

## CLIMATE COACH

# Think you need another car? Consider an e-bike instead.

Advice by [Michael J. Coren](#)

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When Kawthar Duncan immigrated to Detroit from Syria at age 12, she couldn't ride a bicycle. With no money to buy a bike, she learned how to ride at local parks or friends' houses. But by the time she arrived in San Francisco at age 26, Duncan hadn't touched handlebars in years.

"The thought of bikers being in the same area as cars always freaked me out," she says. "So I never looked into it."

But with one child in kindergarten and another in day care, the family needed ways to get around. A second car would create nearly as many problems as it solved, from expenses to parking headaches. So Duncan's husband suggested an electric bicycle, or e-bike.

Skeptical, she walked into [the New Wheel](#) bike shop in San Francisco for a test ride in April.

"If you'd seen me on the first day, you'd think I would never come back," says Duncan, a former [third-grade teacher](#). "I was nervous. The bike was heavy. I couldn't lift it up. I told my husband, 'This is not for me.'"

As she was leaving, however, a staff member offered to let her ride as many times as she liked. So she did, once a week for three months. This summer, she brought home a [Riese & Müller Nevo](#) electric cargo bike. "Before I know it, I'm riding 20 miles a day," she laughs. "I never thought it was going to be me."

Duncan's experience hints at the promise of e-bikes in American culture. [For more than a century](#), bicycle revivals have come and gone in the United States, each one presaging a return to gasoline vehicles.

But the appeal of e-bikes, especially among people who haven't ridden a bike in decades, may help change cities' car-centric ways. Cities are under growing pressure to reinvent themselves after the pandemic shifted how we live and work. From New York to Cleveland, city officials have rolled out measures to prod drivers to leave their cars at home, from closing streets to traffic to creating "15-minute cities" where life's essentials are just a walk, bike or transit ride away. Vast networks of safe bike lanes are becoming mainstays of downtowns and business districts.

As cities build protected bike lanes, research shows, more people like Duncan are likely to ride, especially women and low-income residents, increasing the demand for cities that serve people using two wheels, not just four.

"I've been able to go anywhere, anytime," says Duncan. "It's the new minivan."

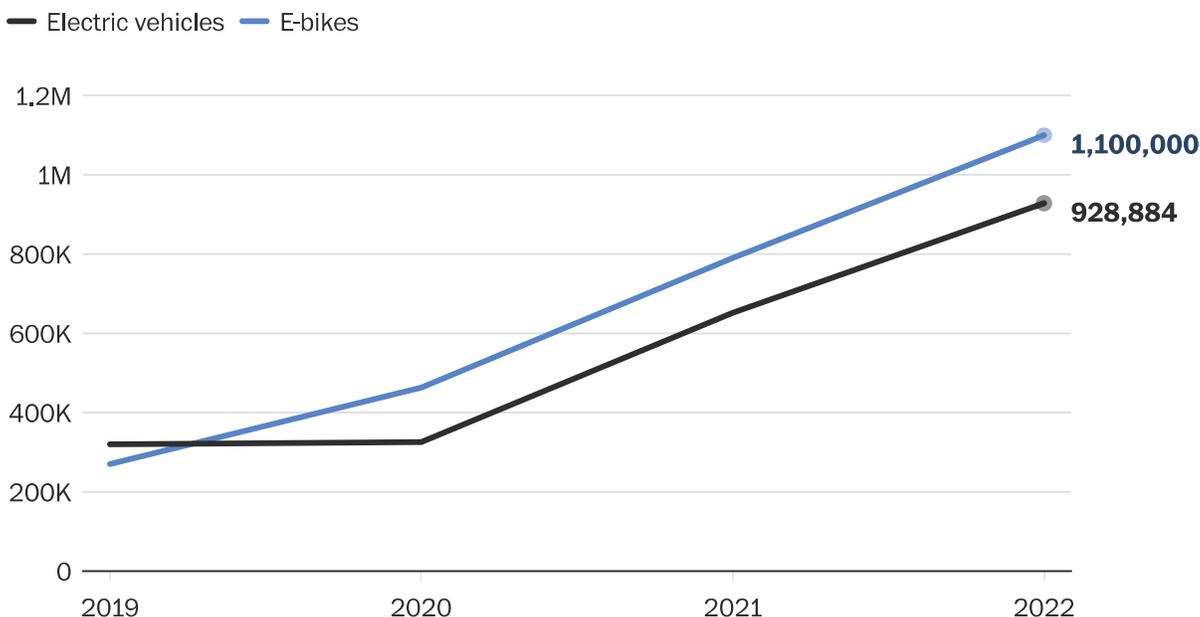
Let's take a ride.

## What are e-bikes?

E-bikes add a battery and an electric motor to the classic bike frame. When riders start pedaling, the motor assist kicks in to climb hills or reach higher speeds, usually between 20 and 28 mph. E-bike models are available as cargo, mountain and even folding bikes. This extra equipment brings weight, usually 10 to 20 pounds, as well as cost, with prices at least two to three times higher than most conventional bikes.

For years, e-bikes languished in the United States even as they exploded in popularity in Asia and Europe. Then the pandemic hit. E-bike sales in the United States surged 269 percent between 2019 and 2022, approaching \$1 billion, even as overall bike sales declined, reports market research firm Circana. In the United States, e-bikes now outsell electric cars and trucks.

### E-bike sales in the U.S. overtook electric vehicles in 2019



EVs includes plug-in hybrids. E-bike import figures are used as proxy for sales given reliance on imports by retailers.

Their popularity has a lot to do with their functionality. E-bikes' extra power lets riders cover hills or distances of up to 100 miles with less effort, avoiding sweaty arrivals at work or school. Electric cargo bikes can carry 500-pound loads, including groceries, equipment or children.

But for anyone who has ridden one, the thrill of an e-bike isn't its utility or how it looks in the school line. It's the uncanny acceleration when you start pedaling, re-creating the magic of riding a bike for the first time.

"It's a really fun feeling when the pedal assist kicks off," says Bryn Grunwald, a transportation analyst at the environmental nonprofit RMI, who has commuted more than 11,500 miles on her e-bike in Colorado. "You have a moment you haven't felt since you were 5 years old. Suddenly, a lot of things are a lot more open to you."

Adrienne McCann, 45, hadn't felt that sensation in decades. But she hadn't forgotten it. "I remember distinctly getting a red bike for my seventh or eighth birthday, and the freedom it gave you," she said. After moving to rural Maryland as a child, "biking really stopped for me."

It wasn't until she had a family that she considered riding again. "I was really thinking how do we manage a one-car household," says McCann, a U.S. Department of Agriculture assistant secretary who lives in D.C.'s Capitol Hill neighborhood.

Her husband drove to Virginia for work, and their 5-year-old went to school a few miles away. A second car wasn't in their budget. Despite being convinced that she was "not a bike person," she began testing e-bikes. Eventually, a lightbulb turned on when her e-bike-owning friend told her she wasn't buying an expensive bike. It was a cheap car.

So McCann bought a \$4,000 Tern GSD — an unofficial abbreviation, she says, for "get s--- done." She has since covered about 3,100 miles. "I would have gotten into a car and sat in traffic adding to the congestion and pollution," she says. "But now the question when I get dressed in the morning is, 'Can I bike in that?'"

## Is biking really for me?

The belief that "biking isn't for me" often comes from a well-founded fear: cars. Many studies — and almost everyone interviewed for this story — say the lack of safe, separate biking paths are a reason people avoid riding bikes.

A second barrier is cost. E-bikes are not cheap: Basic models start around \$1,500, while premium e-bikes can exceed \$10,000. No federal incentives are in place yet, as they are for electric cars and trucks, but several states are spending tens of millions of dollars to help low-income residents purchase e-bikes, according to PeopleForBikes, a nonprofit in Colorado.

That can easily break a budget — although the bike shop receipt tells only half the story. Grunwald at RMI estimated her expenses commuting 11,500 miles on her e-bike relative to her 2010 Toyota Camry. Over five years, she says, she spent \$1,156 on e-bike charging and maintenance, including a battery replacement. To cover the same distance in her Camry, she estimates would cost \$2,488. That doesn't include the cost of the vehicles themselves: \$1,799 for her e-bike compared to \$36,146 for the average used car in Colorado.

RMI, which created a tool for cities to measure the economic benefits of e-bikes vs. cars, estimates if even just a quarter of vehicle trips in the 10 most populous U.S. cities were on e-bikes, users would save a combined \$91 million every month on fuel and vehicle maintenance.

Ultimately, however, the biggest barrier for many people is imagining themselves behind the handlebars.

What drew Duncan back to the bike shop to ride each week was following the advice she gave her own class. “I tell my students, practice is what makes you get better,” she says. “It’s a growth mind-set.” Eventually, her e-bike became more than a way to get to school. It’s a part of her life.

“There’s something really special about being on a bike when the sun is coming up. All the shops are opening, it feels like a movie, and I get to do it every day,” she says. “My biggest regret after 12 years in San Francisco is not getting on a bike sooner.”

## How to get started

Buying an e-bike is a bit like buying a car: a big purchase you’ll probably use in every aspect of your life. So here are a few tips from Loren Copsey of the Daily Rider, a D.C. bike shop:

- **Try it out:** Many cities now have bike-share programs for e-bikes through Lyft or local providers. Try different routes in your city. New bike infrastructure means U.S. cities have built hundreds of miles of separated bike lanes.
- **Find a good bike shop:** It will be invaluable to research and test your options. Since you’ll be bringing the bike back for service, find a convenient location close to home or work.
- **Test ride:** Many independent shops will allow extended test rides if you ask. Try lots of models. Test environments similar to your commute.
- **Expect to spend about \$2,500:** Sure, you can find e-bikes for less than \$800. But “this is where we see the features and components needed for a functional and serviceable e-bike,” says Copsey. “Ideally, this is going to be a piece of equipment that you keep for five or more years.” You’ll be purchasing a bike, lights, locks, baskets or bags, and other accessories. Ask if your state or county has incentives (many do). You can even get loans for e-bikes, as well as access to e-bike lending libraries and rent-to-own options.
- **Get insurance:** Homeowners or renters insurance may cover your e-bike in cases of theft or loss. Find out whether an e-bike battery in your home is a problem for your insurer.
- **Have fun.**