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## PARIS IN STRIKETIME: A SURVIVAL GUIDE

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Getting around the French capital has become a nightmare during the strikes.

PARIS □ Picture the scene: Riding a bike around Paris with Christmas lights illuminating the city's beautiful bridges, Champs-Élysées and Eiffel Tower. Cue the accordion player!

Sounds great, right?

Think again.

Twenty-nine days into a strike against pension reform that has seen large parts of Paris' public transport system grind to a halt, locals and tourists alike have had to resort to bikes, scooters and walking to get to work, run errands or simply get around the city. And they're the lucky ones. Those living in the suburbs have seen their daily commute double or triple in time as suburban trains run on a severely reduced schedule.

The reality of the last month is that absolutely everything □ including walking □ is faster than driving or taking a taxi or Uber (if you can find one), especially during rush hour.

Though Paris got new and improved bike lanes over the past year, getting around is still not for the faint of heart.

Venturing out on the roads, in particular at peak times and even during the break between Christmas and New Year, is akin to gladiator games.

First, there is the challenge of finding that elusive gem: a bike or scooter that works. The good news is that Paris has plenty of cheap, practical schemes. The bad news is everyone is trying to use them at the same time.

Some have resorted to, erm, creative solutions. Scooters that appear on apps as "available" and "charged" turn out to be parked in the hallways of buildings, as users keep them close to hand rather than give them back. It's not ideal if you merely wanted to run an errand rather than be charged with breaking and entering.

Bike schemes are a different beast.

A protester sets off a flare in Paris | Kiran Ridley/Getty Images



First, if you don't have a monthly subscription, you'll have to find a bike station that accepts bank

cards in order to use the service. They are scarcer than you might think. If you find one, the next step is to unlock the bike using the designated code. The code will sometimes be rejected, seemingly without reason. Or the bike will give the go-ahead signal to be pulled out of its parking place only to change its mind a few seconds later and lock itself again. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how can you tell if the electric bike that looks perfectly fine isn't going to break down halfway through your journey? Or have its chain come undone mere meters down the road?



Then there is the challenge of getting from Point A to Point B unscathed.

Though Paris got new and improved bike lanes over the past year (at a high cost for Mayor Anne Hidalgo, who attracted the ire of Parisian drivers during the construction works needed to build them), getting around is still not for the faint of heart.

No longer for leisurely journeys, bike lanes have morphed into highways where speed junkies on electric scooters and cavalier cyclists whizz past more hesitant riders. Helmets are a necessity, but elbow and knee pads are a good idea too.

Electric scooter riders are by far the worst offenders. Tourist couples  in search of stereotypical Paris romance  often ride the scooters together, filming selfie-videos and forgetting to look where they're going.

Parisians have been using scooters to get from A to B | Kiran Ridley/Getty Images

After all that, if you do make it to point B, you have one more obstacle: finding a free parking slot for the bike. The apps for these services have handy geo-locators that  theoretically  show the number of free slots. But this often doesn't reflect reality.





However, it's not all bad.



For one, the weather has been rather nice and a lot more people will be in better shape at the beginning of this year than they have been in a long time.

There's also a new kind of solidarity, as most people are in the same boat (well, bike).

Police hit back with tear gas at French protesters | Kiran Ridley/Getty Images

Cyclists give each other tips on which station has free parking slots. Or tell each other when a bike they're about to ride has a flat tire. Or when a hat has flown out of one's pocket while cycling.

Cyclists also exchange silent, knowing glances when cars  stuck in interminable traffic  idle on pedestrian crossings or in bike lanes, or when bus drivers  those not on strike, that is  aggressively compete for road space with cyclists.

And perhaps most endearingly, while the fight over pension reform is morphing into a larger battle of political wills, Parisians have shown admirable civic awareness, determination and spirit. They have continued going to work  almost no one in the private sector is striking  and this reporter has yet to hear real anger directed at the strikers, or the government, for the inconvenience.

So much for Parisians' reputation for being lazy, coddled curmudgeons.

A shuttered metro station at Montparnasse, as strikes cripple the French capital | Stephane De Sakutin/AFP via Getty Images

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