

London and Beyond: The Bike Tour Boom

I remember a time when cycling was not only unwelcome on the streets of London, it was actively discouraged. It was only the 1980's.



Today in London we see blue Barclay's hire bikes scouting everywhere, bike racks dotting every corner and major roads framed by bright new cycle 'superhighways'.

So too have bicycle tours taken off in the capital. There are several operators now in London and similarly you can do guided bike tours in Oxford, Belfast, Liverpool and many other cities, and that's only in the UK. Across Europe, city cycle tours are fast becoming one of the most popular ways to sightsee.

In 1990, London's first bicycle tour began operations - the London Bicycle Tour Company. Now 20 years on, there are several operators taking thousands of tourists around London every year.

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At London Bicycle Tour company we've had to adapt to the new enthusiasm for cycling. We've just come out of a period of explosive growth - it required some foresight and careful management to make sure we didn't miss any opportunities. We're happy to say that we're managing ok, taking great opportunities to get more people on bicycles and exploring new ways to keep it interesting and fun.

One of the main things we've focused on is creating a unique product and always being innovative. There are a lot of different ideas you can have when it comes to offering cycle tours, and we've probably tried all of them!

In 2010 we started offering tours in 7 different languages, with native speaking guides, which have

proved popular. This was a risk as it meant often splitting our groups into smaller groups depending on the languages being booked. It was harder to find guides with the right qualifications AND language skills. The marketing and administration got much more complicated and the tour guide wages bill went up dramatically, but the overall result is happier customers, many of them returning for more, and a business model we see growing well into the future.



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We've also found a nice little niche market by creating an East Tour to supplement our Central and West Tours. This has attracted a lot of London locals. The East end of London is not as touristy, but is rich with history. This off the beaten track tour is often favoured by locals who want to avoid the tourist trail and learn more about a side of their city that surprisingly a large number of Londoners have never been to.

We've taken every opportunity we can see to build the business in London and have now decided to look for opportunities further afield. In 2011, we launched Cycle Cities (www.cycle-cities.com), a partnership of European bike tour operators. We cross promote our tours with operators all over Europe, in cities such as Dublin, Budapest, Florence and Malaga. We have 23 operators in the partnership and are enjoying working our way through this concept and getting more and more interest.

We feel it's important to be fresh and innovative and try new things to stay ahead of the competition. It means sometimes we have to take risks and sometimes they don't pay off, but if the alternative is being overtaken by someone who is more proactive, we'd rather take the risks. Sometimes the ideas don't work but it's the thought that counts... people appreciate that even though the company is 20 years old, we are young and very enthusiastic.



We're helped by the fact we are operating in a growth industry. Cycling is a cost effective means of transport, which becomes popular in tougher economic times such as now. The tour companies are benefiting from the more positive attitude towards cycling and the investment made in cycle paths and facilities. People's attitudes towards the environment are also changing as people become more aware of their carbon footprint. The 'climate' is right for cycling.

Overall we do what we do because we love bikes, and we love seeing people happy. Every tourism business has its ups and downs but we feel very lucky to be in a great position in the market and we're so happy to see cycling get the exposure and attention it deserves in large cities like London. Perhaps we'll see you on a tour soon?

By Steve Kopandy (Business Manager)

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