



TOUR de BIKE

Friendly Cities

BY BARBI WALKER

You've biked around the neighborhood, maybe to a local business, but you are looking for something more, adventurous or with more of a view than cement driveways – where to go? Luckily, there are many bike-friendly spots in Arizona. In fact, Bicycling magazine named Tempe, Scottsdale, and Tucson in their top 50 of America's Best Bike Cities. Both Outside and National Geographic magazines listed Tucson as a top bicycling city.

More recognition and praise for Arizona came from The League of American Bicyclists, which gave awards to eight of Arizona's cities for being bike-friendly communities (BFC) – and this isn't an easy win. In order to receive an award from the League (much like the Olympics' gold, silver or bronze), cities need to meet an extensive list of criteria, which includes the "Five E's: Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, Evaluation - and Planning."

When businesses, cities, and locals encourage bicycling instead of driving, everyone benefits. Biking reduces vehicle emissions and traffic congestion, and is an excellent form of exercise. However, bicycle safety courses, improved access, and bicycle-friendly laws and road construction are needed, and those require community support from businesses and citizens.

We all know that bicycling has great health benefits, but it also adds to the health and vitality of communities. According to the League, cities and regions are better at supporting, advocating, and making policy changes in favor of biking and walking projects than states. Working with local leaders, businesses, and grass-roots groups, cities and bike advocates have made incredible progress toward bike-friendly communities. Recently leaders of Roosevelt Row Community Development Corporation (Roosevelt Row CDC) in downtown Phoenix and locals of Roosevelt Row had such a win. They will have a dedicated bike lane when Roosevelt Street is improved, says Colin Tetreault, local Ironman athlete and senior policy advisor, sustainability, for Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton.

Promotion is also important, and Tetreault says that smart and sophisticated groups of cyclists can show that bicycling is a safe way to get around. Groups like Critical Mass and Pedal Craft are two such groups. In April, Pedal Craft brought together the city's bicyclists, artists, and community members to celebrate Phoenix's growing bike scene.



Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton, who says bicycling is vital to Phoenix's future, was on hand to speak at the "fun and innovative" event. "This was an amazing celebration of the art, culture, innovation, and benefits of bicycling," Mayor Stanton said.

So what makes a bike-friendly community?

Bike lanes, and city or municipal bike racks, designated bike paths or routes and, critically, businesses that welcome bicyclists by providing racks near entrances. Equally important, "Cities must also support a vibrant and diverse bike culture, and it must have smart, savvy bike shops" to make the Top 50 list, according to Bicycling magazine.

Scottsdale was identified as one of those cities. With 63 miles of trails in the McDowell Mountain preserves and a plan to add 140 more miles, Scottsdale transportation planner (and self-described sporadic cyclist) Susan Conklu says the City received a gold award from the League this year. The City was able to add mileage to existing bike routes by taking advantage of planned road construction.

Conklu says that almost 75 percent of addresses or locations are now within a half mile from a shared-use path which significantly decreased the connection gaps in Scottsdale's bike paths and roads. Funding and planning is underway to connect a new path along the Crosscut Canal which runs between McDowell Road and Mill Avenue through Papago Park. Tempe recently finished its portion of the Crosscut Canal and bicyclists will soon have access to the 17-mile loop connecting downtown Scottsdale and Tempe, the Phoenix Zoo, Desert Botanical Garden and Tempe Town Lake.

Among other cities, Tempe was awarded a silver award by the League, and now the Mill Avenue bridge across Tempe Town Lake is an illuminated bike/pedestrian multiuse path that makes the final network of cycling paths complete. For biking commuters, the Bicycle Cellar, located in downtown Tempe in the Tempe Transportation Center, offers bike riders storage, showers, bike service, and rentals.

Cottonwood and Flagstaff have also received awards from the League for their bike-friendly communities, as well as Gilbert, Chandler, Mesa, and Sedona. With so many Arizona cities and towns making great efforts for bike riders, riders have lots of reasons to get out and ride and enjoy the benefits of connecting with nature, their communities and their neighbors.

“We look at it as a quality of life issue,” says Conklu, and when she sees so many people out riding and walking and connecting in the shared path spaces, she says it makes her feel good. “This is why we do the work we do,” she says.

Many businesses are getting on board and encouraging the trend. In Phoenix, people are cruising Central Avenue on bikes to visit bike-friendly local establishments and hangouts, and local businesses are crawling with bikes, kids, and adults, thanks to an emerging pedestrian culture and an increase in the marked bike lanes on the busy street.

Bike lover and local restaurateur Craig DeMarco says that biking is “near and dear” to his heart, and he and his partners have worked to create spaces that encourage the pedestrian vibe. The love of community and the connectedness that comes from being close to your neighbors and patrons is just part of what motivates DeMarco and his partners to choose restaurant locations that are or can be pedestrian.

As a kid growing up in the Valley, DeMarco and his friends would ride their bikes through his neighborhood and to the local businesses, but that kind of culture doesn't yet exist in Phoenix, he says. DeMarco wants to change that.

“We have a higher purpose,” DeMarco says of the restaurants that his company, Upward Projects, creates and owns. He and his wife Kris created Upward Projects with Lauren and Wyatt Bailey, and together they own and operate many Phoenix favorites including Postino Arcadia, Postino Central, Postino East, Windsor, and Churn.

When they looked at Central Avenue and Camelback Road for their latest projects, DeMarco said they realized the area needed more pedestrians, more kids, and more bikes.

What the partners also noticed was how fast traffic moved on Central Avenue. The lanes were huge and cars were going too fast, DeMarco says. He worked with former Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon and others (including Local First founder Kimber Lanning) to create a bike lane on Central Avenue that would connect riders from the Light Rail to the Murphy Bridal Path (known to locals simply as ‘the bridal path’) that runs along Central Avenue from Northern Avenue to Camelback Road.

At their restaurants, Postino Central, Windsor, and Churn, bike racks are given a premier location. Cruisers with cup holders; sleek, single fixed-speeds (“fixies,” as they are called) and bikes with training wheels for youngsters have become part of the “scene” as locals talk about bikes and compare notes, like car owners at a car show. On any given Sunday, or weekday for that matter, navigating the bikes parked at Windsor and Churn can be quite the challenge.

DeMarco also points out another significant factor about bikes and the environment; if a business has 100 parking spaces, at some time there will be 100 cars parked there, which means not only more carbon emissions but exacerbates an issue with parking in Central Phoenix. Parking is at a premium at businesses along the Central corridor. You may not see lots of parking spaces, but you will see lots of bicycles. Longtime local bike shop the Slippery Pig is located on Central Avenue, south of Camelback, should you need a new bike, or a bike repair on your way to the ever popular Lux Coffee Bar for your midday latte, to Pane Bianco for lunch, or to nearby Hula's Tiki Bar for happy hour.

This year, make it a point to explore the many vibrant communities, get to know new places and new people, and reconnect with nature as you pedal your way around town and towards fitness. If you're looking for detailed information on bike routes, contact a local bike shop to provide tips and guidance on the best routes in the city for fitness, cruising, or finding new places to hangout and meet other riders. 

Barbi Walker is a freelance writer and an award-winning journalist. Barbi lives in Phoenix with her husband and young son.



Photography by Sylvia Mousseux