

THE REAL THING

How can you tell a mountain bike from a quiche-eater?
And should you really care?

By Ted Eugenis

Despite what you've heard, mountain bikes aren't more powerful than locomotives or able to leap six foot ravines. They are, more exactly, a kind of super-charged paper-boy's bike that has beefed-up but lightweight components compared to the slim stuff on your typical ten-speed.

Start with 15 gears. Then add stout frames, big rims, and gnarly looking tires, and you've got a machine that loves abuse. Hit a pothole or a dirt rut and your rim stays round.

What's more, mountain bike manufacturers are using the same technology that made lightweight racing bikes inexpensive and popular.

True mountain bikes have better frames that use double-butted (thicker at the ends than in the middle) chrome-moly tubing, which is brazed rather than welded using lugs (or sleeve joints) where the tubes join. They also have slightly better components, a wide range of low gears for grinding up soft terrain, and sell for \$400 and up. But as price cutting heats up, "Prices are not as low as they're going to get," predicts Ward Curtis, formerly an engineer with Schwinn and Trek.

"The bike industry did a disservice to its customers by selling them bikes with dropped bars," adds Curtis. "Nobody used dropped racing bars except racers. That's why all the inexpensive bikes were sold with the 'safety levers' that operated brakes from an upright riding position. Mountain bikes have opened people's eyes to what a bike should ride like."

Mountain bikes have opened people's wallets too. For example, one of the first to offer a commercially produced mountain bike was an outfit named Specialized. Their Stumpjumper debuted in 1979 for about \$750. At that time the only other mountain bikes cost over \$1400 and were made by fat-tire pioneers Tom Ritchey and Gary Fisher.

Specialized's Stumpjumper's sales screamed through the roof, and in 1981 other manufacturers finally got on the bandwagon.

And whether or not serious price cutting has started, the fact is, every bike that costs \$300 or more will have perfectly usable and serviceable parts that will last for years to come.

The biggest improvements are in frames. Tubing manufacturers are responding to bike makers' pleas, and making special tubing that is larger diameter, strong, and lightweight.

If you have to have the best, look for a bike that has butted and lugged tubes for strength and lightness, and top of the line components like Shimano or Suntour's new XC Gruppo. The XC Gruppo was designed specifically for mountain bikes and dealers think it's one of the hottest things to come along. The components are not a rehash of road equipment, but are designed for mountain bikes.

Another new item is the Cunningham/SunTour roller cam brake. It's a low clearance system that could challenge cantilevers as the brakes of choice, but it's expensive, and serious riders are using them only on the rear wheels because of their excellent stopping power. "They stop too well," observes Curtis, and on front wheels "increase the chances of an inexperienced rider being pitched over the handlebars."

Also making an appearance are long seat posts. Up until now, some riders had to jury rig their mountain bikes with a BMX seatpost and spacer to accommodate the seat. Component manufacturers responded with actual mountain bike seatposts, so now you don't have to worry about a wiggly seat.

Ten years down the road, we may see some space-age technology—things like graphite-reinforced frames, plastic frames, composite wheels of metal and plastic, and more. But until then, bikes will stay about the way they are now, using tried and true materials like chrome-moly steel, and aluminum alloy components.

So the mountain bike is here to stay. But one big question remains: Do most people who are buying, really need them? Dealer Creag Hayes, who's an active cyclo-cross (moto-cross without

motors) rider, says: "Most people aren't riding mountain bikes off-road. For what they *are* doing they could use a standard ten-speed with beefed-up rims and tires, and upright bars. I use a cyclo-cross bike which looks like a regular ten-speed, except for cantilever brakes, stout rims, tires with deep tread, and a beefier fork and fork crown. I use my bike off-road, and while it won't go some of the places a mountain bike will go, it can cover most of the same terrain and go faster."

So before you go out and buy a mountain bike, ask yourself how you'll use it. If commuting and road touring figure prominently, then an "all-terrain" bike is the vehicle because of its durability—the extra weight of the steel frame won't bother anything, because you're not doing anything too ambitious. My six-year-old converted Schwinn is still unscathed after commuter battles in the streets of Chicago, and the underbelly of New York City.

For offroad touring, my new \$350 mountain bike is the vehicle of choice because it's so light and quick—I can ride on rough secondary roads and dirt roads away from traffic and people. Granted, a streamlined touring bike is faster, but, to me, touring means getting off the beaten path, not staying on the highways like all the other tourists. And yes, I've toured extensively on numerous designer racing and touring bikes and just don't have a good time riding them anymore. Fun is what bike riding is all about and mountain bikes make riding fun.

How much should you spend? Well, for \$300-\$400, you can get a lot of bike.

If you spend \$400-\$600, expect sealed bearings in your bottom bracket, headset, and hubs. This means you won't have to overhaul them frequently to get rid of the mud and grime that seep in from off-road riding.

Over \$600, be discerning. Look over the fine details like lugwork, paint job, and assembly. But for my money, *any* price a mountain bike commands is better than the price you have to pay for a regular ten-speed . . . having to stay on paved roads. ♣