



Fat bikes have become very popular this year.© Coast Cycles

Date 2 October 2015 Author Jonathan Tan
130



It might not be visually obvious, but the modern mountain bike is now available in a range of wheel sizes that offer different capabilities off the beaten trail. Exploding from the standard 26in build, bikes now feature large 29in (the 29er) and in-the-middle 27.5in (the 650B) sizes. And as the latter is fast becoming mainstream, fat bikes, with tyre widths of 3.8in and above are slowly becoming a thing, on both street and trail.

We make sense of what each has to offer.

1. The Classic 26in Mountain bike

This is the standard platform for mountain bikes and the one bike that we'd have grown up with. The model which a mountain bikes are based on prior to the advent of the medium and large wheel platforms, this was the default 'mother of all mountain bikes'. Arguably, it's still the best platform for smaller-built riders riding through a course with technical corners and climbs.

However, given Singapore's geographic limitations, where flat cross country dirt trails make up much of the riding landscape, 26in rides will more than suffice as par for the course.

2. The Upsized 29er



It's tough for smaller riders to use the 29ers. © Merida

The availability of steep rock-littered riding trails makes practical sense for a set-up with larger wheels. Riders could easily take advantage of the greater rolling efficiency, stability and traction that quite literally allowed a 29er to crunch through everything. Moreover, physics will also reveal the fact that a larger wheel size would allow the bike to cover more ground quicker.

"However," noted Dean Koh, the editor of cycling magazine Spin Asia, "should the course be more technical, with more corners and sections that require climbing, it would make a lot more sense for the nimbler, more responsive 26in bikes."

Adding on to the appeal of the bikes in Singapore, "the initial pick-up gradually died down here in Asia as the size of the wheels made the bikes bigger, which won't exactly suit the frame of anyone shorter than 1.75m in height." Additionally, Singapore's relatively flat terrain would mean that there's little opportunity to maximise the additional traction and grip offered by these larger wheels.



[Related Story](#)

[A Professional's Guide to Bike Servicing](#)

3. The 650B In-betweener



The 650B feels similar to the usual 26in platform. © Scott

The year 2012 was the year which saw the emphatic rise of the 650B platform, where major manufacturers like Scott showed off stunning examples of their production models. "Geometry-wise, they're similar to the standard 26in mountain," describes Koh. Adding on to the conversation, mountain bike enthusiast Juliana Tan says, "The larger wheel size gives the 27.5in platform a slight advantage over the 26in in terms of stability and rolling momentum. However, It will not be a very big difference though to new riders."

"Another issue I face is frame size," adds Tan, who rides a standard 26in mountain bike. "These new 27.5in and 29in bikes generally bring the top tube higher and longer, which is not 'Pikachu-friendly' as I'm only 1.57m tall."

That said, "The take up has been significant," adds Koh. "Looking at the 'Enduro' cross-country race scene, the 27.5in 650Bs have established themselves as the go-to build for elite riders. To some extent, even downhill bikes have moved to this platform." And why not? Combining the advantages of more grip and smoother rolling on the trails without compromising the 'go-fast' accelerative capability and handling offered by the standard 26in mode, the 650B makes a very strong case for itself, which will certainly suit Singapore's relatively even cross country terrain.

4. The Fat Bike Fad?

The 650B and 29er platforms might have been around for a couple of years now, but the latest bike trend that's been leaving consumers spoilt for choice is the resurgence of the fat tyre. "From the start of the year," observes Koh, "the scene has exploded to include all sorts of fat bikes across a wide genre of bikes. This includes the '+' versions of the 650B and 29er."

The 3.5in and above width and increased volume of these 'fat' tyres does translates into a lot more traction, allowing these fat bikes to be ridden over snow and sand.

"From a performance standpoint, observes Koh, "bigger tyres definitely means more drag, which would mean that it's more tiring to ride off road."

The Last Word



Bike shops now stock various parts for all bikes. © Dean Koh

The growing variety of platforms and variations for two-wheeled off-road machines might have grown beyond the 26in garden variety, but there is little doubt that this has given the industry and consumers a greater palette of choice. And bike shops here have reported an increasing number of these different bikes and are actively stocking parts for them.

Humorously describing the bikes, Tan says, "the 26in is like your classic go-to ride, the 650B your mountain goat of a machine, while the 29er is like a monster truck." Whichever you fancy, "enthusiasts should experience each of these different types of bikes, and determine for themselves which best suits their individual taste," adds Koh.

