

Let it Shine  
(for NextBike)

“It’s just like riding a bicycle,” people say, meaning that a once-learned skill, though long unused, will effortlessly return . . . but what about *actually* riding a bicycle? Would that be “just like riding a bicycle”? This was the question that haunted me last fall, when I signed up for NextBike in Leipzig.

Thankfully, the truism proved true, and I found I could zip along the city’s bountiful bike lanes with competence and even possibly some panache.

But I still had a problem. You can’t remember a skill you never learned in the first place, and, having never encountered lamps like those on the NextBikes I was using, I had no idea how to make them work. I could tell that the little roller device attached to the lamp needed to make contact with the front tire, so the wheel’s spinning could generate power, but how on earth to move that roller toward the tire?

I pushed; I pulled. I was gentle; I was cruel. I couldn’t get the darn thing to budge.

Too proud to ask for help, I restricted my bike riding to daylight hours. But as October slumped into November, and the Saxon sun started setting ever earlier, my rides home from the university grew darker and darker. I either had to figure out the lamps or give up my riding, which would double my commute.

One afternoon, when I was halfway home, a cloud descended, shrouding the city in sudden drizzly darkness. I paused at a traffic light, letting it cycle from *Steh* to *Geh* and back again. Should I give up and walk the bike to the nearest NextBike station?

Just then a woman biked up beside me. She wore a typically German wedding dress of a scarf, above which her face looked calm and mild.

“Entschuldigen Sie,” I said. “Sprechen Sie Englisch?”

Thank goodness she said yes; I’d just expended 80% of my German.

“I’m an idiot,” said, “but I can’t figure out how to turn on my bike’s lamp. Do you have any idea how it works?”

“Oh, no, you’re not an idiot at all,” she said, and in a flash she was off her bike and kneeling next to mine. “It’s tricky for everyone at first,” she went on. “It’s quite counterintuitive.”

(I made a mental note: I’ll consider myself fluent in another language when I can casually deploy its equivalent of “counterintuitive.”)

“See this little thing here?” she said. “You just have to press down, hard, and it snaps over. Now you try it.”

I did. It couldn’t have been simpler.

“You’re a lifesaver!” I said. “How can I thank you?”

“If I have a problem in *your* city, will you stop to help me, too?”

I told her yes, of course. Of course I would!

With smiles and waves, we rode across the street and on our separate ways, speeding into the lights our bike lamps beamed.

—Michael Lowenthal, 29 December 2014