

SHOPPING FOR A BIKE?

by Don Peddie (Original February 2015 updated February 2021)

I frequently get asked, "What bike should I buy, Don?" If I only knew what to tell you... There is so much to consider. There are so many choices in today's world, at so many prices, with so many features, that there's just no exact answer. This is how I see the bike world now.

The first thing to consider is what type or style of cycling do you anticipate doing the most of? Road Biking? Mountain biking? Snow Trails, Touring? Racing? Recreational jaunts with others? Any bicycle will do most of these things to some extent but selecting the right bike for a particular job will make it more enjoyable. It's possible to tour on a racing bike, or race on a touring bike, but the person sitting on the bike made for the job at hand will be happier than the person on the saddle of a bike doing a job it wasn't primarily designed for.

Novice cyclists need to decide on what is the PRIMARY type of riding they'll be doing and then buy the bike best suited for that job. A second bike can be considered later if interests change. Most members of EBTC will want some sort of bicycle that performs well on paved roads, is fairly lightweight and will carry a few things to get them through the day. In my opinion, what is commonly called a "sport/leisure" bike will be the bike of choice for them. If they later decide to go on extended tours and carry all their supplies and equipment with them, they might consider buying an actual "touring" bike. If they decide that off-road cycling is their preferred choice, then they will want to get a "mountain bike or a Fat-Tire bike." Establish a price-point for yourself before going shopping and stick with it.

Types of Bikes

Categorizing bikes isn't easy, there are so many subtle distinctions between types. A "Road bike" can be a racing bike, a touring bike, a sport/leisure bike, a comfort bike, a tandem, a cruiser, or some other type of bike. A "Mountain bike" can be a cross-country bike, a downhill bike, and maybe even a BMX bike falls into this class. There are even "between" types of bikes such as "hybrids," (they look like a light-weight mountain bike); "cyclocross," (bikes that look like a road bike but are ridden in the dirt like a mountain bike); fat-tire bikes that can be ridden in deep snow or mud; and recumbent bikes that are low to the ground and the pedals are way out in front.

Sport leisure bikes

Looking like a racing bike, these bikes are just what EBTC members frequently select as their bike of choice. They weigh a bit more than a racing bike (having fewer exotic parts) but they are less expensive and easier to handle. They can be fitted with a rear rack (by any good bike shop) to carry a day's clothing

and snacks. They can be fitted with a triple chainring, providing anywhere from 24 to 30 gear selections, making them suitable for getting anyone easily over all hills and up mountains but more common today are bikes with two chainrings, one of which is much smaller than the other. This provides a very wide range of up to 20 gears. Prices range from \$700.00 to \$2,500 depending on frame materials and component quality. Many fine aluminum-framed bikes with a quality 27-gear drivetrain were available in Edmonton last year (Ed. Note: 2004) for under \$2,000. As of 2020 there are fine bikes available in this price range built with a carbon fibre frame, or a portion of the frame made with carbon fibre.

These bikes are fun to ride, quick and efficient. They excel on day trips, covering the ground with minimum effort while providing a feeling of comfort. Weighing around 20 pounds, their relatively light weight makes for easy hill climbing and they can be nearly as fast as an outright racing bike if and when you decide to mix it up with your friends. They are sturdy enough to carry a few extra pounds of kit.

They do have some limitations. They are a poor choice for city riding, as their wheels are too fragile to repeatedly hammer into curbs and potholes. They cannot be fitted with panniers. They are difficult to control in gravel or dirt but very few club road trips encounter these conditions.

Touring bikes

At first glance a “touring bike” also resembles a racing bike, but a quick inspection will show the difference.

Touring bikes are designed to carry a heavy load. This might include two or even four panniers loaded with all the equipment required for an extended trip, including sleeping apparel, stoves, clothing, and food. They will have special “braze-ons” to mount fenders and carrying racks, front and rear.

Often, they will have three water-bottle mounts. Their wheels have extra spokes for added strength and the tires will be wider. They are a bit lower for stability and are slightly longer to provide a bit more space for fenders. This added length also tends to make them travel straighter for better control of the heavier load and creates a softer, more comfortable ride than the shorter sport bikes mentioned above. Triple chainrings are standard equipment on touring bikes, providing a full range of gears that will make it possible to climb huge hills or take advantage of strong tailwinds. Touring bikes are readily available in Edmonton, made by Cannondale, Guru, Trek, Marinoni, Giant, Bianchi, and others. In 2004, prices ranged from \$900.00 to \$2,000 in Edmonton shops.

A touring bike is a necessity for fully loaded touring. These bikes are also very suited to in-city riding and commuting, especially if fitted with wide and sturdy tires. On the other hand, in my opinion, they are too heavy and sluggish for those who anticipate they will be riding only day trips and short, light jaunts. They are more bike than needed for casual riding and van-supported day trips.

Hybrids

As the name suggests, a “hybrid” bike is a blend of a couple of other types, having characteristics of both a road and a mountain bike plus a bit of its own personality thrown in as well. These bikes were created for riding in the city and work best in that role.

Their frame geometry is a bit more upright than both road and mountain bikes, giving a great view of traffic. The wheels are sturdy enough to take potholes and curbs. The tires are wide enough for comfortable riding over gravel and they resist glass cuts but are not as fat and knobby as a pure mountain bike tire. Fittings are provided for mounting a carrying rack. The handlebars are flat and wide, giving good control and handling. Not as heavy as a pure mountain bike they are great for commuting or running errands. Their upright position makes them appealing to those with back problems.

Out of the city their characteristics tend to work against them. Putting the rider in a very upright posture makes him or her become much more susceptible to the full effect of the wind, hindering forward progress, and making the rider work much harder than it would be for someone riding a road bike. The flat handlebars limit one’s choices of hand position and make it difficult to lower the body to reduce wind resistance. The heavier frame, heavier wheels and wider tires all make the bike roll less efficiently, making these bikes slower and harder to pedal than a road bike. They are a compromise – great for in the city or on dirt paths but not very good on a highway or trip.

Fat-Tire Bikes

These are the bicycles of choice for those who want to do some serious off-road riding. The extra-wide tires allow the bike to “float” over snow and mud, making cycling in the winter a lot of fun. They are also very suited to riding unimproved trails which have roots, rocks, puddles, and hazards which usually discourage or prevent cyclists from considering such terrain. The bikes are relatively heavy but are fitted with multiple very low gears. Speed is not usually sought, rather it is the delight in riding in such rough and rugged conditions that makes these bikes so appealing. Prices are dependent on frame material, drive-train choices, and personal desires. Bike shops stock lots of choices and are happy to help novices who seek off-road adventures of this type. Many EBTC members are avid Fat-Bike enthusiasts and are more than happy to offer advice and introduce you to their favourite trails or snowy adventures.

Cost

How deep are your pockets? Bicycle prices range from \$800.00 (entry level at a bike shop) to \$10,000 (if you must have one of the finest machines available today). With bicycles you get exactly what you pay for. **As the price goes up so does the quality of all the components.** Manufacturers will sometimes put an inferior part on a bike to hold the price to a certain level but in general all the parts at a certain

price-point will be standard for that amount of money and you will see little variance from one brand of bike to another.

You should purchase your bike at a bicycle shop, not at a “Big Box” store. The price may seem a bit higher, but it is worth every penny. The bike shop bike will have only quality parts that the shop is willing to repair and maintain. It will have been assembled by a professional mechanic, not by someone hired for a few months to slap together as many bikes as possible to meet the spring rush. The bike shop will welcome you back for many years, the department store will steer you to somebody else when something goes wrong or needs fixing up. The shop will be happy to help you with advice, will give you a trade-in if you choose to upgrade in a year or two, and will make you feel part of a very select group of people, namely those who ride a bicycle.

At 2020 prices, I would say that around \$1200 is about entry level, where you might start looking. At this price point the components are all good and will last a few seasons. The frame quality is acceptable, the wheels, brakes and tires are reliable. A more serious bike will cost about \$2,200 and weigh about 20 pounds, several pounds less than an entry level bike.

It will have some carbon fibre parts, the gear train will be very smooth and be trouble free for several years. Bikes in this range are fine for most of us, they will give years of quality service and will carry us on every trip we want to take. Bikes costing more than this tends to become very specialized and lightweight. It is said that every pound of weight saved on a bike costs \$1,000 and you will find that's pretty accurate. If you want to ride a 15-pound bike rather than a 20 pound one, you will have to pay for the privilege.

Fourteen years ago, I bought a touring bike when I joined EBTC, “just in case” I ever wanted to go on a fully loaded tour. I still have this bike, but I've never gone on a fully loaded tour. I have since bought a sport bike and am much happier with it. Every case and every person is different, nobody can decide what is best for you. Sometimes even your own choice may turn out to be wrong. Make a decision, stick with it for a year or two and then think it over again. All bikes are fun. They will bring you great pleasure, take you to places you have never been to and have you meeting people who are like-minded, energetic, and interesting.

I am always open to questions and conversation regarding bikes. I can be reached at don_lynnpeddie@telus.net if you need clarification of any points or are still unsure of what bike might be best for you. Get out there and ride.