

Biagi's Barcelona Blog



by Marco Biagi MSP for Edinburgh City Centre

I called him 'Shadowfax'. With Barcelona's 'Bicing' on-street municipal hire scheme closed to me as a non-local, he was the bike I hired from the extremely friendly [Green Bikes](#) in Plaça de George Orwell.

Amidst enjoying the culture, architecture and febrile political atmosphere of a recess break I had decided to put to the test what I've said – that if the city I was in had a network of off-road cycle paths I would be happy to get off my two feet and onto two wheels. But I also wanted a practical lesson in street design to take back to Edinburgh, and to experience the challenges faced by so many of the people who write to me, in a place whose infrastructure may (or may not) have been developed enough to cushion my unfamiliarity with the mode of transport.

My first leg was an 8km cycle northward from the city's centre to a park in the lower part of the hills that surround Barcelona. Well, it should have been an 8km cycle. The moment the segregated path along the great boulevard of Ave Meridiana ended I was lost, and cycled in so many circles through a residential area I felt like I was on a fairground roundabout. After rejoining a main thoroughfare at the eyebrow-raisingly named Plaça de Karl Marx, a concrete homage to visions of automobile futures past, I reached my destination.

On the next leg I tried to do completely the opposite of what I'd done the last time but still managed to get lost at the same point, just in a different way. Shrugging, I followed the example of Newton's apple and let gravity guide me downwards

until reaching the waterfront. After a break for feeding and watering I was one of many taking the long, leisurely cycle along the series of artificial beaches that had been built for the 1992 Olympics and have now become an enduring part of the city's seascape.

My final leg was successfully racing the hire shop's opening hours back to where I'd started, with one accidental if scenic detour through the cruise ship-laden harbour. There was only one Euro in it if I returned Shadowfax the next day, but hey, I'm Scottish. I also needed the satisfaction of getting back on time, and by then frankly I definitely also needed a shower.

As someone who is fairly fit but hadn't been on a bike in eight years, the segregated cycle lanes along Barcelona's great boulevards suited me perfectly. The least substantial of barriers between myself and the rather energetic local drivers was a set of oversized cats eyes. I would rather have dismounted and walked than share a space with a ton of metal moving at forty miles per hour without some form of barrier between us – and a line of paint or different-coloured road surface never counts.

Could Edinburgh do this? While we're noted more for narrow streets than great boulevards, there are many large main roads that feed into the city centre like tributaries into the Amazon. And our narrow streets are nowhere near as narrow as the ten-foot wide passages in the Ciutat Vella. I see no obstacle of *engineering* that would prevent Edinburgh doing likewise. Crucial for me though too as a nervous newbie were the junctions, where cyclists moved with the pedestrians rather than the motorists and remained off-road at all times.

One stark difference was that in Barcelona when the cycle

paths were absent bikes were expected to cohabit on the pavements rather than the roads. Pedestrians did not seem fazed by cyclists on pavements, though this cyclist was often fazed by pedestrians, especially the thirty-strong pack of roller-bladers who came at me like TIE fighters in Luke's final run on the Death Star. Cycle paths are built with money and concrete – this sort of relationship is only built with time and respect.

So, if Edinburgh somehow copied Barcelona's infrastructure and on-street 'Bicing' hire scheme, would I start travelling by bike? In absence of also copying Barcelona's also more extensive public transport network, possibly. The city's warm weather may help its café culture, but for me would hinder a personal cycling culture. On those five uphill miles that broke me in (and almost broke me full stop) I was longing for a bit of Edinburgh haar and smirr. And that was in October. Topographically, cycling in Edinburgh and Barcelona at that point also seemed more similar than I had ever imagined. But the appeal for me of Barcelona's network is not just its greater comprehensiveness in providing routes from where I would be to where I would want to be to but also what feels like a greater emphasis on wholesale separation from motor traffic than Edinburgh has put in place so far.



Marco's inexact map

I left thinking that while the Netherlands and Denmark may be the elder statesmen of cycling investment, under the Mediterranean sun Barcelona's growing reputation is well-deserved. The [Copenhagenize](#) table regularly lists the Catalan capital as one of the new emerging cycling cities in Europe. But Barcelona's network has come about because of determined action over less than a decade by the city's leaders – 'Bicing' only started in 2007. If Edinburgh wishes to follow there are lessons to

learn. Just one thing though – a few more signposts, please.

For more information (and more photos than I had the foresight to take), see this [excellent article from earlier this year by Robin Lovelace on the CTC blog](#).