A photograph showing a close-up of a cyclist's hands gripping the handlebars of a bicycle. The scene is set at night or in low light conditions, with blurred lights from traffic and streetlights creating a sense of motion and urban environment.

MEXICO CITY

Biking the Beast

What it takes to survive as a cyclist in Mexico City

By Megan Frye

Photo by Flo Karr

Anyone who's sat in a car on Insurgentes during rush hour (or, really, any main road in this city at any hour) has surely witnessed cyclists flying by, making much better time than those of us stuck in traffic. It's easy to envy their freedom. But if you've been here long enough you've probably also seen the white-painted bicycles hanging from lampposts, each one representing a cyclist fatality. There are special considerations to make if you want to rock a densely populated city not known for its respect of traffic laws on a 10-speed. To get a better grip on what to expect, we talked to three seasoned cyclists: filmmaker-teacher Andrés Pulido; Luis Octavio Calvillo Anza, a student of the ancient Mesoamerican language Nahuatl; and frequent CDMX visitor Leilani Rapaport. The three of them tell us why they love biking in Mexico City and offer tips on how to stay safe and find thrills on two wheels.

If you don't enjoy a healthy dose of chaos every now and again, this is not the activity for you

"It might sound weird, but I like that it's a bit dangerous," says Calvillo Anza. "It's like riding on an all-terrain track. Most of the streets are so messed up, have bumps, are full of garbage, people walking all over, cars jammed, traffic lights that don't work, and some beautiful secret shortcuts; in a way I feel like I am doing some extreme cycling. It makes me feel very alive to be in such a chaotic city riding my bike in between the traffic jams, feeling like the hummingbird in the wind, while I leave behind the cars and trucks which will be stuck in traffic for the better part of the day. I exercise, I feel the wind in my hair, I get everywhere almost as fast but without the stress of traffic, plus the dangerous element of cycling in a city that is hostile to cyclers."



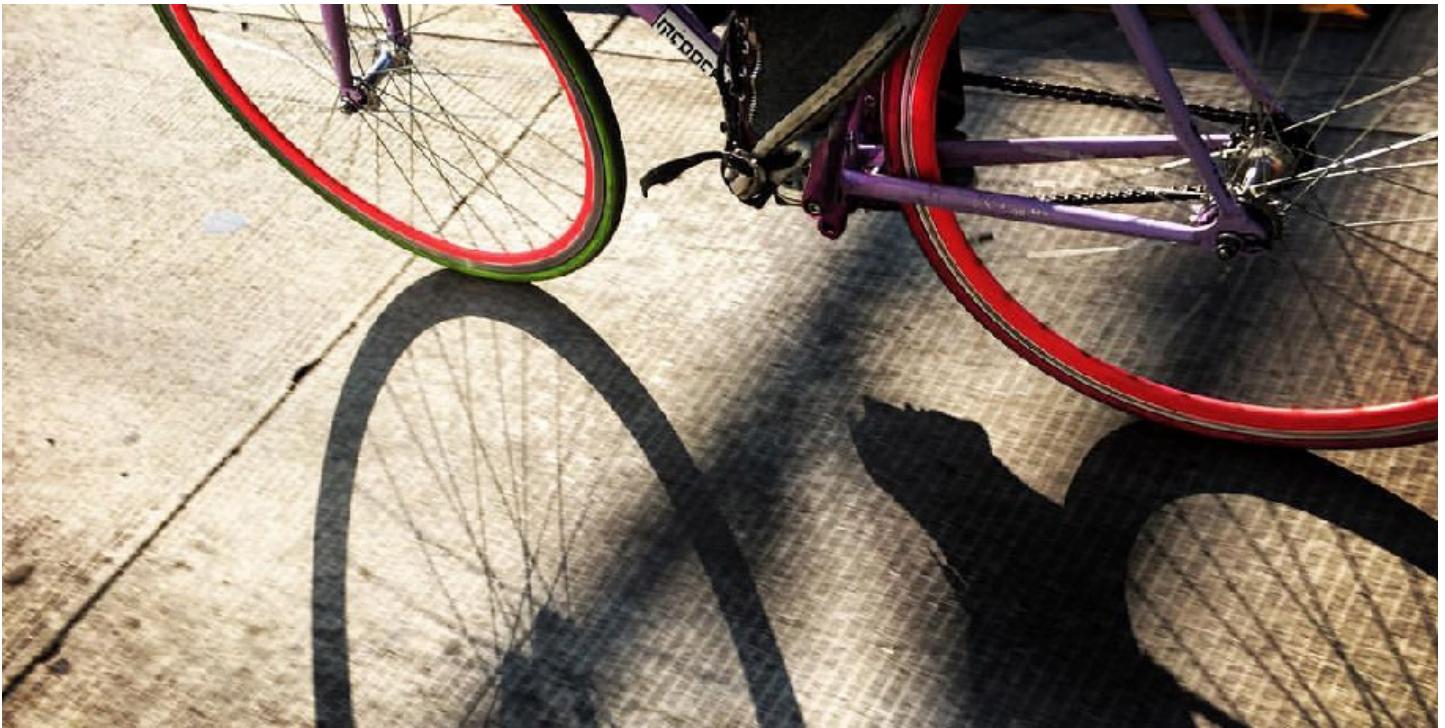
Photo by [Luca Campioni](#)

On many occasions, cycling is actually the quickest form of transport

"Cycling in DF makes traveling fun, and you realize how close everything is," Rapaport says. "You can just do more. A trip to my friend's house takes almost two hours on public transportation, but 30 minutes on bike. When I visit, I stay in the south of the city, and can cycle to the center in 40 minutes, to Xochimilco in 40 minutes and to Coyoacán in 30 minutes. There are so many events and activities going on daily, and biking allows you to accomplish more. No waiting for buses or getting stuck in the metro. No need to bring money for transport. Transportation in DF is cheap, but the tickets still add up."

In a city this big, your bike can carry you more places than a motorized vehicle, and there are charms you can sense on your bike that you just won't get on a bus

"In a city with millions of inhabitants, every time you go from one place to another you become part of the traffic problem, and at the same time, you become a victim of it," Pulido says. "So one of the most gratifying things about cycling in Mexico City is that you reduce that cause-effect relationship: It's better for you and it's better for others, because you become 'less traffic.' You can use a lot of shortcuts when you're traveling from point A to point B. Some of these shortcuts are very practical, but in other cases you use them because it's a pleasure to travel on them."



Cyclecity via [Facebook](#)

Don't leave home without a map

"The biggest issue I've had has been getting lost," Rapaport says. "One road can have three names and not be marked. People have repeatedly given me wrong directions. Public transport won't allow your bike on board except for on Sundays. I once got lost coming home from the center at night. I was very nervous and scared, and vowed never to bike at night again without a detailed map with multiple routes. The first two people I saw led me to different neighborhoods, and the last two actually accompanied me an hour back home. I am forever grateful to them. I should have arrived home in 40 minutes, but it took two hours through dark and lonely streets."

Rapaport suggests drawing a detailed map with instructions before journeying out on your trusty steed. "Make friends with cyclists and learn the good roads," she says. "Cyclists are the ones who will help you most with directions. People on the streets are not always reliable for directions. Neither is Google Maps. Make eye contact with drivers. If you're going through unknown neighborhoods, choose big avenues rather than small streets. The two biggest safety concerns I've heard about are accidents with motor vehicles and getting robbed. I haven't experienced either, but I'm still very cautious."

Be confident and make your presence known

"The first thing you must know about riding a bicycle in Mexico City is that you should do it with confidence," Pulido says. "You shouldn't ride with fear, but you must never, ever, lose your attention. Also, if you want to keep safe while riding your bicycle in Mexico City, you must know how to drive a car, because you always have to think as though you were a car driver. And not just any driver, you have to think as if you were the worst car driver that ever existed. Only when you're able to think like the worst driver ever can you predict and dodge some of the terrible maneuvers that certain people make with their vehicles."



Brújula Que Orienta Al Norte via [Facebook](#)

Embrace organized biking activities, because, well, there's safety in numbers

"Reforma Avenue is beautiful, and on weekends it's open only to bikers," Calvillo Anza says. "It's a little bit boring without the noisy, polluted traffic jams I love so much, but I would still recommend it." In addition to blocking off Reforma, a major artery in the city, other group bike rides encourage community among cyclists and offer protection, since a pack of bikes is a lot more noticeable than just one. "Sunday bike events Muévete en Bici and Ciclotón, where main avenues are closed off to motor vehicles, have helped me see a large part of the city in a short amount of time," Rapaport says. "You're riding among lots of other bikers and roller skaters and runners on these traditionally traffic-heavy roads."

Don't expect the city to help you out

"Only just recently has the city government taken matters into consideration, creating bicycle-only lanes," Calvillo Anza says. "But still, these are used by pedestrians and cars will park there if they want. This is a city that has had cyclists for ages: street-bread vendors, taco vendors and a lot of different people that use their bike as their main or only source of transport and commerce. But the reality is that in this city, people don't care much for riders, so the best thing is to be very alert all the time, and maybe just imagine that all the drivers are drunk. What seems logical in other countries can't apply to Mexico City. Always be aware of this, [and] use a helmet and a light at night. Also - always bring your bike inside at night. If you don't, you'll find it dismembered and half of it missing."



Photo by [Jack Alexander](#)

A bit of "Virgencita" bling never hurt anybody

"Although I don't believe in any religion, on my old bicycle I have a sticker with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe," Pulido says. "At the beginning, I put it on my bicycle because I thought that it would prevent my bike from getting stolen. But now I think of it as a 'Made in Mexico' label for a bicycle. Because at the end of the day, the majority of cyclists in Mexico are the type of workers who use their bicycles as their vehicles, and they are the ones that every year use them to visit 'la virgencita.' It's difficult to explain, but I think that bicycles and la Virgen get along well."

Join a cycling group

Some of the most popular groups in Mexico City, in no particular order:

Bicitekas
Cycle City
BiciRebeldes
Brújula que Orienta al Norte
Jaguares Ciclistas
BiciSordos Incluyente



By Megan Frye

Megan Frye is a professional vagabond who swears she's danced with the dead at the pyramids. She can usually be found eating her way around Mexico City. Tweet her about the food that makes you squeal at [@fryechild](#), or see what she's up to on Instagram at [@gypsy_fire](#).

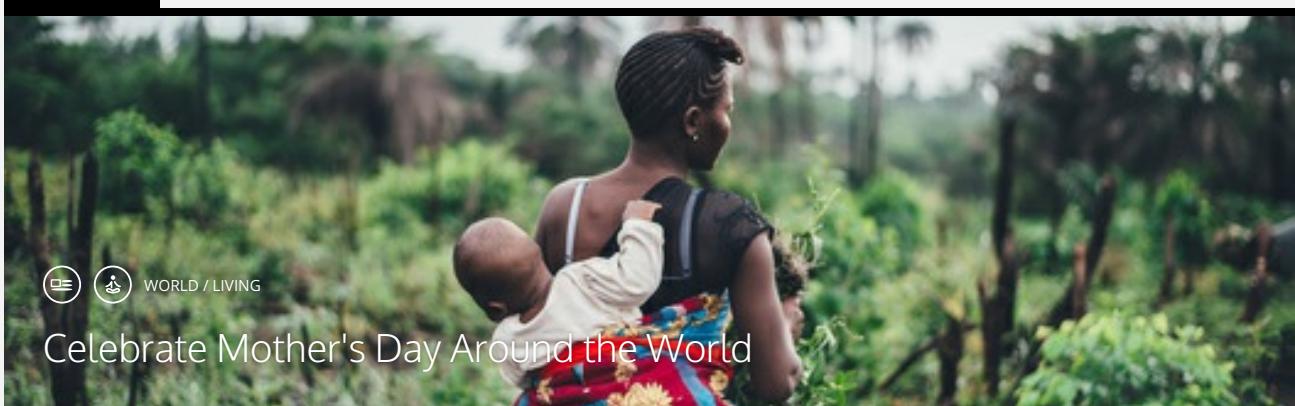
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