



# THE VAN THAT CAN

VELOFIX'S MOBILE BIKE SHOPS COME TO YOU

**H**ave you ever thought it would be nice to have the bike shop come to you, rather than you going to the bike shop?

That's the basic idea behind velofix, the Vancouver, British Columbia-based juggernaut of the mobile bicycle shop business. Nobody else comes close to the reach or volume of velofix.

Beeline Bikes, for example, started as a mobile bike shop service but now has transitioned to software as a service partner for bike shops around the country. Beeline's software helps with scheduling and connects riders to shops.

Beeline does retain about 10 service areas for mobile bike shops in California, Colorado, and New Jersey, and hopes to resume growing that business in the future.

In a recent interview, velofix CEO and cofounder Chris Guillemet said the company has about 100 "franchise partners" running around in red, customized Mercedes-Benz vans, who have performed more than 100,000 services, including tune-ups and builds, for cyclists across the country.

There are velofix franchises in 30 states, from California to Connecticut, and five Canadian provinces — Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Québec. In addition, as *Bicycle Retailer and Industry News (BRAIN)* reported last December, velofix opened

an office in Austin, Texas, last year and launched its "first wave" of corporate-owned mobile bike shops in Austin, Houston, Tampa, San Jose, Raleigh, and Vancouver, British Columbia.

"We've grown from one single mobile bike shop," Guillemet said. "The plan in 2020 is to get up to 150 mobile bike shops on the road. It's pretty ambitious. We're going to put corporate locations on the road and continue to sell franchises."

That first mobile bike shop hit the road in Vancouver in January 2013, following a discussion over beers in Guillemet's garage. The idea came from Guillemet's business partner, David Xausa, whom Guillemet has known for more than 20 years.

"I've done a lot of different things," Guillemet said. "I've had business development roles for different companies, including consumer package-type goods selling to major retailers like Costco."

The third partner in velofix is Boris Martin, who at 28 years old is much younger than Guillemet and Xausa, who are 48 and 45 respectively. Martin is a three-time Canadian Track Champion and has raced in Europe. Martin's involvement began through a chance meeting with Xausa in the neighborhood.

Both Guillemette and Xausa are lifelong cyclists, though not in the

competitive realm like Martin.

"David (Xausa) and I were both frustrated customers of the traditional bike shop," Guillemet said. "Trying to get to the bike shop when it was open, we both had young kids and were very busy. We didn't like leaving our bikes at the shop for five days or 10 days, depending on the time of year."

There had to be a better way, the partners thought. They each wrote checks and chipped in to build the first mobile bike shop van. Martin did most of the hands-on work and was the first mobile mechanic for the company.

"We just put a truck on the road," Guillemet said. "We quickly found out there were a lot of frustrated people out there who were time-restricted."

To use velofix, customers simply fire up the app on their smartphones or desktop computers and put in their zip codes. Up pop the times and dates when the service van will be in their neighborhoods.

"We use route optimization software to try to keep the mobile shop in a tight area each day so the shop is not getting stuck in traffic and we're not running around all parts of the city," Guillemet said. "Efficiency is the challenge. Getting around becomes a major problem for people."

You pick your service package online, whether it's a minor or major tune-up or a full overhaul. Guillemet said velofix's

STORY BY DAN D'AMBROSIO

rates are in line with higher-end bike shops in each market. A minor tune-up ranges from \$69 to \$99.

Velofix also sells and builds new bikes, including electric bikes, from a variety of manufacturers, as well as offering a selection of parts and accessories, including panniers, lights, and fenders.

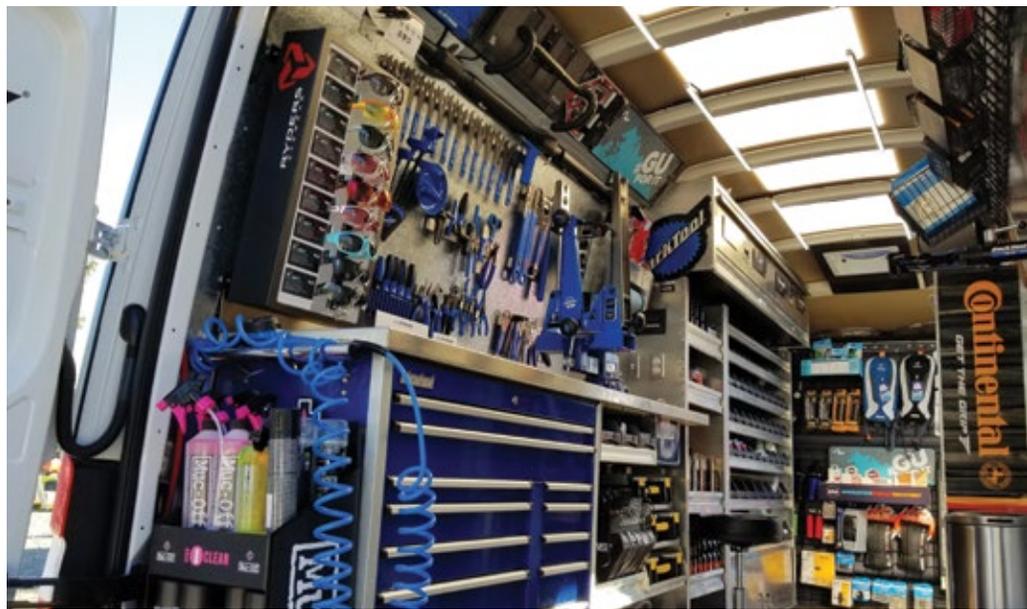
“We’ve got 100 square feet in there,” Guillemet said of the velofix vans. “We’ll stock key inventory.”

Then there’s the “endless aisle,” as Guillemet put it, meaning anything you need can be shipped directly to your home.

Amazon is also a velofix partner. When you buy a bike through Amazon, assembly from a velofix mobile bike shop is included, and comes to you.

When the three partners first launched velofix in 2013, suppliers refused to sell to them because they didn’t have a brick-and-mortar bike shop.

“That’s all shifted,” Guillemet said. “Let’s be honest. We didn’t invent the mobile bike shop. A lot of independent people are doing it today. Most markets we go into, there are people doing it.



Velofix’s vans put 100 square feet to the test with tools, a few parts and accessories, and a waiting area.

We try to make it professional, make it consistent, and build a network. That’s what we’ve done.”

Guillemet said he never speaks ill of traditional bike shops. When velofix came on the scene in a big way, there was concern among traditional shops, who weren’t sure what the company was up to.

“That’s not the case anymore,”

Guillemet said. “We are in the community with the bike shops. We do 2,000 events system-wide every year, community events and charity events. Our whole goal and mission is to get people on bikes. Everybody wins.”

Velofix tries to make the inside of their vans a welcoming place, where

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customers can watch the Tour de France on a flat-screen television while they wait for their bikes to be serviced or built. There's coffee for those who are so inclined. Mechanics use that same television screen to go over a customer's bill, or to connect customers to websites where they can learn about various products that are available for sale.

"We do what's right for the customers and offer premium service all the time," Guillemet said.

Velofix's friendly, social approach requires mechanics who are also people persons, which is not always easy to find.

"It's always a challenge to get great people," Guillemet said. "Our franchise partners have the same challenge. Great mechanics are not in short supply, but the trick is getting the right ones. Not only do you have to be a great mechanic, but you also have to interact well with people."

In the "current model," by which he means the traditional bike shop, Guillemet said those people skills are not always evident.

"Many mechanics don't have to interact with customers, and frankly don't want to," he said.

All this mobile friendliness and repair camaraderie doesn't come cheap. Velofix's Franchise Disclosure Document, dated March 27, 2019, estimated the initial investment to launch your mobile bicycle shop at \$170,200 to \$202,950, which includes a \$25,000 franchise fee, and \$49,000 to \$55,000 for the van.

"What we like to say is put approximately \$65,000 down and you're operational," Guillemet said. "You have the keys and you're rolling around."

As the Ashburn Bicycle Repair blog ([ashburnbicyclerepair.com](http://ashburnbicyclerepair.com)) noted recently, \$200,000 is a lot of money.

"For comparative purposes, for as little as \$31,000, you can open an H&R Block franchise," the Ashburn blog says.

Ashburn Bicycle Repair is an independent mobile bike service provider in Ashburn, Virginia, and many small surrounding communities. Ashburn also offers consulting services for those interested in opening a mobile bike shop. The blog also says that velofix is just about the only game

in town for those looking to get into a franchise for a mobile bike shop.

"For better or for worse, they're the big boys on the block," the blog notes. "Their growth has been constant and sustained. It seems rarely a month goes by without another positive velofix press release and another corporate partnership."

Chris Guillemet wouldn't disagree. His vision is to take the red velofix vans international, although that idea has been shelved for now, according to BRAIN. Guillemet told BRAIN that international growth remains a long-term goal.

Velofix also attracted investment capital from a Montreal-based firm that focuses on the clean energy, transportation, and smart city sectors, according to a May 24, 2019 news release from MacKinnon, Bennett & Company's MKB Partners Fund LP.

The amount of the investment was not disclosed, but MKB Partners said the goal was to help the velofix founders expand the company's footprint within North America, enhance its technology, and scale up its marketing efforts. The fact that velofix was able to attract venture capital at all is a good indication of how the company is viewed in the wider business world.

"When we launched this business, we saw in our hearts there was a need for it, but you don't know how it's going to go," Guillemet said. "At the end of the day, you start a business based on a pain point or frustration. You hope and expect others are feeling the same frustration and pain, but we didn't know in the beginning.

"We were pleasantly surprised." **AC**

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*Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.*

this bike," said George Parry, the Niner designer who led the project. "When mountain biking first started, it was just guys out in regular shorts, ripping fire roads. Now cross-country riding is super serious, with everyone kitted out in Lycra. People find a way to split off when it gets too serious. For me, that's what this bike is about — exploring, and doing it with comfort and efficiency."

arc of our history, the growth of our membership, the exciting "speciation" within the bike world (think gravel, touring, mountain, bikepacking, eBikes, urban, epic, overnight, etc.), and the immense looming pressure of our collective response to climate change ... NOW is our time at Adventure Cycling to revisit the strategic plan that we adopted in 2018 and determine the best bets for incremental improvement and where we might be positioned for more rapid change. As Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

As bike travelers, we have rare and collective insight into how to get along with others, appreciate diverse cultures, reflect and learn from experience, connect to our surroundings, and travel with a low carbon footprint. Valuable skills in today's world. Plus, we're an interesting lot that knows how to have a good time with whatever cards, climbs, or company we're dealt.

Which brings me back to thinking about that 50th birthday party, because along with the strategic planning, advocacy, and white papers we put into the world, I want to have fun while I'm doing it. I want to celebrate our community, and I want to get on my bike and ride. And I look forward to seeing you out there too.

**Scott Pankratz**

*Executive Director*

[spankratz@adventurecycling.org](mailto:spankratz@adventurecycling.org)

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If you're looking for a gravel race bike, this probably isn't it. But if you want a bike that gives you something a hardtail mountain bike or full-suspension XC bike can't — more hand positions, touring bike geometry, braze-ons galore, higher speeds on pavement — the answer is a hard yes. **AC**

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*Berne Broudy is a Vermont-based writer and photographer. Find her on Twitter @berneab and on Instagram @bernebroudy.*