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JOURNAL REPORTS

E-Bikes Are Making Cycling Vacations Accessible to a New Crowd

Face it: Not everybody likes riding bikes. Electric bikes let both fans and detractors pedal as much or as little as they want.



A cyclist on an e-bike climbs a hill in Ishikawa prefecture Japan

PHOTO: BUTTERFIELD & ROBINSON

By Jen Murphy

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Jeremy Dubow, an avid cyclist and Chicago business owner, never thought he would be able to take a cycling vacation with his partner, Kathleen Kustra. A five-mile bike ride in the city was enough to tell them it wouldn't work, he says. He would get annoyed having to slow his pace to wait for Ms. Kustra, or she would get frustrated trying to keep up with him.

That all changed in 2019 when he convinced her to join him on a cycling trip to Tucson, Ariz., using an electric bike. The e-bike has been the equalizer for the couple, they say, allowing Ms. Kustra to finally enjoy her partner's passion, joining him on one or two group cycling trips a year. "I'm looking for the hardest trip with the most miles and most climbing," says the 45-year-old Mr. Dubow. "And now not only can she keep up, she pushes me."

E-bikes are outfitted with a motor that gives riders extra oomph. While some have a throttle the rider simply presses to achieve top speed, most require the rider to pedal to get a power boost. Riders choose the level of assistance they want, ranging from eco-mode, the least amount of help, to turbo mode, which might boost speed up to 28 miles an hour.

“I’m able to ride mileage and hills I wouldn’t be able to do on a regular bike but at an effort that feels comfortable,” says Ms. Kustra, a 38-year-old tax consultant who has since purchased her own e-bike. “It’s opened up so many more possibilities for us to travel and ride together.”

No free ride

E-bikes date to the late 1880s, but it wasn’t until the early 2000s that they entered mainstream production. Early versions were heavy and clunky, and early adopters were often snubbed for being lazy or cheating. While modern e-bikes are lighter—they weigh about 40 pounds, roughly twice as much as a regular bike—they aren’t a free ride. In fact, a recent [Miami University study](#) found that while riders engage in higher-intensity exercise when using a nonelectric bike, the amount of exertion on an e-bike, if on low assist levels, still provides moderate-intensity exercise.

Newer models with longer-lasting batteries have helped e-bikes take off in the past decade. According to NPD Group, sales of electric bikes are growing 16 times as fast as for general cycling bikes; e-bike prices average around \$1,400 to \$4,000. And nearly every bike-tour operator now has e-bikes in its fleet, including outfitters such as DuVine, Butterfield & Robinson and Backroads.



Cyclists, some on e-bikes, at the Iglesia Fortificada de San Miguel in the Wachau Valley in Austria.

PHOTO: GWEN KIDERA/DUVINE CYCLING

Backroads, based in Berkeley, Calif., introduced e-bikes in 2014, expecting them to appeal to users in hilly destinations like the Alps. “We never expected demand across all age groups,” says founder Tom Hale. “We’ve seen that they’re not just for grandma and grandpa. They’ve enabled a whole new group of people to explore actively.”

When Robin Jeffries told her family she wanted to celebrate her 70th birthday by going on a family cycling trip, her younger son, Ryan, was resistant. “He is a person of size and doesn’t enjoy strenuous exercise,” she says. The family decided on a Backroads trip to Nova Scotia. Ms. Jeffries and her older son used road bikes, while her husband and younger son used e-bikes. Mr. Jeffries used just enough assistance to keep up with his wife and older son. The younger son put his bike in turbo mode so he could finish the ride quickly and enjoy a beer while waiting for his family. “I was worried I’d have to ride in the support van most days, but I was able to cycle the entire trip,” says Ryan, age 38. “If my mom asked me to go on another family cycling vacation, I’d do it again if I could use an e-bike.”

Ms. Jeffries, who is now 73, and her husband, 74, both agree she is the stronger cyclist. The couple, who are retired and live in Palo Alto, Calif., take a group cycling trip at least once a year. Before e-bikes became available, they would go on trips but ride separately and meet up at lunches or the end of the day. “Now 90% of the time we ride together and don’t feel like either of us is pushing the other out of our comfort zone,” she says.

A fun vacation

The increased availability of e-bikes from tour operators is also making the sport less intimidating for noncyclists. Sue and Mike Raney, a retired couple in Las Vegas, had always been daunted by the sport's spandex outfits and clip-in shoes. "Cycling seemed too serious for a fun vacation," says Ms. Raney, 64. After undergoing two knee surgeries in 2020, her doctor recommended a cycling trip over any other active vacation.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Have you used e-bikes to travel? Share your experience below.

In July 2021, she and Mr. Raney, 73, joined operator Great Bike Tours for a trip in New Hampshire and used e-bikes. She had her bike on some level of assist most of the time, while her husband didn't. He says he felt he got just as great a workout as he would have on a normal bike. "We were able to keep up with people half our age," says Ms. Raney. "One man wore a different Ironman jersey every day and was so hard-core, and on a really big hill I put my bike in turbo mode and blew past him thinking, 'Eat my dust, Ironman.'"

When five other couples invited Silvia Hayakama, age 50, and her husband, Daniel, on a weeklong Backroads cycling trip to Spain in September 2021, they weren't sure they would be able to keep up. An office-management training coordinator in Phoenix, Ms. Hayakama is fit from hiking, running and doing yoga. But she isn't a cyclist, and her husband has bad knees. "I wanted it to feel like a vacation where I could enjoy Spain and my friends," she says. "I wasn't looking to test myself." The couple opted for e-bikes, which allowed them to get a workout while still being able to chat with friends. They're already planning their next trip.

Even devoted road cyclists like Alison and John Sawyer, who long snubbed e-bikes, are starting to see their benefits. The retired couple from Orange County, Calif., made a last-minute decision to use e-bikes on their fall 2019 bike trip to Corsica and Sardinia with outfitter Ciclismo Classico. They hadn't had time to train for the hilly terrain and worried they would be miserable on normal bikes.

"If we'd been stubborn and used regular road bikes we'd have been the last people pulling into lunch every day and that's no fun," says the 68-year-old Ms. Sawyer. Mr. Sawyer, 73, says he isn't sure he could have completed a 12-mile climb in Sardinia without the assist. "It really saved us," he says.

The couple says they would be willing to consider using e-bikes again, depending on their fitness level and the destination's terrain and cuisine. "The meals we had in Corsica and Sardinia would knock your socks off, and after a multicourse lunch and a few bottles of wine, I was very happy to have an e-bike," says Mr. Sawyer.

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