

Mexico

mexico city weather

TODAY
23° : 6°
CLOUDY



TOMORROW
22° : 8°
CLOUDY



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PHOTO COURTESY OF AARON BORRAS

Mexico City's notorious traffic jams motivate many people to leave the car at home and use the city's extensive network of bike lanes.

Bikes rule the road

Cyclists beat walkers, drivers and motorcyclists in urban race

BY **PATRICK FERGUSON**
The News

MEXICO CITY – The National Network of Urban Cycling (BiciRed) organized the Desafío Modal race last week to see which mode of transportation – cars, bikes, motorbikes or legs – is the fastest and most efficient.

The answer: Bikes.

The races started at 8 a.m. in residential neighborhoods and ended in business districts to simulate the average person's commute. The bicycle won first place in 11 of the races and came in a close second in five others, said Alejandro Morales, BiciRed spokesman.

BiciRed is asking President-elect Enrique Peña Nieto and his administration to allocate 5 percent, or 80 million pesos, of the nation's transportation budget to non-motorized infrastructure. Last year, the government destined 3.5 percent of its transportation budget to bikers and pedestrians.

According to a National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) study, for an 8 kilometer (4.97 mile) journey, a car travels at an average 12 kilometers per hour under normal traffic conditions in Mexico City. The bicycle travels the same distance at 16 kilometers per hour, beating the car by 10 minutes.



Cyclists who participated in the Desafío Modal urban race pose for a picture in Mexico City, Nov. 13, 2012.

A few years ago, only the bravest of the brave ventured down Mexico City's streets on a bike. Today, bikers are packing the capital.

Mexico City resident Gerado Morán, 33, gave up on his car four years ago. He still has it, but drives only about three times a month. The rest of the time, he gets around on two wheels.

"Whenever I found a parking place on the

street, I would rather just leave my car there and find another way to move around. It would take me an hour or more to find parking just to go home," he said. "I figured I would be better off riding a bike."

CHANGE

Long-time residents of Mexico City remember

when the city's choking pollution killed birds mid-flight. Things have changed since then.

The government has limited car circulation and Mexico City's shared bicycle program Ecobici has more riders than ever. By the end of the year, the city plans to have 4,000 Ecobici bikes and 275 stations in operation, with almost 90,000 users.

To the delight of cyclists – and misery of drivers – the city recently extended its bike lane on main avenue Reforma and has plans for new bike lanes in 2013.

Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard has attempted to increase the amount of people commuting on bicycles from 1 percent of the city's population in 2007 to 5 percent by the end of this year.

While the official numbers aren't in yet, Ernesto Corona Velázquez, of the civil association Bicitekas, estimates that about 3 percent of commutes happen on two wheels today.

"Every day you can see more and more bicycles on the streets," he said.

CHALLENGES

One of the reasons why many might be reluctant to get on their bikes is Mexico's poor reputation for road safety. Taking a bike down one of Mexico City's main thoroughfares can be anything but pleasant. At any time of day, main roads and side streets are filled with honking cars; three vehicles abreast cram into two lanes and drivers swerve into intersections from nowhere.

It is impossible to know the number of traffic accidents involving bicycles in Mexico City or the country because the government lumps bike and automobile accidents together.

But according to the World Health Organization, traffic accidents are the leading cause of death for people between 10 and 29 years old and account for about 21 percent of all fatalities nationwide.

Corona Velázquez said one of the biggest challenges for Mexico City's biking culture is a lack of respect on the part of drivers.

Morán said, "I think that when I started using my bike more, I didn't really feel safe. People would push you around with their cars. They didn't care about bikers. They would scream and honk their horn.

"About two years ago things started to change. People become more aware of bikers."

Corona Velázquez said that automobile drivers are not the only ones to blame, because cyclists do not always respect one-way streets, wear helmets or obey traffic regulations.

While bike lanes do now exist, they are not always respected and it is not uncommon to see cars driving or even parking in them. Corona Velázquez added that police rarely enforce laws designed to protect bikers.

Morán said, "If you're riding your bike on the bike lanes in the Roma neighborhood, you often have to get out the bike lane because there is a car parking it, and there are police cars parking in it – even they're doing it."