



Getting to most of Paris’ *Vélib* self-service bicycle rental system during your apartment stay



A FREE REPORT BY A LA CARTE PARIS

by Alex Wagner, founder and director of
A la carte Paris apartments : <http://www.alacarteparis.com>
and *A la carte Invest* : <http://www.alacarte-invest.com>

© 2010 Alex Wagner and A la carte Paris

Don't worry.

You're not alone in finding the Vélib system a bit bewildering.

Vélib – the name combines “vélo” (bicycle) and “liberté” (freedom) – is a clever and virtually free self-service bicycle rental system. If you've rented one of our Paris apartments since 2007, you will have seen these rather smart looking neo-retro khaki-grey bikes cruising around, going straight through red lights, the wrong way down one-way streets and weaving in and out of pedestrians on sidewalks. You can chalk this jolly mayhem down to the Parisian's love of rule bending.

The idea is simple: grab a bike at any of the many stations dotted every 100m around Paris, ride to your destination and drop off at whatever station is convenient - there are 5 Vélib stations to every metro station, so there would be one next to your Paris apartment rental.

I still remember when the program was first rolled out in the closing of the summer of 2007: it was an instant hit. Hip urbanites were the early adopters and bike riding, an activity once relegated to idealistic fools and old men in berets, was suddenly utterly cool. Smart men in suits, effortlessly chic women and teenagers in strategically worn jeans all proudly sailing through traffic, hair flowing in the wind. Because, of course, no one wears a helmet - that would mess one's hairdo.

So to recap: now thousands of people are willingly taking their lives into their hands every day, riding through crazy traffic on bikes, helmet-less. And what's more, they look like they are having fun!



So what's the big appeal? Well, I think our Paris apartment rental clients really need to try it to understand. When they're working (more on that later), the bikes themselves have a nicely hefty, well-oiled feel. Plus, on a bike looking like a 1950's vision of the future, you become part of the Parisian glamour.

But it's the freedom that really does it. Plot your own course from your apartment, drink in the sights on the way, improvise a quick stop-off en route, and drop your bike mere meters from your destination. The moment you mount that saddle, you cease to be a slave to public transportation. How can being hemmed into a smelly noisy sardine can of a metro car compete with the wind-in-the-hair romance of Vélib?

Almost all journeys take less than 30 minutes (it takes a leisurely 10 minutes to cycle from the Musee d'Orsay to the Eiffel Tower, for example), and instead of popping up at the sights like a touristy mole, you discover all the hidden attractions in between.

Sadly, many people refuse to try because of the nature of Paris traffic. Put Parisians in cars and these usually mild individuals morph into a hoard of manic-aggressive lunatics, seemingly intent of gaining a few seconds of trip time at the expense of everyone else's safety. That being said, this aggressive behaviour is largely bravado and is little more than a show of intimidation. The truth is that Paris is surprisingly cycle-friendly, and bicycling is statistically the second-least-dangerous way to get around the city (after the bus). You're probably just as likely to break a leg slipping on the parquet floors in your Paris apartment! Most large roads have bike lanes, and since the introduction of the Velibs, many cyclists have noted that drivers have become more conscious of their presence.



Alas, there are a few drawbacks to keep in mind...

- The biggest issue for our American and Australian apartment rental clients is that, for now at least, the system requires a smart-chip equipped credit card. All French cards have a chip, but you'll have to make sure you bring your chip-equipped Amex or Visa, if you have one, or you'll be left out in the cold. At least one card can be used to sign up several individuals staying in the same apartment.
- The pricing structure discourages prolonged riding. The first half-hour is free, the 2nd is 1€, the 3rd 2€, and one thereafter is a steep 4€. This is meant as an incentive for the Vélib to be used merely as a way of getting from A to B, and discourages people from keeping bikes attached while they run their errands. What this means for you is that if you want to ride around Paris all day, you're probably better off renting a bicycle from a rental shop (you'll get a helmet, too). There is a workaround however: the trick is to have a sightseeing break every 30 mins maximum. Drop your Vélib at a station and

you'll be able to grab one again just 5 minutes later. When you get back to your apartment, you return your bike to a station.

- The Vélib bikes don't always operate as designed. By and large, the system is well maintained (quite a feat considering the 20.000 bikes are seldom left standing), but you'll have your fair share of niggles, the worst of which will have you aborting your trip and swapping your bike for another.
- The natural flow of people from A to B is rarely perfectly symmetrical. Depending on the location of your Paris apartment and the time of day, you'll either have more cyclists coming or going at any given station. The resulting imbalance leads inevitably to a patchwork of stations that are either empty or full. To be fair, the city service has a fleet of special trucks that cart Velibs away from the popular destinations and towards the popular starting points. While this does largely negate the problem, you'll still have the frustration of riding to a full station and having to either wait around for a slot to free up or cycle along to the next station in the hope of finding a free slot.



Vélib insider tips & tricks:

- The heavily subsidized Vélib system is almost free of charge. You can get a subscription for 1 day (1€) or 7 days (5€).
- The system is entirely automated and operates 24/7.
- To sign up, you need a smart chip equipped credit card. As well as paying the small fee for your subscription, this is to ensure that you return the bicycle (failing which you will be charged 150€).
- When you sign up at the automated stand (English language is available), you'll be delivered a small card with your access code. This, together with the 4-figure security code that you'll be prompted for, enables you to use the system for the duration of your subscription (1 day or 1 week).

- You'll see many people grabbing bikes with a magnetic swipe card, without having to manually register their access number every time, as you do. These are annual subscriptions which the locals opt for (at 29€ / year) and have integrated into their annual transport passes. Clever, but not practical for you as a short term apartment renter.
- The stands to which you attach the bicycles have an indicator light. Red means inoperable, green means available. When you drop off your bicycle, the indicator will show yellow for a few seconds, before turning green (together with a confirmatory beep). As a precaution you should always wait until the indicator light turns green, as otherwise your bike isn't properly attached and the system will think you're still riding it, debiting you accordingly every half hour. In the very rare instances when the light fails to go green despite the bike being properly attached, you must call the Vélib hotline indicated on the central pillar. Especially if you've just arrived at your Paris apartment for a long time.
- Each bike comes with a clever lock system, so that you can tie the bike to a pillar or railing which you pop into a shop on an errand. This works by taking the anti-theft cable from the front basket, looping it around the pillar you want to attach the bike to, and inserting it in the hole recessed next to the big central magnetic clasp used to attach the bike to its station. When you insert the cable into the hole, the key pops out. You then go shopping, key in pocket, and detach your bike with the key on returning.
- You can also use the anti-theft cable to make sure that your hand-bag isn't snatched by a scooter-riding thug. Just loop the cable through your handbag handles a couple of times, and it'll be safe and secure.
- Despite being very sturdy, Velib bikes are often somewhat the worse for wear. At any given station, you'll typically have good bikes and poor bikes. Always choose a bike number before going over to the central kiosk to enter your access code. Here's what to check (it only takes 10 seconds once you're used to it): give the tyres a quick kick to check them for air, give the pedal a kick to check that the chain is hooked up, check that the handlebar-mounted 3-speed shifter turns and clicks ok, check that the handlebar isn't wobbly, and check that the saddle clamp is tight (it much easier riding a bike with the saddle mounted quite high, so your legs have room to pump up and down). These cursory checks will weed out 90% of faulty bikes.
- If despite your checks, the bike doesn't work properly, you have a couple of minutes to swap it for another, at the same station, without having to wait the usual 5 minutes before taking another.
- An etiquette developed spontaneously among Velib riders: should you notice that a bike needs repair, then drop the saddle to the lowest position and turn the saddle facing backwards. This signals to fellow uses as well as the maintenance teams, that the bike needs repair.
- The Velib system is reserved for people of 14 yrs and over. So if you've got children staying with you in your apartment, beware.
- We recommend that you grab a compact street map that includes all the station locations, especially near your apartment. For a handful of euros at a newsagent (or free at the Paris town hall, metro Hotel de Ville), this will take the guesswork out of your navigation.

- Should you find an empty station when you need a bike, or a full station when you'd like to drop off, then you'll have to either wait around or – better – move on to the next station. The nearest stations are seldom more than 100m away from your apartment, and you'll find their locations on the map printed on the central kiosk of the station. Note that if you're in a hurry because you're reaching the end of your free half-hour, then you can log in to the full station and you'll get an extra 15 minutes to drop off your bike.
- In an effort to legalise and officialise the mayhem that was resulting in Velibs cycling the wrong way up one-way streets, many one-way streets now have contra flow cycle paths painted onto the road and sign-posted. You'll see these around your apartment. You should proceed with care, as many motorists fail to see these markings and are surprised to see you coming at them head-on. Use caution.
- Although cycling helmets are not obligatory in Paris, and you'll seldom see a Velib rider so equipped, we do recommend you buy one (I myself use one for longer rides). Although cycling in Paris is no doubt safer than it might appear, accidents can happen and you want to have your head protected at all times. Cycling helmets can be had for about 20€ from any sports shop (Go Sport and Decathlon are the most common, and can be found in central Paris near your apartment).
- Always cycle carefully, especially if you're not familiar with Paris driving culture. Be sure to never copy the disobedient locals who you'll see cruising through red lights, going the wrong way down one-way streets and slaloming the sidewalks. Parisians are in an eternal hurry. You're not, so take care and obey the highway code.



For more info, here is the official Velib leaflet, in English:

<http://www.alacarteparis.com/files/Velib-English.pdf>

Velib is a remarkable system that many European cities are currently looking to copy. I'd encourage you to give it a try, provided at least one person in your party has an Amex or Visa equipped with a smart-chip. If you're worried about traffic and safety issues, then start with a quiet Sunday morning. Try it; the freedom of Vélib is wonderful! ☺

Kind regards,

Alex Wagner