

First Impressions Of CitiBike

By Joshua Stein, Joshua Stein PLLC



The idea seemed absurd at first. New York City would join dozens of other cities around the world by establishing a bike-sharing program.

But New York City probably has more traffic, and more aggressive traffic, than most of those other cities. And space is at a premium in New York City. How could bike sharing possibly make sense here? How could it possibly be safe?

So far, so good, or so it seems. The Citi Bike program is not working perfectly, but it's working. I signed up for an annual membership as soon as I could. I've been trying out the bikes as much as I can.

The first six times I tried to sign out a bike, I succeeded only once – plus a second time only because the Citi Bike technician was standing there and gave me a bike without my needing to sign it out.

Since then, my batting average has risen only slightly, but I am still batting well under .500 in my efforts to check out bikes. For this bike sharing system to work well, it will need to dramatically improve its batting average.

One morning I decided to try biking to work. I live at 57th Street and First Avenue and work at 54th Street and Park Avenue. It's not a strenuous commute in any case. But I thought a bike might make it even easier.

I checked out a Citi Bike near my apartment and very quickly and successfully pedaled my way to the Citi Bike station at 53rd and Madison. But I couldn't drop off my bike there, because the rack was full. I guess other commuters already had the same idea as me. So I biked to another nearby rack. It too was full. So was a third.

I eventually biked back to the very same bike station, near my apartment, where I had originally picked up my bike. I finally got rid of my bike there, and walked to work. Lesson learned: Citi Bike doesn't work for my morning commute. I haven't tried it for my evening commute.

I had a client meeting in the village, and had no problem checking out a bike at 53rd and Madison and biking straight down Fifth Avenue to the meeting. I learned that Fifth Avenue slopes gently downwards as you bike south, a pleasant surprise.

It was an easy ride, and I got there in plenty of time. Even though it wasn't a strenuous ride, I was pretty sweaty by the time I got there but somehow managed to become presentable by the time of

the meeting. Citi Bike may work better for client meetings in the Spring, Fall, and Winter.

Isn't it dangerous to ride in traffic? It's a little scary when there's a lot of traffic. The good news is the traffic generally doesn't move very fast, and the drivers seem to have learned to watch out for bicyclists. At least I haven't been killed yet.

Every time I see a bus or a truck I vividly remember the time, many years ago, when I saw a bike messenger who was riding next to a bus, and then got stuck under the bus when the bus headed to the right toward a bus stop.

Bus and truck drivers don't necessarily know everything that's happening on all four sides of their vehicle. I keep a respectful distance from buses and trucks. There are a lot of buses and trucks.

Any form of bike path makes it easier to ride, even if it's just a narrow strip between the parked cars and traffic. I prefer those strips to be on the left side of a one-way street, because one thing that particularly scares me is the risk of getting "doored" – having someone suddenly open their door just as I'm biking by or about to bike by.

If I get "doored," I might end up on the ground, perhaps in front of an oncoming car. The risk of getting "doored" is probably higher if you are next to the driver's side of the car, as opposed to the passenger's side.

When you ride a bike, you realize just how many bicyclists there are in New York City. It's not just bicycle messengers or restaurant deliveries.

Nor is it just Citi Bike users. It's a pretty constant flow of all kinds of people. I have no idea whether the number of bicyclists has risen since the city started to establish bike paths, but I would expect it has made a difference.

The idea of biking around Manhattan still seems absurd, but I'm starting to get used to it. When the traffic isn't bad and the weather isn't too hot, it's actually a pleasure and works really well. But the Citi Bike system will need to become more reliable.

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