

what have you been



The Kimball family saves about \$50 a month on gasoline by riding to and from

waiting for?

IRVINE,
CALIFORNIA,
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TO BE A
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evin Tong glides out of his driveway and down his street in Irvine, then pedals into an adjacent cul-de-sac. Instead of looping around and back out, he scoots up over the curb on an unassuming ramp, then points his front wheel toward a bike trail you probably wouldn't see if you didn't already know where to look for it.

Tong, 47, cruises behind his neighbors' homes, past their fences, over school crosswalks and under freeway intersections. The path is lined with shady trees. The new Giant Sedona runs through its gears quietly and smoothly. If Tong wanted to throw in a few brief, on-street detours he could ride to the nearby community college, to his office, his favorite coffee shop or into downtown Irvine.

Today, though, a Sunday afternoon, Tong notices a group of large, beautifully tended vegetable patches alongside the path. "What's this?" he says. He hops off his bike to check out a sign someone put up next to the trail. It tells him he's stumbled across the Incredible Edible Garden, a community project whose crops feed the needy. Tong has lived in Irvine for five years, and he's just 10 minutes from his home, but he's never even heard of the Incredible Edible Garden.

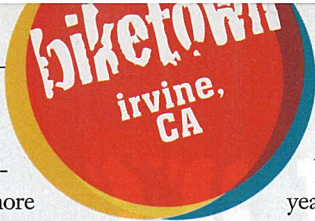
"Neat!" he says, as he looks around at the rows of plants. "Are those spinach?" After a minute or so, he hoists himself back into the saddle and continues pedaling along the bike path, one of 42 miles of off-road bikeways in this city of 172,000.

In 1888, James Irvine II, scion of a San Francisco gold-rush millionaire, rode his highwheeler from the Bay Area to San Diego, inspecting family ranchlands along the route. When the master-planned city of Irvine sprang up on those ranchlands in 1971 it celebrated the spirit of that bike ride. A design plan for the town devotes an entire chapter to the nascent trail system, calling it "the glue that can bind together the people and the facilities of Irvine." That utopian vision hasn't panned out perfectly. As in most American cities of decent size, especially those plagued by sprawl, a tiny portion of Irvine's citizens use bikes

photographed by Marc Jacquot



the kids' school—and kindergartener Rebecca (fourth from left) can go 12 mph, says mom Karen (third from right): "I've been measuring."



for transportation, and even fewer use the paths. Bill Sellin, a city employee who founded the 450-member Bicycle Club of Irvine—and who knows more about biking in Irvine than anyone—thinks the reason for his hometown’s failure to embrace cycling is no different than any other city’s: simple economics. “Until the price of gas gets prohibitive,” Sellin says, “people won’t realize what a great system we have.” Even with a cycling infrastructure in place, why don’t more people ride? Why can’t bike paths in a year-round cycling climate “bind together the people and the facilities” as dreamed?

A few days after Kevin Tong discovers the Incredible Edible Garden, Karen Kimball jumps onto her new Giant and pedals out of her neighborhood onto a different bike path. Unlike Tong’s shaded, neighborhoody trail, Kimball’s path is stark and feels exposed—to the sun, to the rain that leaves the puddles behind, even to the noise and exhaust of traffic on the adjacent 405 Freeway, which carries thousands of travelers each day from San Diego to Los Angeles and beyond.

NEIGHBORS WATCH FOR “THE BIKER BABES OF IRVINE,” WHO RING THEIR BIKE BELLS, WHOOP AND WAVE WHEN THEY

But Kimball doesn’t mind. Four of her five kids are waiting for her at their school, a couple of miles away. It’s time for their daily ride home, which, even if it is alongside a major interstate, beats cramming into a car. “You get the children outside, you get to ride next to them, from one kid to another,” enthuses the 39-year-old mother. “It’s a healthy lifestyle.” It’s also a money-saving lifestyle. Kimball estimates that the family saves \$50 a month on gasoline with this bike commute.

At the intersection of a large street, Kimball stops and walks her bike across. Back on the path, she pedals across part of Tong’s Incredible Garden route before a few turns take her to the parking lot of the Vista Verde School, where her kids sit and wait for her on a hillside. Stephen, 14, tinkers with a friend’s bike while Kathy, 11, secures a violin to her bike’s wire basket—a much easier

task than riding home with a cello strapped to her back, as she did last year. The two youngest, eight-year-old Cameron and five-year-old Rebecca, ride in circles and chat with classmates. (Amanda, 16, rides home from her high school separately, with a friend.)

With a simple command from Kimball, helmets go on and the kids streak away from school on the sidewalk. Kimball doesn’t let them ride on the street. Ever.

Once on the path, Stephen, Kathy and Cameron race ahead until they’re almost out of sight. The two boys steer through muddy pathside puddles and over grassy bumps. Kathy rides along, her violin jiggling in its basket. Kindergartener Rebecca huffs and puffs to keep up. Kimball doesn’t just let her kids ride ahead, she encourages them to; she knows they’ll stop at street crossings. She watches little Rebecca’s receding figure, pumping away furiously at the pedals.

“I’ve been measuring, now that I’ve got this,” Kimball says, pointing to the speedometer on her new bike. “That girl can ride 12 miles an hour.”

It’s 9 a.m. on a Monday, and Diane Shindler and her friends Ronna, Rita, Angela and Jacquie are sitting at Tully’s Coffee in Irvine’s Woodbridge Village, drinking celebratory cups of joe. They’ve just completed what’s come to be a beloved routine: an early-morning bike ride, somewhere between 10 and 15 miles, along the bike paths around the village’s two lakes.

When she first got her Giant, Shindler, 50, figured she’d ride alone. She wanted to lose weight. But she invited “the girls” to come along on one ride, and before long all of the women were hooked. Now they ride four days a week, taking a break on Wednesdays, bowling day.

“We finally found an exercise we enjoy,” Shindler says.

“And we wouldn’t have done it if we didn’t know Diane,” interrupts Angela. “Her one bike has affected so many people and—”



The Biker Babes of Irvine, led by BikeTown and pedal-proselytizer Shindler (center) take over their neighborhood four days a week.

Since he started exploring the bike paths, Tong has discovered a garden of delights just blocks from his home.



PEDAL PAST ON THEIR BELOVED MORNING RIDES AROUND THE LAKES. NOT JUST ANYBODY CAN RIDE WITH THEM.

"We're dying to do the ride to the Back Bay!" someone else interjects.

Another voice: "And we have to get our bike outfits!"

Neighbors watch for them; one fan put her front-porch Halloween scarecrow on a bike for the women's benefit, and when Shindler's pack pedaled past it they rang their bike bells, whooped and waved. The women have taken to calling themselves The Biker Babes of Irvine, a slogan they had printed on T-shirts. Shindler estimates that her group has ridden 750 miles—but they still stick to the paths as often as possible, avoiding the streets. "We're afraid of cars," Shindler says simply.

But the Biker Babes now face a serious dilemma: how to politely discourage some friends who want to join in but can't match the pace. The Biker Babes of Irvine can't ride with just anybody. As they drink their coffee this Monday morning, they shift awkwardly in their chairs and practice apologies.

"If they can't keep up, they can't ride with us," one of the women proclaims, with conviction.

When the BikeTowners received their bikes, back in July, Bill Sellin extended free memberships to anyone who wanted to join the Bicycle Club of Irvine, whose members take over the city's streets on most Saturdays, and pack auditoriums to hear monthly seminars on topics such as bike fit. Around 20 BikeTowners accepted Sellin's offer, but over the course of three months only two or three ever showed up for a Saturday ride. "I think they're a little intimidated by the helmets and the shoes and the skinny tires," Sellin says. "It's a lot of clicking pedals and fast riding." Also: BCI cyclists prefer open roads and on-street bike lanes (Irvine has 132 miles of marked lanes) over the off-street paths. "Mile for mile, on-road cycling is safer," says Sellin. The paths can get crowded with pedestrians, dogs and other slow-moving but erratic objects—such as kids pedaling home from school.

Kevin Tong refuses to ride with his city's premiere cycling organization. "I've seen those people with the jerseys and the drop-down handlebars," he says. "I'm not going with that group." Even Diane Shindler, now one of the most experienced of the BikeTowners, seems cowed. "Those are real bikers," she says.

So it's remarkable, as the BikeTown project officially winds down at the end of October, to see Shindler and her fellow Babe Jacquie standing together on a sidewalk in Irvine's Deerfield Park, waiting to head out on the BCI's legendary Saturday ride. Stephen Bonswor, 56, a retired cop using BikeTown to pedal away pounds and boredom, is also there. Malcolm Wing, a BikeTowner who's ridden with the club before, joins them, and finally Karen Kimball and her son Stephen show up as well, wearing the matching T-shirts they got when they competed in a mini-triathlon.

The BikeTowners don't exactly blend in—when BCI long-timer Carrol Lund asks which of them will lead the pink group, as the short-distance, slower riders are called, they all look at each other, sheepish and slightly confused. Same goes when Lund asks if anyone brought an extra tube. Eventually, Lund and his wife

step in to lead the newbie pack. The BikeTowners seem vaguely embarrassed about it all, as if it feels like being picked last for the kickball team, and then having to ask where first base is.

When the ride finally gets going, however, everyone loosens up. They start talking as they ride. They practice street-riding etiquette, try out hand signals. Wing pitches in to help when another rider gets a flat. Bonswor, who's bought fancy cycling shoes, starts to look like an old pro. After 19 miles the pack finishes together—bound together—and, in the last couple of miles, the BikeTowners even convince Lund to take a detour, onto a creekside, off-street bike path. ■

Retired bike-cop Bonswor helped the BikeTowners infiltrate the intimidating gang of "real cyclists" that ruled the city streets.

