

Cycling goes through a gear change

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Gear from Tokyobike. Source: Supplied

IN the 1990s, cycling seemed serious and Lycra-clad. But its forbidding nature has been overtaken by the birth of a buoyant urban bike culture that has altered what we ride, wear - even where we "caffeinate"

Australians are embracing pushbikes that are already part and parcel of daily European life - in particular "fixies", simple, single-speed street bikes, inspired by the easy-to-use, low-maintenance variety used by city bike-couriers.

Fun and simplicity are key ingredients in the new cycling equation. "As kids, we used to ride in plain clothes. Then at some point in the 90s, it felt like cycling started to get competitive and you needed to ride a particular kind of bicycle or have the right kind of gear," says Faith Hunter, editor of *Treadlie*, a monthly magazine read by street-wise, design focused, tech-minded, fashion-conscious Australians. "I'm not sure why we made things so difficult. You don't need to wear anything other than your everyday clothes to get around on your bike."

But along with the super-cool bikes, it was a matter of time before we started to see hipster-esque cycling apparel and accessories hit the streets. Think canvas and leather musettes, skater-style helmets and timber-slatted baskets, available at such outlets as Gear or Northside Wheelers from \$30 upwards (see box).

"While some deride aspects of cycle chic, I believe it's important because it has given a wider range of people the ability to 'imagine' themselves on a bike," says Hunter. "When people are encouraged to ride, it's usually from a point of view coloured by sports cycling, which often puts them off."

Surprisingly, Dan Shifter, one of Melbourne's premium bicycle mechanics and general bikie know-it-all, agrees. Shifter, a once-professional cyclist (he used to train alongside Cadel Evans), owns Shifter Bikes, a bicycle workshop that pays homage to some of the most coveted classics in cycling. While he serves "the pointy (serious, competitive) end" of the market, he embraces the burgeoning lifestyle cycling trend.

"Commuter-style bikes aren't exactly the most comfortable ride, but they look great," Shifter says, mulling over their mechanical deficiencies versus their obvious street "cred". "Purists may tell you otherwise, but it's actually not all that important what bikes people ride. It's just great to see so many more on the road."

It certainly is. Given their simple and streamlined aesthetic, fixies and the like have caught on with many discerning riders who can finally associate themselves with bicycles that are less about performance and more about lifestyle. And the trend has spawned the beginnings of a buoyant urban bike culture, suitably inspired by the synergy between good design, practicalities and daily life.

"When we looked at taking Tokyobike abroad, we felt that the laid-back but design-conscious Australian landscape was a good fit," says Yuki Sugahara, co-owner of the Japanese brand born out of that country's rich bike culture and pared-back design aesthetic.

The light, beautiful frames, available in muted colours, include step-through and sport models. From \$770, they are more affordable than the performance-bike variety and much loved by the pavement-riding hipster. They sit among a curated selection of paraphernalia in Sugahara's light-filled concession space at Sydney's hipster hangout, Paramount House, and in their own dedicated store, in Melbourne's Collingwood. "Tokyobike is about simple and pleasurable moments in the way you'd experience a good coffee or a good movie," Sugahara says. "Cycling is not a serious pursuit for us. It's about enjoying life and beautiful things."

It's a cultural insight that should not be underestimated. Local designers have jumped on the bandwagon, drawing on their

own talents to produce locally-made options. "Our customers love that our bicycles are practical, exceptionally well-designed and in line with their design aspirations," says Sydney-based industrial designer Pablo Chappelli. After witnessing the fixie explosion in Britain and Europe, Chappelli launched custom bicycle company Chappelli Bikes with partner Tom Davies. In only four years, the business has established a strong export market, won an International Design Award and risen to the top of the local cycling scene. But, with bicycles starting at \$350, for models that include The Nero, Le Coq and Glow Bike, Pistola and Rossa, it's their remarkably low price tag that's set the market a-fluster. "The price point was a conscious business decision," says Davies, who sells online and out of a warehouse in the southern Sydney suburb of Botany. "People want beautiful and well-made bikes but can't afford most of them. We wanted to provide a high quality, locally-made option that is also attainable."

Local manufacturing, assembly and distribution saves costs plus adds environmental and feel-good factors. "People love that our bikes are locally designed and locally made," says Myles Chandler of Mocan Brothers, a Canberra-based collective that includes David Alcorn and brothers Nectar and Jonathan Efkarpidis. "Our dream was to create, build and sell Australian bikes, suitable to our own unique conditions. We have the skill and talent right here, so why not use it?" While local iterations prove popular, retailers have discovered a growing demand for folding and electric bicycles, the bulk of which are still imported. "They provide a completely new way of getting around," says Paul Shub of Melbourne-based bicycle retailer Velo Cycles. "They're perfect for commuters who are simply unable to ride a manual bike, for riders in business attire and for those who'd prefer to arrive at their destination sweat-free. They're also compact and fun to use."

Electric bikes (starting from \$1500) allow the rider to choose the level of assistance - either throttle or pedal assist. Fold-ups use sophisticated hinging systems to fold quickly and easily (in just 20 seconds they become small enough to fit under a desk or in a car boot).

British cycling apparel brand Rapha, recognising a gap in the market, offers casual yet well-tailored, commuter-appropriate gear, such as labelled jackets made from a lightweight and quick-drying cotton-nylon blend and elastane, riding trousers made from lightweight stretch fabric with a reinforced Cordura seat panel from its cafe-cum-clothing store in Surry Hills, Sydney. "There's a real desire for cycling accessories that support people's everyday lives and aesthetic preferences," says William Chen of online store Same Same But Different. "I saw the need for casual shoes that could still function as a traditional cleated (or magnetic) cycling shoe. I guess I gave the old classic cycling shoes a modern facelift."

Aside from the designer aspect, the trend is also supported by people with a strong environmental conscience. "Whilst riders are concerned about where their bikes come from, the logic also extends to their accessories," says Trent Jansen, the established Sydney-based designer who creates cycle signs and bike reflectors fashioned from recycled road signs. "Creating a guilt-free cycling accessory seemed like the logical thing to do. Cycling is above all else a fun and environmentally appropriate pastime and the bikes, the gear and the accessories should reflect that."

In addition, communal initiatives that enhance the social experience of cycling are springing up. "Cycling is very much about connecting with other people," says Treadlie's Hunter. "As a result, there are a growing number of bicycle shops that also offer cycling workshops, cycling-themed get-togethers and community services like bike donations, as well as associated fairs and markets." Bike Jam is a Perth-based collective that hosts communal bike-themed film nights and bike tours, while cycling shop Bike Revolution in Brisbane recycles and donates refurbished bicycles.

And, as expected, cycling isn't quite a pastime without the pitstops, with "bike cafes" taking many forms. A number, such as St Ali North in Melbourne, are just extremely well frequented by cyclists; others such as Melbourne laneway gem The Little Mule and Sydney's Town Bike Pitstop are also shops offering workshop facilities, quality fare and cycling gear alongside the requisite caffeine hit.

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WHERE TO GET IT

Treadly Bike Shop (Adelaide)

A selection of fixed gear, geared and classic bicycles, apparel and accessories.

Treadlybikeshop.com.au

The Humble Vintage (Melbourne)

Vintage and classic bikes (and free cycling guides) for hire.

Thehumblevintage.com

Chappelli (Sydney & Melbourne)

Refined, locally designed and assembled fixies and geared bikes.

Chappelli.com.au

Papillionaire

(Melbourne & Sydney)

Customisable, Dutch-style bicycles and a curated range of accessories including Baggu bags.

Papillionaire.com.au

Velo Electric

A specialist store and workshop stocking the latest in quality electric and folding bicycles.

Veloelectric.com.au

Tokyobike (Melbourne & Sydney)

Lifestyle bicycle brand inspired by Japanese bicycle culture.

Tokyobike.com

Goodspeed Bicycle Co (Canberra)

Customisable fixies and gear bikes, designed and manufactured in Australia.

Goodspeed.com.au

Gear (Brisbane)

Boutique store offering a fashion-conscious selection of bikes, apparel and accessories.

Gearbrisbane.com

Pony Bikes (Melbourne)

Workshop and retail space that offers premium, bespoke bikes and basic repair services.

Ponybikes.com

Cycle Signs

Guilt-free recycled bicycle reflectors made from salvaged road signs.

etsy.com/au/shop/cyclesign

Same Same But Different (online)

Crafted cycling shoes for discerning cyclists.

Ssbd.com.au

Northside Wheelers (Melbourne)

Purveyors of fine cycling wares.

Northsidewheelers.com

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PITSTOPS

The Little Mule (Melbourne)

A popular cafe and bike shop that builds custom bikes and serves home-style fare.

Thelittlemule.com

Townbike Pitstop (Sydney)

A cycling hub that's also a cafe, a shop and home to maintenance hub Redfern Bike Depot.

Townbikepitstop.com.au

Rapha

Laid-back cafe that sells high-quality cycling apparel and accessories.

Rapha.cc

Cog Bike Cafe (Warburton)

Healthy food and a bike repair service on the Warburton Trail.

Cogbikecafe.com.au

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RESOURCES & EVENTS

Dismantle (Fremantle)

Workshops, maintenance courses and community initiatives such as The Bike Rescue Project.

Dismantle.org.au

Bicycle Revolution (Brisbane)

Quality custom-built recycled and refurbished bicycles for hire.

Bicyclerevolution.org.au

BikeJam (Perth)

Organised, communal cycling events including bike tours and film nights.

bikejam.tumblr.com

Strava (online)

A motivational and social app that connects competitive cyclists.

strava.com

Cycle Re-Cycle Club (Sydney)

A volunteer-based initiative that transforms preloved bikes.

Bikeclub.wordpress.com

Cycling Resource Centre

A nationwide information hub offering information on cycling workshops and safety campaigns.

cyclingresourcecentre.org.au