

Cycling connections

For something that involves one person sitting atop two wheels, riding a bicycle is remarkably social, writes *Gail Rehbein*.



Through riding my bicycle, I'm more connected with my community. Being on my bike shows me who lives in my neighbourhood. I see their diversity and their unique expression. One afternoon as the day was coming to a close and I needed to organise something for dinner, I grabbed four calico shopping bags, my wallet, glasses and mobile, dropped them into my pannier, attached the second pannier to my bicycle and rode down the street to the shops. Over the next ten minutes I noticed my neighbourhood criss-cross my ride.

A retiree sweaty and tanned was getting some exercise on his Italian racer. A woman and man, maybe thirties, summery clothes, old bikes, helmet-free, faces filled with smiles, floated along on an afternoon bicycle date. A middle-aged woman sped by on a mountain bike with an outrigger paddle poking out of her backpack. One, two, three young boys on small bicycles, playing after school, weaved around the Norfolk Pine cones scattered across the bike path. The first boy waved. All three smiled hello.

Bicycle riding is like that. People can say

hello. They can share a smile, exchange a wave or nod their head. The barriers aren't there. There's no boundary made by age. There's no need to have a lot of money. It's easier to see what people are doing – exercising, going swimming, paddling, fishing or just cruising playfully. The things that separate us aren't there.

When I started to experiment with riding my bicycle more often and driving the car less, I had no idea that I'd experience this deeper connection to my community.

Moving to the Gold Coast over a decade ago, I had a taste of how cycling can connect people. My partner's workmate introduced us to a group of road bike riders. It was my first experience of riding in a group and a positive one. We rode with them most Sunday mornings for a few years, enjoying an energetic ride, conversation and coffee. Being part of that group, I not only learnt more about bicycle riding I also enjoyed some new friendships and heard about life on the Gold Coast. In fact, being part of that bicycle group gave me a really good introduction to my new city. I got to know its streets and suburbs better by riding

them. Far better than any reading of a GPS navigator could have given me.

Now, most of my riding is with my partner. It's very companionable. We talk, laugh, encourage each other, and happily stop to snap a photo, have coffee or take in a view. The social side of cycling is very much alive in our rides together. It also comes through random meetings of people known and unknown when we're out riding.

The Currumbin Valley carries the waters of the Springbrook National Park along the Currumbin Creek to the estuary where the fresh water meets the salty Coral Sea. Riding to the end of the valley and back is 40 kilometres of very pleasant cycling. We rode out there recently on a Sunday morning and we weren't the only ones.

There were groups of cyclists from other parts of the city and there were people from our neighbourhood – people we've met through the shared enjoyment of cycling. People who we would be unlikely to ride with – because one's a triathlete, another a brisk riding commuter, others are recreational road cyclists on sleek bikes –



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but we'll occasionally meet for coffee and always share an exuberant hello when we see each other out riding. I love this and they do too.

There's a strong sense of community because of our mutual enjoyment of bicycle riding but it's also there because we share the roads and streets in our neighbourhood. We criss-cross them, out in the open, at a pace that makes it easier to see, hear and feel the pulse of the neighbourhood. Easier to say hello or stop for a chat. Cycling creates connections in ways that travelling by car rarely can.

Of course not everyone is likely to say hello. I wouldn't want to give you the impression that people magically become social when they ride a bike. Although I have to say the natural high from cycling-induced endorphins makes me feel pretty happy to be alive. Some people are very serious about their bike riding – perhaps they're training for an event and stretching their limits. Some are in a hurry because they're running late on their commute. Some are simply immersed in their ride, focused, perhaps taking time to be on their own. Not

everyone wants to interact, I understand that. But I know that interaction is only a heartbeat away if ever I'm in trouble out riding. Passing cyclists will always check to see if I'm okay and stop if I need help. And that's not because I'm a fifty-something woman. It's just what bicycle riders do. That's community.

Organised rides cultivate this community. Cycling Australia runs social rides to introduce women to cycling and stimulate the community benefits of bike riding. These programs are known as 'She Rides'. Local bike shops are also a good starting point for connecting with your local cycling community. Sharing a social ride is not only enjoyable for meeting people but it also builds confidence with riding.

This winter I had my first experience of riding the Brisbane Valley Rail Trail. I'd been apprehensive about riding in conditions that were so very different from my urban streets on the Gold Coast. The Brisbane Valley Rail Trail runs through rural landscape following the old railway line between small towns in the Brisbane Valley. There are 158kms of trail to explore. Through a ride organised by the

Brisbane Valley Rail Trail Users Association, I was given an excellent introduction to the trail. It set us up well for confidently riding a different sector of the trail the following day unsupported.

Despite these social connections that cycling makes possible, it remains true that cycling can still be something to do solo. And there are days when riding out alone suits me quite fine.

Perhaps that's what makes bicycle riding remarkably social. It reflects our need to be an individual, to express life as we wish. And it also brings us together, creating connections that we need, in order to feel part of something, part of a community.

ABOUT

Gail Rehbein

Gail is a bicycle-riding writer who has a knack for guiding people through change. This article is an extract from her forthcoming book about her bicycle project. To discover more about Gail and cycling through change, head to:



Website abike4allseasons.com
Email gail.rehbein@me.com
Facebook [@abike4allseasons](https://www.facebook.com/abike4allseasons)