


# On your bike

**Samantha Whitaker** road tests the Barclays Cycle Hire scheme

I am, at best, a fair weather cyclist. So it has taken me a while to pluck up the courage to try out the Barclays Cycle Hire scheme. Nicknamed the 'Boris Bikes', this fleet of bicycles was launched in July 2010 as part of London Mayor Boris Johnson's 'cycling revolution'. Since then, 3.5 million journeys have been made. "London's blue bikes are simply the best way to travel", said Johnson. In the first six months, Londoners used them to cycle 10 million kilometres.

Of course there were teething problems, but it seems that there are now enough bikes – and enough people using them – for the system to work. And it really is easy. There are membership options, with 'keys' that give quick access to regular users, but for a casual ride all you need is a credit or debit card. You pay an access fee using a touch screen at the docking point – just £1 for 24 hours – and receive a four-digit release code that unlocks a bike. The first half hour is free; after that prices range from £1 for up to an hour to £50 for 24 hours. Technically, you can ride around all day for the £1 access fee: just dock your bike within 30 minutes, wait five minutes, and take another.

You can return the bike to any docking point, as long as there is space, and if there isn't, the screen will direct you to the nearest empty docking point and grant you an extra 15 minutes to get there. The website shows the status of docking stations, while the handy 'London Bike' iPhone app, which costs just 59p, provides real-time information about the number of bikes and spaces available at the 20 docking stations closest to your location. Eco-friendly electric vehicles redistribute the bikes throughout the day, to try to prevent the docking stations becoming either full or empty.

There are currently 385 docking stations and 5,000 bicycles in circulation. Within walking distance of Over-Seas House there are four: the closest on Pall Mall, opposite St James's Palace. I picked up a bike in St James's Square and rode down The Mall to Buckingham Palace. The bikes are a little cumbersome, but feel sturdy: in laboratory tests they withstood 15 years worth of use. Each has a kick stand, dynamo-powered lights, a basket and a bell. I cycled along the side of Green Park, dismounted to cross the chaotic intersection at Hyde Park Corner, and looped round Hyde Park, across Serpentine Bridge and via the Rose Garden.

*In the first six months, Londoners used the bikes to cycle 10 million kilometres*

The cycle paths are clearly marked and on the roads there are wide cycle lanes. There are six docking stations within the park and I saw lots of other people on Boris Bikes. I docked mine at Constitution Hill, within the free half hour, but you could always stop for ice cream or to watch the boats on the Serpentine.

Another part of the 'cycling revolution' is the introduction of 12 Barclays Cycle Superhighways. These 1.5m-wide cycle lanes make it safer and easier to commute to the capital by bike. The aim is to increase cycling in London by 400%, by 2025, which should ease congestion on public transport and help to keep people fit. The number of cyclists on the two pilot routes, on the A24 and A13, has increased by 70% since 2009, and, of those asked, 75% said the Superhighway had improved safety for cyclists.

The future of the bikes seems positive. With summer approaching, there couldn't be a better time to get peddling and see London from a different perspective.

*Visit tfl.gov.uk/barclayscyclehire or call 0845 026 3630 for a free map and information on cycle safety and reporting damage. Remember to wear a helmet at all times.*




© Nick Whitaker Photography