CONSUMING PASSIONS

Bottoms, brackets & bikes

When I first started riding, and breaking, bicycles the shops which sold and repaired them were small, dingy and run by surly old men in grubby overalls.

The bike parts (they didn’t have ‘accessories’ in those days) were kept in a rabbit-warren of tiny drawers and cupboards behind the counter, along with the proprietor’s decades-old collection of miscellaneous nuts and bolts stripped from ancient machines but never discarded because they “just might come in handy”. Shop decor tended to be limited to the occasional black-and-white postcard of the local sprint champion from the 1920s.

To the mechanically incompetent teenager, such places and their proprietors (who were always called either Reg, Stan or Alf) inspired not so much affection as naked terror. Being able to sense immediately whether or not you knew your bottom bracket from your derailleur mechanism, they would dismiss you with just a faint sneer of contempt. Nowhere else could the words “it’ll have become, in most cases, spamonster or a village blacksmith. His cramped and gloomy surroundings have become, in most cases, spa-

rious, gleaming showrooms, resembling design studios more than workshops. Cycling has become a marketing person’s dream - technology and fashion combined in a product which is both healthy and environmentally friendly.

As you’d expect in Sydney, Paddington leads the way at the trendy end of the market. I felt more than a bit self-conscious about wheeling my rusty old racer across the immaculately-polished wooden floor of Woolys Wheels (82 Oxford St, Paddington, phone 331 2671). Woolys caters not just for those who want a good bike, but also those who want to be seen to have a good (or at least an expensive) bike. In fact, many of their customers settle simply for being seen and don’t bother about the bike at all - more than 20% of Woolys’ sales are in clothing and related accessories, with bike gear apparently still popular on the Sydney dance club scene.

Customising is a speciality and in Paddington they know how to pay for it. You can buy a frame at Woolys (not a whole bike, mind you, just the frame) for $3,000, if you’re so inclined. Their most expensive complete custom job wound up at $7,000. Not the sort of machine you’d want to leave tethered outside the pub on a Saturday night. If you’re the sort of person who thinks that a computer, to measure heart and pulse rate, etc, is a useful bike accessory (you can buy them for $50-80), then Woolys is for you. However, be prepared to pay a good bit more than elsewhere for parts and clothing and don’t expect to pick up anything second-hand.

For competent repairs, good advice and a rather less intimidating atmosphere, I prefer Calypso Cycles (404 King St, Newtown, phone 517 1655). They stock all the flash gear and cater for the triathlon masochists and yuppie customisers too, but not to the exclusion of more mundane jobs for the less committed. The staff are particularly helpful and not patronising. Recommended.

The friendly approach is also much in evidence at Inner City Cycles (31 Glebe Point Road, Glebe, phone 660 6605). Run as a co-operative, Inner City specialises in mountain and touring bikes, but is also one of the few shops in Sydney to provide a hire service. What’s more, they offer maintenance classes ($90 for six two-hour sessions) and sell not only second-hand bikes, but even second-hand parts. I was gratified to find that they keep these in a welcoming jumble of old wooden boxes, albeit downstairs and out of sight! This is a goldmine for the cheapskate cyclist who doesn’t care too much if she or he doesn’t have matching designer trademarks on every component. For personal service and a great attitude, Inner City is unbeatable.

Finally, right at the opposite end of the scale to Woolys is Gilbert’s Cyclery (16 O’Brien St, Bondi, phone 30 5216). To walk into Gilbert’s is to step back into an age before skin-tight lycra shorts, aerodynamic helmets, fluorescent jerseys and orange-tinted sunglasses. The shop is barely wide enough to walk through, crammed as it is with new bikes, old bikes and, most of all, bits of bikes, which litter the floor and the counter; and compete for space on shelves already stuffed full with unidentifiable clothing, miscellaneous tools and the inevitable boxes of useful nuts and bolts. The carpet is worn, the decor nil.

Gilbert himself, an ex-Algerian pied noir, is more than willing to expend at length to customers on the evils of the Australian government, greenies, Arabs, cars and Sydney’s other bike shops, of which only five, he claims, are not run by crooks, shysters or incompetents. He recounts with derision how Woolys allegedly charged a customer an extra $200 to paint a new bike pink (“pink!”). Political discussion is not recommended, but at Gilbert’s at least you can be sure of old-fashioned service with a scowl. He knows his bikes (repairs are his main business), prices are reasonable and you even get a free lecture on General de Gaulle thrown in if you’re lucky. Now that’s what I call a real bike shop.

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