

WHEELS OF WOOD



Sueshiro Sano stands with one of his mahogany bicycles.

BOTH PHOTOS YOSHIFUSA HASHIZUME

In a workshop in Kiba in Tokyo's Koto Ward, known as a town of lumberyards and shipwrights since the Edo period (1603–1867), Sueshiro Sano handles the production of mahogany bicycles.

Sano is the heir of shipbuilders who have been in business for more than 200 years. He began to study drawing and shipbuilding design in earnest at age thirteen, and at fifteen he started building an ocean-going yacht, which he completed by himself over a period of three years. The boat was introduced in a U.S. magazine specializing in wooden boats, and then the advanced skills of Sano came to be referred to as "Sano Magic" with both respect and praise.

In 2008, Sano used the generations of shipbuilding techniques he has inherited to manufacture the first mahogany bicycle.

"My grandfather, a seventh-generation shipwright, often used to tell me that those who imitate others will not get to the top. That is why I never imitate others. I built the mahogany bicycle because I wanted to shape something that no one else in the world had done."

This bicycle shot into the limelight after prototype No. 3 was exhibited at Eurobike, the world's biggest bicycle fair, held in Germany, in 2009. Weighing the same as a carbon bicycle, yet as beautiful as a work of art, with a never-before-experienced ride feel, the mahogany bicycle astonished people.

"By utilizing the special qualities of mahogany to give the frame resilience, it is possible to use stress to assist the pedaling force in the same way as the footboard for a vaulting box. Everyone who has ridden it says it is as easy and fast as an electrically assisted bike," says Sano.

With the exception of the mechanical parts, all parts of the bicycle are formed by exposing 0.8–1.0 mm strips of mahogany to heat and moisture, bending them by hand, and then bonding several layers together with adhesive and pressing them into a wooden mold. The handlebar is hollow and carefully carved with a chisel. The lightest model weighs no more than a mere 7.2 kg. Sano is only able to produce three bicycles in one year. Despite the 2 million yen price tag, he has advance reservations for the next two years.

Highly admired for their artistry, one of Sano's bicycles will be shown at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London from this September to January next year.

Sano comments, "One day I would like to use the new techniques I have developed for making mahogany bicycles to build an ultra-lightweight wooden boat." 



Two Italians stop by Sano's workshop on the recommendation of a neighbor whom they were visiting.