



The wheel deal

Cycling in London doesn't have to be a life-threatening experience. Jane Yettram gets on her bike in Ealing and learns how to ride more safely

It is 8.30 in the morning and I have just returned from dodging between the traffic on the school run – a three-mile round trip on bikes with two energetic eight-year-olds. Cycling? Health promoting? I need a stiff whisky and a defibrillator. So before my nerves and the boys' competitive instincts mean we have to ditch our bikes in favour of doing the school run by car, I decide it's time to take advantage of Ealing Council's subsidised cycle training programme.

On the day of the lesson I am nervous. Not only because I'm sure that my cycling technique is riddled with bad – and dangerous – habits, but also because my bike is far from a miracle of modern engineering. It is old and battered – usefully unattractive to potential thieves – but possibly so shabby that our instructor, Ian Pearson, will pack me off home without so much as a masterclass in swerving. Fortunately, after several instant adjustments from Ian, it is passed fit to ride. Indeed, that is how our lesson (for myself, my son, his friend and his father) in a local park begins – with comprehensive checks on the road-worthiness of our bikes and standard of safety equipment. As Ian reminds us, many accidents are caused by elements within our own control, such as badly adjusted brakes and trailing laces.

Like all the instructors from Cycle Training UK (the company that runs Ealing's scheme), Ian teaches to recognised national standards, with a series of objectives to be met in turn. So, bikes adjusted, we move on to control skills – gears, emergency stops, swerving, looking behind and signalling. Simple? Not necessarily. Ian asks us to ride directly at him as fast as possible – and then perform an emergency stop. It is very hard to

speed willingly towards another human being in the vague hope that you will do everything right (both brakes on, arms braced, weight back). I am the slowest of all of us – officially labelled a 'scaredy cat'! – while the three males have no problem at all careering full-pelt towards Ian and slamming on the brakes at the last minute. When we get on to looking behind, signalling, checking behind again before a turn, I'm more confident. Multi-tasking? That's a girl thing!

Ian's lesson is tailor-made to our needs – that means learning to ride safely in a group so that I can get from home to school without panic attacks and 10 more grey hairs each time. First we try out what we've learned in the park and then head along the road in convoy. The boys are focused, concentrating hard, and we reach home safely. There are more lessons to come, all on-road. We will be learning about road positioning, right and left turns, overtaking and much more... And there will also be a 'journey accompaniment' session with Ian supervising us on the route to school.

With such expert teaching, safe cycling is clearly achievable for everyone. Yet in the UK we make just 1.5% of trips by bicycle – and 65% of trips by car. A quarter of women and 10% of men can't ride a bike – and the statistics for men may be higher as the need for stabilisers is not something the average male happily admits to. The congestion charge and recent bombings have prompted more of us take to two wheels, but there are other valid reasons for choosing to cycle: it gets us fit, it is environment-friendly, it is often faster during rush-hour and it saves money on petrol and parking. And you don't need to look luscious in Lycra or be a kaftan-clad eco-hippie!

Ian is convinced that good training is the key to increasing the number of cycling aficionados. 'Lack of confidence on the road is the main reason people don't cycle,' he tells me. 'The oldest person I've trained was over 85 and had never ridden before.' Four-year-olds coming off stabilisers can also have a lesson, so parents avoid hours of saddle-holding frustration. And training is not just for beginners. Most cyclists could benefit from some tuition – particularly those who cycle through red lights or career along the pavement. 'Even an experienced cyclist often needs half-an-hour on control skills such as braking and swerving,' Ian emphasises. So get on your bike. You'll feel better, contribute less to the oil companies' coffers and help save the planet at the same time. ♻

Cycle Training UK (www.cycletraining.co.uk; 020 7582 3535) runs lessons for residents, workers and students in Ealing and in Hammersmith and Fulham. You pay £5 towards the training (free in Ealing for unwaged trainees). For this you get two hours' tuition – if you have lessons as a small group you can combine the hours and have several group sessions. Hounslow Council runs adult sessions and courses in Chiswick for children from Year 5 onwards through schools. Call 020 8583 5039 or visit www.urbanpedalpros.org.uk.

