



Velib, of course, is the much-touted new "free" bicycle rental program putting thousands of bikes on the streets of Paris. The program began on July 15, 2007. Velib is a contraction of the words *velo* [bicycle] and *liberté* [freedom].

Currently there are 20,600 bikes and 1,451 velib stations. It is said that there's 1 station every 300 m throughout the city centre, making Vélib' the largest system of its kind in the world.

First, the bicycles are sturdy and attractive; and while I wouldn't go so far as to call them beautiful, it is a case of function defining a pleasing form. Except for their weight [approximately 40lbs], they seem to be eminently practical bikes: Baskets, lights, locks, the whole package.

The preliminaries

In order to ride a Velib, you must be at least 14 years old. [No upper age limit. Whew!] Between 14 and 18 you must have parental [or equivalent] permission.

To sign up for the one-year subscription for 29 euros, you have to fill in a form and have your Velib *carte* mailed to you. The form is available at <http://www.velib.paris.fr/> and takes about 15 days. The application is also available at the *mairie*, metro stations or *pâtisseries*. [Pâtisseries? -- I don't know why, so don't ask]

If you already own a Navigo pass, you can have the 29 euros charged to that and can swipe it as you would your Velib *carte*, at the electronic docking stations.

In order to sign up for Velib for a one-week (5 euros) or one-day (1 euro) pass, you have to have a credit card. You get this pass at the "*borne*"-- a kind of tall freestanding ATM found at each station.

Enrollment requires a deposit of 150 euros, none of which is removed from your account unless you fail to return your Velib at the appropriate time. The *borne* will issue you a magnetic Velib Ticket, which you swipe at the Velib electronic post (*point d'attache*) in order to unlock your bike. Subscribers to the annual pass or those using their Navigo card go directly to the electronic post and swipe their card.

This gives you free unlimited use of the Velib for **precisely 30 minutes**, at which time, in order not to be charged more, you must either

- 1) Return it to any Velib station in the city,
- 2) Swap it for another Velib at any station in the city,
- 3) Return it to a Velib station for 2 minutes (connect it to its electronic stand) and then take it again, or
- 4) Get charged for the additional minutes.

The specifics

The additional minutes are the key part to this program.

First half hour over your free initial 30 minutes: 1 euro

Second half hour after that: 2 euros

Third half hour beyond *that*: 4 euros

Better get that bike back on time! The point of the program is for Velib to be an alternative to public transportation or walking. It is not "*un velo a balade*" -- not for leisurely day long bike rides. The program is aimed at people making short journeys.

The Velib has a small electronic dashboard, which tells you the status of your available minutes. Kind of like being on the bicycle machine at the gym, but this time you're actually going somewhere.

Locks and Security

Since you won't be keeping your bike idle for very long, the lock system won't be that necessary. But it is practical. The temporary lock is permanently attached to the bike.

So, if you, for example, are just stopping by the boulangerie for a baguette, you simply flip down the kickstand (kind of like a motorcycle kickstand) and attach the lock around the nearest pole. The lock key is released once the lock is well attached. Don't lose the key! And you'll hope that the boulanger is speedy, because the minutes are ticking away on your dashboard *minuterie*.

Next scenario. Your 30 minutes are up and you've duly arrived at the nearest Velib station to dock your bike. But wait -- the Velib station has no free space! What to do without getting nailed for the charge for the extra 1/2 hour? Aha! They have anticipated that. The all-knowing *borne* knows when its station is full, so you go up to it and in Oz-like fashion ask for mercy, by swiping the magnetic ticket. It grants you a 15-minute reprieve and also tells you where the nearest empty Velib station is located.

<http://www.velib.paris.fr/> [In French, English & Spanish] – to download plans of all Velib stations by sections or as a whole