

Which is Faster across LA? Car, Scooter, Bicycle, Motorcycle?

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CTXP across L.A.: Motorcycles are like 40% off your commute
[Ari Henning](#)

Nov 15, 2024

Los Angeles is infamous for having some of the worst traffic in America. According to the [TomTom Traffic Index Ranking](#), in 2023 Angelinos spent an average of 86 hours extra hours in their cars due to traffic over the course of the year. That's more time in congestion than most people get for paid time off.

We only have so many days on this planet (about 28,000), so wouldn't it be great if there was a coupon you could apply to save some of those wasted hours?

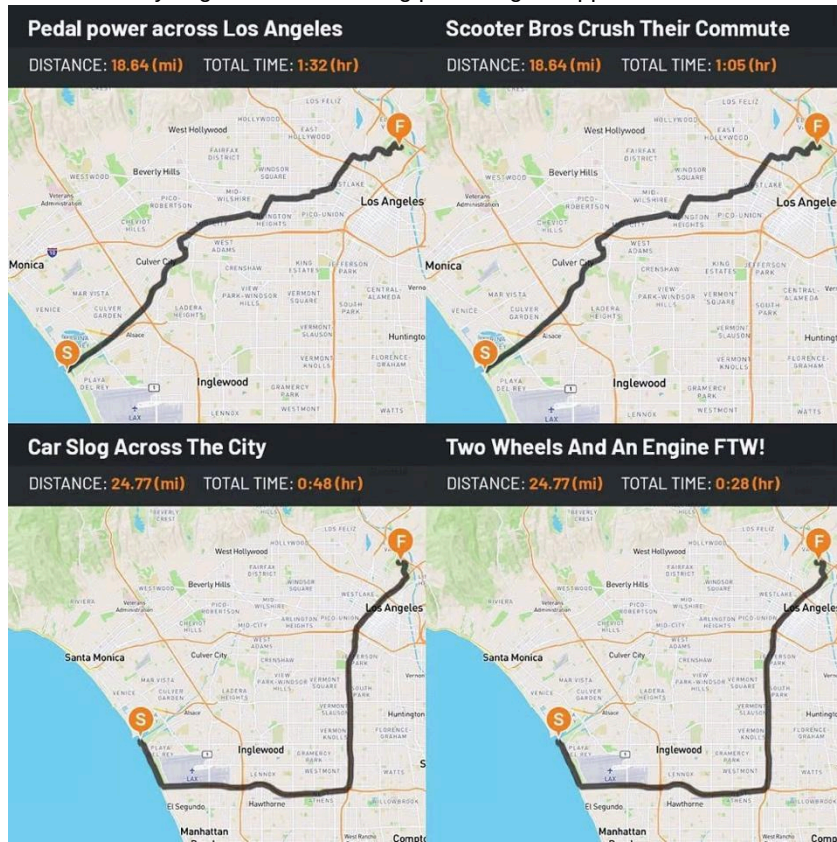
There is, and it takes the shape of a motorcycle. It doesn't matter if it's a 200-horsepower supercharged Kawasaki Z H2 or a clapped out 20-horsepower Honda CBR250R, two wheels and an engine can shave 40% off your traffic sentence here in L.A.



The "freedom machine" epithet is even more apt in Los Angeles, where the ability to lane filter frees you from the constraints of traffic. Photo by Chris Force.

Those of us who live and ride in the City of Angels already know that motorcycles are a huge life hack that applies to everything from commuting to parking, but for our latest episode of CTPX (video below) we decided to quantify our subjective experiences. And in order to get perspective, we needed to compare motorcycles to some of the other ways L.A.'s 3.9 million people get around.

We settled on bicycles, electric scooters, a car, and motorcycles, and established an 18.5-mile route that spanned from the Pacific Ocean in Marina Del Rey to the hills above Dodger Stadium just north of downtown Los Angeles. Then, over the course of four days, we tackled the same trip during morning traffic (which is actually a continuation of the previous night's traffic, which is an extension of that afternoon's traffic, and so on and so forth). Here's the abstract: Cycling is feasible in L.A. thanks to abundant bike lanes and beautiful weather, but it's a slow roll (1:32:37 to complete our route). Bike lanes are also accessible to electric scooters, which are quicker (1:05:07) and a lot less calorie-intensive. The quiet, climate-controlled, self-driving world of a Tesla Model Y is faster still (0:48:42), but even luxury cages are a frustrating place to get trapped in traffic.



Motorcycles are clearly the fastest way across L.A., and we're confident our test results will apply to any other city you can think of, assuming you can lane filter. RevZilla illustration.

Which brings us to the reason we all come to Common Tread — motorcycles. In our test they were the most expedient (0:28:15), with none of the effort of a bicycle, range anxiety of a scooter, or captivity of a car. Compared to how the overwhelming majority of Angelinos get around — in a car — the motorcycles represent a massive 42% time savings.



What's the best way to get across Los Angeles? Riding a motorcycle is like getting a 40% off coupon for your commute. RevZilla illustration.

We may have been on a couple of wickedly fast machines, but outright speed has little to do with why motorcycles are such a silver bullet. It boils down to the fact that when you encounter traffic, you can use the motorcycle-sized space between lanes to keep moving. And therein lies the fine print on the back of this 40% off coupon: California is one of just six states that allow lane filtering.



Filtering to the front of traffic at stop lights is a safe and highly effective way to save time. One piece of advice: Stay one or two cars back from the very front of the line so you're protected from opposing traffic. RevZilla photo.

Here on the mean streets of L.A., slipping through traffic is a superpower akin to The Flash phasing through walls. It means that when you roll up on a sea of brake lights and the cars around you slow or stop, you don't have to. It means moving to the front of the line at lights instead of watching the signal cycle from the back of a column of cars. There's no reasonable way to avoid traffic and congestion in L.A., but on a motorcycle, at least you can avoid sitting in it.

This two-wheeled coupon does more than just save time, it can save your spirit. In a car, traffic is your captor. On two wheels, you can always exercise your free will. That autonomy is liberating, and makes you feel empowered to control your own destiny instead of being subject to the will of a city that can feel like it's trying to crush you.



Los Angeles International Airport is a snarl, day or night. But there's a cheat code. Ride your motorcycle and you can split lanes all the way to your free parking spot directly across from your gate. There's literally no better, faster way to fly. Photo by Ari Henning.

You might not live in an urban area where lane filtering would make a difference, but [more than half of the world's population does](#). Getting this 40% off coupon to apply to other cities is the challenge. Luckily, as Dustin reported in [this recent article](#), five states have passed lane-filtering legislation in the last five years, suggesting there's a groundswell of interest, and dare I say support, for the idea of lane filtering. Want to take 40% off your congested commute, but don't live in a state that allows lane filtering? One way you can help is by joining the [American Motorcyclist Association](#), which lobbies on behalf of motorcyclists nationwide.

Reader comments:

- [Mark Gardiner 15 days ago](#) edited

I think another key observation is that while motorcyclists willing to filter/lane split get where they're going a lot faster, everyone in cars gets there at least a little faster, because each motorcycle takes another car out of the traffic column. Also, m/cs don't usually take up a whole car spot at their destination, meaning many car drivers' door-to-door time is further reduced.

Having commuted between San Diego and LA for a few years, I've spent many hours closely observing traffic flow, and before readers scoff at the notion that a few motorcycles could measurably speed car traffic, I'll point out that the difference between free-flowing traffic and frustrating stop-and-go traffic is the addition or subtraction of a very small percentage of cars. This was vividly demonstrated to me one weekday when I got all the way into Motorcyclist's death star office tower on Wilshire Boulevard without even needing to lane-split.

That was freakishly good traffic flow for Orange Co./LA. The explanation: it was a Jewish high holiday (sorry don't recall which one). Jews account for 7% of LA County pop'n and 17.5% of City of LA pop'n. Make your own guess about how many observant Jews stayed home, but if we say that there was 5% less traffic entering the city, that was enough to essentially eliminate a normal rush hour. Years earlier, I observed something similar when a federal civil servant strike in Canada meant that one building in downtown Calgary was unexpectedly empty. Again, representing only a few % of commuters pulled from the traffic column and again, essentially no rush hour.

Math, eh? Who knew it could be relevant?

[Fabian Mark Gardiner 14 days ago](#)

You also see that effect when you have school holidays.

[PA observer Mark Gardiner 15 days ago](#) edited

Let's call it the exponential impact of a small reduction in traffic volume, that was the highlighted outcome of 2012 Belgium study. Of course, that begs the question, is it an issue of just adding some two wheel vehicles or getting people out of large 4-wheelers into something smaller.

In my area, outside of a few college towns, I wouldn't expect to see the relative number of cars shown in this article's leading picture. The SuperDuty Pick-up with Dualies and a construction trailer is typical, typical. And, by the way, they can be going really fast, and in your lane, at the end of the day. So, keep that in-mind when planning your outside-inside-outside path for that next curve.

[Peter Swinton PA observer 13 days ago](#)

Just curious, have you read the actual Belgian study, or lane split and/or filtered where it is legal and part of the local culture? As Ari says, drivers mostly learn and make it work for motorcycles, which improves traffic for everyone. I've filtered and split in Europe, and read the full study, and at no point did I think that either would lead you to believe that substituting motorcycles with smaller cars would have any benefit.

[PA observer Peter Swinton 12 days ago](#)

Yes, I have read the Belgian study. A copy in the directory where I keep a library of safety related papers and articles. The foundational hypothesis of the Belgian modeling effort is a variable space footprint for the MC which shrinks as traffic speed slows. It's analogous to a theoretical variable viscosity fluid passing thru a screen/filter. Reduce the viscosity of the fluid (i.e., the footprint of the MC) and more fluid will flow thru the screen/filter. If other vehicles (cars) were smaller and allowed the same freedom to fill all available road width, you would get the same result.

[Peter Swinton PA observer 12 days ago](#)

Firstly, as I'm sure you have heard, both cars and trucks in Europe (including Belgium) are already smaller than in North America.

Secondly, the viscosity argument only accounts for a small amount of the 40% improvement. The study points out that once the traffic slows enough that motorcycles lane split, and when motorcycles filter to the front, their traffic footprints effectively become "0". That's where the bulk of the 40% improvement comes from. That effective disappearance of a portion of traffic is also why with proportionately more motorcycles and less cars, traffic jams recover quicker. Even if everyone was driving a Smart Car, this benefit wouldn't occur because Smart Cars can't filter.

[PA observer Peter Swinton 12 days ago](#)

Commercial truck width in Europe is 2.6m or 102".....same as the US. In Germany, heavy Combination trucks can be 25.25m (83-ft), but in other countries combo trucks are limited to 18.75m (61.5-ft). As for lane width, the German federal standard for the Autobahn is 12.3-ft vs our 12-ft.

As for the footprint discussion....."0" means the motorcyclist has no width and requires no clearance relative to the other traffic. That "may be" possible, with the conceptual 250cc MC assumed in the Belgian study, most bikes I know of are ~32" wide at the bars/mirrors or nearly a meter at the bags (if they have them).

If three or four Smart or similar cars could share two lanes, you would get a similar result. You seem fixated on the concept that all vehicles, but MCs, should stay in their lanes. Once you eliminate that artificial restriction, everyone has the freedom to fill the roadway width.

[Peter Swinton PA observer12 days ago](#)

The Belgian study is based on their laws, which allows motorcycles and scooters to split, but not cars. Length in a lane is the governing factor, not width. When a motorcycle is splitting beside a car, it has no effective length from a traffic perspective.

[PA observer Peter Swinton12 days ago](#)

You're wrong on the PCE used in the Belgian study.

Page 19 of the report

"Car equivalent (PCE) of the motorcycle"

"When there is little traffic on the road, it can be expected that motorcycles will take up as much space on the road as cars. A motorcycle then has a PCE value of 1. However, when the road becomes busier, and the speed of the traffic flow falls, motorcycles take up less space. Some motorcycles keep less distance from the vehicle in front or ride between two lanes. The passenger car equivalent of the motorcycle is consequently reduced. When traffic comes to a complete standstill, it can be assumed that all motorcycles drive between two lanes. In this case, the motorcycle has a PCE value of 0."

[Peter Swinton PA observer12 days ago](#)

Thank you for including the study quote which proves exactly what I said.

[PA observer Peter Swinton12 days ago](#)

Anything you say

[Mark Gardiner PA observer14 days ago](#)

I think it's getting vehicles out of the traffic column and into the interstitial spaces between lanes. I doubt if the same number of smaller cars would travel much faster than hulking SUVs and "open-carry" pickups. As many experiments have shown, it's the accordion effect of vehicles speeding up and slowing down that eventually causes the system to crash.

Interesting thought experiment next time you're in miles of stop and go traffic: Ask yourself, If we could magically accelerate this traffic column to 75 mph, would it be safe? Answer: Yes, because as you speed up the traffic column, the cars stay the same length, but the gap expands to fill the available time.

IE, imagine you're inching along and the guy in front of you finally moves far enough for you to put your front bumper at the spot where his was even two seconds earlier. (A rate of one car per lane every two seconds is far from a standstill.) At 75 miles per hour, 2s separation is... 220 feet!

[PA observer Mark Gardiner14 days ago](#)

It is an accordion effect, but the filtering approach also relies on the MC accelerating away from the stopped slower traffic. If the power to weight factor wasn't there, you would just have one blob of traffic moving from each stop light to the next.

When you mention the stopping distance, be it a two or four second rule, that time needs to include your time to observe and then react. After that your brake distance is going to be the same as other vehicles, if you use proper technique. I use one second at 60mph equals a tractor trailer plus 15ft.

[Jack Meoph 15 days ago](#)

I've lane "shared" for decades now. The only time I was under any threat of accident or injury was when someone tried to cut me off (because it's not fair..whaaaaaa). Getting to the front of the queue at a light and then leaving that cluster of cars behind is one of the safest things you can do when riding an MC. Yes, I've seen the bike thugs who filter at speeds that are unsafe and stupid, but most ppl who filter are usually going 5-10 mph faster than what the traffic is moving at. It's absurd and counterproductive not to have lane filtering as a universal rule to reduce traffic congestion and commute times across the nation.

[DickRuble Jack Meoph15 days ago](#)

Filtering is safe only if there are no knuckleheads in traffic. I've been sworn at, cut off, and squeezed out the lane for doing it. And that was in a progressive east coast city. It's not worth it. It suffices for one idiot to hit you..

[Ari Henning](#) [DickRuble15 days ago](#)

My experience was similar when I first came to CA nearly two decades ago, but nowadays everyone is used to it, nobody tries to squeeze you, and some people even move over to give you more space. There's certainly a learning curve and a (potentially long) uptake period for riders and drivers alike, but it's become pretty symbiotic here in Los Angeles.

GMoney [Ari Henning14 days ago](#)

Have you ever been in an accident or with someone who has, while legally lane splitting? Also, does CA have good data breaking down MV accident categories? We hear helmet stats, OVI stats, high hazard intersections stats etc. That may be a great project for Spurge to work on during his office season.

[PA_observer](#) [GMoney14 days ago](#) edited

Many states are creating crash data dashboards to visualize MC crash data. Here in PA, it called the Pennsylvania Crash Information Tool (PCIT) and MC data was the first dataset to be functional. It spans data from 2004 to 2023.

<https://crashinfo.penndot.pa.gov/PCIT/dataVisualDashboard.html>

Caltrans has a site, but you have to register to use it,

<https://shsp.dot.ca.gov/>

[SuperDuperDoughnut](#) [DickRuble15 days ago](#)

That can be said about riding in general; it's only as safe as the drivers around you. Sure, does filtering and lane splitting open up some new scenarios/opportunities? Yeah, but it also closes other ones. I call it a wash, and most safety studies tend to do so too.

[dracphelan](#) [16 days ago](#)

On my last business trip to LA, I pointed out lane filtering as the reason I wanted to rent a motorcycle for myself instead of sharing a rental car with my boss. We were sitting still on the freeway as motorcycles filtered past us.

[Stravoxylo73](#) [dracphelan16 days ago](#)

A past LA trip I was smiling in my helmet, lane splitting in line with a CHP officer. As a past NYC commuter, where the rider-LEO relationship is "frosty", it was a treat!

[Lookin-Kool](#) [Stravoxylo7315 days ago](#)

Rode in NJ 1972 until 1988, never got a break from a LEO and pulled over at random. If the lights came on you're getting a ticket. Moved to California, have had a couple of roadside chats when deserved, but never written up once! California Dreaming indeed...

[Jack Meoph](#) [Stravoxylo7315 days ago](#)

If you can "get a tow" from a LEO on an MC, it pretty sweet.

[Greg Steffensen](#) [dracphelan15 days ago](#)

I borrowed Ari's Versys once on my first time ever in LA, and started going northwards on the 105 when a Ducati invited me to "play" before taking off at like 85mph ahead of me -- that quadruple line between the HOV and regular traffic lanes is basically a free motorcycle lane and you can semi-safely do some speed on it well beyond the usual recommendation 5-10mph over. Though, uh, I don't necessarily recommend playing with the local wildlife

[Matthew](#) [14 days ago](#)

I have commuted via motorcycle from Los Feliz to Santa Monica for ~13 years now. I calculated a total time savings of roughly 4200 hours in that time. This doesn't consider other benefits like savings on fuel (compared to my 4runner lol) and parking. Although, I do go through tires much more frequently than on a car.

[neanderthal](#) [Matthew12 days ago](#)

Northridge to Burbank. Beneficial in multiple ways.

[Stravoxylo73](#) [16 days ago](#)

Looking forward to the CTXP episode!

Thanks to an easy commute, I don't usually have an opportunity or need to lane split. Many years ago, I had the opportunity and I split lanes often. I live in a state where it is not legal to lane split. In the last 20 years I've been stopped once for this. I consider it a bargain for the many hours saved. So much of the world successfully employs lane splitting, that it's so frustrating that America can't get on board. It should be legal across the USA.

[Mr. Bond Stravoxlyo7315 days ago](#)

There's a lot of thingsThere's a lot of things that we don't do here. You should hear the complaining in my area that we're putting traffic circles in. They work well in Europe. They work well in other parts of the United states, particularly New England. But I live on the board of the Rust Belt where people believe nothing should ever change and things shouldn't change unless people are comfortable with it already. We live in the land of status quo. At least that's the way it is in some parts of the country

[PA_observer Mr. Bond14 days ago](#)

Having attended a few public meetings, some of which included the much-feared roundabout, I'm glad I spent my life working in a field of engineering that didn't seek public comment.
Public Meeting: The Constitutional right to express opinions without knowledge of the topic.

[DickRuble Mr. Bond14 days ago](#)

But we have 4-way stops. Europe will never have that...

[Dickie McGeezacks16 days ago](#)

Ari just popped the choke and pulled the cord on PA_Observer...
(Not sure how much only an 'Observer' you are if you have replied to every single Common Tread article for the last 4 years, but that's besides the point)

[PA_observer Dickie McGeezacks16 days ago](#) edited

This is just a demonstration of what was modeled in the 2012 study by the Belgian consultancy Transport & Mobility Leuven. Whether or not lane filtering / splitting will increase average MC travel speed (the inverse of travel time) thru congested traffic is as relevant as questioning whether low or high viscosity oil will flow faster thru an orifice. The challenge for the driving, riding and pedestrian users of our highways (which includes side and crosswalks) is what are the rules of the road? What is my lane or right-of-way? Who is at fault in the multitude of various traffic interactions? Do CA rules apply to CO, ID or MN? Filtering and Splitting or just Filtering? Whenever these "legal" questions are poorly defined (vague), property damage and medical expense will likely be shared, inviting litigation. As they say in Pittsburgh.....Time to call Edgar.
Proceed with caution and understand that you, as the MC rider have minimal physical or legal protection. You are intentionally placing yourself in a condition of reduced space and time cushion relative to other vehicles with non-, or poorly, defined lane width for your path of travel.

[SuperDuperDoughnut PA_observer15 days ago](#)

Do CA rules apply to CO, ID or MN?
Is this an honest question?

[neanderthal SuperDuperDoughnut12 days ago](#)

It's a red herring to distract from the poor argument.

[WM Lawlor PA_observer15 days ago](#)

Agreed on the caution. Seems the risk factor goes way up when you ride in a non-lane--between car drivers of doubtful concentration. But I hope you all stay safe. Truly.

[Tom P. PA_observer15 days ago](#)

I've visited my sons (who both ride) in and around San Francisco and have lane split there on rented bikes. If traffic is stopped or just creeping along it's useful and time saving. However, I've witnessed a lot of splitting at higher speed that seemed like a death wish. I'm surprised it's allowed at all over 5 mph.

[airhead4890 Tom P.14 days ago](#)

If you follow the CHP guidelines it is quite safe. There is no obligation to lane split on a bike. The study used by the CHP on assessing lane splitting rated it 30% as effective as wearing a helmet in reducing fatalities. One of my motorcycles is air cooled with a dry clutch so I greatly appreciate lane splitting.

[neanderthal 15 days ago](#)

Rode little125cc UJMs back in the stone ages for a job I had in Africa. I was only there for 3 months.
Picked up riding again in 2016 and bought myself an Africa Twin. As my first bike. Picked up the bike (in a crate) on Monday, registered it on Tuesday, and Friday as I was riding on the east bound 210, I was passed by a couple of bikes who were lane splitting. This particular section of the 210 (in Pasadena, some where near Lake Blvd) there is a wide demarcation between the carpool and #1 lane. When a Goldwing, went gliding by serenely, I figured I could do it too.

Once I got over the initial trepidation (hadn't ridden in 25 years, this was my first bike, it was NOT a cheap bike, and I had put a lot of money down, that late afternoon/ evening commute is brutal) I realised that I was going to be a daily rider. The bike was supposed to be a weekend thing, but it became an essential tool for my commute. I still daily an Africa Twin here in north Texas even though lane splitting is explicitly banned. I still lane split if traffic is very heavy, but my normal daily routing rarely has me stuck in traffic.

[tbq 10 days ago](#)

Rented Aprilias in Italy with my buddy. Filtering at every stop light. Cars in line for toll booths just pull way over and let you by in their lane. 150kph past slower Italian police, waving at us and giving thumbs up!
Will Never Forget It.

[tomek hohn 14 days ago](#)

Here's an aspect that gets mentioned a lot for helmet laws and not for lanesplitting - what about adherence to the law?

in Boston, NYC, and most other congested cities, people lane split whether its legal or not, and cops do not ticket for it because it happens so often.

I'll admit, as someone that lives in downtown Boston, I lane split despite it not being legal, and it saves so much time wherever I go.

I think the big thing is that since it is legal in CA, everyone driving cars takes more care to make space and keep alert for bikes, something that doesn't happen in cities where its not legal.

If its going to be done regardless, then all legalizing lane splitting is doing is making people in cars more aware, and keeping bikers safe.

Similar to helmet laws, it seems like an easy decision to make, as long as we can all agree that the goal is making motorcycling safer, not arguing for the sake of arguing

[PA_observer tomek hohn14 days ago](#)

I don't think there's any info saying filtering is safer. Perhaps, not more dangerous seems to be the statement from CHIP. So, comparing Filtering and helmet laws tends toward the claim, by some, that helmets don't make you safer. So, they can be eliminated. Which many states have done.

[tomek hohn PA_observer12 days ago](#)

what I'm saying is that in a world where lane splitting will happen regardless, then legalizing it will make the public more aware and less likely to drive a rider off the road for it, I never said its safer overall, but its a very easy to see why awareness of lanesplitting = safer motorcyclists

[Scarab PA_observer13 days ago](#)

What is ironic is that the states with NO helmet laws also do not allow lane-splitting, generally. Wearing a helmet and having excellent riding skills, constantly sharpened, is a better way to ensure one's longevity, no?

[Harry Haller14 days ago](#) edited

The only reason I'm able to live in LA is thanks to my motorcycle. If I had to be solely dependent on a car for everything here, I simply would not live here. I couldn't do it. I do not have the patience to sit in traffic for 2hrs each way to go 5 miles. It's no surprise to me at all that people are shooting each other out there in road rage incidents. It's too much. You don't have to kill people, just get motorcycle!

[M.A. 15 days ago](#)

Though slower I'd argue the bicycle gets you a longer life. Until you factor in the lack of US infrastructure then it's the opposite.

Lane filtering legal all over the UK though, and MT made it legal 2022, I moto commute but I am the odd one who finds my bicycle commute more fun.

[Greg Steffensen M.A.15 days ago](#)

I actually commute on my bicycle more than my motorcycle -- I live about 1.5 miles from my job, and on a couple decent bike lanes, so I can get out of my building and to the bike rack before my W650's carbs would even be properly warmed up! The W is like 90% for pleasure riding. I think riding a bicycle so often does help keep me sharp on the moto, though

[M.A. Greg Steffensen14 days ago](#)

Not to mention all the gear required. For me here theft is high enough where it's 10+ minutes taking both locks off, cover, and squeezing it(versys 650) past our car. Versus the bicycle which is just hop and go. absolutely couldn't agree more. I think there is alot to be gained by pedaling which translates to better bike handling, road preception, and potentially shedding more then the 13lbs on the gs1300 while being significantly cheaper.

[Yossarian M.A.15 days ago](#)

Same here. I find it easier to do my errands (groceries, commute, etc.) on a bicycle (or public transit), rather than a motorcycle, particularly as bicycling infrastructure as slowly improved in my city. Totally understand that choice isn't possible in a lot of places, but it feels great to be able to do it and I get exercise in at the same time.

Full Name[13 days ago](#)

We've all heard how our friend/coworker/internet commenter complains about the long commute.

The solution is right there. Just ride a motorcycle.

Then the excuses come down like a waterfall:

- It's too dangerous

Listen, how much do you value your time? I value it enough to risk my life over it. There's no way in hell I'm sitting in a car for 2 hours when the alternative (motorcycle) cuts that down to 15 minutes.