

What to look out for when choosing a bike

Jon McGee (article written in 2012)

Bristol
to
Bordeaux.
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Hello and welcome to the first of our articles aimed at helping you get the most from your journey from Bristol to Bordeaux.

In these articles we will be covering topics such as riding in groups, climbing and descending, bike preparation and road side repairs. The articles are written by members of the Bristol to Bordeaux team and riders who have taken part in the B2B rides in recent years. So, hopefully we will be able to pass on a few gems of advice to you all.

This first article will look at how bikes are classified, which bikes are most suited for the Bristol to Bordeaux ride and what to look for if you are thinking about purchasing a new bike or upgrading your current bike.

Cycling, as with most sports or hobbies, suffers from technical language overload. It is a world full of strange terms and acronyms. My aim, therefore, is to keep the technical detail to a minimum where ever possible.

Which Bike?

Although there are many types of bikes, for convenience, I will stick to defining the three main groups -Road, Mountain and Hybrid.

Road – Any bike designed to be used on the road, usually light, fast, equipped with drop handle bars and narrow, smooth tyres. Road bike geometry (shape of the frame) varies from being quite relaxed as in Touring road bikes to more aggressive as in Racing bikes.

Mountain – A bike used off road with larger tubing on the frame, suspension, wider rims and knobbly tyres.

Hybrid /City – As the name suggest this can be combination of the two bikes above. The weight and size of the frame is akin to a road bike but with straight handlebars. The wheel rims tend to be thinner than a mountain bike and have smoother tyres. The riding position is less radical than a road bike and therefore a little more comfortable. Hybrids are generally used for commuting.

From these descriptions it is clear that either a road bike or hybrid should be the bike of choice for our ride to Bordeaux.

To keep things simple I will refer to road bikes and their components throughout this article. For those of you riding a hybrid don't fear as there are many similarities with road bikes.

So, are you in the market for a new bike? With so many different brands, models and makes on offer, how can you tell one bike from another? Why do they vary in price so much and what things should you be looking for?

Where to start?

1. The first thing you need to decide is what type of riding do you enjoy. Do you enjoy a relaxing ride on a comfortable bike where speed is not the most crucial factor? Are you planning to complete the 'classic' route where you will be cycling between 70 – 80 miles per day? If so, either a hybrid or touring road bike set up will serve you well.

If you are thinking of signing up for the 'extreme' route then speed over the ground is more important. A simple calculation will show you that to cover 125 miles per day at an average speed of 12.5 miles per hour you will be in the saddle for 10 hours. An average speed of 15 mph will mean an 8 hour day. To keep your average speed high you will need a bike designed for speed over comfort. This is where a more aggressive road bike set up comes in.

2. Secondly, what is your budget? Most manufacturers produce a bike for each price bracket. With at least 10 large bike manufacturers you have many models to choose from regardless of your budget. As with any piece of equipment, the more you pay the better the bike. Having said that, within each price bracket there will always be a stand out bike which is excellent value for money. The price brackets tend to be somewhere in the region of sub £500, £500-£750, £750-£1000, £1000-£1500 and £1500+. I have not bothered to consider 'supermarket bikes' which can be as cheap as £70. These are not really bikes, more bike shaped objects. As a rule of thumb, if you intend riding serious miles then your budget needs to start at a minimum of £400. This will get you a bike which is up to the job, but the components will be at the lower end in terms of quality and the bike will be heavy. (As you will see in a later article, weight is everything in cycling).
3. Thirdly, sex and size. Getting the correct size and shape (geometry) of bike for you is an absolute must. If you are going to be spending up to 8 hours per day in the saddle (which you probably will be doing on your way to Bordeaux) your bike must 'fit' you. Ladies tend to be a little smaller in stature and shorter in reach and therefore a woman's specific bike is required. Most of the major bike manufacturers produce a women's bike but the choice is much more limited meaning only two or three bikes per manufacturer across all the price brackets!!

The best way to ensure your bike is set up correctly (in terms of saddle height and position, handlebar height, length of reach etc) is to have a bike fit session at a specialist bike shop. One of our sponsors (Bike Science) offers this type of service. They will be able to tell you exactly what size of bike to buy or alter your existing bike to fit you. We are in the process of finalising a deal with Bike Science, where by PfP riders will receive discount for a 'bike fit' session. Details will be on the PfP website in the near future.

Why does the price of bikes vary so much?

Apart from a second hand car or a very large TV there aren't many things as expensive as a new bike. Why on earth do they vary in price so much? What are you paying for?

Well, there are three things which make all the difference to your riding experience.

Frame - Can be made from Steel (heavy - £400), Aluminium (light - £750), Carbon Fibre or Titanium (Super Light - £1000+). No prizes for guessing that the lighter the material the more expensive the frame. Don't forget weight is everything and you pay more for lighter gear.

Note - There are different grades of steel, aluminium and carbon fibre which will vary in price but that is a little too nerdy for this article.

Wheels – The one piece of kit which makes a huge impact on the speed and comfort of your ride are the wheels. On a new bike a manufacturer will fit the cheapest wheels they can get away with. A very cheap wheel will have poor quality bearings in the hubs, thin heavy rims and will be difficult to keep true. All these things will result in a slower, less efficient ride. Once again, there are many models of wheels from companies such as Mavic, Fulcrum, Bontrager and Shimano. A cheap wheel set (front and rear) can be as little as £70, a very good pair will set you back £350 whilst the most expensive wheels can cost £1200!! Strong wheels (designed for touring and the heavier rider) will have more spokes than a race ready pair. The more expensive wheels will have sealed bearings in the hubs and the very best wheels will have ceramic bearings. What you are looking for is the lowest 'rolling resistance' possible. As this term suggests, you want a wheel that will spin and spin as smoothly as possible for as long as possible.

Of all the upgrades you can make to your bike a new set of wheels will transform your ride.

Connected to the wheels (quite literally) are the **tyres**. To speed you on your way you need to reduce the friction between tyre and road to a minimum. The easiest way to do this is to replace any tyre with a deep thread with a 'slick' tyre. (Word of warning – unless you are an experienced cyclist, don't use slick tyres on wet roads or if rain is forecast). Also, the thinner the tyre, the less the amount of rubber in contact with the road. This will mean a

reduction in friction and therefore more speed. As with all things cycling, there are many choices of tyre. Some of the top end tyres are made by Continental, Schwalbe, Michelin and Vittoria. To help with puncture prevention, many tyres now come with a Kevlar type layer within the tyre which offers protection from thorns and glass.

Components – These are all the ‘bits’ you find on your bike. Also known as ‘Group Sets’ they consist of gear shifters and brake levers, chain rings (large cogs at the front), cassette (cluster of small cogs at the rear), front derailleur, rear derailleur, brake callipers, crank arms, bottom bracket (the part the crank arms attach on to) and the chain.

The majority of road bikes are equipped with groupsets made by one of three companies.

Shimano (Japanese), SRAM (American) and Campagnolo (Italian).

Each company makes a selection of groupsets which vary massively in price. The main differences between them are weight (again), the materials they are made from, how well they are made and how smoothly they operate.

Starting with the most expensive, the groupsets for road bikes are as follows-

Shimano – Dura Ace (£1300), Ultegra, 105, Tiagra, Sora, 2300 (£250).

SRAM – Red, Force, Rival, Apex.

Campagnolo – Super Record, Record, Chorus, Athena, Centaur, Veloce.

(The prices quoted above are just for the components and not a complete bike!)

Alongside the importance of the groupset are ‘gear ratios’. This term basically means “how easy is it to pedal uphill”? (An aspect of cycling close to all our hearts). Although the route to Bordeaux is not chock full of hard climbs there are definitely enough hills to challenge us all. With this in mind, having a suitable gear ratio will mean you have the best possible chance of making it up every climb. Without getting too technical, the gear ratio is the relationship between the size of the chainrings and the size of the cassette. In a nutshell, to spin your way up the hills you need a very small inner chainring (30 – 34 teeth) and a large inner cog on the cassette (25 – 28 teeth).

So which bike should I choose?

This is a very difficult question to answer - there are so many to choose from. Bikes of a similar price are usually made from the same materials with similar groupsets and with recommendations from friends and previous bikes you have ridden; it becomes a very personal choice. If you are thinking about buying a new bike then why not try the following:

1. Find a couple of bike shops you are happy to deal with. Each bike shop will stock maybe two or three makes of bikes.
2. Tell them what your budget is and what type of bike you want. Be confident with your requests. Don't be pushed into a direction you don't want to go.
3. Ask them to measure you for the correct size of bike.
4. Take a couple of bikes out for a test ride to see which one feels the most comfortable.
5. Don't be tempted to buy a bike on your first visit to the shop as you have a little research still to do.
6. Visit a second shop and repeat processes 2 – 4.
7. Now, hopefully, you have a couple of bikes to choose from.

This is where your research begins. Check out www.bikeradar.com to see if the bikes on your short list have been reviewed. If they have and one is a clear winner then that could be one to go for.

If the bikes on your shortlist have similar reviews then you need to start looking at each bike in more detail. Assuming both bikes have frames made from similar materials (i.e. Aluminium) then check out the groupsets. If they are different then go for the most expensive groupset assuming all else is equal. If the groupsets are similar in quality then check out the wheels. Different bike manufacturers will use different wheels so make a note of them and then use the internet to see how good they are. (Use websites like

Chain Reaction, Wiggle or Evans to see how much this set of wheels may cost you. Use www.bikeradar.com again to see if there is a review of your wheels).

8. If you are still undecided between a couple of bikes then take them both for a test ride again. This is a process not to be rushed. You are going to be spending a lot of your hard earned cash on something you are going to be sitting on for a long, long time.
9. Once you have made your decision start searching the internet to see if you can buy the bike for less than the shop price. If you can find it cheaper, print off the web page and take it back to the shop. Most shops will price match the internet price as they need your custom.
10. Don't stop there – see if the bike shop will throw anything else in for the price of the bike such as a pair of pedals (believe it or not but expensive new bikes don't come with pedals) or a set of lights, a pair of cycling shoes or a free service package. The more you are spending the more you can haggle for.
11. If the shop won't match the internet price then you have two options
 - a. Pay the shop price not forgetting to haggle for a few extras.
 - b. Buy off the internet. If you do then try to use one of our sponsors such as Wiggle or Chain Reaction as PROPs receives a contribution from these companies whenever we shop there. (Please follow the instructions on the PfP website). There are disadvantages with buying a bike online. The bike will need to be assembled when you receive it. You won't have the convenience of returning it to the shop if anything goes wrong and you won't be able to haggle on price or free extras.

Or is life too short?

A few recommendations

It wouldn't be fair to end this article without naming a few bikes which have had excellent reviews in some of the many bike magazines or ones which have gone down well with Pedal for PROPs riders.

Sub £500 Range

Carrera Bikes from Halfords. Don't be put off buying a bike from Halfords. The Carrera range has an excellent selection of bikes for riders who are beginning their cycling adventure.

Fuji Absolute 3.0 hybrid scored a very solid 86% in 'Cycling Active' magazine review. Available through www.evanscycles.co.uk

£500 - £750 Range

Trek 1.2 scored a whopping 90% in 'Cycling Active' magazine. Aluminium frame and carbon forks with Shimano Sora and Tiagra gears can't be bad for under £750. Take a look at www.trekbikes.com.

Specialized Secteur gets 4 out of 5 at Bike Radar – "It's comfortable, has a reassuring ride, looks great and is well spec'd for the money". You can't say fairer than that.

£750 - £1000 Range

Boardman Bikes from Halfords. I know, Halfords again, but this is the only retailer that stocks Boardman bikes. These bikes have been a real hit with cyclists due to their very competitive price, great range of components, super light aluminium frame and carbon forks.

Specialized Dolce Elite, which is female specific bike, scored 44 out of 50 in 'Cycling Plus' magazine. As with the Boardman bike above - Aluminium frame with carbon forks and Tiagra groupset.

£1000+ Range

Planet X is a small company in the North of England that produces an excellent range of bikes. Their carbon fibre nanolight model has fantastic SRAM components and Planet X wheels at a very competitive price. Planet X bikes are stocked by Bike Science (Bristol) and through their own website (www.planet-x-bikes.co.uk).

BH Bikes are a Spanish manufacturer. The BH Speedrom carbon fibre model is an excellent ride which benefits greatly from an upgrade in wheels.

Specialized S-Works models are ridden by many of the pro teams but you do pay for quality. The S-Works range starts from £1600. Specialized concept stores have everything you could ever want (but at a price). We are lucky enough to have one in Bristol!

Giant and Pinarello are also 'uber' manufacturers and produce fantastic bikes. I'm afraid it is a case of 'whatever floats your boat' in deciding which one to go for.

We hope this article has been of interest to you. If you require further information or help, please feel free to contact me at jonmcgeecycling@gmail.com or 07917 325088.

Happy cycling

Jon

Jon McGee has been a rider and mechanic on the last five B2B and PROPS CC European rides. He is a full time Mobile Bike Mechanic as well as a cycling coach for students at PROPS and Briarwood Sixth form. He is able to carry out all aspects of bike repairs and upgrades. A full service, including bike collection and return costs £50.00 (excluding parts). PROPS will receive a donation of 20% from each bike service booked by B2B riders. To book your bike in for a service or upgrade please use the phone number above.