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IS YOUR CAR AS INDISPENSABLE AS YOU THINK? A STORY OF CYCLE
COMMUTING IN GAUTENG.

My first real foray into cycle commuting was in Cambridge, UK, where I lived for four years. Cycle commuting worked well in Cambridge because the city was cycle-friendly, mostly flat, and the 3 km commute wasn't enough to break much of a sweat. (This helped in part by the mostly "mild" weather.) This was a novel experience for me, having lived the other 26 years of my life in and around Jo'burg: car-jammed, cyclist-unfriendly, and a record of poor road safety and lawlessness.

My wife and I didn't own a car in the UK for three of the four years, also a new experience for me having owned a car for all of my legal driving years before. In the fourth year, we bought an old Renault Clio for £450 (!), which took us on the occasional day and weekend trip, and then a big road trip right the way around the British Isles. (We then sold the car for £450 – got to love the UK's second hand car market!)

When my wife and I moved back to SA in 2018, I motivated to my wife that we should only buy one car for the household, in stark contrast to the usual middle-class South African mind-set of "needing" (at least) one car per person. I think we can agree that it would be a huge challenge to have no car at all, as public transport options are limited (though improving). Further, when we first moved back we stayed with family in Jo'burg, and I had a 65 km commute to Pretoria for work. But one car is certainly less than the

two cars society might expect us to have.

After a few months, we moved into a temporary rented flat in Pretoria for me to be closer to work, and my wife started working in Centurion. We shared the car, with one of us dropping off and collecting the other as necessary. This resulted in long hours for at least one of us, but it was manageable. In October 2018, we moved into a permanent home in Pretoria, which was yet a bit closer to my work. Location and proximity to at least one of our places of work was a huge priority in choosing our new home.

The new house put me within cycling distance of work, making cycle commuting a real option for me. It would also leave the car available to my wife to get to work and back. Once the aftermath of moving home had settled down, I decided it was time to resume my cycle commuting, a first for me outside of the UK. (This is not entirely true. I used to walk/cycle about 2 km from home to my high school, but this was very much within the confines of suburbia.)

I started commuting around late November, and with the exception of December holidays, I've been commuting for around two months now. The commute is longer (around 6 km) and certainly hillier than in Cambridge. My commute takes approximately 20 minutes each way, which is the same time it would take in minor traffic, and quicker than in peak hour traffic. There is also a small matter of the -40 degree summer

temperatures in Pretoria, especially unavoidable in the afternoon commute home, but I am fortunate to have access to showers at work. (If your place of work does not have showers, you should petition them to install at least one.)

I've been largely surprised by how accommodating most drivers (certainly not all) are to me as a cyclist, but my route avoids most major roads. One needs to be very aware, for sure, and to ride defensively, but for the most part this is not very different to cycling around Cambridge. (You might be surprised to learn that they too have taxis, and they too are not very accommodating of cyclists...)

To date, I've cycle-commuted 300 km, which excludes the once a week I run home from work. (Why not shake things up a bit, right?) In term of carbon emissions, an average petrol car with a fuel consumption of 8 l/100km would emit around 54 kg of CO₂ for the same commute. Given my current rate of cycling, I save about 10 kg CO₂ per week, or 500 kg CO₂ per year. One also needs to take into account the effective carbon savings of not acquiring a second car. To manufacture a small internal combustion engine car today produces around 6 tonnes of CO₂, before it's even set foot on the road. So that another 6 tonnes saved by not buying a second car. (Production of a large premium SUV produces as much as 35 tonnes of CO₂.)

There are other benefits too. I'm getting 40 minutes of decent exercise for every day that I cycle commute, without having to set aside extra time out of my day for it. This has noticeably helped my running training, while I work

towards my first half marathon in April. I'm starting to see the positive effect of the extra endorphins at work and at home. I am one fewer single-occupant cars on the road during peak hours, which would otherwise be contributing to endlessly worsening congestion and frustration, leading to a negative impact on our well-being.

I will add that occasionally I get a lift with my wife or catch an Uber, for example when I needed to transport a large pile of documents or if I've had to attend meetings off site and I couldn't get a lift with a colleague. However this is certainly the exception, and the cost of this pails into insignificance compared with paying off another car. In fact, we are saving a significant amount of money not paying off a second car loan, car insurance, petrol and maintenance. Instead, that cash is being redirected into our home loan and

helps us pay that off faster. Doing the financial calculations and extrapolating, the net effect of this is a 35% reduction in our total home loan payments, and a reduction in the home loan term from 20 to 9 years. And this doesn't take

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into account refinancing a new car every few years. It's incredible, really.

I'm not saying this can work for everyone, or for every stage in one's life. Many people live simply too far from work, and don't have the option to move closer to work for a number of reasons. If I was some sort of consultant for example, the demands of the job would mean I'd probably need a car of my own. If my wife and I had children of school-going age, this would take a bit more thought but may yet be sustainable. But for many of us, if we look at our lives holistically, we do have a say in where we live and where we work. We do have a say in how we want to live our lives, how we spend our money, and how we prioritise the different elements of our working and personal lives. And of course, the more people which take up cycle-

commuting, the more attractive these options appear to others, and the more society moves along to accommodate this. (There is, of course, still much to be learned about cycling and cyclists' rights to be learnt by the average Gauteng motorist.)

In my day job, my research revolves around finding and implementing means of making transport as sustainable and safe as possible, and reducing the global carbon footprint of transport systems in general. I like to try and practise what I preach as far as possible. Our family circumstances may change, and I may have to adapt to those changes, but for now my wife and I have taken the necessary steps to implement the changes we want to see in our lives and in the environment around us. And we're having a lot of fun along the way.

Safe (and sustainable) travels. [ride](#)