



Ana Ivanovic: 19-year-old rising star. Story, 8C.

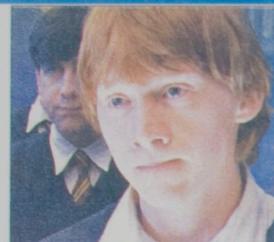
4-page pullout

Is 'road trip' on course?

■ Jury's still out on tennis' US Open Series, 7C

USA TODAY

NO. 1 IN THE USA



Rupert Grint: Final Potter book out Saturday.

Wizard awaits his fate

■ Actor is as curious as fans about next step for character, 3D
■ Phoenix makes \$140 million, 1D

It all adds up to a \$22,000 bike

This bike by KGS Bikes in San Antonio costs \$22,000. What exactly makes a bike worth this much? Here's a breakdown of some add-on features beyond the \$5,950 Parlee frame and \$800 paint job:



Photos by Kevin Saunders, KGS Bikes

High-end pedals to the metal

Cover story

State-of-the-art wheels are spinning in a resurgence of custom-bike shops

By Marco R. della Cava
USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — If bicycling has a nirvana, the bucolic back roads snaking throughout the Bay Area would qualify.

Bikers here tend to be fit, fanatical and — thanks to high-tech-enterprise success — flush. As a result, the region does not lack for fancy bike shops. Which is why ultra-exclusive Above Category stands out.

Tucked into the small Marin County town of Mill Valley, the shoebox-sized shop sells some of the coolest bikes you've never heard of. Bike fanciers know about Trek and Specialized, but how about off-the-wall names such as Moots, Parlee and Land Shark? Didn't think so.

"The so-called Lance effect got people onto bikes that you could describe as mainstream," says owner Chad Nordwall, whose customers include weekend warriors, talented amateurs and even area celebrity and bike fanatic Robin Williams. "But now people are saying, 'I want something unique, something no one else has.'"

Please see COVER STORY next page ►

While European-made bikes once represented the *ne plus ultra* of the bicycling art form, a small but increasingly popular brigade of American bike builders is gaining momentum across the USA, thanks to cyclists with deep pockets and taste for the extraordinary.

Thanks largely to boomers, who have little free time and therefore want that time spent in a quality way, my shop has gone from nothing to super-busy in a year," says Kevin Saunders of KGS Bikes in San Antonio. "They're all looking for more than just a bike."

Though it comes as no surprise that pros in the Tour de France, now underway, often ride custom machines that brush the five-figure mark, it's another matter to learn that mere mortals will spend as much to slip the state-of-the-art into their garages.

"When I first started, I rode around on a \$100 bike and loved it, but slowly I got addicted to the technology of it all, and that was it," says Robert Vasquez, a radiologist in San Antonio who recently had KGS spec out a Parlee to the tune of \$22,180.96. "It's just like computers, where, if you want to, you can keep seeking out the smallest and lightest parts. It all adds up."

A quick ultra-bike primer: You start by being measured for a frame. Then you choose your components. The bike is then built to your specs. You ride, adjust and repeat, until it fits like a glove.

For \$22,000, you're certain to blow past rivals like the space shuttle overtaking a Cessna. Right?

"There is no way a \$12,000 bike is six times better than a nice \$2,000 bike," says Steve Madden, editor of *Bicycling* magazine, which nonetheless named Parlee its Editor's Choice cycle for 2007.

"Having said that, what you're buying is an emotional attachment to something that means a lot to you," Madden says. "Buying a hand-built bike is like sipping a great wine, slipping into a bespoke suit or having coffee roasted just to your taste. In the past few years, there's definitely been a surge in the number of people who want just that."

Advertisement

funship island

Discover all the fabulous ways to have fun.

DISCOVER FUNSHIP ISLAND

funshipisland.com


 PRINT THIS
Powered by  Clickability

High-end pedals to the metal

By Marco R. della Cava, USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — If bicycling has a nirvana, the bucolic back roads snaking throughout the Bay Area would qualify.

Bikers here tend to be fit, fanatical and — thanks to high-tech-enterprise success — flush. As a result, the region does not lack for fancy bike shops. Which is why ultra-exclusive Above Category stands out.

PHOTOS: [See what goes in to a \\$22,000 bike](#)

Tucked into the small Marin County town of Mill Valley, the shoebox-sized shop sells some of the coolest bikes you've never heard of. Bike fanciers know about Trek and Specialized, but how about off-the-wall names such as Moots, Parlee and Land Shark?

Didn't think so.

"The so-called Lance effect got people onto bikes that you could describe as mainstream," says owner Chad Nordwall, whose customers include weekend warriors, talented amateurs and even area celebrity and bike fanatic Robin Williams. "But now people are saying, 'I want something unique, something no one else has.'"

While European-made bikes once represented the *ne plus ultra* of the bicycling art form, a small but increasingly popular brigade of American bike builders is gaining momentum across the USA, thanks to cyclists with deep pockets and taste for the extraordinary.

"Thanks largely to boomers, who have little free time and therefore want that time spent in a quality way, my shop has gone from nothing to super-busy in a year," says Kevin Saunders of KGS Bikes in San Antonio. "They're all looking for more than just a bike."

Though it comes as no surprise that pros in the Tour de France, now underway, often ride custom machines that brush the five-figure mark, it's another matter to learn that mere mortals will spend as much to slip the state-of-the-art into their garages.

"When I first started, I rode around on a \$100 bike and loved it, but slowly I got addicted to the technology of it all, and that was it," says Robert Vasquez, a radiologist in San Antonio who recently had KGS spec out a Parlee to the tune of \$22,180.96. "It's just like computers, where, if you want to, you can keep seeking out the smallest and lightest parts. It all adds up."

A quick ultra-bike primer: You start by being measured for a frame. Then you choose your components. The bike is then built to your specs. You ride, adjust and repeat, until it fits like a glove.

For \$22,000, you're certain to blow past rivals like the space shuttle overtaking a Cessna. Right?

"There is no way a \$12,000 bike is six times better than a nice \$2,000 bike," says Steve Madden, editor of *Bicycling* magazine, which nonetheless named Parlee its Editor's Choice cycle for 2007.

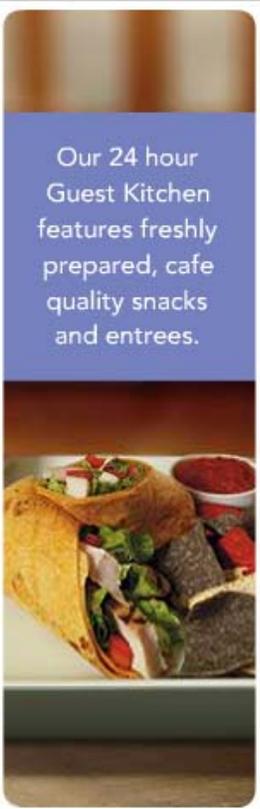
"Having said that, what you're buying is an emotional attachment to something that means a lot to you," Madden says. "Buying a hand-built bike is like sipping a great wine, slipping into a bespoke suit or having coffee roasted just to your taste. In the past few years, there's definitely been a surge in the number of people who want just that."

Share this story:

[Digg](#)[del.icio.us](#)[Newsvine](#)[Reddit](#)[Facebook](#)

What's this?

Advertisement



Our 24 hour Guest Kitchen features freshly prepared, cafe quality snacks and entrees.



Bicycles represent a \$5.8-billion-a-year business; an estimated 43 million Americans ride with some frequency, according to the National Bicycle Association. Today, 99.3% of bicycles sold in the USA are imported, largely from factories in China and Taiwan.

That only serves to make a hand-built, made-in-the-USA ride — often from a shop that builds no more than a few hundred examples a year — an even more impressive statement. Despite the fact that admission to this club starts at around \$4,000, interviews with a half-dozen top builders reveal that demand far exceeds supply.

"The death knell for hand-built bikes rang about 10 years ago (with the rise of quality mass-market brands such as Trek), so I could have never predicted this resurgence," says Richard Sachs, a one-man operation based in Chester, Conn., who makes six frames a month and has a 51/2-year waiting list. "I get some older folks ordering, but most are young people who see the value in something made carefully by hand."

Sachs makes most of his bikes the old-fashioned way: out of steel. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Bob Parlee, a former boat-builder of Olympic-class sailboats whose expertise in carbon fiber was transferred to the bicycle in 2000. Since then, it has been a rocket ride to the forefront of the genre.

"People today want way more than just some fancy paint job," Parlee says. "They're looking for creations with real technological value."

For many, a super-light bike is the holy grail. You get an instant appreciation for Parlee's feathery frames when you consider that a light bike hovers around 17 pounds. Tour de France bikes (by regulation) weigh in at just over 14 pounds; some Parlees have rung in at just over 9 pounds.

But for those who do want a fancy paint job and then some, other builders are happy to oblige. Among them are Richard Schwinn — yes, that Schwinn, great-grandson of Ignaz Schwinn, founder of the iconic American brand now made in Asia — who has been making his own bikes under the name Waterford Precision Cycles.

Beyond crafting a flame-motif frame valued at \$10,000, Schwinn's shop in Waterford, Wis., has a flair for hard-carved lugs, the sleeves that connect a frame's tubes. For one particularly religious customer, three crosses were incorporated into the \$3,000-plus steel frame.

"You might pay \$6,000 for our bikes when all is said and done, but we're a cheap date compared to a Harley-Davidson" motorcycle, which can easily top \$20,000, Schwinn says. "We keep stretching in what we can build, and the customers just keep coming with us."

Even so, Schwinn says making a living as a small-volume bicycle builder is a challenge, made even more so because of competition.

"There are a growing number of hobbyist builders out there now," he says. "The smart ones keep their day jobs."

There are an estimated 175 custom-bike builders in the USA, many of them one-person operations, says Don Walker, a bike builder who for the past three years has staged the North American Hand Made Bicycle Show. About 400 people came to the first show; last year, more than 4,000 attended.

"This niche is expanding as the riders out there grow more sophisticated," Walker says. "People just don't want to pull up to a group of riders and see 10 other bikes just like theirs."

So some are even making their own bikes. Enrollment is surging at the United Bicycle Institute's two-week frame-building course, says John Baxter, administrator at the school in Ashland, Ore. Four years ago, the classes (\$2,300 for steel, \$3,000 for titanium) booked up a few weeks before starting. Today, they're full roughly eight months in advance.

"We get some people who work at bike shops, but we're seeing a growth in another category: folks who have a lot of expensive bikes at home and just want to add one more that they've built themselves," Baxter says.

Baxter, bike show organizer Baker and a number of top builders say the Internet has played a crucial role in their success. "There's no way we'd be as well known to the biking community without blogs," builder Sachs says.

Rick Guggemos started a blog a few years back, only to discover that countless others shared his passion.

"There are two groups of people chatting about this online," says Guggemos, a real estate agent from Northbrook, Ill., who now also builds his own frames. "Those who have the means to buy this stuff, and those who just like to dream."

Mill Valley's Above Category — a translation of *hors catégorie*, the most difficult stage of any professional race — gets a good number of both crossing the threshold.

Customers often linger before a shelf brimming with shiny bike parts, gawking like brides-to-be before a Tiffany window. Some walk out with just an \$80 biking jersey advertising his shop, while others slip out with a childhood reverie come true.

"I guess not long after I got into riding I realized I would try and get something really special," says Rhett Hobgood, 34, a shoulder surgeon who has popped by to switch out the wheels on his new Moots, a Steamboat Springs, Colo., company that makes frames solely out of titanium.

"I love the notion of coming into a small shop like this, getting treated like you're special, and winding up with a bike that you can tell someone spent a lot of time on."

Nordwall slips a pair of Campagnolo wheels on Hobgood's ride, a \$2,000 piece of his \$9,000 puzzle. The native of Jackson, Miss., smiles: "That's all right."

Asked what his wife, Shane, 33, an interior designer with a passion for music, thinks of his indulgence, Hobgood grins again.

"Let's just say she's looking after her interests," he says. "I think we'll be going shopping for a new piano soon."

Share this story: [Digg](#) [del.icio.us](#) [Newsvine](#) [Reddit](#) [Facebook](#) [What's this?](#)

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2007-07-15-bikes_n.htm

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2007 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.