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Two wheels

Why I love the 'fixie'

Matt Seaton
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[The Guardian](#)

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I've been putting off writing this one. Not because it's a difficult or awkward subject - quite the reverse: because it's too pleasurable and feels as though I'm just boring on about a hobby-horse. I think of it as "my paean to the fixed-gear bike" - a cycling topic that has to date seemed perhaps one click too arcane. But now I think it is no longer an indulgent fancy on my part, but an idea whose time has come.

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What is a "fixed gear", you ask. It is a bicycle pared to its essence: there are no gears but one, which means that

there is just one chainring fitted to the cranks, just one sprocket at the back, and a single loop of chain tensioned between. Neither is there a freewheel mechanism, so you can't stop pedalling while the bicycle is in motion, because the momentum of the bike causes the pedals to rotate (independently of your force on the pedals making the bike go forward). Track bikes are still made this way, but once upon a time (circa 1900) all bicycles had a fixed gear.

If you have never experienced riding a "fixie", it's hard to communicate adequately the almost transcendental pleasure of the sensation. Initiates of the art grow lyrical, even mystical, on the subject. On a fixed, you feel far more intimately "connected" to your bike. Your pedalling develops a silky smoothness; your legs benefit from greater "souplesse", as the French say. And let me not even get started on the joys of performing "track stands" - that is, balancing stationary on the bike (a relatively simple skill on a fixed) ... you begin to see why I've kept quiet till now. But perhaps I just wanted to keep it all to myself.

The only disadvantage is when you hit an incline. Still, a fixed is better than you would think on the hills - the way the bike's momentum pushes the pedals helps you over all but the most horribly steep with relative ease. And then there is the fact that a fixed-gear bike has so few moving parts there's almost nothing to go wrong. Little to clean, little to wear out - it's the nearest you can get to a zero- maintenance bicycle.

Which explains its appeal to couriers. But the fixed has gone way beyond that subculture now. I see more and more commuters riding fixed-gear bikes (or their vanilla cousin, the single speed with freewheel). And at the peripatetic Bicycle Film Festival, which opens for its second annual outing in London this week, there is a screening of MASH, a 20-minute film all about the fixed-gear riders of San Francisco - a city whose hills, until now, have been more familiar in movies featuring car chases.

The fixed: practical, pleasurable, beautiful in its simplicity - and, as it happens, the last word in urban cool. What's not to like?

· See Bicyclefilmfestival.com for further details

Bike doctor

All your cycling questions answered

Dear Matt, I am a 65-year-old male training for a trans-America ride. I use a racing bike with narrow tyres, inflated to 125psi. The result is a hard, bumpy ride on our appalling English roads. After some recent 50-mile rides, I now have greyish- red lines in my vision. An optician has diagnosed damaged blood vessels in the back of my eyes. At the time I did not consider cycling had been a factor. But if this could be the cause, I assume the obvious correction would be to use softer, more absorbent tyres.

Gregory Carol, via email

I have never heard of road shock causing vision problems, but nerve damage to hands is documented, so it sounds possible. In any case, your tyres don't need to be so hard: 100psi is plenty unless you are 85kg or more. It's a fallacy that hard equals fast; some compliance improves smooth rolling and traction. Second, an aluminium frame might explain the harshness. If you can, try a carbon frame - much better at absorbing road shock. Other, less costly, technical fixes would include gel-padded bar tape, and a Specialized seatpost with "Zertz" insert.

· Email your bike-related queries to bike.doctor@guardian.co.uk

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