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You never forget how to ride a bike – Remember in Amsterdam!

By Nanci Tangeman

They say you never forget how to ride a bike, but in Amsterdam, you have to remember a few things to survive on two wheels. Like how to hang on to your bike. My husband's bike is old, bent and the color of something that, sooner or later, you're going to have to scrape off your shoes if you spend enough time in Amsterdam. Every single part of his bike – from the bell to the taillight – sports a squirt of yellow spray paint. It's ugly. It's unique. That's why he's managed to keep it in his possession for over two years.

The second thing you learn is that when it comes to bicycle maintenance, the more creaks and groans the better. Every rattle, squeak, and grind of the pedals is another warning to cyclists and pedestrians that you're approaching.

That's the next lesson for bicycling in Amsterdam – bicycle bells do get used. Walking in a bike path (you can't miss them, they're the pathways – usually red pavement or red brick – marked with a BIG WHITE BICYCLE ICON) can bring on a cacophony of bells that would rival the introduction to a Queen song. If someone rings his bell at you, don't take it as the aural equivalent of a middle finger. Just GET OUT OF THE WAY! Don't let your last words be, "Gee, honey. I wonder what these big bicycles painted on this path mean?"

Daisy may have had a bicycle built for two, but hang out at rush hour in the Vondelpark and you'll see bicycles built for two kids, Mom *and* the family dog! You'll see boxes mounted on the fronts of bicycles with whole herds of toddlers peeping out. Bicycles will go by loaded with giant houseplants or Christmas trees, depending on the season. Window washers will pass with their extension ladders and businesspeople will pedal past in suits and ties, cell phones to their ears and briefcases in their panniers. You'll see lazy dogs in baskets and wannabe sled dogs pulling their masters at top speed – often in several directions.

From cradle to grave, the Dutch pedal – or coast – through life. The smallest Amsterdammers don't spend their time in an SUV, staring at the back of mom's seat. They're right out there on the front the bicycle, soaking up traffic patterns and getting a healthy blush on their cheeks. Children on their first bikes have Mom or Dad's strong hand on their shoulders, urging them on and guiding them through traffic. Eventually, it will be their first love who pedals alongside or casually hops on the back fender for a ride. And for retired sweethearts? Matching his and hers bicycles are Holland's answer to the American RV.

The cycling culture does take its toll on hairstyles and clothing choices for a night out. Slacks or short, stretchy skirts work best and go well with a windblown coiffure. But once you've bicycled home along the canals by moonlight after a late dinner and a good bottle of wine, you'll be throwing away your car keys . . . not to mention your curling iron, half your wardrobe and the number to the taxi company!