

Bicycling

Urban Treasures

By Brian Fiske

From the East Coast to the West, singletrack to asphalt, these urban treasures are the 21 best cycling cities in the U.S.

Best overall: [Portland, Oregon](#). Population 529,121

Why: Innovative programs, from designated bike-only areas at traffic signals to free bike lights, make riding in Portland practical even for new cyclists; 2005 bicycling BikeTown

Must-ride: Eastbank Esplanade to Springwater Corridor Trail: 18 miles from the Willamette River downtown, past a wildlife refuge and some urban farms, to the rural community of Boring

Cool event: Providence Bridge Pedal: This two-wheeled takeover of 10 city bridges is the culmination of a five-day velo par www.providence.org/oregon/events/bridge_pedal

Hangout: Lucky Labrador Brewing Company; www.luckylab.com

Local info: Portland Wheelmen Touring Club; www.pwtc.com

Bike Shop: Bike Gallery; www.bikegallery.com

The benefits speak for themselves: Greenhouse gas emissions have decreased over the last four years to levels lower than 1990 in Portland, the only major urban area to see a decline while national levels have risen more than 17 percent; Oregon only state whose obesity rate did not rise last year; and in 2005 alone, traffic congestion in Portland's Eastside Hub (a test area monitored by the city) dropped 8.6 percent. Is it a coincidence, then, that in the last 10 years the number of cyclists here has tripled? We think not.

Portland has always been an outdoor lover's nirvana, close to the craggy Cascade Mountains and perched on the Willamette River, with the Columbia nearby. The climate is mild, if damp in winter, making the surroundings deliciously green. But while kayakers and climbers love it, one thing is clear if you take a spin through this urban center: Portland has become a city of cyclists.

The growth can be attributed to a number of things: The city is constantly adding bike lanes (current total: 163 miles), paths (66 miles) and bike boulevards (designated low-auto-traffic streets that are conducive to cycling; now 30 miles); bike parking ubiquitous; and sprawl is controlled by an urban-growth boundary that keeps the city compact. But really, it comes down to momentum. As the streets become more bike friendly, more cyclists take to the streets, and their numbers inspire others. Pedal around Portland at rush hour, and you can see it for yourself.

"There's kind of a European flavor here," says Justin de Jesus, a founder of the Magpie Messenger Collective, a Portland-based bicycle-focused messenger service. "There are roadies and mountain bikers and commuters in their yellow rain jackets, and people in their business attire. It's great to ride to work and share the road with 20 other cyclists, because they cover all strip

Portland's thriving cycling scene is what puts the city head and shoulders above any other in the U.S. Sure, P-town now has incredible—even surprising—facilities like the newly opened bike path linking the airport (with its free bike parking) to the rest of Portland's bicycle network, but it's the local passion that makes the difference. Each year, thousands take part in events like Chunkathon, crazy competitions (jousting, anyone?) on tall chopper bikes; Pedalpalooza, a monthlong bike festival held each summer; and the Providence Bridge Pedal, which attracted more than 15,000 riders in 2005.

But events are just the beginning. Last year, there was a holiday craft fair that featured locally made bike-themed gifts. SHIF, a loose-knit local group, helps people move-as-in, all of their possessions to a new residence—completely by bike. The nonprofit Community Cycling Center runs a Create a Commuter program that provides bikes, locks, helmets, lights and safety training for low-income adults. And, recently, a program called Get Lit, which gives free bike lights to anyone who needs them, sprouted from a local effort to improve safety. Get Lit is so successful that the Portland Police Bureau is implementing a similar program giving bike lights—instead of citations—to cyclists riding at night without them.

"When you have buy-in from the political people and you have a scene like we do, it trickles down," says Jonathan Maus, who runs the BikePortland.org website. "Portland has passed a huge tipping point."

The League of American Bicyclists has recognized Portland's progress in its Bicycle Friendly Community program, naming it a gold-level city—the largest city to receive that level award. In response, the city put together a team to make sure Portland earns platinum status, the highest level, within five years. Last fall, as part of that process, Portland sent 15 people to Amsterdam, Netherlands to study the transportation systems and bring home ideas that can be implemented in Portland.

Portland deserves recognition for its bike-friendly efforts, but in the end, it's the legacy that matters. Coming generations of Portlanders will grow up pedaling the city's streets to school, to work and for fun. Every day. And they'll do it because they've always ridden, because it's just so easy to do.

CATEGORY: Population of more than 1 million

1st: San Diego, California

Population: 1,223,400

Why: The hat trick: weather, terrain, cycling-friendly infrastructure

Must-ride: Bayshore Bikeway: 24 breathtaking miles around San Diego Bay-free ferry ride included

Cool event: Midnight Madness: Ride at midnight? Of course. But the party-including a costume contest-starts at 8;

www.midnightmadnesssandiego.org

Hangout: Karl Strauss Brewing Company; karlstrauss.com Local info: San Diego Bicycle Club; sdbc.org Bike Shop: Black Mountain Bicycles; blackmountainbicycles.com

What do you call a place that sits on the ocean, but that's also close to the mountains; where the temperature rarely dips below 50 degrees, or goes higher than the low 80s; where there are more than 850 miles of bike lanes and routes (with 300 miles added in the last three years), easy access to killer mountain bike trails, plus a velodrome and a nearby Olympic Training Center? A perfect place to ride? We thought so. Welcome to San Diego.

"You can easily do any type of ride here, from short and flat to 'Oh my God!'" says Kathy Keehan, executive director of the San Diego Bicycle Coalition. Sure, pavement abounds, but there's plenty of off-road riding, as well. "From my backyard, I can get a trail that goes through a little canyon and connects up to Lake Hodges, which is a huge network of trails," Keehan says. "And it's the same for lots of people here." Cyclists are such an ingrained part of the city that, when Keehan and other advocates city-planning meetings, they rarely need to fight for bike inclusion. "We ask, 'What about bikes?'" she says, "and a lot of the time the answer is, 'We've already taken care of that.'" We wish more cities could get the same response.

2nd: Chicago, Illinois

Population: 2,896,016

Why: Its stated goal is to be the most bike-friendly city in the U.S. and by 2015 it likely will be; Millennium Park Bike Station; 2004 BikeTown

Must-ride: Lakefront Bike Path

Cool event: Bike the Drive; **www.bikethedrive.org**

Hangout: The Handlebar; **www.handlebarchicago.com**

Local info: Chicago Cycling Club; **www.chicagocyclingclub.org**

Bike Shop: Village Cycle Center; **www.villagecycle.com**

With a city leadership dedicated to cycling (including Mayor Richard Daley Jr., roadie), a remarkable network of bike lanes and racks, and an ambitious plan called Bike 2015 to add even more, Chicago's love of biking will soon outshine its drawbacks—dense traffic, bitter winters and ho-hum rec riding near the city.

3rd: New York, New York

Population: 8,008,278

Why: We-and commuters-love New York, and the greenways and car-free Central Park; 2005 BikeTown

Must-ride: Hudson River Greenway

Cool event: Five Boro Bike Tour: 30,000 riders and no cars for 42 miles; **www.bikenewyork.org**

Local info: New York Cycle Club; **www.nycc.org**

Bike Shop: Larry & Jeff's; **www.bicyclesnyc.com**

Each day, 110,000 cyclists ride in NYC, more than at any time in the last 25 years. While the city has had some recent anti-hiccups related to parking and Critical Mass rides, it has also over the last five years added bike lanes, granted 24-7 bike access on several bridges, increased car-free hours in Central Park and continued a greenway plan that will ultimately circle Manhattan.

Honorable mentions

Philadelphia, PA

Population: 1,517,550

Why: The bike-lane network; Wissahickon Park's 40+ miles of trails, including rugged singletrack; 2005 BikeTown

Must-ride: Schuylkill River Trail

Cool event: Bike Freedom Valley; **www.bicyclecoalition.org**

Local info: Bicycle Club of Philadelphia; **www.phillybikeclub.org**

Bike Shop: Cadence Performance Cycling; **www.cadencecycling.com**

Phoenix, AZ

Population: 1,321,045

Why: 500 miles of bike lanes and routes in town; great desert dirt-riding nearby; 2005 BikeTown

Must-ride: McDowell Mountain Park's trails

Cool event: Casa Grande Century; www.sportsfun.com/gaba

Local info: Greater Arizona Bicycling Association www.sportsfun.com/gaba

Bike Shop: Landis Cyclery; www.landiscyclery.com

CATEGORY: Population of 500,000-1 million

1st: Portland, Oregon pop. 529,121
(see page 1)

2nd: Denver, Colorado

Population: 554,636

Why: The city is flat, with mountains nearby, creating easy commutes and great rec riding; 2005 BikeTown

Must-ride: Cherry Creek Trail

Cool event: Moonlight Classic; moonlight-classic.com

Hangout: Handlebar and Grill; www.handlebarandgrill.com

Local info: Denver Bicycle Touring Club; www.dbtc.org

Bike Shop: Cherry Creek Bike Rack; www.cherrycreekbikerack.com

The two most visible examples of the city's unyielding velo passion: the artfully designed \$3-million bike bridge to be built over I-25 this year, and the annual Velo Swap, a.k.a. the world's largest bike garage sale, which last year drew more than 15,000 people.

3rd: Seattle, Washington

Population: 563,374

Why: Bike-friendly, but still raising the bar; 2005 BikeTown

Must-ride: 14.1-mile Burke-Gilman Trail

Cool event: Seattle to Portland; www.cascade.org

Local info: Cascade Bicycle Club; www.cascade.org

Bike Shop: Gregg's; www.greggscycles.com

Seattle earned its spot with one word: creativity. What to do with 1.5 acres of unused-but-sheltered land under I-5? Build a mountain bike park, now under construction. And then there's the Chief Seattle Trail. Set to open this summer, the 3.6-mile path connects neighborhoods in southeast Seattle to the light-rail system; construction costs were prohibitively high-nearly \$4 million-until the city struck a deal to use leftover dirt from a light-rail project. Cost savings: \$7 million. Results: priceless.

Honorable mentions

San Francisco, CA

Population: 776,733

Why: Diverse cycling community; classic riding in town and over the Golden Gate Bridge; 2005 BikeTown

Must-ride: Tiburon Loop: Head north from the bridge for 35 miles of rolling hills, forests and views of the Bay

Cool event: Bay in a Day double century; www.bayareabikes.org

Local info: Western Wheelers; www.westernwheelers.org

Bike Shop: American Cyclery; www.americancyclery.com

Austin, TX

Population: 656,562

Why: Bike lanes galore; Lance's home turf; 2005 BikeTown

Must-ride: The Dam Loop, 35-50 miles with views of Lake Travis

Cool event: Ride for the Roses; www.livestrong.org

Hangout: Chuy's (where Jenna Bush got busted); www.chuys.com

Local info: Austin Cycling Association; www.austincycling.org

Bike Shop: Bicycle Sport Shop; www.bicyclesportshop.com

CATEGORY: Population of 200,000-500,000

1st: Madison, Wisconsin
Population: 208,054

Why: Dedicated and friendly cyclists; 30-plus years of building bike paths, with innovative work still being done; 2005 BikeTo
Must-ride: Capital City Loop: a 14-plus-mile spin on bike paths and bike-friendly roads around town
Cool event: The Wright Stuff Century, through Frank Lloyd Wright country; www.bombaybicycle.org
Hangout: Café Zoma; www.bombaybicycle.org
Bike Shop: Williamson Bicycle Works; www.willybikes.com

Madison introduced its first bicycle transportation plan in 1975, and has been making bike-friendly improvements ever since the easy projects are done," says Arthur Ross, Madison's bicycle and pedestrian coordinator. Now the city is working on the tough stuff that's been on the drawing board for 20 years, like a recently approved bike/ped overpass on East Washington Avenue, one of the town's main thoroughfares, and a bike-path network along the river that transects the narrow downtown isthmus. The riding-and the congenial riders-also make Madison a standout. The terrain is flat to rolling in town and to the north and east, while to the west it's damn hilly, but it's all laced with hundreds of miles of well-maintained blacktop perfect for long days in the saddle with friends.

2nd: Tucson, Arizona

Population: 486,699

Why: Sunshine, sunshine, sunshine; 325 miles of bike lanes
Must-ride: Mount Lemmon Hill Climb: 26 miles, one way, with a 5-percent grade
Cool Event: El Tour de Tucson; www.pbaa.com
Post-ride hangout: Bison Witches Bar & Deli; www.bisonwitches.com
Local info: Greater Arizona Bicycling Association, Tucson; www.bikegaba.org
Bike Shop: Fair Wheel Bicycles; www.fairwheelbikes.com

Tucson's bike accoutrements aren't just functional, they're aesthetic: The Diamondback bike bridge has been voted Best Pie Public Art by the readers of the Tucson Weekly for three consecutive years. Plus, there is stellar road and mountain biking in Saguaro National Park both east and west of the city.

3rd: Albuquerque, New Mexico

Population: 448,607

Why: Good in- and out-of-town riding; the Bicycle Park project
Must-ride: Paseo del Bosque Trail in Rio Grande Valley State Park
Cool event: Spike's Ride and His Roaring Chile Festival: 1,000 riders and 30 local restaurants participate; www.museums.state.nm.us/nmmnh/edu_spike.html
Local info: BikeABQ; www.bikeabq.org
Bike Shop: Two Wheel Drive; www.twowheeldrive.com

Cycling is at the heart of Albuquerque-just look at Rio Grande Valley State Park, which runs through the center of town, and a bike path snaking through it, of course. The city's Bicycle Park project includes a BMX track and an indoor velodrome; the track could be finished this year.

Honorable mentions

Minneapolis, MN pop. 382,618

Why: The city's master bicycle plan promises that, by 2020, everyone will have convenient access to a bike route; 2005 BikeTown
Must-ride: Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway
Local info: Twin Cities Bicycling Club; www.mtn.org/tcbc
Bike Shop: Freewheel Bike; www.freewheelbike.com

Anchorage, AK pop. 260,283

Why: 120 miles of paved trails across and out of town; stunning scenery and wildlife
Must-ride: Resurrection Pass Trail: 40 miles of aspen, spruce, mountain goats and moose
Cool event: Soggy Bottom 100; www.aksoggybottom100.com
Local info: Arctic Bicycle Club; www.arcticbikeclub.org
Bike Shop: The Bicycle Shop; 907/272-5219
CATEGORY: Population of 75,000-200,000

1st: Boulder, Colorado**Population:** 94,673**Why:** 95 percent of Boulder's arterial streets are bike-friendly; the city is surrounded by a greenbelt with 120 miles of trails; there's a vibrant pro-racing scene, and it's home to some top U.S. pros**Must-ride:** Boulder Creek Path: 16 miles, through the town center and into Boulder Canyon**Cool event:** TIAA-CREF Buffalo Bicycle Classic scholarship ride**Hangout:** Amante Coffee; 303/449-5114**Local info:** Boulder Cycling Club; www.bouldercycling.com**Bike Shop:** University Bicycles; www.ubikes.com

There are 151 miles of bike paths and 192 miles of bike lanes within Boulder's 27.8 square miles-and spectacular mountain biking just outside of town. It's estimated that 95 percent of Boulder's arterial streets have bike lanes or bike-friendly shoulder and, best of all, the city is actually willing to fight for more: The 17th Street bike-lane additions, completed in 2005, required the removal of 38 parking spaces in busy downtown Boulder. Plus, where else could you find a year-round Thursday-night cruiser ride (cruiserbikeride.org)? Or a cycling club just for seniors (Boulder Seniors on Bikes; 303/443-7623)? Nowhere but Boulder

2nd: Eugene, Oregon**Population:** 137,893**Why:** Trails and bike commuters galore**Must-ride:** Ruth Bascom Riverbank Trail: a 12.2-mile loop on the Willamette River**Cool event:** Blackberry bRamble; www.eugenegears.org**Local info:** Greater Eugene Area Riders; www.eugenegears.org**Bike Shop:** Paul's Bicycle Way of Life; www.bicycleway.com

Eugene has a highly evolved bike path and trail network-with most major off-street paths lit for night riding-that helps nearly 50 percent of Eugene residents commute by bicycle each day. As for culture, one Oregon information guide delicately mentions there are "reminders of the 1960s throughout the city."

3rd: Ann Arbor, Michigan**Population:** 114,024**Why:** A cycling haven in the heart of car country; 2005 Bike-Town**Must-ride:** Huron River Drive from Ann Arbor to Dexter**Cool event:** One Helluva Ride; www.aabts.org**Local info:** Ann Arbor Bicycle Touring Society; www.aabts.org**Bike Shop:** Two Wheel Tango; www.twowheeltango.com

Ann Arbor has earmarked 5 percent of its share of state gasoline-tax and vehicle-registration fee revenues for developing nonmotorized transportation infrastructure. In two years, the funds paid for the development of 15 miles of bike lanes. There are also stellar mountain biking at nearby Pinckney Recreation area. Insider tip: Try the 17+ mile Potawatomi Trail-you'll love it.

Honorable mentions

Chattanooga, TN

Population: 155,554**Why:** 140 miles of greenways; Singletrack Mind initiative will create 100 miles of local trails by 2010**Must-ride:** Tiftonia-Burkhalter Gap: 27+ road miles around and up Lookout Mountain; watch for hang gliders**Cool event:** Three State, Three Mountain Challenge; www.chattbike.com**Local info:** Chattanooga Bicycle Club; www.chattbike.com**Bike Shop:** Suck Creek Cycle; www.suckcreek.com

Cambridge, MA

Population: 101,355**Why:** Boston's great hope; has a city bike coordinator**Must-ride:** Dr. Paul Dudley White Pathway: 17 miles along the Charles River**Cool event:** Cambridge-Somerville Tour; www.cambridgebikes.org**Hangout:** Redbones Barbecue (in Somerville); www.redbones.com**Local info:** Charles River Wheelmen; www.crw.org**Bike Shop:** ATA Cycle; atabike.com**CATEGORY:** Best small town

Davis, California

Population: 60,308

Last October, Davis became the first platinum-level Bicycle Friendly Community, as recognized by the League of American Bicyclists (for more on the program, visit bicyclefriendlycommunity.org). It was a designation 40 years in the making, since a 1966 city council election when Davis bike advocates won out over pro-car officials who felt that bicycles had outlived their usefulness. Davis hasn't looked back since. Three years ago, the city built a \$7.4-million-dollar bike tunnel that snakes under two-lane county road, six lanes of Interstate 80 and two sets of railroad tracks in order to connect the burgeoning south part town with the city center and the University of California-Davis campus. Thanks to such amazing bike amenities, 17 percent trips in Davis are made by bike. The city's other bike-friendly accomplishments are too numerous to list, but include: a network of bike paths so extensive Davis did away with public school buses; establishing (with UC-Davis) a west coast bicycle museum and a radio program dedicated to cycling called Bike Talk (www.biketalkradio.com). And then there's the city's logo: a highwheel bike.

CATEGORY: Worst cities

It's still a jungle in these 3 urban centers

Atlanta, GA

Population: 419,122

With a swelling metro area of more than 3 million people and a 170-percent increase in traffic congestion in the last 10 years, Atlanta is filled with aggressive auto traffic. To stop spillover cars from gridlocked interstates from speeding on neighborhood streets, the city is narrowing several of them-not by installing dedicated bike lanes but in many cases by building "bulb outs," jutting concrete curbs that cyclists must swerve into traffic to avoid. There is an enthusiastic local community of cyclists, but no city bike coordinator to give them a voice. Meanwhile, more and more two-lane roads are being converted into four-lane speedways that use once-bikeable road shoulders for additional lanes. No wonder a recent Atlanta Journal-Constitution editor recently proclaimed: "The bicycle is dead."

Boston, MA

Population: 569,165

This is the third time Boston has made our "worst" list since 1999, and it does so for the same reasons as before: lousy road conditions, scarce and unconnected bike lanes and bike-friendly gestures from City Hall that go nowhere-such as hiring a bike coordinator in 2001, only to cut the position two years later. We know Boston has the potential to be a two-wheeled haven (see neighboring Cambridge, p. 74). And recent events give us hope: the newly formed Livable Streets Alliance, an advocacy group patterned after successful organizations in Chicago and New York; the under-construction \$2-million South Bay Harbor trail that will connect several bike paths in the heart of downtown; and last fall's mayor-sponsored Hub on Wheels, a festival with 700 cyclists including mayor Thomas Menino showing off his newfound velo dedication.

Houston, TX

Population: 2,012,626

It's not that Houston doesn't have cycling on its radar. It's that the city develops grandiose plans to become bike-friendly, and then fails to deliver. In 1994, the city unveiled a plan to add 1,000 miles of bike lanes and trails, and after years of backpedaling and shrinking the original plan, today it has fewer than 400 miles. With respect to off-street bike trails, construction has been delayed for so long by layers of consultants and program managers (and drained coffers from paying said consultants and managers), that one frustrated local developer began building his own trails privately, with help from a local nonprofit. On the main road, where bike lanes exist-four have been removed from major roadways in recent years-they are not well maintained. Worst of all, the city transit authority has failed to install bike racks on city buses for the past five years, despite having funding earmarked to do so.