

Bicycling facilitates travel in Beijing

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

The last thing I thought of before heading off to Beijing was biking. This is surprising as the bicycle was the strongest, and perhaps the only image I had of the place. Sure, the Forbidden City was in there somewhere and Tiananmen Square, hopefully free of tanks, couldn't be too hard to find. However as far back as I could remember, film footage of the city showed bicycles. These were not alloyed steeds with more flash than function, nor the latest mountain terrain vehicles. They were just sturdy, practical two wheelers and they dominated the cityscape.

When I walked out of my hotel room and saw the bikes lined up for rent I was more than a little bit apprehensive. How could a person, knowing virtually nothing about a city, attempt to explore it on two wheels? Surely, I thought, there was a better way to get around. After a week of traveling on buses, taxis, subways, and, as it turned out, mostly bicycles, I concluded there wasn't. The bike is the finest form of transportation in China's capital.

First of all they are cheap. For about five yuan (¥160) you can have a bike for the day, free to take it any which way your heart desires. On top of this, most hotels have bicycles for hire, making them certainly one of the most accessible forms of transportation. Also, Beijing, and for that matter all of China, still remains a biker's country. Relative to Japan the roads are virtually deserted and often a special lane for bicycles is provided.



SEEING BEIJING by bicycle is far more relaxing and comfortable than traveling on crowded buses or expensive taxis. PHOTO BY PATRICK JOHNSTON

Probably the best part of biking in Beijing, though, is the experience itself. Worlds apart from the tourist enclaves, it is an exploration into a unique part of modern Chinese culture and an ideal way to get a little closer to the lives of the people. The bike in Beijing constitutes a way of life and for many is the single most important piece of equipment in their possession.

With this elevated status comes a different set of riding rules. I've always thought of the bicycle as a kind of rebel, a two wheeled terror free to go anywhere it likes by whatever means. This is not the case in Beijing. Darting in

and out of traffic, riding on the wrong side of the road or commandeering the sidewalk does not go over too well with the locals, and sometimes is outright dangerous.

There is a flow, one that certainly constrains the biker, but one that remains remarkably comfortable. Beijing residents surround you, some going to work, some carrying their work, and some carrying their whole families. It has all the makings for aggravation and tension but most seem strangely relaxed. The pace moves along slowly and many look like they are almost enjoying it.

Of course it's not perfect.

Beijing streets have their vehicles and some, most notably the buses, have a nasty habit of pulling into the biking lane to let off passengers. Also, during rush hour, the roads swarm with two wheelers making any direction other than straight a harrowing experience.

This is a small price to pay, however, for the freedom and opportunities availed by a bicycle. Small shops can be investigated, tiny alleys explored, and temples visited — all in the time frame you choose. The big, the small, the great and the insignificant all can be yours. And this is done comfortably, at a level which is still largely the peo-

ple's domain.

The alternatives pale in comparison. Buses rarely have a seat free and at times the vehicles are so crammed it makes a Tokyo rush-hour train ride seem almost spacious. Taxis offer comfort but, despite laws to the contrary, often drivers do not turn on their meters when a foreigner gets inside (the price must be negotiated). If they do, you might find yourself taking an unusually long route to get to your desired location. They then insist you pay Foreign Exchange Currency (FEC), which is valued 20 percent to 25 percent more than normal Chinese currency.

Beijing does have an excellent subway and I would recommend it if it takes you to where you want to go. But, as there are only two lines, it puts restrictions on how you see the city. And there exist, I am told, some excellent bus tours that do offer both comfort and convenience.

Really, though, for exploring a city, can 10 wheels ever compare to two? On a bicycle I rode to the Forbidden City and explored the fascinating alleys around its walls. I pedaled along the centrally located and busy Qianmen Street and stopped in for some Beijing duck at a local restaurant. I ate a rice-and-vegetable lunch box in Tiananmen Square, talked to some English-speaking Chinese in the Temple of Heaven park and went shopping for Jasmine tea in the Friendship Store near the Diplomatic Quarter. And I enjoyed myself. Could the same be said after using other forms of transportation? In Beijing, not likely.