



Head for the hills

越野飛馳

BUT DON'T forget your bike. The popularity of mountain biking is climbing across Hong Kong's abundance of rugged trails.

爬山單車越來越受歡迎，所到之處遍及香港大大小小的崎嶇山徑。你也別忘記與你的單車同行

Escaping the glistening financial towers of Hong Kong Island's concrete jungle takes a mere 30 minutes - that is just half an hour to reach mountain bike paradise.

On an overcast Saturday morning, two amateur mountain cyclists park their car beside Tai Lam Chung Reservoir. They unload their mountain bikes and strap on helmets and special cycling shoes. After checking a map, the cyclists are off, rounding the reservoir and disappearing on to paved roads and dirt tracks. Other mountain bikers have already hit the trails, departing from residential complexes on the outskirts of the park. The cyclists traverse bamboo groves and subtropical mountain forests. Trails surrounding Tai Lam Country Park stretch eastward, connecting with Tai Mo Shan Country Park.

Most people would not immediately associate bustling, congested Hong Kong with The Great Outdoors, but with nearly 60 percent of the territory's land protected in country parks, mountain bike enthusiasts see the potential for it to become a premier global destination for their sport. Hong Kong is already home to a growing mountain biking scene, with cyclists rapidly coming to cherish the escape from their cramped urban lifestyles.

Anyone who rode a bike as a kid could pick up mountain biking fairly easily, although the sport does require some technical knowledge and practice before you head for the hills. Riders must distribute body weight differently in response to steep or treacherous terrain. They must know when to use brakes and how to minimize injury from the inevitable falls.



ALTHOUGH THE SPORT does require some technical knowledge and practice before you head for the hills.

要掌握爬山單車的基本技巧誠然並非難事，然而真箇要往山徑闖，還是需要一些相關技術知識和練習。

"In Hong Kong, mountain biking really started in the late-80s, early 90s," says Steve Coward, Hong Kong's first and only fulltime mountain bike instructor. "There was nowhere to ride legally at the time, so if you did mountain biking it was on the quiet in the country parks."

When the government began, gradually, to embrace mountain bikers in country parks, Coward, threw himself into the sport and became a leader in the budding athletic community. The 43-year-old is also a member of the Hong Kong Mountain Bike Association (HKMBA), a volunteer group of cyclists working to promote their sport.

"Tai Lam and Tai Mo Shan in New Territories are probably the most popular areas because there are a lot more trails there. You could do three days' riding and not do the same trail twice," he says. "Lantau is fine. There's quite a bit of road riding to link up some of the better trails. It's very mountainous and extremely hilly. Lamma Island is also popular. There's even a trail on Hong Kong Island, the Dragon's Back Trail [leading to Shek O]."

Roughly 80 kilometers of government-managed mountain bike trails trace the contours of country parks (requiring permits). But much of that tally includes paved surfaces. The HKMBA provides



trail info and tips to local cyclists in addition to doing advocacy work. Current membership in the association is more than 4,000.

Hong Kong's Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department issued 7,311 mountain bike permits in 2012. During the past five years, the department has issued more than 24,260 of the permits, which are required for mountain biking on government-designated trails. The free permits are valid for two years.

Government-funded association is officially tasked with promoting and developing mountain biking. It hosts a few races every year in the New Territories and selects cyclists to represent Hong Kong in Olympic competition. Other private companies also host races in Hong Kong, and Coward estimates the number of races at 10-15 per year. Roughly three of those competitions would be downhill races.

Downhill and cross-country represent two drastically different disciplines. Coward teaches cross-country, which involves going up and down hillsides. Races can last hours, taking a tremendous toll on cyclists' fitness and endurance.

Downhill racing, on the other hand, is just like it sounds—downhill, fast. Downhill racers will start high up on a mountain and speed to the bottom, navigating fallen trees, and (for the more advanced cyclists) jumps. A taxi / van is pre-arranged to take riders back up for additional rides.

Downhill courses are faster and shorter than cross-country routes; a few are scattered around the Tai Mo Shan area. Many of Coward's students began downhill racing after honing their basic mountain bike skills.

Specifications of mountain bikes have changed drastically since they were first popularized in

CYCLISTS TRAVERSE
bamboo groves and sub-tropical mountain forests. Trails surrounding Tai Lam Country Park stretch eastward, connecting with Tai Mo Shan Country Park.

車手們騎車穿越
茂密竹林和亞熱帶樹叢。沿大欖郊野公園的山徑路一直往東延伸，連接大帽山郊野公園。

California during the 70s. A man named Gary Fisher is credited as being the "godfather of mountain biking". He even coined the term "mountain bike" and developed many of the design features standard on the bikes today.

In the early days of mountain biking, Coward says Fisher simply used normal bikes with "big fat tires, going downhill at crazy speeds". Today, mountain bikes are specialized depending on function. "Downhill bikes are really just for going downhill, but cross-country bikes go uphill, too," he says.

A cross-country bike frame might weigh 9 kilograms; downhill bikes could be twice that weight. Downhill bikes also carry heavier suspension. Protective clothing for the different disciplines differs too. Cross-country cyclists need a helmet, possibly gloves, and light knee and elbow pads. Downhill racers wear a full helmet like a motorcyclist's, heavier leg guards, arm guards and a chest protector.

During the past two years the government has completed a new purpose-built mountain bike track on Tai Lam mountain using sustainable designs that differ from the past practice of laying concrete (concrete ruins the rugged experience on the mountain and accelerates erosion as heavy rains wash underneath the surface).

According to experienced cyclist Shaun Horrocks, with continued progress Hong Kong could rival the world's top mountain cycling destinations, such as Whistler in Canada or Fort William in Scotland. But, for the time being, the trails are still operating at overcapacity.

"This is only a beginning," says Horrocks. "More needs to be done. Hong Kong could truly be a mountain biking Mecca."

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遠離港島區高聳亮麗的金融摩天大樓，從石屎森林逃遁至爬山單車的天堂，原來不過需要短短三十分鐘。

在一個陰霾密佈的星期六早上，兩位業餘單車手把汽車停泊在大欖涌水塘一旁，然後取下爬山單車，戴上頭盔和換上特別的單車鞋。他們仔細看過地圖，便環繞水塘正式出發，爬山單車迅即在人工鋪設的車道上揚起塵土，繼而消失得無影無蹤。其他單車手早已出發，從密集的住宅區「出走」至公園市郊一帶。

車手們騎車穿越茂密竹林和亞熱帶樹叢。沿大欖郊野公園的山徑路一直往東延伸，連接大帽山郊野公園。不少人都認為香港繁囂擠迫，總不會一下子把這個地方和滿目盈翠的綠林幽谷聯想在一起。事實上，香港約有百分之六十的土地屬於郊野公園範圍，爬山單車愛好者便看準這個優勢，打算把香港打造成首屈一指的國際爬山單車場地。

香港的爬山單車活動確也有增長之勢，越來越多的車手希望藉此遠離偏促繁鬧的都市生活，享受鄉郊的山野之趣。

從小已懂得騎單車的人，要掌握爬山單車的基本技巧誠然並非難事，然而真箇要往山徑闖，還是需要一些相關技術知識和練習。單車手面對陡峭地勢或是險道，必須懂得轉移身體重量，藉以平衡配合。他們也要曉得如何操控煞車腳掣，以及一旦人仰車翻時，可如何盡量減少損傷。

Steve Coward是香港首位和唯一一位全職的爬山單車導師，他表示：「香港的爬山單車活動，在八十年代末和九十年代初才開始活躍起來，當時還沒有合法的單車路徑，只能悄悄在郊野公園馳騁一番。」

後來政府逐漸開放郊野公園給爬山單車手，Coward即全身投入，成為這股嶄新風潮的先驅。Coward今年43歲，同時是志願組織香港爬山單車協會的成員，與其他會員一起支持爬山單車發展。

他說：「新界的大欖和大帽山有多條登山徑，因此大概是最受歡迎的地點。你可以在那裏飛馳三天，也不用重走同一路徑。大嶼山也不錯，有不少車路接駁至理想路段，那裏山比較多，地勢堪稱險峻。南丫島也是熱門地點。而在港島區的龍脊（通往石澳），也有一條單車徑。」

由政府管理的郊野公園爬山單車徑（須申領許可證），約長八十公里，大致勾勒了鄉郊公園的輪廓面貌，而當中也包括一些特地鋪設的路徑。香港爬山單車協會現時擁有逾四千名會員，除了積極推廣這種活動，也向本地單車手提供路徑資料和騎單車的心得。



香港漁農自然護理署於2012年簽發了7,311張單車許可證；而在過去五年，漁護署合共簽發了超過24,260張許可證。申請許可證費用全免，有效期為兩年，車手可在政府指定的路徑享受騎單車之樂。

香港政府一直宣傳和推動爬山單車發展的組織，每年都在新界籌辦一些單車賽，又揀選單車手代表香港參加奧運賽事。此外，也有私人機構在香港舉辦比賽。Coward估計，每年有十至十五項賽事，而當中約有三場為落山賽。

落山和越野是兩種截然不同的模式，Coward專責指導越野項目，包括登山和下坡，賽程或持續數小時，大大消耗單車手的體力，對他們的毅力也是一大考驗。

至於落山賽則名副其實，只講求極速衝下山坡。參賽車手首先在山嶺集合，然後在倒下的大樹間穿梭疾馳，爭先抵達山腳，一些資深的車手甚至會飛越土坡。賽會還為車手預先安排的士或小巴，接載他們返回山上作賽。

落山賽的賽道較越野賽的賽道陡峭和短程，其中一些就散落在大帽山一帶，Coward不少學生掌握了爬山單車的基本技巧後，都參加落山賽一試實力。

自從爬山單車於七十年代在加州風行，其規格演變至今，早已跟昔日大大不同。Gary Fisher被譽為「爬山單車教父」，不但創作了「爬山單車」一詞，甚至發展出許多直到今天仍可在爬山單車找到的設計特色。

Coward指出Fisher剛開始嘗試爬山單車時，不過是駕一般的單車，只有「寬寬的大輪胎，以極速狂飆下坡」。時至今日，爬山單車的規格因應不同需要而有別。他說：「落山單車就是用作下坡，而越野單車則可以同時上山。」

越野單車的車架可重達九公斤，落山單車的重量則更是其兩倍，避震懸掛也要重得多。兩者的保護衣大有分別：越野單車只需頭盔，或許也可戴上手套，以及配備輕薄的護膝和護肘；落山單車的頭盔則與電單車相若，可作全面保護，還要加上較厚重的護腿、護臂和護胸。

過去兩年，政府開放了全新建造的大欖山爬山單車徑路段。新路段有別於以往的混凝土地面，改為採用可長久使用的路徑設計（混凝土不但破壞了崎嶇陡峭的山路，也難以抵受暴雨沖刷，令路底結構較快速被侵蝕）

根據本地資深單車手Shaun Horrocks表示，香港不斷改善爬山單車路徑，將可與多個世界頂級單車地點爭一日之長短，如加拿大的威士拿和蘇格蘭的威廉堡。不過目前本港的單車徑仍然不敷應用，情況有待改進。Horrocks說：「現時還是在起步點，各方面仍要繼續努力。也許有一天，香港真的能夠成為騎爬山單車的勝地。」