

LEADERSHIP & TRANSPARENCY



Mackinac Island: Where Cars are Banned and Bikes Rule the Road

Words by Andrea Newell



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The first thing you notice is the quiet. The only interstate in the U.S. to ban cars, M-185, has no honking horns, no exhaust, no road rage. Only the clop-clop-clopping of horse hooves, the Lake Huron waves hitting the lakeshore and the faint clicking of gears changing. Every so often, someone calls, "Coming on your left!" as they pass. Everyone smiles and pedals on.

In our recent series, [The Business of Biking](#), we have explored how bike lanes bring

revenue to stores and the health benefits and increased productivity when employees bike to work. Unknown to many, there is a town in the U.S. that banned cars in the late 1890s, later doubled down by making it law, and has excluded them to this day.

Mackinac Island, located in Lake Huron, between the lower and upper peninsulas of Michigan, is completely car-free (with the exception of a few emergency vehicles). But, it isn't for any of the reasons that listed above, or any you could guess. It's actually all about the horses.

In the 1890s, tourists attempted to bring cars (horseless carriages) to Mackinac Island, immediately alienating the residents with their noise, spooking the horses and disrupting the island's quiet, contemplative way of life. It rapidly became a safety issue, as well as a lifestyle one. The year-round residents wanted nothing to do with these new-fangled contraptions, so in 1898, the town banned them.

In 1923, one resident was determined to bring the auto back, countering that it wasn't against the law, and proceeded to zip around the island in it. Again, the residents banded together and this time made it law that no vehicles were allowed onto the island for personal use. The island, which is a designated historical monument, has a vast majority of buildings made of wood and has an extensive state park, does have a fire truck and police vehicles for safety.

Mary McGuire Slevin, Executive Director of the [Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau](#), explains that the town, which has about 450 residents year around, has always embraced a slower way of life. The island's narrow streets are designed for horse-drawn carriages, not automobiles, and the residents saw no reason to change their infrastructure for them. When bikes came along, islanders saw a way to zip around town and welcomed them onto the island.

Bikes are just our way of life," Slevin said. "They are like a part of our bodies, we don't even think about it. When I see a tourist go out for a bike ride around the circumference of the island [about 8 miles], you can just tell the difference when they come pedaling back into town - they are more relaxed and have a big smile on their face."

Bike rentals are an extremely big business, especially during the peak tourism season in the summer, when the island population swells to more than 15,000. Slevin estimates that at any one time in the summer, more than 10,000 bikes are in use on the 3.8 square mile island, along with horse-drawn taxis and carts, horse tours and horseback riders and pedestrians. Along with the bike rentals, she estimates that around 30 percent of tourists bring their own bikes with them on the ferries. Even without cars, it can be a busy metropolis during peak season.

But not just anyone can set up shop and rent bikes. The town did a traffic study (yes, a traffic study) and from that determined how many bikes could be rented at any one time. Each business is allotted a certain number of bikes to rent and must pay a fee to the township for each rental bike.

An employee at bikemackinac.com said that during the summer, the line for bike rentals stretches down Main Street past the ferry docks and each bike rental business easily rents out all of its allotted bikes several times a day. Bikemackinac.com itself is allowed 300 bikes to rent (other equipment like Burley trailers and Wee-hoos do not require a license and as many can be rented as many times as they want) and routinely rents them all out 3-4 times a day, resulting in 1200 rentals plus equipment each day, just for one rental business.

Bikes and horses coexist fairly amicably on the island, but on the main drag it can be a

mishmash with slow and steady horses carrying their passengers and cargo stoically along, while bicyclists zip in and out, sometimes narrowly missing the horses. The horse taxi drivers can be heard calling out at pedestrians and bicyclists that don't move or are too close.

Slevin explains that the island has a close relationship with the Amish, who help train their horses and construct special carts that help the residents tow awkward cargo like golf clubs or (as in Slevin's case) even a water heater, with their bikes.

"We really work with the best people we can find to help us adapt to doing everything with our bikes," Slevin said. "We haul anything we need to haul. We drink coffee and text while on our bikes. We ride right up to the front door of our workplace and park right outside."

In bike-friendly towns, some businesses place bike racks outside their doors to entice employees to ride to work, but here, Slevin explained, business owners have the opposite problem, and often businesses want their employees to park elsewhere to leave those spaces free for customers. Laughing, she said it doesn't really work. The employees continue to park in front, and for most businesses, they want the bikes there anyway - lots of bikes signifies that your business is where the action is.

Horses rule

During the tourist season there are about 600 horses on the island. When the tourist season is over, all but about 30 horses are transported by boat back to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where they spend a leisurely winter in the Rudyard/Pickford area until it is time to go back to work in the spring.

"We get the horses from the Amish, who use them to plow for 5 or 6 years. After that, they can work a few days a week during tourist season and take it easy in the winter for the rest of their lives," Slevin says.

Snowmobiles dominate the winter

When winter hits, bicycles are all but abandoned in favor of snowmobiles. Instead of looking forward to getting a driver's license at age 16, the island kids wait to turn 12 and get a snowmobile operator's license.

"It is the best way to get around the island in the [sometimes deep] snow - it's either that or walking."

For a short time, around February, if conditions are right, an ice bridge forms, and while it remains, residents can snowmobile from the island to mainland Michigan freely, the only time of the year they can come and go outside of a ferry schedule.

The few vehicles allowed on the island include a police Jeep that is also used to check on elderly residents during the winter and give them rides to town in the snow to get their mail and groceries. And while the island embraces a slower way of life, they have an excellent cell tower system (everywhere, five bars) and utilities. Those maintenance trucks are allowed onto the island at certain times of the year for repairs.

No to electric bikes. Just no.

As electric bikes have become more popular, naturally, tourists looked to bring them to the island. It seems like a great match, but again the islanders voted them out. It was back to a safety issue, and a nod to the slower island pace.

"We didn't want people to be zipping past the horses and spooking them or causing accidents with other bikers."

That ban includes electric scooters and Segways, unless accompanied by a doctor's note, approved by the town leadership, permitted by the island police and the state of Michigan (in order to be ridden on M-185).

Crime wave: Bike theft

It probably comes as no surprise that bike theft is the biggest crime on the island. Most bikes are not secured, so Slevin says that the most common "theft" is by tourists late for their ferries who grab the nearest bike, ride it to the docks and abandon it when they jump on the boat. In reverse, rather than wait in long bike rental lines, they will "borrow" a bike to get to their hotel or resort.

"We find a lot of bikes on the docks and up by Mission Point [where there is an upscale hotel]," Slevin says.

The locals decorate their bikes to be distinctive, which on one hand, pinpoints their location anywhere on the island, and on the other, makes them quickly recognizable in case they are "borrowed." Slevin will even let you in on a little secret to getting your bike back - slip the hotel porters some cash and ask them to be on the lookout. They spend all day every day transporting luggage from the boat docks to every location on the island and see everything.

Drunk biking

The island does have a "pub culture." And why not? It's a beautiful setting, looking out over Lake Huron at the Mackinac bridge, relaxing after perhaps riding some of the 70 miles of mountain bike trails available in Mackinac Island state park or simply navigating the 8-mile round trip that is M-185. But, it's a bad idea, Slevin says.

Tourists mistakenly think that they can ride a bike after drinking, ride in around in circles and end up falling down, sometimes injuring themselves or others. The locals, of course,

know to walk to the bar and then home (or catch a horse taxi). One lifelong island resident laughed uproariously as he talked about riding his horse to the bar. His horse, however, does not like the overwhelming scent of alcohol, so he would sometimes come out of the bar only to find that his ride had walked home without him.

Mitt Romney on a bike

The island is a popular destination for conferences, but many attendees get a sharp lesson in island ways soon after getting off the boat if they aren't willing to pedal. Eschewing bicycles, many are stuck waiting for horse taxis, since there are only so many on the island.

If you want to move around quickly, use a bike, if you want to see the island in a laid-back, beautiful way, take a horse tour."

As not only a former Michigan resident, but a former Governor's son, Mitt Romney grew up spending summers on Mackinac Island where there is a governor's residence. When he and his wife returned for the Republican conference a few years ago, Slevin described how they zipped around town on their bikes like locals, not only getting to events faster (Rudy Giuliani and his entourage went the horse taxi route), but avoiding the paparazzi, who didn't recognize them.

A bike culture model

The islanders initially banned the automobile due to noise and pollution to preserve their horse-drawn way of life, and as the years went on and cars boomed in popularity, especially in Michigan, the island was considered out of touch. Now, attitudes are coming full circle as gasoline continues to rise in price, and Millennials, especially, are embracing biking as a valid transportation option.

"We went from being considered backward, to forward-thinking," Slevin laughed.

Why don't more bike enthusiasts know about Mackinac Island? "I think most bicyclists are looking for cities that let them bike, not a town where biking is the lifestyle."

On the flip side, Slevin says that many former islanders now live in Portland because of its bike culture. As more people discover that bikes can be a way of life, perhaps bike infrastructure will become a priority in even more city planning. However, the horse taxis might not catch on in many places.

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