

Sausalito swamped by sea of out-of-town bicyclists

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Sarah Oliver, 26, and Mark Nalder, 25, board the Golden Gate Sausalito Ferry with rental bikes. Ferries struggle to keep up with the demand from bicyclists.

Bicycles have made a huge impact on the Bay Area as thousands of people ride for fun, for work or just to see the sights, and the biggest impact has been just across the Golden Gate on the pretty little town of Sausalito, which is on the receiving end of a tidal wave on two wheels.

“No one really has good data, but I’d estimate the number of bikes passing through town has gone from 50,000 a year 10 years ago to 500,000 a year now,” said Edward Fotsch, a Sausalito physician who has become the town’s bicycle boom expert.

If that number is accurate — and various estimates suggest it’s close — those are more people on bikes in Sausalito than the entire population of Miami or Atlanta. And this in a town of just over 7,000 residents.

Bicycles everywhere

There are bicycles everywhere in downtown Sausalito: on the streets, in the parks, jammed up like steel sardines in bike parking lots. There are so many bikes on Alexander Avenue, the southern entrance to town, that residents can’t back out of their garages, or drive down the streets because sometimes bicyclists ride two and three abreast, like slow-moving caravans.

“I’m glad I don’t live in Sausalito,” said Andrew Zimmer, one of the town’s “bicycle ambassadors,” hired this summer through the city to deal with the onslaught.

There are two reasons for the bike boom. One is a big increase in recreational riders from all over the Bay Area. “Locals call them ‘the Spandex guys,’ ” Fotsch said. The other is old-fashioned marketing.

Bicycle rentals used to be a niche market in San Francisco’s tourist business. But a few years ago bike rental promoters came up with a new idea: to sell “Bike the Bridge” packages.

Attachment A

The idea is to rent a bike in San Francisco, ride over the Golden Gate Bridge to Sausalito, and take a ferry back. Bike rentals start at about \$30 a day, and a one-way ferry ticket to San Francisco is \$11.25. Cheaper than dinner and a movie. Healthy, too.

Jeff Sears, who runs San Francisco's Blazing Saddles, the biggest of the rental companies, was a bike-bridge pioneer. He began 30 years ago, took test rides over the Golden Gate and knew he was on to something. It was slow going at first. "Now," he said, "there are 17 different bike rental places just half a mile from my main outlet at the end of Hyde Street. And we own six of them."

The result is huge two-wheel traffic jams on the bridge, and so many bike passengers lining up at the Sausalito ferry landing that the boats can't handle them all. Three years ago, Golden Gate ferry carried 110,000 passengers a year to Sausalito. This year, the number is likely to top 200,000. Blue and Gold Fleet, which also runs a Sausalito service, has similar numbers.

The operators added more boats. Now there are 17 daily sailings to San Francisco, but each boat can carry only about 150 bicycles, and hundreds of bike passengers are being left behind at nearly every trip.

"There's more demand here than there is supply," said Wesley Caddell, who works as a bike attendant at the ferry landing. "It's crazy."

Last year was even worse. The ferries operated on a first-come-firstserved basis and the lines at the ferry landing were stupendous. "The wait was over two hours long, and here were these poor people, with kids, with bikes, tired and sunburned, in a big line. They were mad," Fotsch said.

Locals are steamed

Sausalitans were mad, too. "If the visitors were having a crappy experience, so were the locals," Fotsch said.

This spring, the City Council set up a Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee and a nonprofit called SausalitoPlus. The assignment was to fix the problem. Fotsch is the committee chairman, and his wife, Deb, is CEO of SausalitoPlus.

They hired a couple of dozen college students and some retired people to be "ambassadors" for the town. They greet cyclists at the city limits, hand out information, and even make bike ferry reservations for the riders. The program is financed by a \$3 bike valet parking charge.

It hasn't solved the problem, but it has made things a lot better. Tyrone Nation and his wife, Lisa, from Little Rock, Ark., were glad to get some free advice on where to ride in Marin and where to get a sandwich. The bridge, they said, was crowded, bikes mixed with people walking, but the ride was nice.

Jane Zuniga, a teacher from Las Vegas, rode her bike across the Golden Gate for the first time last week and had a long wait for the ferry, "But it was so beautiful," she said. "We saw some porpoises in the bay, and just before we got to Sausalito we saw a mother deer and two babies. It was one of the most amazing trips ever."