More women than ever are cycling as a way to increase cardio, improve mental health, connect with nature, be social and, at this particular moment in time, feel a little bit freer.

BY DOMINIQUE LAMBERTON • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALANA PATERSON • ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALLY REEVES
In March 2020, Joanna Barcessat’s life changed in an instant. On Friday the 13th, she closed her two Montreal juice bars, unsure of when and her staff would return. At home under lockdown, Barcessat, 31, found herself with the kind of time she hadn’t had for years, and a desire to spend as much of it as possible outdoors. So in July, after she decided not to reopen her second location, Barcessat did something she’d been wanting to do for almost a decade: She dusted off her road bike, took it in for a tune-up and hopped on for a ride. That beautiful summer day, Barcessat cycled for 90 minutes, pedaling along Montreal’s Lachine Canal. She took it at an easy pace, but she felt excited and accomplished—she’d gotten back on her bike. Barcessat, who studied physical education at McGill University, used to be a regular cyclist—she even rode with a group of triathletes. But when she started her business, Rejuice Nutrition, and opened her first cold-pressed juice store in 2011, she gave it up. “If I could, I would go to a spinning or circuit-training class for an hour,” she says, “but I didn’t have the time to commit to riding anymore.” It took the pandemic to finally get her back in the saddle—“and, once she started, she wasn’t stopping for anything. “I had this joke: My store could be on fire, and I’m not giving up my bike ride,” she says. “I had given so much to my business for so long that I forgot to take care of myself.” From July to October, Barcessat rode every other day, forcing a three-month break into her routine and rediscovering her favourite routes and seeking new ones. “Riding was my escape from the stress that came with running a business and being a mom during a pandemic,” she says. “It helped clear my mind and, at the same time, gave me a great workout.”

In the past 12 months, many have had the same idea: Cycling is booming, as people around the world look to stay active, be outdoors and find new ways to get around in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, the World Health Organization recommended cycling or walking as a means of both socially distant, open-air transportation and daily physical activity. Just a few weeks later, bike shops across Canada reported surging sales as many Canadians took out their new two-wheelers, taking advantage of quieter streets and city-wide road closures. And many of these new or returning riders are women: Strava, the world’s largest online fitness platform, saw the number of cycle rides uploaded double in 2020, while women ages 30 to 59 uploaded almost 50 percent more activities between April and September 2020 than during the same period the year before. “One of the reasons we saw this surge is that we were limited in the activities we could do—and we still are,” says Julia Aimers, an Ottawa-based exercise physiologist and triathlon coach. “The walk around the block gets a little bit boring after a while.” In addition to offering a much-needed sense of freedom, cycling provides a cardiovascular workout, its low impact (read: it lubricates the joints while also being gentle on them) and it’s more accessible than other forms of cardio, like running. “It’s a big effort to run. If you’re a little over-weight, it’s hard on your cardiovascular system. Biking is accessible—you jump on, the seat holds some of your weight, and it’s easy to go fast and easy to go slow,” says Aimers. She equates an easy ride to going for a walk, with the workout increasing depending on factors like gears, incline and speed. “If you want to compare it to training for a 10K run, you’d be doing hill repeats, some speed repeats,” says Aimers. The ride also offers a respite from her stressful role as a partner at an accounting firm. “Being on the bike, outside and in nature, provides a mental break from my desk that’s important for me,” she says. But perhaps the biggest advantage for Chang is the social element of riding with a group—and the motivation her fellow riders supply. “You meet people who push you beyond what you imagine is possible. If I think I can only ride 40 km, but the group is going 50, then maybe I’ll try that,” she says. Throughout the pandemic, in lieu of riding in person in large groups, Chang has been doing so virtually, with women from across North America: “We all chat on an app while we ride on our trainers at home, talking about cookie recipes, our cats or dogs or kids; that social interaction is really fun.” Barcessat recognizes that her previous experience of cycling in a group pushed her physically—and her goal is to join one again, maybe even this season. But last year, one of the things she loved most about getting back on her bike solo was reconnecting to the outdoors. Nature has provided a much-needed balm for many Canadians throughout the pandemic. A recent Ipsos poll conducted for the Nature Conservancy of Canada revealed that 94 per cent of them feel more connected to nature during the pandemic than before, and 92 per cent feel more reassured about the future of the environment. But perhaps most importantly, 93 per cent of those surveyed believe that reconnecting to nature is good for their mental health. And as the pandemic continues, many are turning to cycling to both reconnect to the outdoors and to their own well-being.
percent of Canadians have found spending time in nature has helped relieve stress and anxiety during the pandemic’s second wave, while three out of four of those surveyed said that moments in nature are more important to them now than ever before. “The visual aspect of getting on your bike and actually looking around and being present is what’s valuable—the workout and the calories burnt are just added benefits,” Barcesat says.

Throughout the pandemic, many cities have made it safe and easy to access the outdoors by closing roads to vehicle traffic. Last April, the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation temporarily shut down Stanley Park to cars to allow more space for cycling and walking, while in Toronto, the city’s ActiveTO initiative saw High Park, as well as major roadways like Lake Shore Boulevard, open exclusively to cyclists and pedestrians on weekends.

Meghan Winters, an epidemiologist and associate professor at Simon Fraser University who leads the Cities, Health & Active Transportation Research Lab, is encouraged by how quickly urban areas were able to implement these initiatives and how, in doing so, more people took up or returned to cycling. “It was exciting to see that cities can create and accommodate the space that’s needed for walking and cycling,” says Winters. “It allowed them to test designs and locations, but I’m looking for things to be more thoughtful and permanent as we move into the second year of the pandemic.”

It’s initiatives like these that encourage people—especially women, who, research shows, are less likely to cycle than men, particularly on traffic-heavy streets—to ride on roadways and bike paths for the first time, eventually becoming regular cyclists and reaping all of the benefits that come with it. “Riding in Stanley Park during the full closure was a heavenly experience,” says Winters. “I’d imagine there were people who had not been on a bicycle in 15 years. All of a sudden, there was this park you could cycle through—and I think once people tried that, they were willing to go to other places. It starts with safe, protected places, and then people will build daily habits.”

Barcesat doesn’t plan on getting so busy with things to be more thoughtful and permanent as we move into the second year of the pandemic.”

There are a few things to know before you take your shorts out for a spin. First of all, the chamois is designed to be worn against the skin—so no underwear. Second, you get what you pay for. “If you spend a little bit more, you get more breathable fabrics, better stretch and a higher-quality chamois with gel or cut-outs for breathability,” Kargel says. And third, invest in some chamois butter. If you’re going on long rides, this petroleum-free product won’t damage the elastic in your expensive bike shorts, and will help prevent chafing and reduce friction between your thighs and the seat. —Rebecca Gao

DO I REALLY NEED PADDED SHORTS?

They aren’t just for the hard-core cyclists out there—anyone can benefit from riding with a bit of extra cushion. The insert, a.k.a. the chamois, acts as a shock absorber. This cushions your backside and prevents uncomfortable chafing, which is especially important during the warmer months, when we sweat more.

According to Ira Kargel, co-owner of Gears Bike Shop in Toronto, padded shorts “move with your body to help with chafing and shifting, which you could still experience with a gel seat cover.”

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I started cycling last summer as a way to get outside, get active and combat my pandemic-induced stir-craziness. I’m cautious by nature, and while I thought I was taking every safety precaution, a more experienced cyclist friend pointed out that my helmet (which I bought because it was cute and affordable) was designed for skateboarding. Turns out that’s not super helpful—or safe—for biking. If you are as confused as I am about how to pick the right helmet, let these five expert tips be your guide.

Stick to your sport
While there is some crossover among helmets designed for different activities, “it’s usually best to stick to the sport in which the helmet was designed to be used,” says Claire McFarlane, the programs and operations manager at Cycle Toronto. “Helmets are designed differently for different sports to take into account factors like travelling speed and the way people fall when they’re participating in those sports.”

Get the right fit
McFarlane suggests using the 2-V-1 method: With the helmet on, you should be able to fit roughly two fingers between your eyebrows and the helmet; the straps should form a “V” around your ears, and you should only be able to fit one finger between your chin and the helmet strap. “You want the helmet to be snug but not so tight that you feel like it would give you a headache if you wore it for an hour or more,” says McFarlane.

Make sure it’s certified
Choosing a helmet with an approved standards label means you’re getting a product that’s been rigorously tested by the manufacturer. Look for CSA (Canadian Standards Association), CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission), Snell or ASTM (American Testing and Materials).

And look for MIPS
The multi-directional impact protection system, or MIPS, is a safety feature on many new helmets. It refers to a yellow plastic liner in the helmet that’s engineered to help prevent certain types of concussions by rotating slightly, independent of the outer helmet.

Go on and splurge a little
The more you spend on the helmet, the more comfortable it will be. Higher-priced helmets tend to have better ventilation, which makes them lighter and more breathable. “A lighter helmet has significantly less impact on your neck,” says Ira Kargel, co-owner of Gears Bike Shop. “You won’t think it’s a big deal, but small things like adding a bit of weight to your head and shoulders can have a long-term impact.”—Rebecca Gao

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THOUSAND TITANIUM HELMET, $129, velolifestyle.com

49°N ST. LAWRENCE BASKET, $50, bikedepot.com

MIRRICLE MIRROR, $30, sweetpetes.com

HIPLOK DX Lok, $111, mec.ca

ELECTRA DISCO SMALL DING-DONG BIKE BELL, $22, electra.trekbikes.com

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Field Guide: Cycling

COAST IN TO THESE AWESOME WOMEN-RUN BIKE SHOPS

Sidesaddle Bikes
Vancouver
Sidesaddle is Canada’s first explicitly women-focused bike shop. Co-owner Andrea Smith opened it in 2015 after noticing the lack of women-focused retailers despite a boom in gear from manufacturers. Though they focus on women riders, most of their products are suitable for everyone, and they serve both newbie and experienced cyclists. sidesaddlesbikes.com

Peppermint Biking Co.
Montreal
Located in the heart of Montreal, Peppermint Biking Co. designs and sells women’s activewear with an emphasis on fashion-forward biking apparel in jewelled tones and chic patterns.

Situated right across from La Fontaine Park, one of the city’s biggest outdoor spaces with numerous bike paths, Peppermint is a gear haven: cyclists shop here for bras, shorts and accessories like socks and caps. peppermintcycling.com

Gears Bike Shop
Greater Toronto Area
Gears began as a small bike repair business and has since grown to be one of the GTA’s most reputable cycling shops, with two stores in Toronto and two more in Mississauga and Oakville, Ont. The shop stocks many different styles of bikes, from urban wheels to off-road models that will have you adventuring through the woods. gearsbikes.com

Essential Cycles
North Vancouver
Essential Cycles’s small but mighty team is led by passionate mountain bikers Jaclyn Delacox and Sierra Sullivan. The shop sells bike rentals, plus clinics, private lessons and guided rides through North Van trails. essentialcycles.com

Ecclestone Cycle
Bracebridge, Ont.
Alison Davies runs Ecclestone Cycle, the most recognizable bike shop in Muskoka, thanks to its signature purple exterior, with her partner, Ian. Both can be found on the showroom floor and in the workshop. Their service and repairs program offers affordable tune-ups and fixes. ecclestonecycle.com—R.G.

Top Gear Mountain Biker

Step 1: Stretch
There are tons of resources for post-cycling stretches online that will help you avoid sore muscles (and even full yoga flow classes on YouTube, if you’re so inclined), but here are a few that help in the most critical spots.

Quad stretch: Your quadriceps are the biggest biking muscles. Start standing then bend your knee to bring your heel towards your butt. With the hand on the same side, grab your foot near the ankle and pull up closer towards your bum while keeping the knee under the hip to avoid any torque or pull at the knee joint. If you’re feeling off-kilter, stabilize yourself with the opposite hand against a wall, railing or chair.

Downward facing dog: This classic yoga pose helps elongate the posterior chain of muscles (from the plantar fascia and feet muscles, along the backs of your legs, the spine, right to the top of your head). Start in a plank position with your hands under your shoulders. Tuck your toes (in a tippy-toe position) and lift your bum. With the hand on the same side, allow the belly to sink down a little, as you open your chest. Return to neutral spine.

Step 2: Rehydrate
The post-ride beer is a big part of the cycling culture—mostly because it’s so satisfying. While water is still the best way to quench your thirst after a hard workout, there’s nothing more indulgent and gratifying than that first sip of an ice-cold pint. Stick to one, keep drinking water, and spend a little bit more time outside, soaking in the sunshine and bonding with your fellow cyclists.

Step 3: Soak
Whenever you finish a heavy workout, your body is missing all that good stuff that you just sweat out, namely moisture and magnesium. “Epsom salts are essentially magnesium, which is absolutely critical for your muscles to relax and recover post-ride,” says Ira Kargel, the co-owner of Gears Bike Shop. —R.G.