

A person wearing a blue and black cycling jersey, a green and black helmet, and a yellow neck gaiter is riding a green fat-tire bicycle on a snowy trail. The rider is leaning forward, and the bike has thick, treaded tires. The background shows a snowy landscape with trees and a wooden fence.

# Duluth•Superior LIVING

Winter Issue  
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# For Winter Riding, Fat Is Where It's At



by Melissa Maki  
Photos by David Ballard

**T**win Ports residents have long known that our top-notch trails and abundance of outdoor recreation options set us apart. If there was ever any skepticism, it was eliminated by the recent Outside magazine poll in which Duluth was voted best outdoor town in the country. But let's face it: it's not easy staying active during our long, cold winter season.

Enter the fat bike.

Do-it-yourself (DIY) cycling enthusiasts in Alaska and New Mexico created the earliest "fat" bikes to cope with dispa-

rate but equally challenging riding conditions – snow and sand, respectively. These prototypes consisted of regular mountain bike frames with double-wide wheels – two rims welded together with a set of tires sewn together and custom-fit to the rims. Through such experimentation, they learned that wider wheels provided better comfort, stability, and control.

A wider wheelbase helps riders tackle terrain that's tough to navigate on a regular bicycle or even a mountain bike, like deep snow. This makes them especially appeal-





(From left to right) Dave Ojala, Matti Erpestad, Clint Austin, and Jack Rendulich are geared up and ready to hit the trails in Hartley Field on their fat bikes.

ing to cold climate dwellers. In fact, the first mass-produced fat bike came from a Minnesota-based company called Surly in 2005.

Today, there are a number of companies selling fat bikes. The design has been fine-tuned over the years. Essentially, the frame is similar to that of a mountain bike, but is generally heavier and modified to fit specialized rims that allow for cartoonishly wide tires.

Fat bikes have surged in popularity in the Northland over the last five years or so.

Duluthian Todd McFadden was an early adopter. He's been riding fat bikes for six years and racing them for four. He particularly enjoys riding on frozen creeks and Park Point.

"It's a new avenue for riding," says McFadden. "Even at 30 below, if you've got the right gear you can ride comfortably."

McFadden should know. In 2013, he set a new course record of 14 hours and 20 minutes for the Arrowhead Ultra 135, a winter race beginning in International Falls and ending at Lake Vermillion. The grueling 135-mile run, bike, or ski race had only a 35 percent finish rate in 2014.

But you don't need to be as hardcore as McFadden to ride a fat bike. He's quick to point out the sport's versatility: "Fat bike riding is not just for winter. They're very rideable, very stable bikes, which helps people who aren't as good at technical riding."

Asa Jacobs of Continental Ski and Bike agrees. "They are versatile bikes. They've got great traction because of their big footprint. Most people use them for winter commuting, but some people ride them year-round," he says.

Devon Strange, bike mechanic at Stewart's Bikes & Sports, says that fat biking appeals to any bike enthusiast. "Most people use them to get from point A to point B," he says. "The only adjustment needed for winter weather is to let some air out of the tires so that you can float over instead of packing into the snow."

An advertisement for downtown Duluth. It features a collage of photos showing people walking, shopping, and enjoying the city. The main text reads "Get your exclusive Downtown deals!" followed by "Find current deals at GetDowntownDuluth.com". At the bottom left is the "Get DOWN town Duluth" logo. On the right is a large yellow card that says "Get DOWN town CARD" with a play button icon.



Fat bikes aren't cheap; you can expect to throw down at least \$1000 for a basic model. But those curious about the sport have a couple of good options to try before they buy. Continental offers daily fat bike rentals starting at \$65/day.

Day Tripper of Duluth ([www.daytripperofduluth.com](http://www.daytripperofduluth.com)) offers three and six-hour guided winter biking tours in Duluth and on the North Shore from November through April, depending on conditions. Tours include safety, instruction, gear, lunch, and environmental education about the area.

"Our goal is to get people outside," says Day Tripper founder Jake Boyce. "We offer a chance to try out fat bike riding without buying – without having to make a large investment." Boyce, who also works at the Ski Hut, points out that fat bikes are a great option for winter recreation when snowfall is sparse. --DSL



#### WHERE TO RIDE:

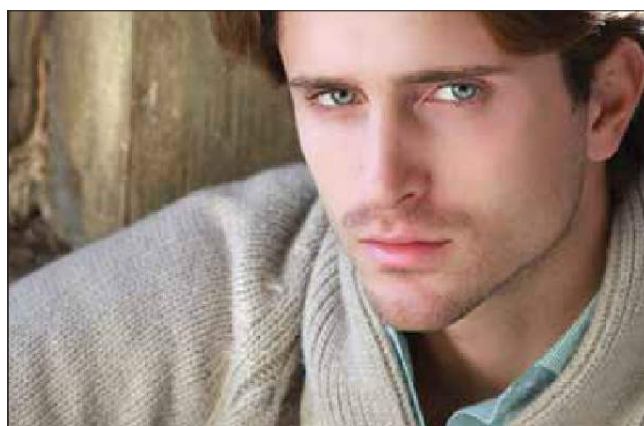
Todd McFadden recommends Lester and Hartley trails, as well as Mission Creek, Brewer, and Piedmont. For the first time this year, the Cyclists of Gitchee Gumees Shores will be grooming Mission Creek and Lester trails especially for fat biking.

#### WHERE TO FIND FAT BIKES:

The Ski Hut sells Salsa, Surly, Trek, and Specialized fat bikes, starting at \$1850. Stewart's Bikes & Sports sells Surly fat bikes, starting at \$1800. Continental Ski and Bike has Borealis, Surly, and Kona brand fat bikes starting at \$1000. It also offers daily rentals starting at \$65/day for aluminum-framed bikes and \$95/day for carbon fiber.

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