

# The lending bike gang

*Evangelos Vlachakis, the man behind the first non-profit bicycle lending club in the country, builds a community on wheels*

By Despina Pavlaki

A RUSTY bicycle is rarely a source of inspiration. Frustration would be more like it, as well as a manic hunt for the neighbourhood scrap collector or anyone willing to take this chunky piece of junk off your hands.

But Evangelos Vlachakis is not your average city dweller. A trained cameraman with a background in film and television, he has learnt to look at everything twice.

"It all started when I came across a bunch of old bikes in my backyard when I was still living in Athens," says Vlachakis. "Three years later they were still sitting there, unclaimed, so I decided to fix them up and encourage people in my apartment building to take the occasional ride."

Soon enough, more rusty bikes, relegated to storage after their owners had upgraded their model, were added to the "gang". It was the birth of something beautiful.

None of this would have taken on the significance it has now, if Vlachakis & Co hadn't moved to the countryside. "It was a major life decision," he says of his family's move. "We had reached a point where we felt we needed to simplify our lives and be closer to nature. It's also a great way to diminish your expenses in the middle of the credit crunch."

The transition took place over the summer, when Vlachakis, his wife Veronika and their 6-year-old

daughter Melina moved to Plytra, a tiny seaside village in Lakonia prefecture. The transition wasn't easy, but he was not going to leave his two-wheeled friends behind. In fact, this unusual lending bike club - the first private initiative of its kind - soon grew in size and even got itself a blog. Podilatoparea (roughly translated as "Bike posse") now counts 10 kiddie bikes and 7 adult models - including tricycles for senior citizens - available to anyone, as long as they promise to bring them back in the same shape they got them, used but still loved.

"Our goal is to make the use of bikes popular with people of all ages, not just for fun, but as a means of daily transport," says Vlachakis. Lending them out for free was a decision in keeping with Freeconomy, a new skill-sharing, free



help and community-building global initiative, designed to make your life a better place.

While building up the bike club, the Vlachakis family has taken to working the land, natural farming-style, determined to produce its own food and take charge of its life. "It's not easy, especially if you've lived in the city all your life, but we already had a house and some land waiting for us, so that was a major motive," Vlachakis says.

Since moving to Plytra, his one-man-bicycle club has found two new members, determined to spread the word regardless of the winter chill. It's a social-minded exercise to bring people together at a place with very few diversions to offer once the tourist season is over.

The club even has a brand new

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activity, Podilatodysseia (Bike Odyssey) - still in a testing phase - that offers a variety of learning games combining physical exercise with education, like treasure hunts and explorations. A series of select ethnographical, geographical and historical elements are part of the fun and, before you know it, your children have actually learnt something without even trying. "We've already tested it with a number of children and the results have been very encouraging," says

Vlachakis, who is on the lookout for more volunteers to help get the project off the ground. "We'd love to get schools involved, so if any educators are interested, we're always open to suggestions," he says.

Besides, with his own daughter in her first year in elementary school, he has the perfect focus group on his hands. But Melina is not the only one enjoying the perks of her father's community-building skills. "Getting into bicycles is the best thing that's happened to me lately," says Dionysis, an 11-year-old Podilatoparea enthusiast.

The lending club was conceived as a non-profit initiative so no child would be excluded because of their family's financial ability, although a parent is required to be present when signing out a children's bike.

In an effort to increase its "fleet", Podilatoparea would like nothing better than to take your old (and possibly rusty) bike off your hands, so if you've got a two-wheeler gathering dust somewhere, don't hesitate to get in touch. The same goes for bicycle manufacturers willing to part with some of their models.

✓ The Podilatoparea fleet is available every day of the week at 69803-58038 or podilatoparea@yahoo.gr. For more information and updates on local activities, visit podilatoparea.blogspot.com. As for those of you considering a move to the countryside, Vlachakis has been documenting his process on epi-strofi.blogspot.com, so feel free to stop by and get inspired

