

Extended Summary: Urban Bike Tourism in Major Canadian Cities

By Anders Turim



About this report

This report represents the product of a year-long project to study urban bike tourism in eight of Canada's largest cities. Using five research methods, I identify the current state of urban bicycle tourism, how it is promoted to tourists, how it connects to the planning profession. I also explore some of the perceived benefits of urban bicycle tourism and provide recommendations for facilitating urban bike tourism.

This Capstone was conducted by Anders Turim, a second-year City Planning student at the University of Manitoba, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the City Planning program. Assistance was provided by the project advisor, Orly Linovski, and advisory committee members Rae St. Clair Bridgman and Jamie Hilland. This research also would not have been possible without the participation of interviewees and survey respondents.

Introduction

Why study urban bike tourism?

Cycling is a growing phenomenon in many Canadian cities (Verlinden et al., 2019). As a result, there has been an increasing amount of research examining cyclists, cycling infrastructure, and motivations for cyclists. Interestingly, however, there has been almost no research on urban bicycle tourism in Canada up to this point. Identifying this was surprising, given the growing trend of urban tourism in recent years. As a result of this, and myself being an avid cyclist, occasional tourist, and someone who believes in the bicycle's potential to be used as a tool for discovery, this topic strongly piqued my interest.

What is urban bike tourism?

Urban bike tourism refers to tourists who bike at some point during their trip to an urban area. There are many reasons one might choose to bike during their trip to a city, including recreation and utility. For this research, I was particularly interested in tourists for whom bicycling was not the primary purpose of their trip and, therefore, who do not bring a bicycle with them. In the academic literature, these types of cyclists are referred to as 'holiday cyclists' instead of 'proper bicycle tourists' (McKibbin, 2014).

How was this research undertaken?

As there had been almost nothing written about urban bike tourism in Canada, I set my research questions to be relatively broad. The following three questions guided this research:

1. What is the current state of urban bicycle tourism in major Canadian cities?
2. How is urban bicycle tourism promoted?
3. What is the connection between planning and urban bike tourism?

To answer these questions, I used five research methods on eight major cities in Canada, including

Calgary, Edmonton, Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg:

1. **Semi-structured interviews** with planners, bike advocates and bike tourism professionals (n = 7)
2. **Policy analysis** of municipal development plans and tourism plans
3. **Content analysis** of city tourism brochures
4. **GIS analysis** of bike routes promoted to tourists by official city tourism organizations in Calgary, Toronto and Vancouver.
5. **Online survey** completed by tourism officials (n = 5).

Findings

What came from the interviews?

First, I asked interviewees about the overlap between tourism and urban bike tourism and their work. Interviewees were unanimous in saying urban bike tourism is not a major component in active transportation planning in Canadian cities.

Second, I asked interviewees about the benefits of urban bike tourism. The most repeated benefits were:

- The city offering a better tourism product
- Tourism's economic benefits spreading across a larger area
- Improving the image for the city
- Economic rationale for cycling by linking it with tourism.

Third, I asked the interviewees about what could be done to facilitate more urban bike tourism. Interviewees identified three general categories for actions: those relating to the bike and biking, those relating to governance and planning and those relating specifically to tourism. These actions are in the table below.

Table 1. Actions to grow urban bicycle tourism

Bike	Planning	Tourism
Accessible bike network	Collaboration between municipal departments	More accessible information
Wayfinding	Multi-use spaces	Branding for businesses
Bike facilities	Bylaws that support biking	Promote and map tourist routes
Access to bikes		Education

Lastly, I asked interviewees about urban bike tourism post-pandemic. All but one believed that it could become more popular. Reasons provided for this include:

- More people cycling since the pandemic began
- Cities investing more into bike infrastructure since the pandemic
- New types of cycling being developed (e.g. fat tire, e-bike).

What came from the policy analysis?

My analysis of planning documents revealed that the development plans do not mention tourism often, and information related to tourists and cycling is nonexistent in most cities. Ottawa was the only city with policy provided in their plan about tourists cycling, which provided guidelines for cycle and multi-use paths for several different groups, including tourists.

Of the six cities with tourism plans, only Vancouver and Winnipeg’s mentioned cycling, and only Vancouver had a substantial reference to tourists cycling. Specifically, it supported the developing bike infrastructure around Granville Island and implemented a bike-share system.

What came from the content analysis?

This research method revealed that official city tourism organizations promote urban bicycle tourism to some extent in every city. Specifically, they promoted areas to bike in and bike businesses and activities. The figure below shows this distribution across the six cities with tourism brochures.

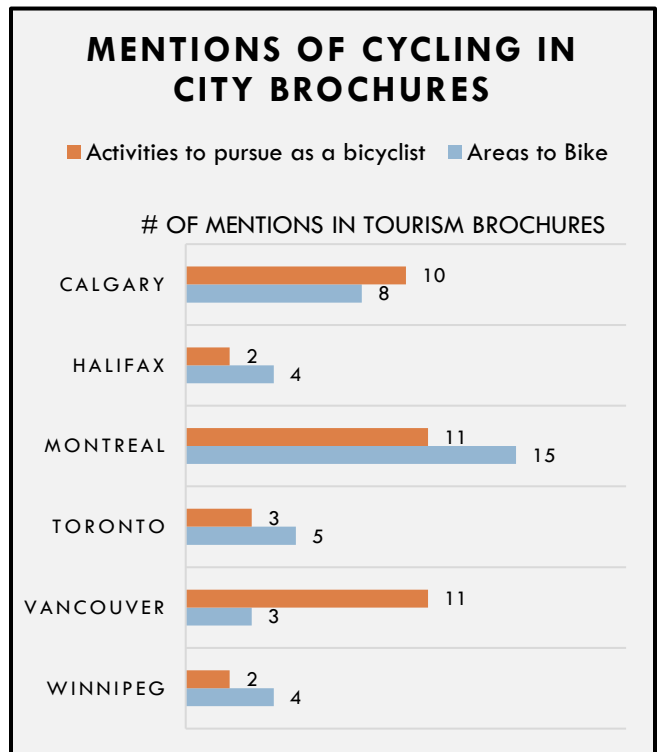


Figure 1. Promotion of urban bike tourism in official city brochures

A common theme of the areas to bike promoted in the tourism brochures was that the areas had a natural scenery element. For example, many areas were parks, along waterfronts or were non-urban places to bike, such as Birds Hill Park outside Winnipeg or Whistler outside of Vancouver. The activities promoted were most often bike rentals and bike tours.

The pictures showing cycling in the brochures most often depicted typical urban scenes, such as people biking on the side of the street, in an urban bike tour or casually biking. Like the brochure

text, Montreal's brochure had the most pictures of cycling.

What came from the GIS analysis?

I conducted a spatial analysis on routes promoted to tourists from the following three online articles on the respective city tourism organizations - Five Great Bike Rides (Tourism Vancouver), 10 Epic Bike Pathways in Calgary (Tourism Calgary), and Top Cycling Routes in Toronto (Tourism Toronto). This research method found that almost every route promoted had a natural scenery component, like the tourism brochures' areas. Additionally, most routes were linear instead of circuitous, composed of multi-use paths, and located away from the city's centre. The map showing these routes for Vancouver is shown below.



Figure 2. Promoted bike routes in Vancouver

What came from the online survey?

The data retrieved from the online surveys with the tourism professionals indicated that cities were experiencing increasing bike tourism. Participants noted increasing numbers of tourists interested in cycling in the past five years and that several services had begun or expanded in that

time. Respondents also gave insights into what they think are the best opportunities for increasing urban bike tourism. These included providing more wayfinding signage for tourists and expanding services, such as bike rentals and bike-share systems.

Discussion

What is the state of urban bike tourism in Canada?

Urban bike tourism appears to exist in every city examined. Additionally, the online survey indicated that it might be growing. This growth could be due to several factors, such as increased investments made towards bike infrastructure, shifting trends in tourism (e.g. experiential tourism), and other macro-level trends.

There are opportunities for growth for the urban bike tourism sector. Interviewees identified many kinds of actions to pursue this, of which most would also support cycling for city residents. This suggests that developing an urban bike tourism strategy could possibly occur somewhat in tandem with a city's active transportation strategy.

The findings also suggest some differences in urban bicycle tourism development across the eight cities. As identified by the interviewees and the analysis of tourism and planning documents, Montreal appears to be ahead of the curve for urban bicycle tourism. Following Montreal, the differences between the cities seem to be less substantial. This is consistent with Montreal's status as being a bike-friendly city overall in the North American context (Copenhagenize, 2019).

How is urban bike tourism promoted in Canada?

This research also found that tourism organizations often promote urban cycling to tourists as a way for them to take in natural scenery, such as water bodies and city parks. Additionally, many of the areas promoted for

cycling in these brochures are not necessarily urban, such as Whistler in British Columbia and Birds Hill Park in Manitoba. This contrasts with how urban bicycle tourism is promoted by tourism organizations in cities like Copenhagen, where cycling is portrayed and promoted as a 'hip' and 'cosmopolitan' activity (Nilsson, 2019). There are three implications for this.

First, promoters might be missing the growing demographic of tourists interested in experiential tourism. While many tourists likely enjoy biking through naturally scenic areas, many others would prefer cycling through culturally rich, and/or historic urban areas.

Second, promoting nature-based cycling can separate tourists from the areas of the city that might otherwise experience tourism's economic benefits. As noted by the interviewees, urban bike tourism could benefit cities by spreading tourism dollars around a larger area. Promotion of biking in these areas, such as neighbourhoods adjacent to the main tourism areas, could help cities realize this.

Third, scenic areas that are not always close to the main tourist districts require tourists to travel further away from where they might be staying. For those who are spending just a few nights in a city, promoting bicycling in places close by might be more successful in attracting tourists.

What is the connection between planning and urban bike tourism?

As evident through the findings from the semi-structured interviews, and the policy analysis, urban bicycle tourism is not a major objective for planners currently. At the same time, many of the actions suggested for encouraging more urban bike tourism are ones planners could act on, such as planning for bike facilities, wayfinding and an all-ages and abilities bike network. Additionally, some of the benefits mentioned by the interviewees could directly benefit goals related

to city resident cycling as well, mainly by linking cycling with economic activity. Therefore, urban bike tourism may have the potential to support urban planning goals, such as increasing the active transportation mode share.

Recommendations

From these findings, I have identified several recommendations for planners and tourism officials to encourage more urban bike tourism.

First, promote cycling as an urban activity since this could enhance urban bike tourism. Actions that support this include promoting neighbourhoods to bike in, promoting businesses bicyclists could stop at and areas for tourists to take in the interesting architecture.

Second, develop experience loops. Experience loops are a way to cater a route to tourists, such as with history loops, sports loops or pub loops. These should be circuitous and be all ages and abilities bike infrastructure.

Third, accommodate the needs of tourists should be embedded into the planning of bike infrastructure. This is done to some extent, but interviewees also identified this as a gap. As many of the actions to support urban bike tourism fall in the domain of planners, it is they who have a significant role in bringing it to its full potential.

Conclusion

To conclude, urban bike tourism in Canada appears to be growing. Further, it may increase in the coming years due to macro-level forces such as more people interested in cycling and shifts towards more experiential forms of tourism. As noted by this research, urban bike tourism may benefit cities financially and support city residents by linking cycling to the economy. To help this type of tourism grow, planners can follow the recommendation provided while also developing a good biking environment for city residents.

Citations

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Image resources

Image 1 – Exchange Distict BIZ. (2020). Central Winnipeg Bike Loop. Retrieved at:

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Image 2 – Destination Halifax. (n.d.). Places to go. Retrieved at: <https://momentummag.com/cycling-in-halifax-nl/>

Image 3 – Travel Alberta. (n.d.). Biking along the Bow River. Retrieved at:

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