On Your Bike!

Being as this is the bit of your illustrious organ which is supposed to be devoted to trivia, it seemed like a good idea to start the new decade (and mark ALR’s transition to monthly appearances) on a serious note. For that reason I would like to discuss mountain bikes - or the ATB (all terrain bike, as they’re also known).

This is not unrelated to wondering which lucky pig [ALR subscriber, as he or she is also known] is the winner of the machine offered in last month’s issue. (The competition is still open, so send in your sub form now! - eds.) Before that, but related nevertheless because mountain bikes crop up in them all the time, let’s pause for a moment over the phenomenon of ‘the list’.

At the end of each year and at the beginning or end of each decade, the print media go mad with lists. For some reason people like lists - many can’t enter a supermarket without one for instance, while others take pains to compile lists and then leave them on the kitchen table before going to the supermarket.

Ships develop lists, though these aren’t the most desirable kind, apparently. Gallant knights even used to enter the lists for some reason; in any event, many millions of human beings have been fascinated by lists for a very long time. And the fact is that most publications (including this one, it has to be said) simply cannot let a year end without listing its faults, fads, favourite books, failures and foibles. The past couple of months have been one great global list as not only have 1989 but also the ‘eighties and the ‘nineties been rendered down into supposedly fascinating ... lists.

Lists drive me mad. First of all, I can’t resist them - I realised this in a dreadful flash some years ago while pouring over several pages of lavishly illustrated food experts’ lists of marmalades - from favourites to yukkiest, complete with value-for-money jar weight analysis and wine buff-style descriptions of each mixture. Second, I know from happy hours of compiling lists that they’re a stunningly lazy and egotistical way to fill pages - which is why they’re irresistible to the media.

Mountain bikes have featured prominently in lists of late, either as a significant object of the consumerist ‘eighties (a type of list which is usually accompanied by others such as ‘the best books of the decade’, which basically means the compiler is going to drop in Gabriel Garcia Marquez); or a yuppie accessory to be sneered upon by those who ride ‘real’ bikes (another sort of list usually accompanied by a similar condemnation of the Filofax and laptop PC).

It is at this point that I’d like to make a defence of the mountain bike. The mountain bike, like the Filofax and the laptop PC, is immensely practical, aesthetically pleasing and good fun - although it’s these last two factors that really draw the ire of their lugubrious critics. Yet, let us consider the alternatives, which presumably these critics espouse themselves.

“Ha, when was the last time you rode up a mountain?” is the standard snipe at a mountain biker. To which one can mildly reply: “More recently than when you last rode in the Tour de France, sweetpea,” to the smug owner of the anorexic, neck-cracking, full-crouch racing machine.

This person probably also hates your Filofax and, instead, lofts lugs around a desk diary (or some weeny pocket type with recipes for chocolate and banana surprise in full colour, or many useful illustrations of how to tie knots) and elderly address book, both constantly shedding moulidy pages and scraps of scribbled-on paper. But ideologically sound ... apparently.

But, to return to the mountain bike. Why is it seen as an ‘eighties fad? One fact of the past decade has been the deterioration of the streets of the world’s cities. Racing and ordinary road bikes are made for smooth, untroubled surfaces. Instead we now have potholes, rusts and corrugations, broken hydrant covers, lopsided gratings, broken glass, tin cans, dead cats and toppled ‘racing’ cyclists - and the wide tyres and sturdy construction of the average ATB are in their element.

Then again, the ATB’s despised wide flat handlebars with thumb-touch gears on each side mean better balance, better vision, better control. Haven’t you ever wondered why a cyclist should want to assume a semi-foetal position while riding? Is it perhaps because having your knees almost knocking under your chin while your hands - only centimetres apart - wrestle with the capricious machine, is the best way of disguising terror?

Whatever, it would be difficult to argue that a racing bike is better suited to city riding than a mountain bike. An ordinary old street bike, while having a certain amount of poverty-chic, is - like poverty itself - dreary and ultimately undesirable. That’s that for the street bike.

The laptop PC - filthy yuppie tool, running dog stinking lackey of the oppressor, etc, etc will have to wait for some future date for a defence. Let’s say for now that, like the ATB, they’re also fun and practical. And they’re sexy, too.

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