

Buying the Right Bike For You

Often at this time of our riding season, I am asked for advice about what kind of bike to buy. I'm no expert, but over the years, and having owned more than a dozen bikes, I've learned; not only from my mistakes but from hearing of the unfortunate experiences of others who have ended up with a bike that wasn't really what they wanted, didn't fit properly, was too heavy, or the gears were inadequate for our Haliburton hills. Maybe there is something in this article that will help you ask the right questions as you search for the right bike for you.

So, you've decided to buy a bike. Perhaps this is your first bike, but more likely you are replacing an older bike with something more to your liking. While this does not require the same level of commitment as, say, getting married, buying a bike is a decision that warrants some careful thought.

What is the Right Kind of Bike for Me?

There are four (actually many more) different kinds of bikes. Your first and most important decision will be about the main type of riding you want to do. I know some like the kind of riding that requires 1,400 cc's and a Harley logo! What type of riding will you be doing? This is the most important question, and only you can answer it. Decide on this, and you're half way there. Ask friends and fellow bikers about their experiences to help develop your decision. If you can't decide, don't buy a new bike.

Types of Bikes

Road Bikes. These are designed for paved roads and for going fast. Lightweight frame, skinny tires and handlebars, which allow for a variety of aero dynamic riding positions, are all characteristics of the road bike. If you want to go fast on a paved highway, consider a road bike.

Mountain Bikes. In the past twenty years, there has been an explosion of popularity over mountain bikes. These bikes are heavy, with robust frames, knobby tires and feature an upright riding position, compared to road bikes. Many have front suspension, which also adds weight to the bike. These bikes are designed to handle off-road, rugged trails. Unfortunately, mountain bikes have become the default choice for salespeople at some stores, as they are easier to sell and cost less than road bikes. Too often, these bikes with all the features for climbing up a vertical mountain pass, end up like the four-wheel SUV, and never actually go off the pavement. For our type of riding, there are better choices.

Hybrid Bikes. These bikes are a compromise between road bikes and mountain bikes and offer the best features if most of your riding will be shorter distances on paved roads. These bikes have smoother tires and an upright riding position, making them the most suitable for city riding, rail trails in good condition and paved country roads where you will enjoy their speed, durability and comfort.

The fourth and final group of bikes I'm going to lump together: **Tandems and Recumbents.** Many couples enjoy riding together and tandems allow riders of different levels of strength and endurance to enjoy the ride together. Riding a tandem truly is an experience in compromise and cooperation, but the rewards of riding together are many. Tandems also allow disabled riders, perhaps someone who is blind, to enjoy cycling as the stoker behind the captain. Because they bear more weight than a single bike, tandems are heavy and therefore slow to get up hills. But on the flat and downhill, they fly! Recumbents are, in a

word, comfort! The unique riding position brings no discomfort to the derriere; no back, shoulder or neck pain and no pressure on the wrists, which can lead to carpal tunnel syndrome. Riding a recumbent is like sitting in a lounge chair on wheels. The initial “learning curve” can be a bit twitchy at first and since different leg muscles are involved it takes some time to get used to. We have been riding recumbent for about 9 years and we wouldn’t sacrifice the comfort we’ve come to enjoy by returning to ride a traditional bike. My recumbent trike allows me to ride all day and I never have to put my foot down!

Where To Go To Buy a Bike

Go to a reputable bike store, one that features bikes and offers solid after-market service. From my experience, the folks that work at these stores are avid cyclists. Many commute to and from work, some race but the bottom line is, they know cycling and they are not interested in selling you a bike you will not be happy with. Some of these stores are listed in our club’s website, and some will let you test ride before you buy. Good idea! Why should you shell out good money if you can’t “try it on” first? **DO NOT** buy a bike from a hardware store, from Wal Mart or Canadian Tire. The sales folks at those stores are often teenage part timers making minimum wage, and they know little about the bike that might have caught your eye. Forget the after sale service.

How To Tell if the Bike Fits

A good bike store will have a trainer set up and will put you on the bike you are considering to see if it might be a “fit”, and watch you pedal. This is the only way to really tell if the bike is right for you. Above all, make certain you can stand over the bike, with both feet flat on the ground, and clear the top tube by 2”. Except perhaps on “tippy toes” you should not be able to touch the ground while sitting on the seat. But, you must be able to touch the ground easily when you straddle the top tube!

Regardless of the type of bike you choose, ask questions about the gears. In Haliburton, you will be riding some challenging hills. It’s unavoidable. Having a bike with 27 gears means little if the low gear is not low enough and forces you to struggle up hills, or walk. Fortunately, this is an easy fix as a good bike shop can swap out gears to make your ride smooth, safe and enjoyable. (We seldom regret not having a bigger gear for the fast downhills, but we always regret not having a low enough gear for the grind uphill!)

The seat. You will be spending almost 100% of your time on your new bike sitting on the seat, or saddle. Did you know that some bikes come with a “male specific” saddle? There is a significant difference between men’s and ladies saddles, so ask to have the saddle changed, if necessary, to suit your unique physique! A good bike shop will do this for free. Get on it, test ride and if you’re not happy and comfortable, ask to have the saddle changed. Do not fall for the “soft” seat but make sure the shape fits you. You’ll get used to the firmness of a properly designed saddle and you’ll appreciate the lack of chafing.

You’re in luck! One of the many features of our **Bike Clinic, on April 24th at 1 P.M. at the Stanhope Firefighters’ Hall**, will be further valuable information on how to fit your bike to you. Check out details about the clinic on the club’s website and don’t miss this opportunity to learn more about choosing the right bike and making it a perfect fit.

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