

BUYING A BIKE

THE BIKE SHOP

Now that you have an idea of what sort of bike you might like, you're ready to go shopping. Really, you should be punching the air at this prospect – after all, you're about to buy a beautiful new bicycle! But I bet a lot of you are thinking: gulp, now I have to go to a bike shop. To an outsider, these establishments can be terrifying places, stuffed full of a bewildering number of similar-looking machines with wildly varying price tags and unclear benefits. Not just that, but many are staffed by truculent young men with oily hands who either patronize you into submission or blind you with unnecessary cycling science. Recently, my friend Nic left her local branch of a national chain in fury after she went in to buy a new inner tube and was given an unsolicited lecture on how tyres work, all delivered using the analogy of a stiletto heel.

I think the journalist and bike nut Matt Seaton provides the best explanation for why some bike shop employees enjoy treating their customers like imbeciles:

Bikeshop boys take jobs in bikeshops because they love bikes and they get a good discount. But what they love most is playing with bikes and riding them, not selling them and, worse, answering questions about whether they've got a new nut to go on this bit, and do they know why the gears are making this noise, and, by the way, do they have a set of Allen keys to lend? For most of these young men, the compensation for the boredom of the retail routine and the frustration of dealing with all those idiotic customers is the opportunity to humiliate them in a multitude of ways.

From *The Escape Artist*, Matt Seaton

Of course, not all bike shops are like this. An increasing number have woken up to the fact that treating their customers with respect rather than contempt is actually rather a good business move. But there are all too many who will bark at you about gear ratios and group sets and insist you need to spend a grand on a bike that weighs less than a newborn when all you really want is a reliable machine to get you to the shops and back. If you encounter this sort of nonsense, up your heels and go elsewhere.

If you know you want a particular sort of bike – Dutch bikes or fixed gear spring to mind – try to seek out a shop specializing in those sorts of machines. Ordinary bike shops tend to just stock one or two niche models, and their employees may have no experience of riding them. You want to be served by people who can answer all your questions about the sort of bike you're interested in.

Assuming you have a choice of shops, only give your business to the ones who treat you like a sentient adult. Don't necessarily be put off by the fact that your chosen establishment doesn't have the bike of your dreams on sale. Your new friends may be able to order it in. Give them a précis of your answers to the five questions at the beginning of the chapter, and see what they have on offer.

Of course this works both ways – always be polite to people who work in bike shops. Generally, they are on more or less minimum wage, and though they would rather be out riding, they really would like to help you. I was flabbergasted to see how one man treated a female assistant at my local bike shop recently. He told her he wanted to see a mechanic. She told him she was a mechanic and asked how she could help. He said, no, a *real* mechanic.

THE TEST RIDE

The only way of really finding out whether a bike is for you is to give it a spin. Indeed, the best bike shops not only recommend you try out a bike before buying it, they insist on it. Expect to try out at least three before you find your perfect match. Usually, you'll have to give your credit card as surety in case you never return.

THE PERILS OF BUYING ONLINE

Sometimes people decide to skip the bike shop altogether and jump online instead. Be wary of doing this. First of all, you have no way of knowing whether the bike will really fit you. Even if you know your inside leg measurement to the nearest millimetre, there is no absolute standard between manufacturers – just like a size 10 in Marks & Spencer is bigger than a size 10 in Topshop. Not only will you not be able to try it out first, but if something goes wrong, you'll probably have to pay to get it fixed. If you buy from a proper shop, they'll more than likely offer a free service a month or so after you buy the bike, just to check everything is working properly. They'll also be far more inclined to fix it further on down the line – indeed, some over-subscribed shops will only fix bikes they themselves have sold.

Bikes bought over the internet also tend to arrive flatpacked, which we know from the Asda experiment is a recipe for disaster unless you really know what you're doing.

Of course, you could go to a real life shop, try out a bike and then buy it online if you think you can get it cheaper. But a better, more ethical, move would be to simply tell it like it is: explain to the sales assistant that you want the bike but can buy it cheaper online (a printout is a good idea). Very often they will match the price.



IS IT OK TO HAGGLE?

It's worth a go, especially if you have built up a rapport with the shop assistant. It's unusual to get a discount on the bike itself (apart from the automatic price reductions you often get if you are a member of a cycling organization such as the CTC), but very often you can wangle a cheaper helmet or lock, or maybe a free set of lights. You are more likely to succeed on this front if you are not in a chain store, though if you are polite and friendly and stick with the same assistant throughout the whole buying process, you might get lucky. At the end of the year, the previous season's bikes are often discounted. In bike years, this means that autumn/winter is often a good time to buy.

CHAIN STORE OR INDEPENDENT SHOP?

Do support independent bike shops, especially if they are local to you. Independent shops often offer superior service, because they tend to be managed by their owners, who really know their stuff and care whether you come again. At big chain stores, especially on the weekend, you sometimes get part-time workers who would just as happily work in Superdrug. They don't really care if you get the bike of your dreams, or if they sell you something totally unsuitable. They'll get the commission and, anyway, by the time you return to complain, they'll be back at college.

The downer is that small shops have a correspondingly small range of bikes. If you want to support your nearest shop but they don't have the machine you want, it's worth telling them your dilemma. Maybe they can order it in for you (though this isn't always possible, as many manufacturers insist on bulk ordering), or they can suggest something similar, or perhaps a model better than the one you were hankering after. If you can't buy your bike locally, make sure you pop in for all your other bikey needs. If you don't, they'll go out of business, and next time you just want to buy a new inner tube or a replacement for that screw you lost, you'll have to go all the way into town to Halfords.

Never buy a bike from a shop which doesn't specialize in bikes.

BUYING SECONDHAND

If you are short of cash but still want a good bike, buy secondhand. You'll probably get a far better used bike for £100 than you would spending £200 on something new and sub-standard. There are two main pitfalls with buying a used bike – 1. it's not always easy to tell whether the bike is any good, and 2. it can be hard to ascertain whether it has come from a reputable source.

How to spot a stolen bike

- Never buy from a market stall. These are the prime locations for criminals offloading fenced goods, including bicycles.
- If you are buying the bike from an individual, whether via eBay or a classified ad in a local paper, ask the owner to provide some proof of purchase. If they won't or say they can't, be suspicious. If they don't have a receipt, maybe they have insurance documents or the manual they got with the bike when it was new.
- If you meet the owner, ask yourself whether the owner and the bike are a likely match. Could that kid really have been able to afford that top-end racing bike?
- If not all the bike parts match, ask the owner why that's the case. Often, thieves strip down stolen bikes and mix and match the parts to make the provenance harder to trace; sometimes they've only nicked the frame and left the wheels. There are often legitimate reasons for mismatched componentry, but casually asking why this is the case could root out a dodgy dealer.
- Check if the bike has any security markings. Look under the frame, underneath the bottom tube, and see if the serial number is intact. If someone has filed it off, walk away. Some bikes are postcoded. If the postcode doesn't match the seller, ask them why.
- When you decide to buy, ask for a receipt. If they won't give you one, ask why.

Where to buy a secondhand bike

The most reputable places to buy secondhand are from a proper shop or a police auction, where the police sell off stolen bikes they cannot reunite with their true owners. To find your nearest auction, ask at your local police station or have a look on www.bumblebeeauctions.co.uk, where many forces sell their stuff. Others sub-contract out the sale to an auction house; you can find a list on www.police-information.co.uk.

Bike hire shops often sell their bikes on after a certain time at low cost too.

The biggest bargains are found at auctions, but the disadvantage is that you have to buy without inspecting the bike closely and have no comeback if you are sold a pup. Wherever you go, try to take along a bike-knowledgeable friend who can steer you away from disaster. Make sure you understand exactly how the bidding process works before you get cracking, and check that you don't have to register as a bidder beforehand. Remember that you will have to pay an auctioneer's fee in addition to the price of the bike – usually 10 per cent of the cost.

What to look for in a secondhand bike

There really is no point spending £25 on a bike only to discover that it's going to cost £150 to make it roadworthy. So learn to look for the obvious warning signs and get a test ride if possible, as secondhand bikes are usually sold 'as seen' (no refunds). Bear in mind that it can be very difficult to get hold of certain parts of old models, so if a lot needs replacing, make sure you know where you can buy new bits.

- Check the frame and forks for obvious dents or cracks, or to see if bits have been welded together. These are the most expensive parts to replace, so if you notice a problem, move on.
- If the frame isn't the right size for you, there's no point buying it.
- Look to see if the wheels are buckled or if there are many spokes missing. Lift the bike up and spin the wheels. If they wobble about a lot, they could become a problem. Replacing both wheels plus tyres can easily cost £100.
- See if the brakes work. Are the cables frayed? Are the brake pads worn down (i.e. can you no longer see the ridges in the pads?)? This is a relatively cheap fix, so if everything else about the bike is OK, this isn't a deal breaker.
- Check the chain isn't rusty or baggy.
- Look at the sprockets (cogs on the back wheel) and the chain rings (cogs on the front, by the pedals). If they are in good condition, their teeth will be sharp, pointy and evenly spaced. If they have become rounded, you won't be able to change gears smoothly and you'll need to buy a new chain, chain ring, and cassette (collection of sprockets/cogs on the back wheel), which will cost around £50.

MAKING SURE YOUR BIKE FITS

Never buy a bike that doesn't fit you – it will be uncomfortable to ride and can cause all sorts of aches and pains in knees, bottoms and backs.

- Straddle the frame. If there is a crossbar, the bar should not be more than 1.5 inches away from your crotch with road bikes and hybrids, and at least 2 inches away on mountain bikes.
- Your arms should be sloping forward to reach the handlebars, but not stretched.
- You should be able to reach the brakes and gears easily, without straining.
- When pedalling, your legs and knees should never feel overstretched or too scrunched up.
- Sitting on the saddle, you should be able to touch the floor when on your tiptoes.
- If you have found the right frame size, you can adjust the saddle and handlebar height using an Allen key or by unscrewing a bolt. If you have to have either as high or low as they can go, try going up or down a frame size.