

Beijing by bike

In China on business, **Stephen Hobbs** hired a bike to explore the capital

Beijing will have millions of visitors this year. If you're one of them, then seeing the city by bike is easier than you thought. Its tourist sites are too widely spread to see by foot. However, on a bike it's possible to visit most of them conveniently and to see the less touristy areas in between. It can also be a lot of fun.

Last May, a friend Dan and I had a week's business in Beijing with a day free before flying home. Hiring bikes was the obvious way to spend the day. Bikes can be hired inexpensively from shops scattered across the city. We used a Giant shop close to the hotel. The bikes were basic, singlespeed, but fine for the city. We did need to find a bike repairer twice to tighten loose handlebars and then a slack chain. In residential areas it was surprisingly easy to find a repairer – someone sitting in the shade by the roadside with tools scattered around. Next time we'll probably

pack a compact wrench.

Unless you're familiar with Chinese script, navigating can be a challenge. GPS comes into its own here. Dan had a GPS unit with a street map of Beijing loaded. It was brilliant. In a strange city it was hugely reassuring to know where we were and which way was home.

How about the traffic? Beijing is built around a grid of dual carriageways, and each had a whole lane at either side for cycles separated from the main traffic. Junctions were controlled by lights, with time for cycles to cross, and the drivers weren't surprised at seeing bikes. It's best not to race though: the local cyclists had a more relaxed pace than our Western-tourist-in-a-hurry hurtle.

The best memories for me are the parks we visited. They're very popular, especially morning and evening, and very sociable – with dancing, music, chess and cards, singing and just strolling.



The Vätternrundan

Jon Asbridge joined nearly 16,000 cyclists for a 300km ride around a Swedish lake

With the rain bouncing off the roof of our campervan I wondered what I was doing here in Motala in Sweden. The reason was to ride the 300km (186 mile) Vätternrundan. I was due to set off at 1am.

Four of us from the Royal Navy based in Portsmouth had taken the Euro Tunnel then driven up through Europe to take part in what is billed as the largest recreational bike ride in the world, in terms of the total distance cycled by all the participants. The event first took place in 1966 with 370 riders and has now grown with 15,945 starters in 2008. And what a mix of participants! From hard-core lycra-clad roadies on top of the range carbon machines to occasional cyclists on sit up and beg bikes.

The route starts and finishes in

Motala and goes round the outside of the Vättern, the second largest lake in Sweden. Organisation is excellent. You get computer chip timing with intermediate check points that can be sent as live update SMS messages to your loved ones; nine refreshment stops on the course with free sports massage and mechanical assistance; medals for all finishers; and free pasta and beer at the end.

The ride is not particularly hilly but the rolling terrain coupled with the distance provides a good challenge, although the time constraints are generous with the finish not closing

until midnight. Driven along by the adrenaline and the volume of other cyclists on the road to work with, all four of us completed our longest ever ride faster than we had predicted. Even the weather cheered up. By the finish the sun was shining and the day pleasantly warm, which made the cold beer at the finish very much appreciated!



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