can comfortably wear a skirt, dress, long coat ... whatever. No need for lycra!

It's odd that the idea of riding a bike around the city may be old fashioned to some. But rather than being an anachronism, it's time has clearly come again. As the legions of Lyon riders showed me, the city bike may just be one of those things that never truly goes out of fashion.