The decision Kara Sergile made two years ago wasn’t meant to be significant. Staring at the dusty mountain bike tucked in the back of a storage room behind her garage—the bike’s tires were flat; it hadn’t been used in more than a decade—all she really wanted to do was fulfill a simple request from her two grade-school-age daughters. “They were asking to learn how to ride bikes,” says Kara, 48, of Glendale, California. “So I thought, I’d better get back onto mine.”

She’d bought it way back, as a completing-grad-school present; she and her husband, Yves, had ridden a little bit, but mostly on nearby bike paths. She had never considered biking on the street because car congestion and speed made it seem unsafe. “When people talked about wanting to do that,” she recalls, “I thought they were crazy.”

In fact, what’s nuts is that 40 percent of all trips Americans take are 2 miles or less, according to the most recent National Household Travel Survey. Yet only 2 percent of these short trips are accomplished on a bicycle. It’s easy to assume why: Go beyond the limits of bike-centric major cities like Portland, Denver, San Francisco, and even Los Angeles, and the suburbs sprawl. Malls, six-lane boulevards, and high-speed traffic make even otherwise-quiet neighborhoods seem inhospitable. Glendale, 9 miles north of downtown L.A., has a particularly scary distinction that would intimidate almost anyone contemplating getting around without a car: one of the highest injury and fatality rates in the state for pedestrian and bike accidents involving vehicles.

Yet places like Glendale—even amidst the cars and traffic and especially the skepticism—have potential to be ideal bike towns if you look closely. Off-street bike and pedestrian paths flank the city, including the popular L.A. River path to Griffith Park. In town, coffeehouses, theaters, restaurants, and shops—some of which have bike racks out front—are short, doable distances away. More impressive: The recently built Americana at Brand shopping mall offers free valet bike parking to patrons.

Sure, city dwellers have embraced biking as a convenient way to get around. But the next bike wave is brewing where most of us live.
As Kara began exploring beyond her neighborhood, she recruited Yves to join her. Seeing Mom and Dad pedaling excited the kids, and when their youngest daughter, Sarah, turned 9—Genevieve was 7—it was time for lessons. First, around the corner, then on the annual Los Angeles River Ride, an easy, family-friendly roll along a smooth, breezy bike path with great scenery. Later, they took their bikes on a summer camping trip to Yosemite National Park. “We pedaled all over the valley,” Kara says. One key accessory: a trailer for Yves’ bike, allowing quick runs to the park’s grocery store from the Upper Pines Campground. “We never had to get into our car. It made the whole thing so much more relaxing.”

As Kara was expanding her biking world, Glendale was doing its own transportation soul-searching. In addition to being a dangerous place for pedestrians and bikers, the city is hazardous for drivers, who are 80 percent more likely to be in a traffic accident than the average American. “We needed to slow down cars,” says former Glendale mayor and current council member Laura Friedman, “and even reduce the number of them.” She proposed a bicycle plan last year. As Kara was expanding her biking world, Glendale was doing its own transportation soul-searching. In addition to being a dangerous place for pedestrians and bikers, the city is hazardous for drivers, who are 80 percent more likely to be in a traffic accident than the average American. “We needed to slow down cars,” says former Glendale mayor and current council member Laura Friedman, “and even reduce the number of them.” She proposed a bicycle plan last year.

Today, a bike rack at the school is often full, while it used to hold just one or two lonely two-wheelers each day. Some Fridays, Kara participated in a “bike train” through her neighborhood. One key accessory: a trailer for Yves’ bike, allowing quick runs to the park’s grocery store from the Upper Pines Campground. “We never had to get into our car. It made the whole thing so much more relaxing.”

Kara’s biking transformation is becoming Glendale’s transportation. Later this month, the city will try pairing back Honolulu Avenue—a wide, speedwaylike boulevard—from four lanes to three, and bike lanes will be added. On nearby streets, the city has painted special markers called “sharrow” (shared-use arrows) designed to let bikers and motorists know that they should share the street.

Kara and her kids bike to school, or sometimes to breakfast or lunch on weekends, but more than her routine has changed. “I liken this to a midlife crisis of sorts,” she says. Instead of a sports car, she just bought a new kids’ bike to replace her old mountain bike. But Kara’s big picture has changed too. It worked. Kara and her girls and a dozen kids with their parents slowly paraded down the sidewalks, watching out for one another at driveways and intersections, ending at their elementary school. And it didn’t stop there. Today, Kara bikes with her kids to school, or sometimes to breakfast or lunch on weekends, but more than her routine has changed. “I liken this to a midlife crisis of sorts,” she says. Instead of a sports car, she just bought a new kids’ bike to replace her old mountain bike. But Kara’s big picture has changed too.

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**GET STARTED**

**THE GEAR YOU NEED**

What to look for in a bike, and how to use it all

By Loren Mooney

**The Bike**

**Electra Ticino 8-speed ($60; electrabikes.com)**

**Bear Rack**

Front baskets are cute, but loading them down can affect steering. Rear racks can add more carefree riding.

**Comfortable Seat**

Myth exposed: A “step-through” bike, like this one, has a sloped top bar for even easier on/off.

**Flat Pedals**

No need for fancy bike pedals. Flip-pops going to the store, or lunch. Ride as you are, whether in heels or flip-flops.

**Wide-Ishe Tires**

Bigger tires (14 by 2.1) feel more stable than the skinny ones used by the spandex nation. But fat tires with knobs just slow you down. Go for smooth bread.

**The Helmet**

There are cute, colorful lights out there—forget them. Planet Bike’s 15-watt Blaze headlight and Super-Flash rear light ($35 for both, planetbike.com) keep you visible better than any others.

**The Lights**

For quick stops in slow-creme areas, a key-operated coiled cable lock like the OnGuard Doberman ($50; onguard.com) will do. Longer stops on chadler streets? Go with a U-lock (not shown).

**The Lock**

**Gold**

- **Green Valley, AZ**
  - 35 miles from Tucson
  - Part of bike haven Pima County, where the local police actively advocate motorist and cyclist equality. Green Valley is the latest community in the county to double its bike lane miles (from 30 to 60) in the last five years.

- **Scottsdale, AZ**
  - 12 miles from Phoenix
  - Talk about door-to-door service. A whopping 75 percent of homes here are within a half mile of a bike path or lane.

**Silver**

- **Redmond, WA**
  - 15 miles from Seattle
  - The city offers residents a $50 Amazon gift card for signing up to bike or car-commute. HT to 39 miles of bike lanes here.

- **Arvada, CO**
  - 8 miles from Denver
  - Eleven major off-street routes make up this city’s bicycle network, providing easy access to places like Costco (via the Interurban Trail) and many local parks.

- **Beaverton, OR**
  - 6 miles from Portland
  - Within the last decade, ridership here has grown tenfold—from 0.33 percent of trips to 3.1 percent. And with Nike HQ in town, there are more than a few Portland residents doing the reverse bike commute for work.

- **Gresham, OR**
  - 16 miles from Portland
  - In the past two years, the city has invested millions in a bike-pedestrian-only bridge and connecting trail (The Gresham-Fairview Trail Bridge over Powell Boulevard).

**Bronze**

- **Liberty Lake, WA**
  - 15 miles from Spokane
  - One of the fastest-growth communities in the state (it has almost doubled in population over the last decade). Liberty Lake is designating residential streets with low traffic and plenty of room from “bike boulevards”—traffic speed limits on these are 25 mph or lower.

- **Mountain View, CA**
  - 19 miles from San Jose
  - The majority of large streets in town have bike lanes. Bike lockers for train commuters and other parking options populate downtown for easy lock-and-shop. And Google, based here, donates to charity when employees ride to work.

- **Oceanside, CA**
  - 38 miles from San Diego
  - Hats off to this coastal town, with its 33 miles of bike lanes and paths, for being the only place south of L.A. to receive a bike-friendly community designation.

- **Thousand Oaks, CA**
  - 39 miles from Los Angeles
  - In 2005, the city committed to a 20-year master plan to link all neighborhoods and key destinations (schools, parks, shopping centers) to one bike system. A 2-mile segment of this trail is currently in development on the popular Lynn Road between Simi Valley and Newbury Park.


**20 Favorite Bike Routes in the West + Tips**

Sunset June 2012