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**The Basics****I went car-free in California**

Here's how I gave up my auto in the center of the car-culture universe and still got to work on time -- and saved a bundle of money.

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By Rick VanderKnyff

I cycled. I took the train, the bus, the shuttle. I bummed rides from co-workers. Sometimes I walked part of the distance, and once I was even forced to wade.

Living without a car requires persistence and creativity -- and a lot of patience, both for you and for others in your life. That's particularly true in Southern California, a land built for automobiles and famously hostile to those who commute by other means.

In my year without a car, I commuted from my home in Carlsbad, in northern San Diego County, to La Jolla, a distance of 17 miles.

The high points of forsaking the car:

- Saving money on gas, maintenance, insurance and parking.

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- Getting a workout, if you cycle or walk (my tally -- calves of steel and a curiously persistent paunch).
- Socializing (or reading, or napping) on your commute, if you take public transportation.
- Feeling good about saving gas, cutting down on pollutants and keeping one car off the crowded roads.
- Gliding past long lines of idling cars on your bike (particularly satisfying on Friday afternoons).

But there are trade-offs, too. It can be inconvenient, particularly if your schedule is at all unpredictable. Public transportation options, in Southern California at least, are not plentiful and the schedules can be skimpy. Miss one connection, one transfer, and you might suddenly be tacking an hour or more onto your planned commute.

Even when things go as planned, commuting by bike or public

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transportation can take longer. As an early riser, I was able to drive to work in just over 20 minutes. My bus-train-shuttle commute, by comparison, was a little over an hour, door-to-door; by bicycle, it was about an hour and 15 minutes.

Finally, in formerly two-car families (like mine), giving up one car puts all the errand duties onto the driving spouse. There's no relief from running the kids to and from school or doing the day's grocery run. Keep that in mind.

Giving up my wheels

I gave up my wheels almost exactly a year ago -- or, more accurately, they gave up on me. There should have been more life in that '97 Mitsubishi, but the last in a series of major repairs finally triggered the "Get rid of it NOW" response.

I was already in for a thousand or so dollars to my mechanic, and to get the car in selling shape

[Get out of the car](#)

would have taken another thousand at least -- maybe twice that. So we made a deal: He kept the car, I kept the money that I owed him. He was going to have his junior mechanics get it into shape, for practice, then donate it to the Self-Realization Fellowship down the street. (How do you know when you're in California? When your mechanic donates a car to the Self-Realization Fellowship.)

The conversation I had with my wife about what to buy next and how to pay for it turned into another conversation altogether: Did we really need a second car? Could I get to work (and home) without it? We decided to try it, for a few months, as an experiment -- and that stretched into a year.

The routine

I had three main modes of transportation available to me -- train (and shuttle), bus and bike. Any given day could include any combination, such as shuttle-train-bus or cycle-train-cycle. All sorts of permutations were possible. Sometimes, just for the view, I got off the bus at Torrey Pines State Beach and walked three miles of gloriously deserted sand before scrambling up the bluffs to my office. Once I was caught against the cliffs by the incoming tide -- hence the wading.

So you're thinking of giving up the car, or at least keeping it in the garage on some of your commuting days. Before you do, check with your employer about what it can do to make your decision easier or cheaper.

In areas of the country affected by air quality issues and overcrowded roadways, local and state governments often give employers incentives to create alternative commuting plans for employees. In Connecticut, for example, Yale University offers \$25,000 to employees who buy a house within walking distance. In Oregon, Nike gives free shoes to those who walk to work.

The federal government has gotten into the act also. The EPA's voluntary "Best Workplaces for Commuters" program has qualified more than 1,000 companies based on its criteria. Here are some of the EPA-blessed programs you can ask your employer about:

- Rideshare or carpool matching.
- Employer-run or -assisted vanpools.
- Guaranteed rides home.
- Pretax transit or vanpool subsidy.
- Telecommuting or flexible work schedules.
- Cash instead of free parking.
- Shuttles from transit stations.
- Secure bicycle parking, showers and lockers.
- Employee commuting awards.

If your employer doesn't have any programs, ask why not and point them to the EPA's "[Best Workplaces for Commuters](#)" Web site for resources such as business benefit calculators.

(On warmer days, it had the added diversion of naked people -- the path cut through Black's, a famous clothing-optional beach).

The point is, getting to work without a car can take some creativity, but you may have more options than you think. Before I stopped driving, I had no idea that a bus line ran anywhere near my suburban neighborhood, or that there were free shuttles covering the last few miles from the train station to my office.

What I spent . . . and saved

Transit pass: My major expense was a monthly rail pass, which also worked on the buses. It started at \$95 a month and ended at \$116 a month. We'll call it \$1,200 for the year.

Bike accessories: I already had a very sturdy touring bike, perfect for commuting, and suitable shoes and clothing. I did elect to buy a reasonably high-end headlight (about \$110) because I left before dawn for much of the year. Other odds and ends included a new helmet (\$30) and new tires and other miscellaneous items (about \$50).

I did some rough math and determined that giving up my car for a year saved about 10,000 commuting miles. AAA estimates that the average cost of operating a car in the United States is 56.2 cents per mile. For me, that adds up to \$5,620 in savings, while AAA says the average driver spends \$8,431.

Those are theoretical savings, based on routine maintenance (including tires), fuel and insurance, depreciation and financing. But I could see a real impact on my monthly bills.

- Just glancing over my credit card statements for the past year, I believe I saved \$75 to \$100 a month in gas.
- I worked at the University of California, which charged employees \$66 per month for parking. That's \$792 for the year.
- I took about \$600 off my insurance annual bill when I

took the second car off our insurance.

- Annual registration on my California car was running about \$100.

Bottom line

I figure I spent about \$1,300 during the year on my transit pass and minor bike-related costs and saved about \$2,400 in dollars that I can point to. That's a clear \$1,100 in my pocket, not counting the monthly car payment I avoided. Add to that the "hidden" costs of maintenance and depreciation, and the savings go up even more significantly.

The figures will vary, but it costs thousands annually to own and operate your car. If you can do without a vehicle, it's money in your pocket -- but there are sacrifices as well.

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