

On The Beach: Smoooooth fat-tire beach bikes

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You've seen those bikes with the big balloon-looking knobby tires. Why would someone ride a bike like that? Here's why ...

Meet the fat-tire bike. Before making their way to Oregon and the coast, the bikes were very popular in Colorado. They even have a beer label named for them.

The fat bikes originally were developed in Alaska a number of years ago for riding in the snow on the Iditarod routes. Which is what makes them perfect for riding in the sand - as on California and Oregon beaches - according to Erin Kessler, owner of Pineapple Express Adventure Rides in Port Orford.

"I like getting off the road," Kessler said. "We've got great beaches. We live in a place where we can just access the beach, and we've got all these public lands and everything."

The Pilot caught up with Kessler at Live Culture Coast on Oct. 25 to find out more about the bikes - including trying one out. The bikes look big and clunky, but they're not necessarily more difficult to pedal, Kessler reassured.

“It takes a bit to get going, but they float over the sand,” Kessler said. “It’s like a snowshoe, and floats over the surface. You can have less air pressure with the bigger platform of a tire, creating a wider surface.”

The gearing is pretty easy, making them also good for mountain trail rides, towing trailers and taking longer excursions, she said.

“They’re really stable,” she said. “They are very good for older riders, who may not have perfect balance, and you ride upright like a mountain bike.” The upright posture is more comfortable for most riders compared to the street bikes that predated mountain bikes, which are also upright.

The fat bikes turned out to ride exactly as Kessler had said: easy to pedal but hard to get started, especially with the slightly inclined slope of the parking lot where she was set up.

The ride was surprisingly smooth, though, especially considering the knobby tires and stiff frame, even when going over speed bumps set up in the parking lot.

The bikes Kessler brought to her event last week are from Fatback Bikes of Alaska. They were one of the first fat bikes on the market, she said.

The company offers several models; Kessler carries the Fatback Rhino FLT, which is a stiff, lightweight bike with an aluminum alloy frame. (For those irritated by acronyms, FLT stands for Fast Light Technology.)

The tires are 26-inches tall by 4.8-inches wide, and can run with as little as 3 pounds of pressure, although Kessler keeps her rental bikes at around 8 psi.

The wider tires provide more traction, allowing the bikes to handle snow, mud, sand, rocks and roots. The frames are wider, especially built to accommodate the wider wheel size.

The fat bikes in Kessler’s rental fleet come with a variety of gearing configurations, ranging from 1 x 10 to 1 x 11 and 1 x 12. The 1x configuration eliminates having multiple gears on the front hub, so there’s no front-gear shifting and less maintenance.

Sand is not a friend to bicycle gears, however. “I spend a lot of time maintaining these bicycles,” she said. “They get new chains every season. I’m constantly lubing everything and getting sand out of the nooks and crannies. I try to keep them in good working order for each rental. It’s very time consuming.”

Kessler, who started her company in 2017, offers guided tours and bike rentals with both mountain and fat-tire bikes. She has tours for all levels of experience, with rides from Bandon down to Gold Beach. Customers can also arrange rental bike drop-offs and shuttle services.

She sells new Fatback-brand bikes at \$2,000, but also sells rental bikes at the end of the season for \$900. Not all fat bikes sell for as much as the Fatbacks, which are considered a pro model in the industry.

At Live Culture Coast, Sophie Traub and Eliot Feenstra of Toronto, Canada heard about the opportunity and decided to take a beach ride from the Port of Gold Beach to Kissing Rock, just south of town. Neither of them had ever ridden a fat-tire bike.

“I’m so excited,” Traub said. Feenstra was also looking forward to the ride. “I’ve stayed before at Ireland’s Rustic Lodges, but haven’t done much in Gold Beach,” he said.

After finding the right size - four sizes are available - the pair waved and took off on their adventure. When The Pilot caught up with them at the Gold Beach Visitor Center, they were pedaling by smoothly on the sand and gravel beach, big smiles on their faces.

Pineapple Express Adventure Rides is at 832 U.S. Highway 101, Port Orford.