

Mountain Biking

If you're looking for a truck or SUV to explore the countryside, you're thinking two wheels too many. To get really close to nature, have a blast and keep in shape, grab a mountain bike and head for the hills.

The popular "mountain bike" style was developed, as the name suggests, from bicycles designed for cruising up and down a mountain. Obviously racing down a mountainside can be a real adrenaline rush, but it can also be quite dangerous. Anyone actually considering taking on a mountain pass is advised to invest in a bike designed to accomplish such a task. With the right equipment and some common sense, mountain biking is a fun sport for the entire family.

Find your Style

There are three basic styles of mountain biking: cross-country, freestyle and downhill. Although the styles vary in many ways, each demands a great deal of skill. Choosing your personal riding style will determine the type of mountain bike you should buy. In other words, don't buy a heavy downhill bike if you plan on busting moves with your buddies. A lighter freestyle model is better suited for trick riding.

Hone your Skills

Every great mountain biker needs endurance and stamina. It takes ambition and, sometimes, courage to be able to conquer nature's courses successfully. Like any sport, mountain biking also involves time and practice. Lots of practice. You can't expect to go from riding your bike around the block, to scaling rocky hills and maneuvering through winding trails. Anticipate getting a few bumps and bruises before you're ready to ride with the big kids.

Location, Location, Location

Thinking of mountain biking as riding an unpaved surface. Your bike is ready to take you virtually anywhere you want to be, and many North American parks offer designated biking locations. Before hitting the trails in a park or conservatory, check for rules and regulations. There may even be trail maps available for you to bring along on your trek. Ask about local mountain biking clubs and group trail rides and competitions. You can easily find this information by asking at a local bike shop, checking the papers or searching online. Beginner to advanced groups are available, so be sure you're joining a club that matches your skill level.

Choose your Ride

Once you've narrowed down your mountain biking style#cross-country, freestyle or downhill#the bike you select basically comes down to personal choice. There is a huge variety of makes and models on the market today. Compare styles, shapes and price. Be sure to consider the quality of the bike and the reliability of the manufacture, but don't be fooled into thinking the most expensive models are necessarily the best bikes. The Internet can be a great tool in shopping for a bike, as some compare quality, features and prices for you. When you find a bike you like, ask for a test drive. A great mountain biker needs to feel as one with his or her own bike. Check for a comfortable seat and position, and be sure that the brakes and gears are suited to you.

A mountain bike can be a big investment, so ask around and do your homework before you buy.

Keep it Safe

Mountain biking on unpaved roads and through unexplored territories can be very dangerous. You literally do not know what's lying around the corner. Always wear a helmet, wherever you ride. Elbow and kneepads and riding gloves are also good choices to help keep you safe and comfortable, and goggles should be worn if you're riding in the woods or following a group. Finally, keep a few band-aids in your pack#just in case.

Whether you're riding across the county, or across the country, mountain biking is a great way to see the sights and stay in shape. Wear a helmet, proceed with caution and have fun!