Fit Facts®

Bike + Mountains = Excitement + Challenge

TIRED OF PAVED ROADS AND FOUR-WHEELED TRAFFIC? ENJOY GETTING OUT INTO NATURE AND AWAY FROM THE HUSTLE OF THE CITY? IF YOU ANSWERED "YES," THEN YOUR VEHICLE OF CHOICE COULD VERY WELL BE A MOUNTAIN BIKE. EVER SINCE A GROUP OF FRIENDS TOOK A FAST-PACED RIDE DOWN A STEEP INCLINE IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, MOUNTAIN BIKING HAS BEEN AN EXCITING CHALLENGE TO OUTDOOR ADVENTURERS.

Its debut as an event in the 1996 Olympics confirmed what riders already knew: Mountain biking is one of the fastest growing sports in the world, both in popularity and participation.

If you've never been on a mountain bike you might wonder what all the fuss is about. Many riders say it's the freedom. After all, destinations are seemingly unlimited on these machines built for rough terrain.

THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

Mountain bikes are sturdier than your average road or hybrid-style bicycles, so they can withstand rough roads. They have wide tires designed to grip the trail, 27 gears for riding up steep terrain, and options like front and rear shocks and disc brakes, similar to those found on motorcycles.

When purchasing a mountain bike, be sure that it is the right size. You should always be able to put a foot on the ground to steady yourself, and when standing over the bike on both feet there should be a few inches of clearance between you and the top tube of the frame. A helmet is a must, gloves can protect your hands if you fall, bike shorts can add comfort to your ride and bike shoes and clip-less pedals can improve control and skill.

YOUR BODY ON A BIKE

Riding a bike is one of the best cardiovascular exercises around. Not only does it provide an aerobic workout, but it strengthens the large muscles of the lower body, including the thighs, hips and buttocks, without putting a lot of stress on the joints. Mountain biking offers the bonus of using the muscles of the upper body and torso when climbing hills and navigating technical downhills.

Always warm up before you begin your ride. Pedal at a moderate intensity over flat terrain until you begin to sweat or feel warm.

This usually takes about five to 10 minutes. And don't neglect to cool down when you come to the end of your ride. Gradually lowering your heart rate can help prevent the pooling of lactic acid in the muscles. Again, pedal slowly in a low gear.

ON THE TRAIL

Practice makes perfect isn't a cliché when it comes to handling a mountain bike. Once you start heading up hills and mountains and over rocks and steep descents, you'll need to rely on your instincts, which, if they don't come naturally, will develop through practice.

One of the first things to do is to get a feel for how the brakes work. The front brake on a mountain bike has more power than the back, and pulling it alone may send you flying over the handlebars. Practice quick stops before you hit the trail so you can feel how your weight may affect how you stop.

Mountain bikes usually have V-brakes or more advanced disc brakes, both of which are stronger than brakes found on other bikes, allowing riders to control factors such as descending speed and slowing down prior to turns. When descending, try to prevent the wheels from locking by partially engaging the brakes to control speed, or by lightly squeezing and releasing the brakes—a technique called feathering. To maintain balance and control on descents, stand on the pedals with your knees slightly bent and shift your hips back to decrease the weight on the front wheel.

Change gears as it becomes necessary to keep a steady cadence. Use a low (large) gear when you need power and a high (small) gear when you are climbing up steep hills.

Climbing requires you to shift in your weight back on the saddle to control the tires' grip on the ground. Short, steep hills may require out-of-the-seat pedaling to garner more power. If you try this on a long climb, however, you'll likely tire before you reach the top. When climbing out of the saddle, shift your weight forward, off the seat if necessary, to gain the power you need.

GET PEDALING

You can obtain information about trails in your area from local bike shops, mountain-biking groups, park rangers or the library. The sooner you start pedaling, the sooner you can test your limits—those set by both your body and your mind.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Official International Mountain Bike Association