

Copenhagen City of bikes

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Copenhagen in Denmark is believed to enjoy the sixth highest quality of life in the world. It is also home to the world's most successful community bicycle programme. Here, practically everybody has a bicycle, and for many years, the city has been known as 'the city of bikes'. Authorities in Copenhagen plan to increase spending on biking infrastructure over the next three years. Our correspondent VIOLET MENGO is currently in Denmark and now reports:

IT IS undeniable that the Danish people are a source of inspiration in terms of their lifestyle and culture. Danes are friendly and innovative, as evidenced by their success in the field of science and technology. They have set a good example in various fields. It is no wonder that the city of London now wants to adopt a part of the Danish lifestyle. The bicycle programme has attracted a lot of attention. London city officials are craving for a bicycle culture in the United Kingdom in the hope of saving the environment. One only needs to be in Copenhagen for a few minutes to see how heavily Danes rely on bicycles. The City is nearly as flat as a pancake with a few hills, so cycling is easy and comfortable. Most importantly, travellers get around town faster on two wheels than on four. The city has 340 kilometres of bicycle lanes. More lanes will be added to the existing network over the years to come. The bicycle lane system takes cyclists through the city, to the countryside, beaches and forests, to the suburbs and back, but not across the bridge to Sweden. A traveller will have to be aided by a train, probably with their bicycle in tow. Copenhagen has a population of approximately 1.5 million people, but the number of bicycles for Copenhageners is far greater than its population, at more than two million. Some of the bicycles get stolen every day, so cyclists are encouraged to lock them each time they want to leave them unattended.

Copenhagen 'leases' bicycles to promote the bicycle culture. A bicycle can be used on demand and handed back later. There are outlets for bicycles all over the city. A visitor only needs to deposit 20 Danish kroner to access a bicycle. The money is given back when the bicycle is returned. The bicycles are suitable for small-scale inner city cycling. A Copenhagen resident, Per Osterlund, says using a bicycle in Denmark has become a widely accepted practice. Mr Osterlund says it is 'extremely' expensive to use a car due to high taxes slapped on motorists. As a result, many Danes opt to use bicycles. He says instead of paying parking tax and buying fuel, Danes use bicycles to get to their destinations in good time and with little or no difficulty. "We are very conservative and do not like spending money unnecessarily. With a car, one has to pay between 10 and 20 Danish kroner for parking. Then they have to buy fuel which is about 10 kroner (almost two US dollars) per litre. That is quite expensive," he says. Mr Osterlund says Danes are encouraged to use bicycles because of the infrastructure which supports cycling in the city. He says Denmark has invested substantially in road development to support the use of bicycles. "I am sure you have

taken time to look around the city and you have seen how people love to use their bicycles. Parking space is available and it's so convenient. It is just fantastic. One does not need to worry about their bicycle as there is a place for it anywhere in the city and in the outskirts," Mr Osterlund says.

Another Copenhagen resident, Phillip Mellen, says cycling is environmentally friendly and healthy. Mr Mellen says unlike cars, bicycles are harmless to the environment because they do not emit any gases which can pollute the air and cause harm to public health. Other Danes on the streets of Copenhagen say riding a bicycle has been part of Danish culture for centuries. Cycling is one thing Danes have in common with the Chinese. Currently, 32 per cent of workers cycle to work and 50 per cent say they use this mode of transport because it is faster, cheaper and convenient. The city's bicycle paths are extensive and well-maintained. The paths are often separated from the main traffic lanes and sometimes have their own traffic signs. "We simply love cycling. It is good exercise. It's quick and a cyclist is better placed to know the geography of the city more than a motorist," Mr Mellen says. He says the bicycle has always been a big political issue. Cycling is fervently supported by politicians because of its immense economic and social benefits. A cyclist can enjoy Copenhagen to the fullest in an environmentally friendly atmosphere using a healthy mode of transport. Mr Mellen says since the 1890s, Danes have been using bicycles to get around and the practice can only gain momentum. " In the beginning, bicycles were mainly acquired by the upper middle class (those who could afford to buy one as a pastime), but the general public quickly discovered the advantages of owning a bicycle," he says.

From 1920 to 1950, Copenhagen city was dominated by cyclists. Cycling was and still is an easy way of maneuvering in a big city without the hassle of relying on public transport. It is also surprisingly a great way to transport goods. Danes use bicycles to carry all kinds of goods and some bicycles are designed with carriers for babies, shopping or picking children from school. "We cycle with everything from groceries to children, using a built-in box," Steffen Kretz, a Danish Television journalist and climate change correspondent, says. Mr Kretz says during the Second World War, the bicycle continued to be the main form of transport in Copenhagen because of restrictions in accessing gasoline. He says in post-war times, things changed. The car overshadowed the bicycle but not for long. When the big oil crisis struck in the 70s, it became ever so popular to cycle again. Today, cyclists make up approximately 30 per cent of the central Copenhagen traffic. Mr Kretz says Copenhagen aims to be recognised as the environmentally friendly metropolis- to set an example for the rest of the world. The city will be hosting the crucial United Nations (UN) summit on climate change in December, 2009. This will be an opportunity to showcase cycling as a cleaner, healthier way to get around. He says as more lanes are created for bicycles, cyclists will be given preference over cars at traffic lights. "One major route is already operating in Nørrebro and more green light routes will follow. This is all being done to make it more attractive for people to choose to use their bicycles instead of driving," Mr Kretz says. He says bicycles were not only being used in an effort to reduce congestion on the roads, but also to ensure that Copenhagen suffers very little or no noise pollution. The idea is also to make it a joyful experience for pedestrians to walk around. "Cycling is a great way to become intimate with a city and get exercise at the same time. There are so many cities across the world known for cycling, but Copenhagen is one place everyone will truly enjoy cycling," Mr Kretz says. Copenhagen is among the 11 most accessible and cycling-friendly cities in the world.