

# The use of the bicycle in Italy: old traditions and important new features

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Since its origins, the sport of cycling has seen a strong participation of Italian athletes and, to this day, it continues to be one of the sporting activities that people love best and follow with enthusiasm, on television, and along the roads where the bike races take place. Numerous Italian male and female athletes engage in competitions all over the world, and often win. Two examples are Olympic gold medal winners Paolo Bettini and Paola Pezzo. In Italy, today, cycling surely is the sport that people like best after soccer.

Even among amateurs, cycling is one of the sports that people practice most widely, 10 months a year. Over 7000 cycling sports clubs are present in Italy and organise a host of non competitive sporting events that see the presence of thousands of spectators, a growing share of whom consists of women. Over 150,000 bikers are sport club members, and over half a million cycling enthusiasts run along suburban and country roads every weekend, profiting from a healthy sport and relaxing after a week of hectic activity.

In Italy, the industry that produces frames and accessories for professional and amateur cyclists continues to be a world leader, on account of the quality and technology embodied in its products, designed for superior performance.

The Italian bicycle industry relies on highly skilled artisans, who conceive this vehicle the way a tailor views a suit made to measure for a specific person.

The dimensions of the frame, the length of the pedal cranks, the size of the handlebar, the distance from the steering rod, the position of the saddle and the positions of the shoes on the pedals: these are but some of the factors that help make an Italian bicycle truly unique.

A slogan that is gaining widespread recognition defines the refinement of Italian made products in a few words: “We go by the millimetre, not by the inch”.

In recent years, the use of bicycles has grown fast in two major sectors of social life: tourism and leisure time. People have begun to realise that a bike is one of the best means to “discover” and “experience” the beauty of the environment and the landscape. As a result, tourism by bike is a favourite pursuit, that people practice along itineraries of cultural, artistic and historical interest, not to mention wine and food specialties. A common practice is to travel by train to reach a given location and then bike along the chosen itinerary. One of the favourable aspects of these good

practices that are coming to the fore is the participation of entire families, including the children.

The bicycle in the city.

In Italy, the bicycle has always been viewed as an appropriate gift for kids, and a beautiful sports tool, but it has never been regarded as a valid means of transport over short distances, that is to say, as a good vehicle for moving around in town. Now, finally, prompted by increasing congestion of vehicle traffic and air pollution levels, mated to escalating fuel prices and other factors, people are “discovering” the benefits of the bike as a comfortable, fast and cheap means of transport. They are beginning to realise that a bike does generate no pollutants, runs noiselessly and takes up hardly any space. As a result, measures to encourage its use are being devised and implemented.

A decisive role in the development of this new approach to the use of the bicycle is the contribution made over the last few years by the governing bodies, from local administrations to the central government. This favourable result should be an encouragement to construct a growing number of bike lanes.

In recent years, an ever greater number of people have started using the bike as a means of transport. Bike lanes in Italian cities extend over 4200 km (still few, but it should be noted that this total has increased greatly, from 1000 km in 2000). Out of town, we have 8400 km of bike tracks and/or itineraries.

In the medium-small towns of north and central Italy, mostly level, and profiting from a mild climate, the share of movements by bike comes to 15% on average. People go to work or go to school by bike, and it has become increasingly evident that the use of the bike can be combined with that of other means of transport: with a bike you can reach a train station or a subway station.

The use of the bike must be encouraged and promoted among kids and teens, by setting up areas and services reserved for bikers, and by adopting measures designed to safeguard the safety of those who use it.