



Pedal faster, Amsterdam: Is Seville now Europe's greatest cycling city?

By Barry Neild, CNN

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Photos: Cycling in Seville

Riding over oranges – Orange trees overhang Seville's cycle paths. One unexpected pleasure city is running over aromatic citrus fruit.

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Seville, Spain (CNN) — With due respect to Copenhagen, Amsterdam has long been hailed as Europe capital of cycling, but now there's a new kid riding on the block.

Seville.

Until recently the southern Spanish city has been an unlikely contender for the crown.

Jump back 10 years and barely anyone there owned a bike, let alone rode it.

Now, it's a different story.

The compact city is ringed by green-painted cycleways.

Its central boulevards have been closed to all but cycle, tram and taxi traffic. And a city-wide cycle hire scheme offers 2,600 bikes from 260 docking stations.

Up to 70,000 bikes are now used daily in the city -- not a huge figure, admittedly, but a giant leap from the 6,000 of a few years ago.

So is it premature to proclaim Seville's two-wheeled triumph over Amsterdam, where 800,000 people make daily use of their cycles?

Let's look at the evidence:

The bike paths



Seville's cycle paths are clearly marked and segregated from other traffic.

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Go for the numbers here and Seville's off to a bad start.

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It's got just 160 kilometers (100 miles) of cycle lanes compared with Amsterdam's 500 kilometers.

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Then again, Amsterdam's a sprawling capital city that covers an area one-third bigger than Seville.

The numbers don't take into account Seville's maze of narrow alleyways in the heart of the ancient city that cyclists can scoot down largely unbothered by cars too wide to follow them.

And, as we mentioned before (and will keep mentioning), Seville's new to this game.

The fact that it's created so many cycleways in such a short time is pretty amazing.

The lanes themselves are a match for their Dutch counterparts.

They're partitioned from traffic by fence posts and curbs and coated in a smooth green surface. There's traffic lighting and clear signage.

Result: Seville wins for effort. Bonus points because nothing beats the zesty pleasure of riding over fallen oranges.

The bikes

No one can fault Dutch classic black city bikes -- Armageddon-proof steeds shaped by eons of cycling across the flat Netherlands.

The secondhand clunkers favored in Seville are a motley fleet by comparison, but cherished nevertheless.

Serving an equally flat terrain and an unhurried culture, Seville's bikes seem to be selected on the basis of low price rather than quality or speed -- especially as they're prone to theft.

"I've had five or six bikes stolen," says freelance journalist Candela Gonzalez, sitting astride a rusty-looking machine.

"Even this one was taken, but I found her on sale at a market and demanded her back. I don't want to lose her again, I love her so much."

Where Seville triumphs is in its [Sevici city bike](#) rental network which, while starting to show some wear and tear after eight years of action, is a breeze to use both for locals and visitors.

After an initial outlay of 13.33 euros (\$15) for a week-long subscription, the cycles are free to rent for 30-minute periods, and just over a dollar an hour thereafter.

Result: Seville takes it. Rusting underdogs will always win more hearts.

The cycling culture

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For the architects of Seville's network -- urban planning chief Jose Garcia Cebrian and social campaigner Ricardo Marques Sillero -- it was a struggle to overcome opposition.

"We faced a fight getting the bike lanes," recalls the network's architect Manuel Calvo, while taking CNN on a tour of his handiwork.

"They said that Seville wasn't a cycling city, that it wasn't in our culture and that we'd never take to it."

"But it was a success, so now they've had to shut up."

That's in contrast to Amsterdam where cycling has been around so long older buildings would probably topple into canals were it not for the vast weight of bikes leaned up against them.

Having created a cycling culture where virtually nothing existed before, Seville is now being seen as a model for other cities looking to combat road congestion.

That said, there's no escaping the fact that one reason for the success of Seville's cycling campaign is the dire economic situation facing the city following the recent eurozone crisis.

With high unemployment, particularly among young people, many have adopted cycling as a cheap way to get around.

Result: Uphill all the way, but Seville makes it.

The cycling facilities

In Amsterdam, cyclists know the city has their back.

There are bike shops everywhere, offering rentals, repairs and spares.

There are amazing bike parking facilities -- on barges, on the street or in purpose-built multi-tiered underground and overground bike parks.

Rental and sale shops are springing up almost weekly in Seville, but they're already struggling to keep up.

"We're empty of bikes right now, which is amazing," says Jaime Jowers Sanchez-Cervera, a worker at a branch of [Centerbici](#) (C/Espronceda 5, Corner with C/Boteros, Seville; +34 954 211 044) bike shop

"Before we used to just rent to foreigners, but now it's mostly people from Seville."

The city has installed a number of branded bike racks for locking machines, but these don't come close to meeting demand.

Result: Amsterdam. Lock, stock and cycle clips.

The cycling etiquette

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Seville Sevici bike hire scheme offers 600 bikes from 260 docking stations around the city.

It might have a laid-back reputation, but Amsterdam is a battleground for cyclists.

Pity the poor tourist who dares to ride too slowly -- or even stop -- on one of the city's teeming cycle lanes, causing a moment's [delay to impatient local riders](#).

So far, Seville seems incredibly relaxed, with cyclists, motorists and pedestrians coexisting in relative harmony.

There are a few teething problems with the new cycle lanes, with older residents still using the cycle lanes as footpaths, according to some in the city.

At [Santa Cleta](#) (*Calle Fray Diego de Cadiz, 24, Sevilla; +34 622 77 01 03*), an independent shop close to the city's hip-ish Alameda de Hercules district, there are cycling lessons for seniors who've never touched a bike before.

According to cycle path designer Manuel Calvo, opponents are trying to drum up a nonexistent conflict between cyclists and pedestrians, but have so far failed.

Result: Seville takes it easily, by taking it easy.

The cycling climate

Apart from the height of summer when Seville reaches egg-frying temperatures, it's hard to argue with 300 days of sunshine versus Amsterdam's colder, damper weather.

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Result: Seville is so relaxed now.

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The cycling future

With a reported \$500 million national cycle budget, there's no doubting the commitment to cycling in Amsterdam.

In Seville, despite recent advancements, the fate of cycling in the city is by no means guaranteed.

With no political consensus on cycling, Seville's infrastructure is already crying out for more funding.

But with plans afoot to link the city to a wider network of cycle routes across Andalusia and a substantial network of cycle lanes now hardwired into the road system, it's hard to imagine Seville backpedaling.

Result: Amsterdam's ahead by a few bike lengths, but with the sun shining and a fair wind behind, Seville could one day ride into a clear lead.



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