

HOW TO BUY A BIKE

by **Jock Cheetham**

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As I pedal around Sydney, I sometimes reflect on the excitement of it all – the wind slithering across my bald patch, or running over a rat, or the endorphin rush after a speedy ride. It's fun, but there's slog buying the right bike.

I researched at eight bike shops. If you end up bewildered by the choice, don't follow my lead and ask "What bike would you recommend for me?" I asked it once, and the reply was: "If you don't mind me saying, that's a stupid question."

The guy was right. How would he know my needs? The bike buyer's first job is to decide on the use – commuting, racing, off-road mountaineering, touring or recreation.

The main choice is between road and mountain bike, or a combination, the hybrid. Road bikes generally have curly handlebars. They are built for speed, for serious riders with bulging quadriceps and lithe torsos. Most bike shops recommend against them for the average commuter, and I agree. You gain speed but lose durability and road traction.

Mountain bikes are for real off-road, knockabout conditions, and again, not ideal for the ride to work and back. Their wide, nobby tyres and suspension are overkill on streets, and slow down the commuter. And who doesn't sometimes run a little late for work?

Hybrids are sturdier than racers, and heavier. But they are built for comfort, with flat handlebars and more upright riding. Hybrids have thinner tyres than mountain bikes, so they are faster. For recreational, weekend riders, the choice depends on the rides – but hybrids are a good compromise, unless you go bush regularly.

Buy your bike from a bike shop. There's less chance of getting crap made in China, and you'll have your bike set up properly, not in a box. Bike shops have staff with the skills to assess your needs and give advice and after-sale service. You should get a free service when you buy, and may end up returning to the shop for regular services. Ask questions and get them to explain jargon or technical words.

One size does not fit all, and you can customise frame size, seat height, stem length, handlebar rise and the type of saddle. Take a test ride. Bike shops have the bike accessories you need (see break-out list), which add up to hundreds of dollars.

Choosing a model is simpler than you might think. The Cycling Promotion Fund recommends you buy "the best bike you can afford". Sound advice with any product, but with a bike over the years you will need repairs. The better the bike, the longer the parts last and the less expensive they are long term.

Don't worry about the frame, because it is mainly on expensive bikes there is much difference between them. Frames on each type of bike are similar. Most mid-range frames are made in about four factories in Taiwan, the bike shops kept telling me. So the frame affects neither the price, nor the quality, until you get towards the top of the range. But get the right size, which is height related.

While buying a bike is not about the bike's brand, make sure it is reputable. The difference is not which name they paint on, but which grade of components they use. Components hang off the frame and wheels. The brakes, cogs, pedals, cables, chains, wheels and derailleurs (which shift the chain up and down the cogs), and the shifters on the handlebars which change the gears. Since one component manufacturer dominates the scene in Australia, comparing bike brands is often about comparing components.

Cheaper components are not as durable or effective, but there are many grades of quality, or group-sets, to choose from. Most of the price variation between bikes depends on the quality of each component. A cheaper bike will have lower-quality components, while a mid-range priced bike might mix cheaper and higher-quality components, and so on.

My final tip? Pay attention to tyres and wheels, because there's a recycler's fortune of glass out there on city roads. Puncture-resistant tyres will save heartache. Consider upgrading to them when you buy a bike, or wait until you get frustrated. As for wheels, a cheap rubber trim encircles a wheel to separate the metal from the tube. It can shift and the wheel metal will pierce the tube and cause a flat. The cheap trim can be replaced by thick tape, eliminating this problem.

As ever, the trick is to research. As well as bike shops, inquire of friends, books, magazines and websites. And whether or not you have the opportunity to run over rats – as only happens to a fortunate few – relax, take care and enjoy the ride.

LIST OF ACCESSORIES

Compulsory by law: bell, rear red reflector, front and rear lights (at night), helmet.

Essential: lock, portable pump, repair kit and spare tyre and small tools, water bottle, backpack, wet weather gear, wind break, reflective bits (on vest or stripe or backpack), gloves, map, home pump (with pressure gauge),

Optional: helmet lights, wheel lights, mirror, shoes, special clothes, racks, panniers, mudguards and pedal clips, or, for the more advanced, clipless pedals.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.bicyclensw.org.au ... this will help to find a bike shop and maps, although the maps are not as good as *Bike-it! Sydney*, a booklet guide to back streets of a huge chunk of inner Sydney (bike-it.com.au).

www.cyclingpromotion.com ... buying bikes and much more.