

# The Virtual commute

Commuters get to cycle every day, rain or shine, summer or winter. How lucky is that?! Having an office 20 yards from home isn't going to stop **Dave Barter** from joining in



**S**anctimonious. Smug. That's how the Clarksons of this world characterise commuting cyclists. They annoy me too. It's not that I don't agree with the idea that we should get out of our cars and onto our bikes. I know that cycling to work saves money, improves health, and clears the roads of traffic. I just have a problem with commuting. Like those who are retired or unemployed, I can't join in: I work from home.

About the best I could manage would be a 60 foot mountain bike ride to the shed at the bottom of the garden that has become my office. Maybe to add interest I could ride from the bedroom, 'huck' down the stairs and hone my trials skills as I dodge kids and cereal in the kitchen en route...

Things worsened when my lunchtime riding buddy, Rob, announced that our sessions were cancelled. He had decided to cycle to work instead. Through gritted teeth I congratulated him, particularly as it was the depths of winter. It was the final straw when I calculated that his 36-mile round trip would push his weekly training mileage way beyond mine. Not only was he to join the ranks of the sanctimonious, but he'd be doing me over on the summer rides as well.

I thought he was joking when he said: 'Dave, you could always join me. Why not become a virtual commuter?'

## **On your marks**

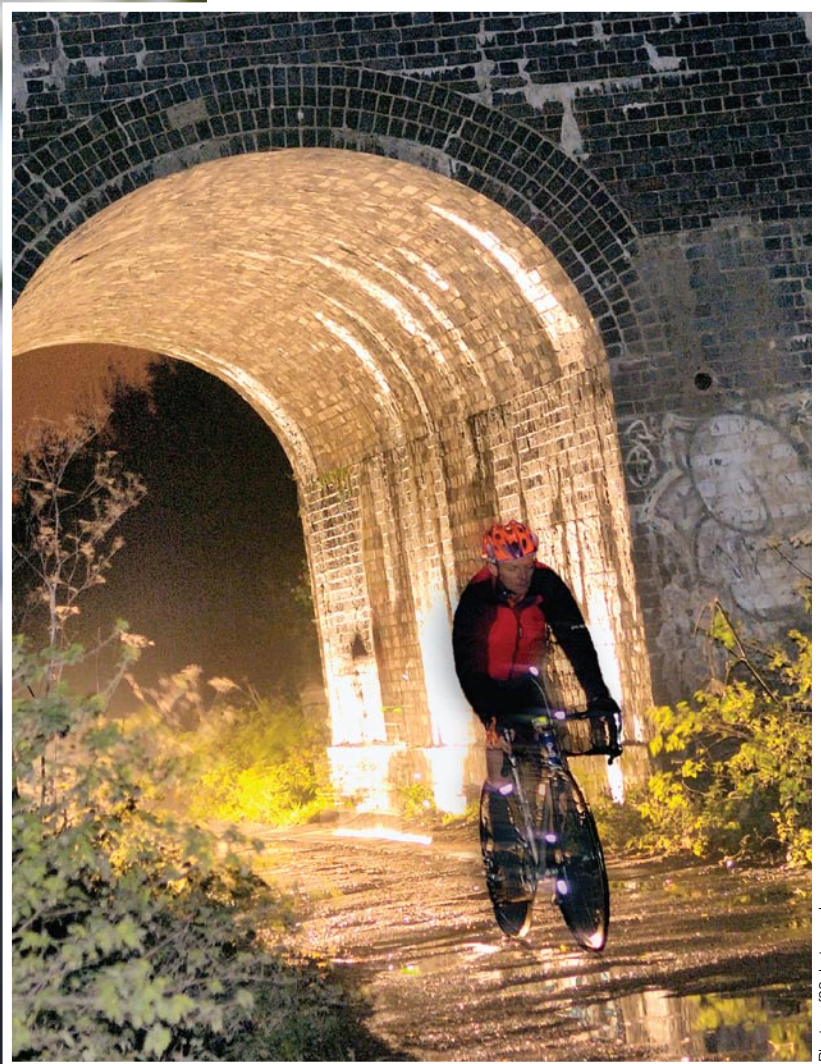
The plan was hatched. Rob's normal commute was an 18-mile journey to my home town. I would awaken early, mount the bike and cycle in the direction

of Rob's place. Meanwhile, Rob would wait until 8am and then set off. We would meet, I would turn round, and together we would cycle back. Rob would continue on to his office and I, the virtual commuter, would roll up at my own front door and report for duty. What could be simpler?

A lot, actually. The night before saw my frantic preparations. I started by strapping lights to my bike and siting it next to the front door. The virtual commuter would soon lose the support of his wife if the young children were awoken before the very last minute necessary to clothe, feed and herd them to school.

I collected a mound of cycle clothing and placed it strategically. Underwear and base layers by the bed, middle layers on the kitchen table, and helmet, gloves, shoes, coat and overshoes next to the bike. Pump, tube, tools, mobile phone and house keys were placed alongside the middle layers ready to be stuffed into pockets. Energy powder was carefully measured and mixed into my bottle, then mounted to the bike.

Then it started to get silly. I laid out my toothbrush, toothpaste and contact lenses. I put a cereal bowl and spoon on the table and, as an afterthought, stood a packet



Photos: i22p/photography

(Main photo) Dave jostles with the morning commuter traffic  
(Above) Leaving suburbia and heading out into the pre-dawn darkness

of Frosties next to them. I resisted the temptation to tear off the required lengths of toilet roll.

The final step: I set my alarm clock for 6.30am. It made a funny noise – I think it was the digital equivalent of ‘Are you sure?’ It hadn’t seen such an early hour in three years of home working.

And so to bed, and a hacking cough that saw me finally drift off at about 1am. A perfect start to my life as a virtual commuter.

### **Milk floats & morning light**

Morning came and I rolled out of bed, driven by the excitement of a pending new adventure. Resplendent in my lycra underwear I tiptoed down the stairs and rendezvoused with my breakfast apparatus. Swift calculated movements saw breakfast disappear, then my semi-nakedness, followed by my contact lenses down the back of a radiator...

I rapidly disintegrated into a maelstrom of picking up, putting down, clothing and unclenching. As I zipped up my final layer I caught a glance of my heart rate monitor strap. I had half a mind to leave it, but couldn’t face the small gap in my near perfect training log. Off and on came the clothes for the final time.

I left the house five minutes later than planned. I had an hour to do the 18 miles to Rob’s house. I flicked on the lights and headed into the dark of a winter morning. The virtual commute was on.

Cool fresh morning air rushed through my lungs straight to my senses. As I

skulked through my home town, I became aware of the indigenous creatures that populate the early morning. A postman struggling with a full bag of mail, a milk float blocking a car-laden street, dustmen slinging black sacks, and a spattering of early morning dog walkers trying to ignore the defecating canines attached to them by leads.

Orange lamplight and mist had repainted the streets and my regular escape route from town became suddenly unfamiliar. Gradually I slipped from suburbia and followed a steep hill under a railway bridge and into the dark. Here I learned the first lesson of the cycle commuter: my front light was entirely inadequate.

A thin pool of light in front of me failed to pick out the potholes and lumps in the road. I veered from left to right as hedgerows and corners rushed at me, and I desperately fought to keep control in the dazzling flood of full beam lights that streamed from approaching cars, only dipping at the last possible moment. I could not see and nor, apparently, could I be seen.

Lesson one: attach decent lights.

### **Commuter racing**

A motorway roundabout provided temporary respite as I was stopped by a traffic light and lit by a street lamp. I glanced down at my cycle computer: seven miles in 30 minutes. I was slow this morning, which surprised me. The dark had altered my perception of speed. At 7.30am the motorway was surprisingly busy. I allowed myself a private smile of sanctimony. The lights changed and I rekindled my fight with the headwind, on into another town.

There was no spectacular sunrise. Daylight snuck

## Virtual commuting's 10 commandments



**1) Always go first thing in the morning. Something will crop up and stop you from riding later on in the day. Can you remember the last**

**time the phone rang before 7am? Get out there before it starts ringing.**

**2) Ritual is everything. Prepare to go the night before and you'll go. Procrastinate and it will become too hard or too time consuming and your resolve will crumble.**

**3) Ensure the longevity of your virtual commuting career by leaving the house as quietly (and tidily) as possible. Waking your partner, housemates or relatives will earn their wrath.**

**4) Save a cheery smile for road users imprisoned within their cars. Remember that without them your feelings of sanctimony would be much reduced. Don't hector them either. The mantra of the virtual commuter should always be 'demonstrate, don't remonstrate'.**

**5) As with all rides, the things you leave behind are the things that'll catch you out. The worst punctures happen when the spare tube's at home and fully charged batteries discharge in direct proportion to the number of backups you've left in the kitchen.**

**6) Why not use a virtual commute as a means to stay in touch. Contact your friends within a ten-mile radius and virtual commute to a café midway.**

**7) If you can't get enough of your virtual commute, consider a career change. Cycle couriers and many postmen get paid to ride. Failing that, add a virtual commute at the end of your working day as well.**

**8) Remember to leave the bad habits of other commuters at home. These include: talking loudly into mobile phones; drinking overpriced lattes; actively ignoring your travel companions; smelling of aftershave; wearing odd socks; and pretending to complete crosswords that are way beyond your vocabulary.**

**9) Why not buy a new bike for your virtual commute? I'm sure your partner would fully understand and share with enthusiasm your justification of yet another pointless cycling-based purchase.**

**10) Remember that all virtual commutes should end in the shower. A virtual commuter should never be detectable by smell, only by the sanctimonious smile.**

"Slowly the darkness around me became grey. The noises of my bike were interspersed with bird song"

up on me. Slowly the darkness around me became grey. The groans of my poorly serviced bike were interspersed with bird song.

The bike and I creaked towards our halfway point. At last I reached a queue of traffic stopped at lights and mocked by unattended roadworks. I afforded each driver a cheery smile and glided to the front of the queue. A short sprint, in which I was probably the only conscious participant, saw me cross the roadworks first to bag the first prime of day.

A few miles further I reached the midpoint of my ride. Rob had left on the dot and I met him a few miles from his house. I turned in the road and took a deep suck on Rob's rear wheel.

As is always the case with any rider I meet up with, Rob was better prepared than me. His bike sported a set of powerful lights. It was well oiled and looked clean. I spotted no holes in his kit and he'd even had a shave. I maintained the facade of some friendly banter as I secretly willed pieces to peel off his bike.

We retraced my route at what felt like double the speed, driven by the wind behind us and that unspoken agreement that spurs two riders to increase their pace faster than that of one. The traffic jams had become more profound but were easily skirted by confident cyclists. All too soon I was close to home and waving Rob 'goodbye' as he turned off towards his office.

### Ready for work

It felt strange to turn the key in my own front door at nine o'clock in the morning. The house was quiet, devoid of children and smelling of breakfast. I changed, showered and then sat with a coffee to reflect upon my commute.

I'd covered 32 miles and the clock said 9:15. I had a complete day ahead of me, without the interruption of a lunchtime ride or evening turbo training session. I felt tired, but a motivated kind of tired. No, I'll be honest, I felt the fatigue of the sanctimonious. I was tired, but I'd earned the right to be tired, and that sort of tired felt good. I was ready for the day ahead. If you understand that, then you probably cycle-commute already.

My virtual commute may seem entirely pointless. It doesn't save a car journey and I'd have ridden the miles at lunchtime anyway. Yet after it I had one of the most productive day's work in a long while. And so I'll continue. Not every day, mind: 32 miles is a fair distance and I'm sure that a percentage of my motivation was delivered by novelty. But I'm definitely doing it at least once next week, and maybe the week after. And we'll see about the week after that.



The virtual commuter doesn't need to carry work clothes or a packed lunch, so can travel light on any kind of bike