

Jan-Keno Janssen decides to rent a bicycle to get around Las Vegas; this is what happens

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Jan-Keno Janssen writes about technology for German computer magazine c't. He covered the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas earlier this month. And that means horrific traffic that turns a trip from the hotel to the convention center into an hour-long ordeal. But he had an idea: Everywhere he needs to go is within a five-kilometer radius. The terrain is flat. The weather is cold but nothing a coat can't handle. Solution: Rent a bicycle and use that to get around.

This was not as simple as it sounds.

Uneasy Rider: Radfahren in Las Vegas chronicles his absurd experience trying to execute on his simple plan, through the lack of comprehension, the blank stares, the offer of a mobility scooter, the hotel employees privately talking about the crazy European, the impossibility of finding a place to lock his bicycle, and a video of his triumphant bike ride. (Article is in German, which you should read if you can because the attitude may not survive translation. And because stories of the absurd naturally belong in German.)

Maybe he should've asked this guy for tips.

A friend of mine who is more clued in to the bicycling scene says that at Interbike, a bicycle conference held in Las Vegas, a common solution is to buy a cheap bicycle at a local big-box department store and abandon it at the end of the convention. Maybe he could try that next year. (If abandoning the bicycle offends his sensibilities, he could always donate it.)

Bonus content: Here's my translation of the article into English.

Uneasy Rider: Bicycling in Las Vegas

Media coverage on bicycle? In Las Vegas? To Americans, this is about as absurd as using a jet-pack to get a loaf of bread. A report on my experiences at CES 2014.

The traffic situation in Las Vegas at CES is a catastrophe. Whether by taxi, monorail, or bus, there are annoying queues of people everywhere. For six years in a row, I have tortured myself through the crowd of chaos to report on technology for c't and heise online, and every year, I think, "There must be another way."

On the opening day of the conference, it can take an hour to get from the hotel to your next appointment. The distances to be bridged are fairly short: The convention takes place within a radius of about five kilometers, including hotels. A European doesn't have to think very long to come up with a way out of the interminable waiting: This year I will try to get to every appointment by bicycle, not handing over a cent for taxi or public transportation.

This notion strikes an American as if you had said you wanted to take a jet-pack to get a loaf of bread. The reactions of the locals left no doubt about that. Before the conference, I sent a few messages to businesses which rent bicycles. That's right. Bike rental companies. They actually exist. However, they aren't what I had imagined: From the email replies I got back, I gathered that bicycles here are used exclusively for sport and exercise, not as a means of transportation.

The customers of the bike rental companies drive up in their cars, toss in the rental bike, and drive off somewhere into the desert. As a result, I also was offered a high-tech mountain bike with full suspension for \$100 a day. My relatively simple request (renting a simple bicycle with a light and lock for a week) seemed so absurd that the proprietor simply ignored it.

Wheelchair instead of a bicycle

Upon arriving in Vegas, I inquired at the hotel. The concierge of the MGM Grand can help with any request, or so it says in the brochure of the third-largest hotel in the world. But when I asked about renting a bicycle, I got the same story the bicycle rental gave me via email: You can rent expensive mountain bikes for desert riding.

Me: I don't want to exercise. Just use the bicycle as a means of transportation. It is very practical, because at CES I have meetings all day in different hotels.

Concierge: <blank stare>

Me: It's so easy to bicycle here. Everything is flat!

Concierge: You can rent a mobility scooter here in the hotel.

Me: Isn't that intended for handicapped people?

Concierge: Well yeah, but anyone can use them.

Me: I would rather rent a bicycle.

Concierge: Please wait a moment.

The concierge called somebody on the phone. Unfortunately, I could not hear what he said, he had taken a few steps back and turned away from me. I could barely make out a few fragments of conversation. "European." "Crazy." As he turned back to me, he informed me that there is a bicycle shop named McGhie's "nearby". I could try my luck there. I knew about McGhies already. That was one of the businesses that didn't answer my emailed questions.

Me: Okay, thanks. Assuming I can rent a bicycle, may I take it with me to my room? Or is there somewhere a place to park a bicycle? I haven't seen one.

Concierge: Please wait a moment.

And again he picked up the phone, turned away from me, and called somebody. The phone call lasted a very long time, but ended apparently with a positive result: Yes, I may take the bicycle to my room. But I was strongly advised against riding a bicycle in Las Vegas. It was far too dangerous. Aha.

Okay, so off to McGhie. Apparently it is the closest bicycle shop to Las Vegas Boulevard (commonly called "The Strip", the location of pretty much all the city's hotels). Around 15 kilometers and taxi fare of over \$50 later, I stood in a large store for mountain bikes and snowboards. And here too, people understood me only after prolonged attempts at explanation. The salesman asked if I really wanted to do it. He said it was very dangerous, lots of traffic, and furthermore the drivers are not accustomed to seeing bicyclists. I replied that I didn't have to go on the eight-lane Strip, but rather could take the smaller side streets.

"This is America"

Shaking his head, the salesman gave me a bicycle helmet, included in the price of \$150 per week. 150 dollars? Yes, because McGhie doesn't rent simple street bicycles. The simplest model was a crossover bike from Trek. Does it at least come with a clip-on light and a lock?

No. Our customers don't ask for lights, and we don't rent locks for insurance reasons. "This is America," the salesman insisted. And speaking of insurance: There wasn't any. If the bicycle got stolen, I would have to replace it. For \$1250. I swallowed hard and bought myself a \$50 lock and a few simple LED lights.

Now the salesman wanted to know whether I had my own car or whether I would like the bicycle delivered to the hotel. When I answered that I just wanted to ride the bike to the hotel right now, I earned another shake of the head. "Good luck."

Somewhat intimidated and slowed down by the thought that I'm about to do something forbidden, I head out. And then it happened: Nothing. It was pleasantly warm, little traffic, I could travel on the sidewalk most of the time. When the kitchily and bombastically-lit Strip emerged at dusk, I had for the first time the sense that my bicycle riding idea was maybe not so preposterous.

This feeling held up until the next day. The ride from the MGM Hotel to the meeting at Mandalay Bay was admittedly trouble-free, but where the hell was I supposed to put this expensive bike? There were (obviously) no bike racks, and on top of that there was nothing I could chain the thing to. So I asked at the hotel lobby. There I was met with the usual skepticism, but they offered to store it in the baggage room. Good idea, great. So for the next few days, the baggage-room-as-bicycle-rack strategy worked great. Only at the LVH Hotel at the convention center, the very place I had to go most often, did the people in the baggage room put their foot down, even though the hotel was one of the official CES venues. I was not a hotel guest at all, and on top of that was some sort of problem with the insurance again. When I asked where I could store my bicycle, the answer was merely a shrug. Ultimately, with my CES press pass, tips, and tenacity, I finally succeeded.

Fear and Cycling in Las Vegas

After five days of putting the cycling plan into practice, the result is clear: The whole fear-mongering was unjustified. You can ride your bicycle in Las Vegas quite decently. There are the fewest problems on the side streets, the sidewalks are practically always free. (In Las Vegas, one travels by foot only in explicitly designated areas. Under no circumstances is this rule broken.) Now, on the large multi-lane roads like the Strip, riding requires considerable concentration because the drivers employ an, er, original driving style. But that also makes it rather enjoyable to whiz past the rows of cars by the Bellagio fountains, the Mirage volcano, and the neon signs.

Also, you can see places where tourists and convention attendees rarely go, and for good reason: The mini-supermarkets beyond the Strip often sell groceries and drinks a full one third cheaper than at the kiosks of the hotel monopolists. In the stores away from the tourist

stomping grounds, you meet the alcoholic and/or mentally ill people who were spit out by the glossy gaming industry. If you talk with the people here, you learn sad stories about the downsides of the American dream and a de facto non-existent social system.

At one point, I also came to understand why the locals warned me about being stopped frequently by the police. Anyone not riding in a car is a priori a suspicious person, just like for example in Los Angeles. “Only the homeless ride bicycles in the city,” I heard more than once. I cleared the police screening probably only because I was wearing a suit most of the time. Sad.

The efficiency-loving Americans should at least see that you can save huge amounts of time with a bicycle. From the hotel to the convention center, for example, it took me only twenty minutes. At rush hour on the first day of the convention, it was easily an hour by taxi or monorail. That’s what I told the man I met in the hotel elevator: He had seen plenty of things in Vegas, but a guy riding around the hotel hallways on a bicycle? Never. He acknowledged my story of the time savings with a shake of the head. Like I said, a jet pack probably would have confused him less.

Photo captions

1. Bicycling in Las Vegas: To a European, this sounds completely ordinary, but in practice, it requires a lot of discussion. But it’s worth it because...
2. ... during CES, a person on a bicycle is significantly faster than a car: In a car, you spend most of your time stuck in a traffic jam.
3. If you go for the shuttle bus, first and foremost, you must wait...
4. ... same goes for the taxi stands in front of the hotels.
5. Here is the end of the taxi queue. From here to finally sitting in a taxi, it’ll take up to an hour.
6. With a bicycle, you simply ride past all the traffic chaos. However, since there are (almost) no parking facilities, you have to put the bicycle in your room. At least in the MGM Grand it’s allowed.
7. Not allowed is riding down the extremely long hallways. Purely theoretically speaking, one could save a lot of time by doing so.
8. The elevators in the hotels are, fortunately, roomy enough. The bike came along with me without a problem. On top of that, it is a safe “conversation starter” in the small-talk-friendly USA.
9. Although riding along the at-times eight-laned Las Vegas Boulevard falls into the category or “extreme sports”, you can take a relaxing ride on the sidewalks of the quiet side streets. Also, the traffic is easy to negotiate here.
10. Here, right at the beginning of Las Vegas Boulevard, at the famous sign, the traffic is not quite so relaxing. Two kilometers to the north, traffic gets confusing. (See videos.)

Video caption

First-person view of bike riding in Vegas: To get from the MGM to Treasure Island, you have to cross a number of overpasses and escalators. Logic would suggest otherwise. The video was designed by the Amsterdam multimedia artist Christopher Holloran.

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