

# Heads-up Dept.: Keep a lid on it

Forget biodiesel, baby. Leave your Prius behind. The city of Amsterdam's got your alternative vehicle "right here" - in the form of a hard, rubber bicycle seat and a pair of firm, round handle bars.

Amsterdam (pop. 1.2 million), it is said, has more bicycles than people. Around the university, racks are jam-packed with burly, black, one-speeders with footbrakes and beefy fenders. From block to block, down sidewalks, and over canals, bikes squeeze together like posts in a loose coyote fence that seems endless.

A regular cavalcade of cyclists gently pants by. Boys shake long locks out of their faces as they hum. Girls thumb those classic, round bike-bells to the rhythm of the city. Sometimes they don hats and scarves, but get this: Santa Fe might have more bike helmets. We never saw one during a recent three-day stint.

In the cab from the airport, I wondered out loud how the authorities could have

missed the memos about bike helmets preventing brain injury. "Maybe those coffee shops - with their legendary menus of Purple Haze, Stella Blue, and Columbian Gold - have had some unforeseen consequences," I mused. "Might this be the biggest bureaucratic space-out in history?"

But when I asked around, people thought I'd just come from a coffee shop for even thinking of wearing a helmet. Amsterdam is almost completely flat and has a strong culture of respect for bicycling that permeates society. "But don't accidents happen?" I asked.

"No, not really," I was told. As it turns out, new research by Dr. Ian Walker of the Psychology Department at the University of Bath in the UK suggests that wearing a helmet is less safe than riding bare-headed and, if you happen to be male, riding bare-headed is less safe than wearing a long wig. Using an ultrasonic device that

measures the distance between a bike and a passing vehicle, the lecturer determined that, on average, cars would get 3.3 inches closer to him when he wore "protective" headgear, and vehicles would veer 2.2 inches away from a "female" appearance.

"We know helmets are useful in low-speed falls, and so definitely good for children, but whether they offer any real protection to somebody struck by a car is very controversial," Walker said. "Either way, this study suggests wearing a helmet might make a collision more likely in the first place."

Before pedaling over to Retrospect for that new lid, you should know that I haven't jumped the helmet ship just yet. Certainly Amsterdam's laissez-faire approach is tempting and I do appreciate the science behind the work of Bath's cross-dressing professor. The fact is, however, that people *really* would start to whisper about what went on during my



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Amsterdam trip if I started promoting helmetless cycling in Santa Fe.

For now, I'll just set the best example I can - for the children. Yes, I'll wear my helmet proudly. Or, better yet, maybe I'll gift one to a kid in need at Christmas.

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