



NAIROBI'S CYCLOVILLE: IT TAKES A VILLAGE

By James Murren

Passing through the hectic market area along the main road in Kasarani, Kenya, an outlying suburb east of the traffic-choked downtown streets of Nairobi, my taxi driver makes a phone call to pinpoint the location of our destination. Two U-turns later, down a side road, we pull up to a shop with no sign in a nondescript building. If not for the bikes sitting outside and people milling about, there is no way to know that we are in the right place: Cycloville.

Upon my early afternoon arrival, Cycloville's original bike-shop-cum-office is abuzz with local riders hanging out talking while a mechanic services a rear brake. The point of my trip is to check out Cycloville, a local bike shop that serves as a hub for all things biking. More than a bike shop, it is a local effort that began in November 2012 with the central focus of uniting the cycling community in the capital city and throughout Kenya.

Zair, a soft-spoken guy who is eager to show me around and share more of Cycloville's story, takes me inside to show off the mechanic's tools and bike parts they have in stock, along with the used bikes, shorts and jerseys they have acquired over the years, mostly through donations. It is obvious that he is proud, in a very humble, averting-eyes and head-sort-of-down kind of way (or maybe it was my cross-cultural miscommunication).

Zair explains that Cycloville "promotes bicycling as a means of transportation, recreation, business opportunity, healthy lifestyle, and as a professional sport."

Cycloville represents a "cycling village" and has four shops throughout Nairobi. In the Mathare slum, Cycloville works with Bikes

Not Bombs (BNB), a Massachusetts-based nonprofit founded in 1984 and well-known for its mission to "use the bicycle as a vehicle for social change." Among its efforts, BNB gathers thousands of bikes and countless used parts each year and sends them to Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean as a component of its economic development program of which Cycloville is a part. Zair says that since Bikes Not Bombs has collaborated with them, things "have really taken off."

Working with the Mathare Community Education and Development Organization (MCEDO), Cycloville, with some guidance and input from Bikes Not Bombs, trains youth in bike mechanics and entrepreneurship, preparing them for employment in one of Cycloville's shops or possibly opening their own bicycle business. This training program combats a stark unemployment reality in Kenya: A 2016 World Bank study determined that 1 in 5 young Kenyans of working age do not have jobs. Comparatively speaking, Kenya's east African neighbors of Uganda and Tanzania see rates of 1 in 20 for youth unemployment. Considering Mathare is a Nairobi slum, the picture is even starker there.

Bikes Not Bombs ships the bikes and bike parts to Cycloville's Mathare warehouse, where the young apprentices service the BNB-collected bikes back into riding condition, learning skills that might better position them to gain employment in the growing used bicycle industry that exists in Nairobi. In 2015, five youths completed the training program in mechanics and gained the skills needed for managing a bike shop. They, in turn, are now training more young people in Mathare. A new program for women was launched in 2016 and included 40 participants. What's more, all graduates of the training programs are now employed at bike shops around Nairobi.

While talking with Zair, I notice some old race fliers posted on the building's exterior. He comments, "Riding bikes on the roads and dirt roads for exercise and sport is growing in popularity throughout Kenya. Road and mountain bike race events take place every year. Both Kenyans and expats participate in the races."

Nearby Karura Forest in Nairobi has mountain biking trails and is a site for races, and Zair recommends I check out the area while in town.

Outside, a young man in his 20s is bedecked in a full kit talking about why he likes bicycling. In a nutshell, his answer: "When I'm on the road and get away from the traffic and can go fast, that's the best feeling. I love it."

I nod and smile, saying that I understand the sentiment. Feet back on his pedals, he heads out for an afternoon ride.

Zair goes back inside the shop and comes out with a banner that displays and summarizes what he and his colleagues are trying to do through Cycloville. He wants me to take his picture, a little of that shy sense of pride lifting away in the hot and humid air. I immediately oblige him, taking out my camera and snapping off a few shots of the banner, which reads: **CLUB CYCLOVILLE KENYA TRANSFORMING KENYA INTO A CYCLING NATION**

"Bold," I think. I like it. I have no doubt that Zair and his colleagues, with the support of BNB, are going to make that statement a reality. Already, in less than four years, Cycloville has succeeded in growing from one shop to four shops, developed a trans-national partnership, and initiated youth development programs in one of the poorest communities on the planet. 🚲

To support Cycloville/Bikes Not Bombs, visit: <https://bikesnotbombs.org/cycloville>.

To learn more about Cycloville, visit the Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/cyclovillekenya/>.