

Riding Over the Williamsburg Bridge: A Mixed Bag

By Josh Simons
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BROOKLYN — When I bicycled over the Williamsburg Bridge, I didn't know what to expect, since the path is fairly new. Yet I ventured onward anyway, finding out that it's actually a pretty okay ride.

When I travel over the Brooklyn Bridge, which is more often, I go down Chambers Street. When I turn onto Centre Street, I'm in the middle of traffic. I have to find some way to cross over so that I can get on the bridge. When I went to the Williamsburg Bridge, I found to my delight that I could go directly down Delancey Street to the staircase where I could begin my ride. Delancey Street has very few cars going by, so I felt safer. It's also downhill. This is nice because you can rest up before your ride.

I reached the staircase, which is pretty deserted, and I lifted my bike up the 3 flights of stairs. The stairs are metal and pretty wide, but it was tough and bothersome to have to lift my bike.

When I reached the top of the bridge, I was a little out of breath. I discovered I was on a platform made of wood planks. The planks seemed safe, but the surface was not ideal because the planks vibrated a little.

In addition, the walkway was very narrow. I estimated the walkway was about 1½ bike lengths long. I was unsure which lane to ride I because there were no signs. The scenery wasn't very nice either, as I found when I looked over a building on Delancey Street.

So my ride began with cars driving over the bridge to my left and a fenced-off barrier to my right, which prevented me from flipping of the bridge. The ride wasn't that hard for the first stretch, because the distance to the next stopping point was so short that I still wasn't over the East River.

I also noticed for the first time that there was only a short wall and metal bar barrier between the car lane and the walkway. This is a little scary because you realize how close you are to the traffic.

After lifting my bike over another tough uphill flight of stairs, there was a short period of time where the path was

like a maze because of all the quick turns one has to make. Since the path is even narrower here, I decided not to take any chances. I walked it through.

The bridge's surface now changed to smooth concrete as I entered the second stretch of the walkway. This section is elevated in the middle of the bridge. I found myself looking to the left, to the lower level, and finding the J, M and Z trains. Looking down to my right, there were cars. There were clear signs telling me which lane I should be in.

Along this path, there is a pink rail on the right. This is good idea because it gives people something to hold onto, especially if they're tired. The path starts up on a short incline and then turns into a relaxing decline. The bridge gets very noisy here because of all the construction going on below.

Despite the blind spots, I think the second stretch was the nicest of the three. Since I was over the water, I could begin to see some of New York's spectacular scenery to my right, including the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges.

Once this stretch finishes, I reached a very steep ramp along the right side of the bridge. The ramp is not enclosed, but it's cramped. It causes a need for extra awareness and safety because there's not a whole lot of room to go.

While I was riding down this ramp, I had to grip my hands on the brakes so I didn't go too fast and hit anyone. This caused my bike to vibrate as much as it had at any other point along the ride.

I believe this was the most dangerous of the three stretches.

When I came out on the other end, I didn't find myself in the nicest or safest-appearing area. But it's not crowded and there is no traffic, so I didn't have to worry about cars.

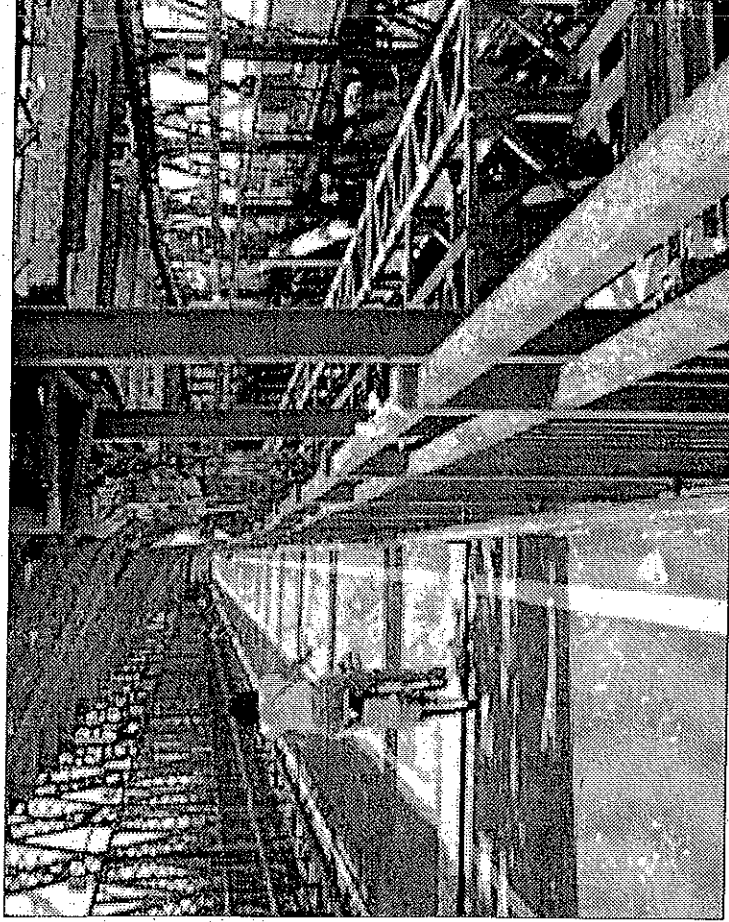
Don't expect a leisurely ride over the Williamsburg Bridge. Lifting my bike took a lot of energy and its narrowness causes you a need to be more careful.

One may try this the first time and not like it. It's one of those rides you have to get used to.

Photos courtesy
of Transportation Alternatives



A turn-off to riding along the Williamsburg Bridge is the constant need to lift your bike up its wide metal staircases. Above, a rider is shown at the isolated entrance of the bridge preparing to lift his bike up one of two convenient staircases.



This second stretch of the Williamsburg Bridge, made up of a smooth concrete surface, has clear signs along its small path, so people know where they should walk and bike. While this stretch may be the smoothest and offer the nicest view, one must be aware of blind spots where people can jump out and mug you. Fortunately, a new path similar to that of the Manhattan Bridge is scheduled to be completed in 2005. This should improve the bridge's whole ride.