

ASCOBIKE, a Refuge for Cyclists

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The people of São Paulo go to great lengths to escape the city's gridlocked traffic, which produces 90% of the dense smog that veils the city from above. For the wealthy, a massive helicopter fleet rivaling that of New York City's transports commuters over traffic jams and slums. For others, a simpler, healthier alternative is growing in popularity – making São Paulo a city of bicycles.

In the São Paulo suburb of Mauá, a one-of-a-kind bicycle parking lot is becoming an oasis for cyclists. In Mauá's gritty pedestrian area near a train station, where popular Brazilian tunes blare from small shops selling juices and fried foods, the Association of Bicycle Riders, or ASCOBIKE, has carved out a refuge for residents who travel on two wheels.

"I save time and money using my bike," said Orlando Ribego Senna, a Mauá resident who rides the train to work in São Paulo. Senna used to spend a half an hour just getting to the train station. "With my bike, it takes me seven minutes to get to the station now," boasts Senna.

With a population of 10.9 million living within the city's limits, and 19 million people in the greater metropolitan region, São Paulo is the largest city in the Southern hemisphere and one of the five most populous in the world. Although the city government has recognized that increased cycling could benefit air quality, alleviate gridlock, reduce traffic deaths

and injuries and create a more equitable city, a significant network of bike lanes has not yet appeared, and the city's cyclists are forced to brave aggressive and deadly traffic.

ASCOBIKE was created in 2001 by Adilson Alcantâra, then the station manager at the Mauá station, when he noticed the passageways around the station had become obstructed by cycles locked to railings and posts. The original 700 spaces filled quickly, and with 1,800 current members and new people signing up everyday, the association is looking to expand.

For a ten Real (about \$US 5) monthly fee, ASCOBIKE members can park their bikes as well as receive regular maintenance. Members also have an area to change, wash up, and shine their shoes before getting on the train.

"People don't just park their bikes here, they hang out together, and on the weekend we have bike rides and barbecues," said Adilson. "No one values the bicycle [in São Paulo]; all of the road space is given to the car. Here we try to make the friendliest environment possible so that people feel good about using their bikes."

ASCOBIKE members can also save money. "The bike is

also about 80% cheaper than the bus," said Orlando Senna. "I would pay 120 Reais (about \$US 60) a month for the bus, and here I pay 10 Reais, giving me an extra 110 Reais per month." ♦



A typical day at the ASCOBIKE parking lot in Mauá – completely filled.