

Automatic shifting for bikes does the job

AN FRANCISCO--Heading into my test of Shimano's automatic bike transmission, I was a skeptic. But by the time I finished, I was convinced the company got the technology mostly right.

Shimano's Coasting technology is a three-speed automatic transmission for bikes. It's nothing a serious bicyclist will be interested in, but that's not the market Shimano and its bike-making partners--Raleigh, Giant and Trek--are going after. They're hoping to appeal to folks who cruise along the beach or who may not have ridden since childhood.

I'm not the target market: I often bicycle to work and am able to conquer San Francisco's mighty Mt. Davidson on the weekends. But for those who aren't in the Lycra shorts crowd, Shimano's technology makes sense.

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The bikes shift relatively smoothly, with gear choice pegged to the rider's speed. Use of planetary gears hidden in the rear hub means that the shifting happens even when the bike is stopped. Occasional clunks and downshifting delays were the only serious problems I detected. The design is clean, without a lot of cables or other external items that owners have to futz with.

The gear range seemed reasonable for the flat or mostly flat terrain most novice riders in this category are going to stick to--this is not the kind of person who's going to tackle Tour de France routes over Mont Ventoux or the Col du Galibier. Some of the gearing is up to the bike makers--I preferred the Trek's range--but the shift points can be adjusted easily with a screwdriver-operated dial.

The system is equipped with a mandatory coaster brake (the kind that works by pushing the pedal backward as opposed to a hand-controlled brake), which I loathe but which Shimano assured me is the mechanism of choice for the bikes' technophobic market.

There are some unknowns. It's not clear yet how durable the technology is--in particular the electronics that generates the power for the shifter and monitors a rider's speed. Maintenance also is a potential issue, since some parts are hidden away and unfamiliar to the average bike mechanic.

And it's not clear who's going to be willing to pay the relatively steep prices, which range well beyond \$600, for just a basic bike.

But at its heart, the technology functions well enough that it fades into the background. Would that other technological novelties work as smoothly.