

Commuting on your bike

By Rod Fraser



Living in Canada or the United States, it's hard to imagine the bicycle is on a par with the automobile as the world's most popular form of transportation. It is estimated there are over one billion bicycles on the planet; many of them used each and every day for local trips and transportation.

Of course, this is not true of North America, where bicycles are used primarily for recreation. But even here: bicycle ownership is claimed by 45% of the population.

Unfortunately, only 1% of Canadian commuters

report bicycling as their usual mode of transportation, despite the compelling arguments for doing so. One U.S. study found the average driver spends four hours a day, driving, maintaining or earning the money for a car.

If this fact doesn't sway you, how about this: An article in the National Post recently mentioned the key reason for admission to nursing homes—older people no longer have legs strong enough to support them. It's no wonder, given that children, working adults and retirees spend so much time in their automobiles (or sitting on their couches).

While not everyone can commute to work by bicycle, given the distances involved, some might manage it, if they reconsidered their priorities. And others might increase their cycling time (and reduce their car driving) if they used their bikes to run every day errands.

Nearly half of all trips in North America are three miles or less; more than a quarter are less than half a mile. Many of these trips are easily biked—or walked. A cyclist can cover a mile in four minutes, a pedestrian in 15 minutes.

Assuming you would like to commute to work or use your bicycle regularly for local trips and errands, you have to give some thought to the type of bicycle that would work for you. I suggest a mountain bike.

Since it originated in the early 1980s, it has become the most popular bicycle used for cycling.



Initially they were much like a touring bicycle with fatter tires. But this has changed. They are now manufactured with strange frame shapes and front and rear suspension. This type of frame does not readily lend itself to fenders or racks.

The advantages of a mountain bike are its upright handle bars, reliable and accessible brakes, and wide tires. All are a great advantage when you're cycling in traffic since your head is up, your bike feels stable and your brakes are always near at hand.

While fatter tires do add stability to a bicycle, I'd

suggest you limit the size of your tires to 1.5 inches, as the extra weight is unnecessary. Knobby tires should be avoided if your riding is mainly on roads.

A good mountain bike for commuting and transportation should have eyelets for a rack in the rear, This enables the mounting of panniers (a form of saddlebag). While some cyclists carry their lunch and supplies in a backpack, panniers in various sizes, attached to your rear rack, can carry books, parcels, groceries, a tool kit and files for work. A briefcase pannier is available for more business-minded commuters.



Many cyclists argue that fenders are important for commuters and this is certainly true if you are wearing good clothes while cycling. Riding in the rain on a muddy road should encourage most cyclists to

try fenders. As for me, I don't find them useful. In a serious rainstorm, I drive to work, or wear suitable rain wear. In a light drizzle, spandex pants offer ample protection.

Cleaning fenders is a great nuisance, so I have determined not to use them. If rain is a worry, I leave a supply of suitable clothes in the office and change upon arrival.

The gearing of mountain bikes is also well designed for commuting and local travel. The chain ring at the front of the bike is usually sized 44-32-22 and the rear cassette is 11-32. Combined, this provides for easy pedaling up most hills and a moderate speed going downhill. For all but the strongest cyclists, this will be welcome.



If you want a mountain bike for general purpose use, you should consider purchasing one without a suspension fork (or ordering a rigid fork as a side item and having the bike shop install it).

While manufacturers would have you believe you require a suspension fork for normal road use, this is clearly not so. The wider tires of a mountain bike (even the 1.5 inch tires suggested above) will provide a smooth ride on gravel and paved roads, as well as most bicycle paths.

Weather is probably the biggest factor in discouraging people from cycling to work. In the summer, you should remember that cycling creates its own breeze. If you wear a cool-max T shirt and spandex shorts (changing into work clothes when you arrive), you're unlikely to overheat and require a shower. If you feel you're getting hot and sweaty, slow down fifteen minutes prior to arriving at the office and you'll be fine.

In the winter, the secret is to wear layers of clothes. Why not consider a T-shirt, covered by a Polartec sweater with a nylon shell over top? Spandex pants are generally warm all winter long, but if it's especially cold, you can wear something over the pants.

Gloves for your hands, as well as a balaclava to keep your head warm will round out your outfit. If you start to get too hot, stop and remove whatever seems appropriate.



I use a studded tire in the winter. Snow melts during the day and freezes once the sun goes down; this can create patches of black ice which are treacherous to cyclists. I have found one studded tire on the front is adequate.

If you hit ice with your front wheel (without a

studded tire), it usually slips and you will fall. A rear wheel slip is often easier to recover. Keep in mind: when conditions are bad enough to warrant two studded tires, you should drive to work.



You'll need a helmet, a flat fix-kit, extra inner tube, one or two tools and an air pump. Consider a headlamp and blinking rear light just in case you get caught after dark. I have found it useful to have a bell to warn pedestrians and motorists of my presence. You should purchase cycling gloves and a Brooks' saddle (bicycle seat). You just can't beat the Brooks' brand for comfort.

If you haven't cycled on busy streets or if you lack some confidence in doing so, it would be prudent to take a course to improve your competence and comfort level while riding in traffic.

Such courses are widely available and focus on essential bicycle handling techniques, as well as the rules of the road, as they apply to cyclists.

So there it is: a primer on using your bicycle for commuting and local transportation. While I tend to focus on the latter, I try to use my bike every chance I can. I do love riding and I highly recommend it for you.

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