

On yer bike - Bangkok

When Thai actor Jay 'Montonn' Jira brought a fixed-gear bike back from the US in 2005, he helped spark a movement that has seen Bangkok become a hub for South-East Asian 'fixie' fans, says Matt Crook

On a muggy night in a Bangkok car park – a short hop from rows of food vendors on a traffic-clogged street – showboating cyclists try to outdo one another on what appear to be oversized kids' bikes. The bikes' brightly coloured frames and wheels compete for attention with the riders' snazzy outfits. This is no ordinary biker gathering.

By day, Tawanna Square on Ladprao 124 looks like any other car park, but every Monday, Wednesday and Thursday after dark, it's home

to Far Fast – a collective of riders who have embraced the latest craze to grip Bangkok: fixed-gear bikes, or "fixies". Keen to avoid the city's chaotic streets, freewheeling fanatics congregate in car parks, squares and other public spaces after work and on weekends.

Fixed-gear bikes differ from regular bikes in one major way: they don't coast, which means if the pedals aren't in motion, the rider isn't going anywhere. Whichever way the pedals are turned – including backwards – the rear wheel turns with them.

Teenagers have embraced the use of fixies in rad colours and with wacky wheels as a way of standing out from the crowd. Thrillseekers use the stop-start pedals to perform skids and stunts – from bunny hops to track stands (balancing the bike while barely moving).

The first thing that tends to attract young people to fixies is "fixie fashion" and the unique look of the bikes. Fixies aren't suited to long roads or dirt tracks, but they're great for short distances and ideal for life in the city, says Thammawat "Dongee" Arthachinta, a project

manager at a film studio and a self-confessed fixie convert.

"I ride my bike nearly every day near my office and on weekends with friends," he says. "I've been riding bikes all my life, from BMX and mountain bikes to road bikes. One day a friend showed me this clean-looking fixed-gear bike. I really liked it. It has fewer components and is fully customisable."

Fixed-gear fashion is among the hottest trends with Bangkok's hipsters, who have helped build a growing subculture around fixie riding.

TOP FIXIE HANGOUTS

Tawanna Square, Ladprao 124, Ladprao Rd

This car park is home to "bike gang" Far Fast and is the place to be on Mon, Wed and Thu.

Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, City Hall Square, Dinso Rd, Sao Ching Cha, Phra Nakorn

Riders tend to congregate in this popular cycling spot every Saturday.

Rama V Monument, Royal Plaza, Uthong Nai

Popular with riders (especially after dark), Rama V Monument is a picturesque area within easy reach of Dusit Palace and other top spots in the Bangkok's "royal city".

Sealee Fixed Gear Café, 33/306 Chokchai 4, Lat Phrao 53, Ladprao Rd, tel: +66 (0)83 808 9061, www.sealeefixed.com

Originally a drink and noodle seller, it's now a fixie haven where you can also buy yoghurt and smoothies.

Pedalicious Bike & Bistro, Sukhumvit 63, Soi 12, tel: +66 (0)2 713 3377

The artist-owner goes all out to entertain fixie fans with a dazzling array of biker paintings and photos.

Crazy Cycle Bangkok, 204 Lat Phrao 71, Ladprao Rd, tel: +66 (0)2 907 8403

An importer and seller of fixies and parts, owner Tam is also a great source of information on all things fixed gear.

Velayenn at Sugarlust, 59/27 Sukhumvit 26, Klongtoey, tel: +66 (0)80 900 2610

This café/bistro is a decent place for a natter.

