

Vélib' - a short report (Nov 2007)

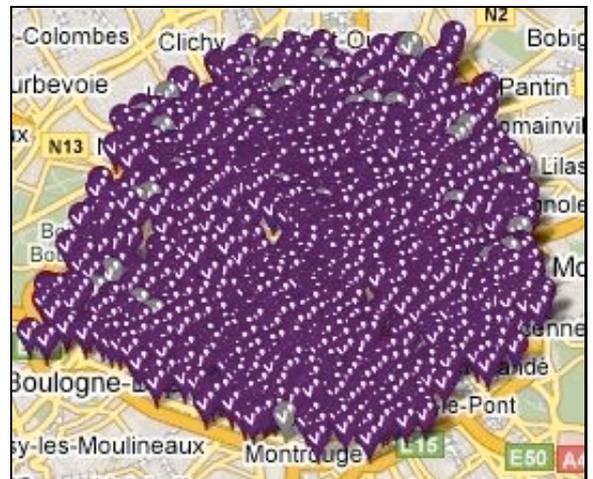
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Jean and I were at St Pancras International almost every day last week. No sooner were we finished demonstrating for cycle facilities than we went back for a quick pleasure trip to Paris on the new, faster Eurostar service. The chance to try out the Vélib' bike hire system was one of the reasons for the trip, though we hadn't anticipated the ongoing French transport strike which made them indispensable.

In short, Vélib' is a new form of transport infrastructure that every city should have. It's a major investment in infrastructure, both capital and recurrent, not to mention the transfer of roadspace for use at each hire station. So it is a very serious commitment.



Most of the cost is probably in the fixed part of the system, 2400 automated hire stations by the end of 2007, each with 20-30 wired-up stands and a user terminal, all networked to a central computer. The stations are said to be distributed at 300 m intervals throughout Paris (inside the Boulevard Périphérique). *Each of the purple markers on the map is a hire station!* In our experience there is a hire station near every metro station and major junction. Stations hold 18-36 bikes.

What it's like to use

The hire stations make it impressively easy to get a bike, even for first-time users. You can register as a short term user (1 or 5 days) by inserting a credit card, against which a deposit of €150 is recorded and cancelled at the end of your registration period. Short-term users are issued with a printed card with a unique ID number and a secret pin.

To get a bike once you are registered, you go up to any user terminal and type your ID number and PIN and the terminal offers the available bikes by listing the numbers of the stands they are on. You choose one; the system unlocks it from its stand and away you go.

Long-term users get an electronic card (like Oyster) that makes the rental process even simpler. They don't have to use the terminal at all, just swipe the card against the stand of the bike they want.

One of the tricky points of using the system is choosing a bike without defects. You should inspect those at the stands and choose one carefully before starting the transaction. Experienced users soon learn what to look out for. See *Minor problems* below. Since the first half-hour of use is free, if you do make a mistake and choose a wonky bike, you can re-lock it to its stand and choose another at no cost.

The bikes are



sturdy roadsters with an upright position and a weight of 22 kilos. They have 3-speed hub gears, a simple cable lock, hub brakes and dynamo operated flashing front and rear lamps that are always on. Saddles are easily adjustable over a wide range and resistant to theft. In practice, they were fine for the purposes to which we put them - journeys of 2 - 5 miles across central Paris and as far out as the Bois de Boulogne. We didn't attempt the Montmartre hill, but the gearing is low and gears were useful on the minor hills we did encounter.

How much does it cost?

Cost of membership: 1 day: 1 Euro, 7 days: 5 Euros, 1 year: 29 Euros.

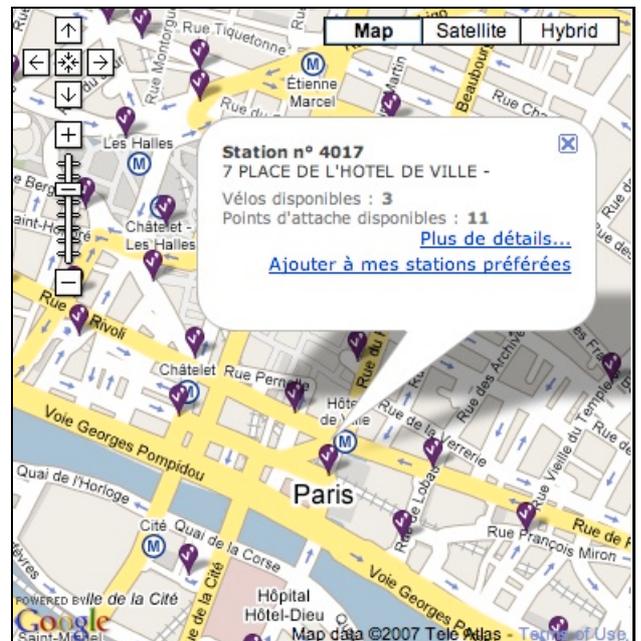
Cost of rental: First 30 minutes: Free, Second 30 mins: 1 Euro, third 30 mins: 2 Euros, subsequent 30 min periods, 4 Euros each.

Minor problems

The system has only been active for 4 months, so it's inevitable that there are a few teething problems.

You have to be careful when choosing your bike; there are usually 2-5 broken ones at each station (this may have been inflated by the extra use generated by the metro strike). The repair teams don't seem to be able to keep up. We didn't see any work in progress at any of the stations we visited. There is said to be a way to report a broken bike, but we didn't discover it. (The demand for the user stations was such that we didn't get the chance to explore all its features).

Sometimes you have to wait for a bike. But we were using them in central Paris during a metro and bus strike and we only once waited a few minutes to get two good bikes. Getting two bikes at once could be a problem if a good second bike doesn't turn up. If you need to try another nearby station, the user terminal can show a map (similar to the one on the right taken from the Vélib' web site) with nearby stations or stations anywhere in Paris and the availability of bikes and empty stands at each.



The inverse problem may arise when you arrive at your destination and there are no vacant stands. We didn't experience that but we did worry that it might arise.

There is currently a lack of signs indicating the locations of Vélib' stations and there don't seem to be any

printed maps with them on yet. Both of these problems will no doubt be remedied soon. Currently the only sure way to locate the stations is to use the the Vélib' web site, which is what we did, begging the hotel receptionist to let us use his computer ;-). There is said to be a version of the website suitable for browsing on phones, but we didn't test it.

One more thing: the city of Paris did a deal with the system owners under which they get free advertising billboards in return for offering the system at such a reasonable cost. It's not obvious which billboards they are in Paris, they seem to merge into the background without much damage to the views, but they might be more noticeable elsewhere.

Conclusion

I think Vélib' is a great, life-enhancing transport system, offering the great convenience of always having a bike available within a radius of 300 metres throughout a city. The minor problems will undoubtedly be ameliorated. The only question is whether other cities, including London, will have the vision and the courage to make the necessary investments.

Of course it would be useful to have some hard figures on usage rates - I'm sure they are or will soon become available. Anecdotally, throughout the 3 days we were there, many of the stations we passed were nearly empty of bikes and the roads seemed full of the special Vélib' bikes.
