



## COMMUTABLE VELOCIPEDES

What's the most committed commute you've seen?

Words Anna Knox | Image Neil Kerr

When I lived in Southern California, I knew a guy who would get up at five in the morning to catch the train from the Seventh-day Adventist town of Loma Linda (the post came on Sunday, but not on Saturday) to Tustin, 60 miles away, where he would disembark with his penny farthing (how he got the thing on the train I never knew), then ride a further five miles to the University of California, Irvine where he was a post-doctoral fellow in atmospheric chemistry.

The LA Basin in the oughts was a smog-bowl, partly because of its bowl-shape, but largely thanks to the spewing exhausts of seven million gas-hungry vehicles driving around inside the bowl. Anyone studying pollution in that town would get a guilt trip driving a car to work, but Bill went to creative extremes to avoid it. Not that a penny farthing boasts anything superior, pollution-wise, to a regular bike. (Or maybe it does? Has anyone calculated the carbon-footprint of bike manufacturing? Perish the thought).

Bill's shared a two-bed apartment with his wife, a med student, which was fully kitted out with a workbench, table saw, drill press and a wall full of tools. He rode a penny farthing because he wanted to build one, and once he'd built one, he thought he may as well ride it. Bill made everything except the tyre; his own version kept falling off at awkward moments. He was one of the most sure-of-himself, wonderful oddballs I've ever met. He was also extremely tall, which helped. It took him two-and-a-half hours to get to work. Come evening, he would leave the lab with a giant rubber-band around one jean leg, a top-heavy helmet on his head, his wire-rimmed glasses firmly pressed to his nose, and ride off into the hazy California sunset. The commute was not very hectic. SoCal's hundreds of miles of commuter cycleways were mostly empty at rush hour, and chock-full on Sunday afternoons. I always wondered, though, what a collision would look like; it was a long way to fall.

Religion, wire-rimmed frames and a penchant for unusual wheels were characteristics common to another committed commuter I once knew, though this guy was slightly on the short side, which perhaps explained his choice: a unicycle. Dave was a Presbyterian, and a clown, who regularly rode to my high-school on

his wheel. He sometimes wore a red nose. I'm not sure in our biggish farm town there was much awareness of carbon emissions in the nineteen-nineties, so his motivation must have been something else. I never gave it a thought as a teenager, but now I'm curious. Was it the physical by-product? He had extraordinarily muscly calves. Could he only afford one wheel? Was it fun? Was it funny? Was it a way to embrace being weird and ride in the face of the smug, two-wheeled cool kids, both hands free to pull finger as he wobbled past? I never saw him do that, actually. He was a gentle soul and I wished I'd asked back then where on earth he got the idea in the first place. I'm sure it's a great story.

Then there were the two 'bents. My friend Rich built his to ride between the flat and 'Tech, where he studied engineering. This was before Christchurch was the Big Friendly Bike City it is today. The rationale for his unusual commute was—naturally—well-engineered. According to Rich, recumbents are 30 percent more efficient than ordinary bikes, and consequently banned from bike races. This was before Google, and nobody questioned him. (Google says he was probably right.) "And it's just so comfortable!" he would exclaim to anyone who would listen, "you'd be mad not to try it!". Rich went on to be the personal engineer for many fancy boats and now lives up to his name and probably drives a brand new electric car to work, or something 30 percent more efficient. The second, whose name I never learned, is possibly still riding his recumbent around the Saudi Arabian desert. On the campus where we both used to live, it made as much sense as riding any kind of open-air vehicle in 40 degrees does, in that things were quite close together, and at least you could get a tan on your thighs (he had very muscly thighs). But taking it out onto the freeway for a spin, which I saw him do, reached another level of committed—or perhaps committable.

All this reflection on the various velocipedal ways to commute has got me thinking—what's the most-wheeled velocipede one can ride? A quick bit of research reveals that the conference bike seats seven, but the party bike (also called the beer bike) may seat even more, and certainly sounds more fun. Now I just need to find seven other committed commuters. ☉