

# Aspiring Anthropologists

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Anna-Isabel Perracini

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## Cycling in a Non-cycling City: Personal Experiences Along the Ride

### *Creative Writing*

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Cycling in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia  
(photo by Anna-Isabel Perracini 2023)

# Cycling in a Non-cycling City: Personal Experiences Along the Ride

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As a young woman who has spent most of her life in European cities, the bicycle has become a necessity for transportation as well as a symbol of freedom to me. The bicycle takes me any place at any time, and thereby ensures me unconditional independence – or so I thought. The past three weeks in Cartagena de Indias have shown me otherwise, as I have experienced that riding a bicycle entails conscious as well as unconscious dependencies: not only do I require an operable bicycle, but I am also undoubtedly dependent on infrastructure such as well-maintained streets, traffic lanes, bicycle lanes, traffic lights, as well as social rules and norms in traffic. The lack of traffic control, lane keeping, rules among various traffic participants and vehicles, and, most importantly, the lack of other cyclists and the resulting non-existing physical as well as social infrastructure for cyclists hampered me in using the means of transportation that I have used all my life.

For the past three weeks, I have been cycling in a non-cycling city. Cartagena de Indias is a seaside city in Colombia, with a population of about one million, making it the fifth-largest city in Colombia. The main means of transportation for non-owners of private cars are motorcycles, cabs, busses, or vehicles booked through mobile ridesharing applications. You can rarely – if ever – see a bicycle on the street.

At first, it surprised me that people were giving me funny looks when I told them that I use my bicycle. They would say “that is so European” or ask me if I have gone mad. To

be honest, maybe I have. I just cannot imagine not having the liberty of moving around freely and without having to wait for a cab every time I want to go somewhere. So why is it that cycling is “European?” Why do people not cycle more frequently in Cartagena de Indias? I mentioned the lack of cycling infrastructure, but then, why would there be infrastructure if no one is cycling. Would cycling increase if there was better infrastructure? I have come to some sort of conclusion here, believing that it is not mostly the physical infrastructure but much more the social one. What I perceive as the most serious issue is that in this city, there is neither understanding for nor approval of people riding bicycles. It seems to me that the bicycle is an unaccepted means of transportation among other traffic participants. Let me, by taking you along on a ride, show you how.

My journey starts at home in Cartagena de Indias. I rented a room, living with a local urban planner in a building next to the main road along the beach. The roads are divided in Carreras that go from north to south, and Calles, connecting the eastern with the western parts of the city. The bike I am riding is an old Dutch bike that is rusting in several places. Its built-in lock is hard to open, but I do not mind, it still moves and that is all that counts. The brakes squeak as I ride down the driveway, the porter opens the door for me. Challenge number one is getting to the right side of the main road by crossing the oncoming lane. Admittedly, this is not easy even when on foot. There are practically no

traffic lights nor pedestrian crossings. I learned to count in up to five minutes to find an opportunity to get from the side to the middle of the road. From there, the same thing again. I am used to riding on the far-right side of the lane if there is no clearly marked bike lane, and I decide to apply that habit in Cartagena de Indias as well. I am trying, at least. However, motorcycles do not only drive on the right side of the road. They drive on the far-left side or in the middle of the two unmarked but obvious car lanes. After my six weeks of staying here, so will I. However, I am not there yet. Once I successfully manage to get to the right side of the main road, I try to follow the general traffic direction and speed. In the mornings, traffic is particularly heavy and there are many busses on the road. Busses make cycling difficult. They usually drive very close to the sidewalk and stop without warning to pick up people. So, passing a bus is not only highly dangerous, but also quite impossible. I end up being stuck behind one, and as if it was not already hot enough, the exhaust of the bus points directly at me. Once it does not seem to be going forward at all anymore, I decide to go forward and cross the bus via the sidewalk.

Back on the road, I continue my journey. The massive and unpredictable potholes keep me from catching speed, and I advance just slowly. At one point, a car stops next to me and the driver asks me why I will not just rather take a taxi, seeming quite annoyed with me. Yet, I get the feeling that motorcycles are even more bothered with me. Due to the narrow and crowded lane they cannot pass me, yet they do not have the patience to ride behind me either. Fortunately for them, there are no rules about lane keeping, so they switch sides back and forth between cars and busses. At one point, I want to turn left, leaving me with no choice but to get to the other side. I look out for a safe opportunity to change lanes but there does not seem to be any other than closing my eyes and going for it. Or rather, eyes wide open. The motorcycles appear out of

nowhere, fast, and furious. I succeed to change lanes, but not without being honked at for at least four times. Being honked at is something I got used to quickly. Talking to a local, I was informed that cars and motorcycles as well as busses honk for various reasons. The most common one is to attract attention. Taxis and motor taxis use their horn to signal to people on the sidewalk that they are unoccupied. Yet you can be honked at for making a wrong move, for your looks, for being thanked, or simply for being on the route and apparently in someone's way. The longer I ride my bicycle, the more often I get the feeling that the last reason applies especially for people on their bicycle. This is probably reinforced in my case, as I am evidently neither from Colombia nor cycling long enough to fully know my place among all the traffic participants. Nevertheless, it amazed me how little respect there is for cyclists. People often refuse to give me the right of way, cars overtake me at the smallest possible distance, and there are many situations in which it is unclear how I am supposed to behave as a cyclist. Overall, I get a very unsafe and disrespected feeling as a cyclist in this city.

Even after reaching the city center, it does not get easier or less dangerous. The one-way streets make it difficult to reach places, and there still are no bike lanes. Nevertheless, I find it much more pleasant to ride my bicycle in the city center than on the main road. The traffic has decreased, now it is more street vendors and dreamy tourists who are obstacles to cycling. Arriving at my destination, I look in vain for bicycle parking, another sign that bicycles are not welcomed in this city. To me, truly a pity, as places could be reached well and much faster. Especially if more people would use bicycles instead of driving or taking a taxi. However, this would require an investment in infrastructure as well as an investment in awareness among all traffic participants. I am aware that natural conditions like heat and the coastal wind differentiate bicycle rides in Cartagena de Indias from rides in European cities, however,



I have survived so far. I am convinced, based on what I have seen in other countries and related to the sustainability goals of the city of Cartagena de Indias, that cycling could improve the traffic situation, lead to fewer accidents, decrease air pollution, reduce noise, and that, additionally, the environment would benefit enormously.

The big question remaining is: whose responsibility is it to initiate such a socially and infrastructurally dependent change of mobility?



This article is available online at:

*<https://fg-ethnologie.unibas.ch/de/blog/details/2023/perracini-cycling>*

# Aspiring Anthropologists

## The Project

Through this pilot project, the student association enables students of Ethnologie (BA) and Anthropology (MA) in Basel to gain valuable experience in publishing during their studies, and to practise collaborating in the peer-review process.

The contents of this publication are written by students and reflect steps in the educational process. Our authors represent their personal opinions, which are not necessarily shared by the Student Association Anthropology, the Institute of Social Anthropology, or the University of Basel. Such opinions may change in the course of the learning process and will certainly evolve.

## Participate

Have we piqued your interest? Are you studying social anthropology, and like to write or would like to practise your writing skills? All students are welcome to participate in this project!

Feel free to get in touch with us. Contact us with or without a concrete idea for a text, with questions or suggestions! You can find all the details on our website.

### Editors:

Mirian Margiani, Julia Singh, Bessy Purayampillil



Student Association Anthropology  
University of Basel  
Institute of Social Anthropology  
Münsterplatz 19  
4051 Basel  
Switzerland