

# 2016 Fat Bike Buyer's Guide



By Nick Legan

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# FAT BIKE BUYERS GUIDE

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Fat bikes — off-road machines with 4-in. or wider tires — are quite the phenomenon in cycling. While initially developed for exploring sand and snow, the capability of fat bikes now has far-reaching interest from everyday mountain bikers and touring cyclists. In the last couple years, the market has exploded as large bicycle manufacturers began producing fat bike models and stalwarts of the segment developed fat-specific suspension, both front and rear, and even larger rim and tire sizes. Prices of fat bikes have also diversified with big box stores offering fat bikes better suited to sidewalks, and specialty builders using exotic materials like carbon fiber and titanium.

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For our purposes, we'll focus on bikes with tire widths of four inches or more, but a quick mention of "mid-fat" bikes is worthwhile. Both 29+ and 27.5+ bikes are becoming more popular by the minute, with manufacturers like Specialized, and Norco, among many others, all on board. These bikes are a middle ground between standard mountain bikes and fat bikes. As a half-measure, they have the potential to meet a given rider's needs year-round, but they will not offer the same flotation as true fat bikes. For off-road riding, though, the traction they deliver is phenomenal.

The origins of fat bikes stretch back to riders in Alaska lacing two rims side by side and installing four tires on modified bikes, two at the front, two at the rear. Now, instead of do-it-yourself projects, a situation of choice overload exists with differences between makes and models becoming increasingly granular.

We're here to help. Through a series of questions, we'll help you explore the world of fat bikes and hopefully come to a few conclusions about them for your personal use. After reading this you call Plaine's Bike Ski Snowboard. We allow demos and even rent fat bikes. Trying before you buy will allow you to experience fat biking before making a big investment in it.

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## Choose your flotation

When selecting a fat bike, put two questions to yourself. The first is how much flotation do you want? There are essentially two subsets of fat bikes, those with room for 4-in. tires and those with space for 5-in. or wider tires.



*As tire options have proliferated so too have widths, each of which correspond to an ideal rim size. So carefully consider potential riding conditions and choose the best combo for your needs.*

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Both are great fun off road and offer a significant gain in flotation over a standard mountain bike. Importantly, you need to match your tire width to the space in your frame and to rim width. Not all frames can handle a 5-in. tire. So this is something to consider when shopping. Will you want the extra flotation of the widest tires available? If you will be riding mostly groomed tracks at your local Nordic center then probably not. But if you will be venturing into the sandy washes of Arizona for a week at a time, you might be happier with an extra inch of tire. This is where checking in with friends with fat bikes or listening to the riders at Plaine's can really help.

Rim widths vary from 65mm to 105mm. It's important to keep the rim width in line with tire width. For 3.8-in. tires, use 65- to 80mm-wide rims. For 4.8- to 5-in. tires, stick with 80- to 105mm-wide rims; otherwise the shape of the tire can be affected. Using too wide a tire on a narrow rim can also lead to burping the tire.

While the tires that come stock on most fat bikes are great all around choices, there are more options. Tubeless tires and rims are also coming on strong. For riding in many places, going tubeless is a great way to reduce weight (sometimes over a pound per wheel) and to avoid flats. No one likes to change a flat with frozen fingers.

**Rigid, front or full suspension?**

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*When Rockshox introduced the Bluto fat bike fork in 2014 it opened up a world of possibility for more all-season riding on the big-tired bikes.*

The second important question to consider is whether to invest in suspension. Most of the fat bikes sold currently are rigid, though many are now equipped with RockShox's Bluto suspension fork.

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The upside to suspension is increased comfort and control in rugged terrain. If you are considering a fat bike as your only mountain bike, suspension is probably a good idea. If most of your fat biking will be on trails shared with hikers and your area experiences frequent freeze-thaw periods, then your fat bike routes are likely to be pockmarked, bumpy trails. This is where suspension can make things quite a bit more fun. Of course, with suspension also comes increased weight and maintenance. Current fat bike suspension fork makers include RockShox, Marzocchi, Lauf, RST, Carver, and Cannondale.

The upside to a rigid fork is simplicity and, in many cases, the ability to carry extra water and supplies thanks to bottle cage mounts. With many carbon fiber fat bike forks now on the market you can also save quite a bit of weight over a suspension fork. If groomed trails are nearby, sticking with a rigid fork is a great way to go and you'll save money in the process.

Thankfully many rigid fat bikes are now made with the aftermarket installation of a suspension fork in mind. Fat bikes that are more than a few years old, though, may pose problems when installing a suspension fork. Few of them were designed for the increased fork length and the tapered steerer tubes that feature on most fat bike forks.

To further complicate things, hub standards are all over the place but are beginning to settle down a bit. It really isn't a big concern, as few of us are constantly swapping out wheels and forks on our bikes. But if you would like the option to install a suspension fork in the future, be sure to purchase a bike with a 150x15mm front axle standard.

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*The popular Specialized Fatboy SE features a 70.5-degree headtube angle.*

## **Geometry**

Fat bikes, like mountain bikes, are generally moving towards slacker head tube angles. Earlier fat bikes were built with stability in mind, which translated into excellent touring manners. This is changing a bit but not in a bad direction for those looking to tour on a fat bike. While the new geometry is a bit more playful on trails, it still sits squarely in a mountain-bike-range of angles. This means that it will remain stable over rough terrain, even at speed.



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When it comes time to buy a bike, be sure to get the right size for you. If you fall between sizes, it's typically better to go for the smaller size. There's a very practical reason for this. While most fat bike trails are composed of packed-in snow, to either side is usually deep, soft snow. A quick dismount often means planting your foot much lower than the surface of the trail. This can lead to uncomfortable encounters with your top tube.

When setting up your bike for a first ride, set the saddle a couple millimeters lower than your other bikes. The wide Q factor of most fat bikes puts your feet quite a bit farther apart and requires a slightly lower seat.

## Frame material

Like any good debate, every player has its merits. Most fat bikes in production today are aluminum or steel. A few titanium models exist as well, and more carbon fiber fat bikes are coming every season. Personally I bought a steel fat bike as it offered a great value proposition and came with rack mounts. For touring, just like on the road, a steel frame is more easily repaired in remote corners of the world.



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*Fat bike tires might claim a 26-inch size, but the true diameter of the bigger rubber is essentially that of a 29-inch bike. Gear down appropriately to compensate for the larger diameter, especially if considering loaded riding.*

## **Gearing**

If you plan on loading up your fat bike for tours, be sure to scrutinize the gearing. With the increased weight of the wider rims and tires, plus the load of your camping items, a nice low gear will keep you happier. While the sidewall on a fat tire will read 26x3.8 in., realize that fat bikes are essentially 29ers. This means that your gearing needs to suit the larger diameter. As always I recommend [Sheldon Brown's](#) excellent gear calculator for your own research.



*The trusty Avid BB7, left, is a time-tested cable-actuated design. The (much more expensive) Paul Klamper, right, offers a mechanical disc caliper option made in America.*

## **Brakes**

For true Arctic riding, stick with mechanical, cable-actuated disc brakes. Avid's excellent BB7 is a great choice as it is field serviceable and easy to adjust and set up. Hydraulic disc brakes have their place as well. If you're planning on sticking to slightly warmer temperatures or interested in desert tours, go with a respectable brake manufacturer and you should be in good shape. For hydraulic brakes in colder weather, use a brake that uses DOT fluid instead of mineral oil, as it has a lower operating temperature.

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*A dropper post like this LEV model from KS can make a great upgrade to any fat bike, though depending on frame size and other factors, a dropper can affect the ability to run a seat bag for bikepacking trips.*

## **Accessories**

Staying warm in sub-zero temperatures isn't easy. Working hard on a bike with 5-in. tires helps, and the lower speeds of fat biking go a long way to keep wind chill to a minimum. Be sure to layer and always carry an emergency layer. A flat tire in frigid temps can turn a situation serious in a hurry. For riding in truly Arctic conditions, do some research on vapor barriers. I use them on my feet and they've kept me riding comfortably for hours in extreme cold.

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*"Pogies" from brands like Bar Mitts offer a way to keep hands warm while still wearing only thin gloves to maximize dexterity on the controls.*

For hands, be sure to consider pogies. Originally designed for rowing, there are now cycling-specific versions for flat and drop bars. A pogie keeps your hands warmer by attaching to your handlebars and creating a pocket that encloses your controls. Inside the pogies, your hands are out of the wind and further insulated. The difference can be astounding. And because you can use thinner gloves, pogies also contribute to better bar feel, something much appreciated when riding off road.

Think about the grips you use as well. Foam grips insulate your hand from the handlebar better than rubber and plastic versions.

While some would say to install a suspension fork first, the best upgrade I made to my personal fat bike was a dropper post. If you use one on your mountain bike and intend to ride trails on your fat bike, I would certainly have one put on.

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In freeze-thaw conditions, it can become difficult to use clipless pedals. And while there are several incredible winter shoe options on the market (Specialized, Shimano, and others) switching over to flat pedals can decrease headaches and make quick bailouts easier. I ride in Sorel insulated, waterproof boots or Boggs winter boots when I fat bike. They both work well on flat pedals and you might have a pair already in your closet.

## **Conclusion**

Fat biking can really expand when and where you ride a bicycle. Incredibly capable in winter and sandy conditions, many bikepackers and touring cyclists have purchased fat bikes to explore beyond normal cycling horizons. With a bit of research and by asking locals in your area, finding a fat bike that suits your needs is a simple affair. With the right clothing and accessories, there are fewer excuses than ever to stay inside.

*Nick Legan is the technical editor of Adventure Cyclist.*

*Photographs courtesy of respective manufacturers.*

