

5 questions to ask when buying a bike

See our other info sheets for advice on what type of bike to buy for city use and how much to spend. But even once you've settled on e.g. a £350 hybrid bike, not all are equal once we get down to details. Manufacturers and (some) bike retailers will be tempted to skimp on components or build quality in areas they think nobody is looking. So here are five crafty questions to sort the good, reliable commuting machines from all the others:

1. Is it a freewheel- or a cassette-type rear wheel? The cassette design pretty much eliminates any chance of a bent or broken rear axle. This makes for a good, reliable bike that will cope with pot-holes and cobbles, even if you've got a couple of panniers full of shopping. Freewheels on the other hand are a bit dated now, and are only really used on kids' bikes and budget adult models. Unless you are a very light rider, never carry luggage, and always manage to avoid bumps and kerbs, I suggest you steer clear of freewheel-type rear wheels. Surprisingly, some bikes in the £350+ price bracket still come with freewheels. If you don't want to run the risk of shelling out £80 or £100 to upgrade to a cassette wheel when your axle bends, check that the bike is freewheel-free before buying. (This question applies to all derailleur-gearped bikes but can be ignored if you are buying a hub-gearped model or a singlespeed or fixie).
2. How many spokes does each wheel have? Racing bikes and mountain bikes typically have 32 spokes (or fewer) per wheel for aerodynamics and lower weight, but for reliability and weight-carrying capability you really want 36. It's a subtle detail, but one that should mean fewer broken spokes in the long run. And if a bike has 36-spoke wheels it may show the manufacturer has prioritised strength and longevity over sporting pretensions or insignificant weight saving. (If saving 43g and pretending to be a pro athlete is your thing, you're probably reading the wrong information sheet here!)
3. Are they double-walled wheel rims? Can you detect a wheel-related theme here? With good reason: the rear wheel is probably the single most oft-broken component of a commuting bike, and one of the most expensive parts to replace. As with the spokes question above, what we're trying to establish here is how strong the wheels are and how long they're likely to last with everyday knocks and bumps. A double-walled rim has much more inherent strength than a single-walled one, in effect being a rigid box-section instead of a flexible flat sheet of metal. Good quality single-walled rims may be acceptable for lighter riders provided they are 36-spoke wheels and properly finished by hand (see 5 below), but they will still bend a lot more easily if you hit a kerb or pot-hole.

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4. Can I fit mudguards and a pannier rack? All commuting bikes should be capable of having full-length mudguards and a luggage rack fitted. Mudguards protect not only the rider, but also the bike's chain and derailleurs from mud and water, reducing corrosion and wear. Many road bikes have barely enough room to squeeze a mudguard in between the tyre and the frame, thereby guaranteeing that annoying rubbing noises will be a perpetual problem. Incredibly, a few hybrid bikes have the same issue. If there isn't room to fit your finger between the tyre and frame or the fork, there isn't really enough room for a proper mudguard. Likewise, if there aren't bolt holes for fitting a pannier rack, just walk away. After all, you wouldn't buy a car without a boot would you?
5. Have you fully stripped, reassembled and serviced the bike? Now this is a nasty little trick question. They'll probably hate you for asking this. What you are asking is not "have you assembled the bike" or "have you checked the bike" (what in the trade is known as a PDI or Pre-Delivery Inspection). What you need to ask is "have you fully stripped down and reassembled the bike?". Unfortunately not many retailers do, but it is an important question that can make a big difference to reliability and longevity. This work should certainly include stress-relieving and retruing the wheels and adding grease to the wheel bearings and headset, and ideally should include removal, greasing and refitting the cranks and bottom bracket as well. [Click here to read more detail](#). It's difficult to tell visually whether this work has been done or not, so it basically comes down to whether you trust the retailer. Of course it is possible to have all this done at a bike shop as a stand-alone job, but that would effectively add approximately £60 to the price of your new bike.

So in summary, your five-point checklist is:

1. Cassette good, freewheel bad!
2. At least 36 spokes per wheel
3. Double-walled rims: yes please
4. Rackable and mudguardable?
5. Has the bike been fully stripped and reassembled by the retailer?

Happy shopping!