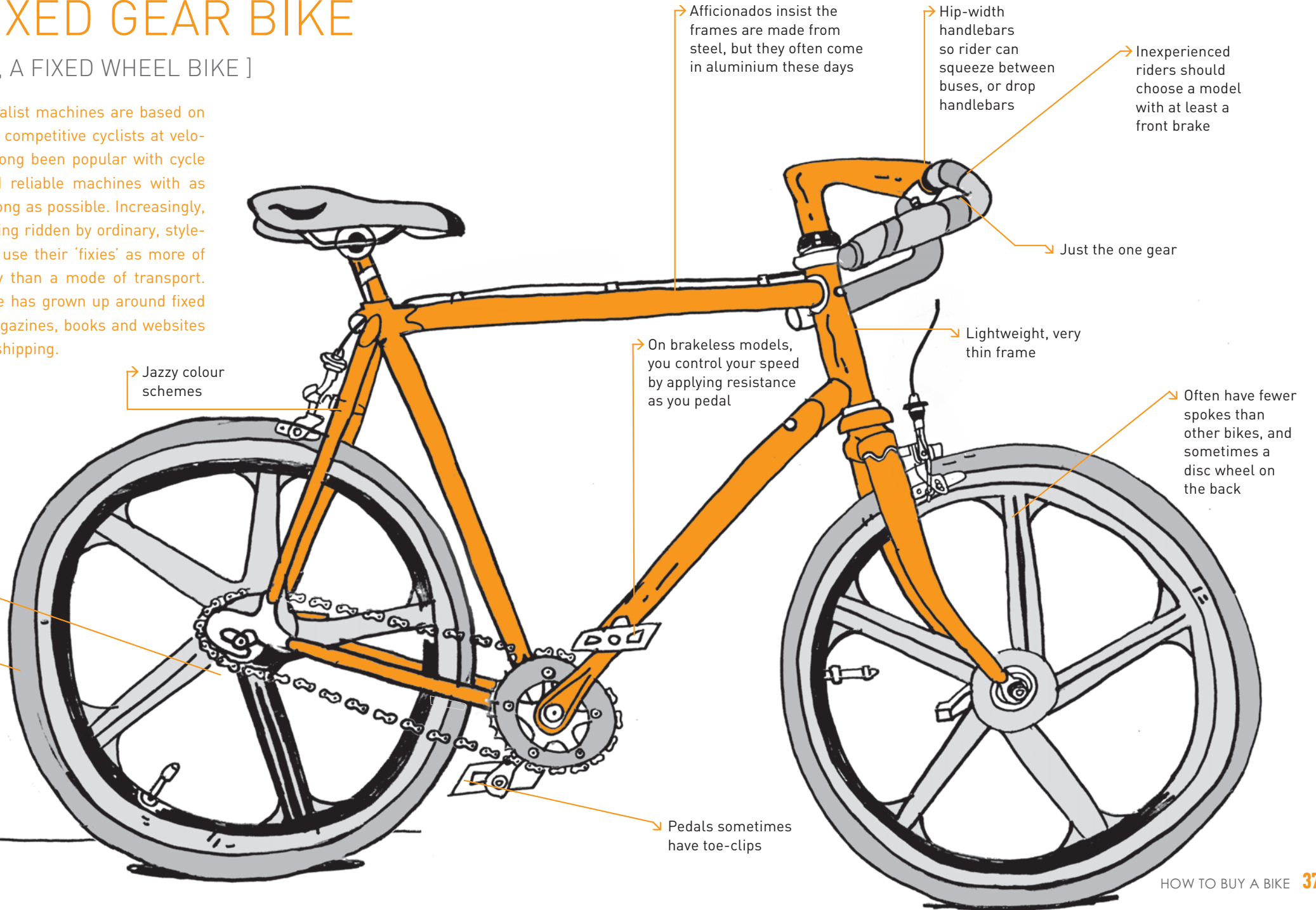


THE FIXED GEAR BIKE

[AKA A FIXIE, A FIXED WHEEL BIKE]

These sleek, minimalist machines are based on track bikes used by competitive cyclists at velodromes, and have long been popular with cycle couriers, who need reliable machines with as few things to go wrong as possible. Increasingly, though, they are being ridden by ordinary, style-conscious folk who use their 'fixies' as more of a fashion accessory than a mode of transport. A whole sub-culture has grown up around fixed gear bikes, with magazines, books and websites devoted to fixie worshipping.



→ Just one front chain ring and one sprocket (cog) on the rear, which does not freewheel. When you pedal, the bike moves; when you don't, it doesn't

→ Jazzy colour schemes

→ Good for doing wheelies and other tricks

→ On brakeless models, you control your speed by applying resistance as you pedal

→ Pedals sometimes have toe-clips

→ Afficionados insist the frames are made from steel, but they often come in aluminium these days

→ Hip-width handlebars so rider can squeeze between buses, or drop handlebars

→ Just the one gear

→ Lightweight, very thin frame

→ Inexperienced riders should choose a model with at least a front brake

→ Often have fewer spokes than other bikes, and sometimes a disc wheel on the back

A true fixed gear bike is single-speed with no freewheel and no brakes, but most used on the roads these days have a brake at the front but not at the back. Not having a freewheel means you can't coast – the wheels only turn when you pedal. You never get a rest, even if going downhill, and if the incline is too steep on the way up, you can't change down a gear. The advantage of this is that your muscles don't seize up or get tight and you get a great workout. Many models also have narrow handlebars, which make it easier to squeeze through queues of traffic – a big plus or a dangerous incitement, depending on your point of view.

Until recently, most fixed gear bikes seen out on the open road were conversions from track or road bikes, but now you can buy ready-made models from companies such as Charge. This is a better idea, because their geometry is suited to the road – because they never have to take sharp corners, track bikes tend to be very compact and therefore people can find the front wheel hits their toes when cornering in the real world.

Expect to pay upwards of £400 for a half decent bike. You can buy off the peg or get one customized with wheels, tyres, chains, frames and handlebar tape in all the colours of the rainbow from dedicated bike builders. Create Bikes in London creates new fixed gear bikes from old bike parts and will customize them in the colour scheme of your choice (www.createbikes.com). It is also possible to convert some ordinary road bikes into a fixie, should you so wish.

Fixed gear bikes are not recommended for novice cyclists, and if you take the plunge, expect to take a while to get used to not being able to freewheel. Once you do, though, devotees insist you feel a closer communion with your bike and with the road, and will develop a better riding style. They like to bang on about the 'purity' of the experience too, and of being 'at one' with their bicycle. It definitely makes you fit – I know fixie riders who can go 100 miles or more across hilly terrain. Being strapped into the pedals also makes for a more efficient ride. Very little power is lost and much is gained in the upstroke.

Though it defeats the object rather, some new fixed gear bikes can be converted to a freewheeling single speed by putting the back wheel on the other way around with what is quaintly called a 'flip-flop hub'.

There are no shortage of websites and forums discussing all things fixie. A good place to start is London Fixed Gear and Single Speed (www.londonfgss.com). Despite its focus on the capital, the forum holds the answer to just about every fixed gear question you could imagine.

PROS

- ✎ Very lightweight, so good for anyone who lives up several flights of stairs
- ✎ With no gears to maintain, there are fewer bits to look after
- ✎ The fixed gear is good at very low speeds, so you can stay upright while waiting for a chance to jump through traffic or simply balance at the lights without putting your foot down
- ✎ Very customizable; can be ordered in every colour of the rainbow
- ✎ Good exercise, as you never stop pedalling and have to work hard on hills – both up and down
- ✎ Because you are more solidly connected to the bike, you have better control of it in bumpy conditions or on difficult corners
- ✎ They look cool – the very essence of a bicycle, with no superfluous bits

CONS

- ✎ Not great for going up hills – though fixed gear fans swear their bikes are surprisingly good climbers
- ✎ No rear brake means lots of skid stops, which wears down the rear tyre more quickly
- ✎ Style over substance; often really expensive for what they are
- ✎ Tend to have no eyelets to attach any extras, whether a pannier rack, bottle cage or basket
- ✎ Skinny tyres mean you'll really feel the potholes
- ✎ No freewheel for when you're going downhill or get tired and want to coast

Purists like to flaunt their anti-establishment credentials on home-built bikes with no branding. Sensing money to be made, however, the biggest bike manufacturers, such as Trek and Giant, have all brought out fixed gear models, and you can increasingly buy fixies from the major bike chains.

SOME SPECIALIST OUTLETS, MANUFACTURERS AND BIKE BUILDERS INCLUDE:

- ✎ **14 Bike Co., London:** <http://14bikeco.wordpress.com>
- ✎ **Brick Lane Bikes, London:** <http://bricklanebikes.co.uk>
- ✎ **Charge Bikes:** www.chargebikes.com
- ✎ **Create:** www.createbikes.com
- ✎ **Fixie Inc:** www.cycles-for-heroes.com
- ✎ **Tokyo Fixed Gear:** www.tokyofixedgear.com