

Nick and Choose {NICK ALTSCHULLER}

THE WHEEL DEAL

Giving Hubway a spin



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OFTEN THE MOST STRESSFUL part of the workday is just getting to the office. The noise, the congestion, the sea of bitter faces. A friend's therapist recognized that her commute was compounding her anxiety. So she recommended my friend get off her bike and start squeezing onto the T.

For years, Boston was ranked as one of the worst cities in the world for biking. But in 2007, noted cycling enthusiast/mayor Thomas Menino launched an initiative to reverse this reputation. The biggest step has been the implementation of Hubway, a near six million-dollar bike-sharing program that debuted in July.

There are now 600 bicycles stationed at 61 kiosks, stretching from the North End to Allston. For prices ranging from \$5 a day to \$85 a year, the bikes provide an intriguing alternative to cabs and public transportation. (Key addendum: That price remains at its base as long as you return your bike every 30 minutes. An hour ride would cost a casual user an additional \$6, and from there prices can escalate into the prohibitively expensive.)

On the surface, the program is fun, green and healthful, the commuting equivalent of forgoing a steak for a salad. In practice, the program can be disappointing, like forgoing a steak for a salad.

Boston is notoriously difficult to navigate by car (and, because it follows the same basic rules, by bicycle). My commute takes about 35 minutes if I walk, 25 if I take the T and 20 with Hubway. In my first rush-hour ride, I had more scares and broke more laws than I thought I could squeeze into a 15-minute window.

I went the wrong way down one-way streets. A valet almost clocked me with a car door. I rode on sidewalks and ran red lights—although I don't feel so bad about these last two. (Sidewalk riding is only illegal in "business districts," and the state has yet to define what that actually means for cyclists, while getting a head start at a red light is apparently the bicycle version of jaywalking.)

Part of my performance can be blamed on inexperience, and I've gotten better. What worries me is the riders I've seen who are much worse. Drunk kids biking the wrong way down Cambridge Street at night. A woman struggling to pedal ahead of a wailing ambulance.

There'll be growing pains in a city adjusting to a new system. The problem is many of these riders aren't wearing helmets.

Hubway is already popular. Since July 28, there have been more than 42,000 rides. Cities of comparable size with their own bike-sharing programs, like Denver and Minneapolis, have taken months to reach that number. But according to city statistics, 28 percent of riders aren't wearing a helmet. That's about 12,000 helmetless Hubway trips in just over a month.

The good news: Hubway makes it comically easy to purchase a helmet. They have street teams and local stores selling them for \$8. They'll even mail you one. Only someone who's already suffered brain trauma could avoid owning a helmet.

MassBike executive director David Watson recognizes the influx of new riders. The number of cyclists has quadrupled in the last three years, and according to Watson, "There's definitely a learning curve." MassBike has begun offering free one-hour classes to Hubway users, and Watson cites studies showing that getting more bikes out on the road actually makes cycling safer. Says Watson, "Everyone has to become aware, so it essentially forces the issue."

Many more bikes are coming. In the next few years, the city envisions adding more than 4,000 additional bikes and 200 kiosks, with Hubway's reach extending into Brookline, Cambridge and Somerville. Thankfully, the infrastructure is changing, too. Says urban planner and Boston "bike czar" Nicole Freedman, "Would I expect someone like my grandmother to be biking across the city now? No. But five years from now, will the infrastructure work for someone like my grandmother? Probably, yeah." Recently, more than 38 miles of bike lanes have been added, with lanes coming soon to the Greenway and Mass. Ave.

I've yet to find Hubway's place in my life. Walking's just as good for my health, and it saves me from biking's minor heart attacks. But I have a dear friend (who owns a much better TV than I do). Getting to his place for football games is a huge pain by any way other than taxi. This fall, cycling could merge cohesively and cost-effectively with my sloth, and that's when I'll know if we have a system that works. ***

Send your stories and suggestions to nick@improper.com.



Impersonals

PACK IT UP

TO THE PERSON WHO TOOK MY BROWN

BACKPACK: You broke into my white Toyota Camry on Providence Street between 6 and 10 pm on Aug. 24. You've got my iPod, but I can let that go. There was something much more personal in there, and I'd appreciate having it returned to me. All my faith in humanity would be restored if you'd please just return it.

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To Shy Gal, from the Aug. 24 issue:

Life is short! If you see something you like, go for it. Maybe slip him a discreet note telling him how you feel, or how to contact you. I know the guy you're talking about. Believe me, you'll be glad you did!

Seize the moment

To the short female bartender at a bar and grill in Brighton:

You may think that a push-up bra and low-cut shirt will mesmerize men. I'm a man, and I feel it's my civic duty to inform you that you are beyond incorrect. Your creepy flirtations aren't even the start to what really makes you unattractive. Stop begging for attention and start making drinks!

Not looking at you, kid

Unrequited crush? Bad hair? Need to vent? Send your e-mails of love and spleen to impersonals@improper.com, or visit improper.com/impersonals.