

Recumbent Primer

by **Bryan J. Ball**

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→ **RECUMBENT** bikes and trikes seem to be gaining popularity at quite a rapid pace. Lightweight carbon-fiber two-wheelers are dominating ultra-long-distance racing in the Ultra Marathon Cycling Association events like Race Across America and the Sebring 12/24 Hour Challenge (bikebring.org). On the other end of the spectrum, baby boomers are snapping up the new generation of lower-cost trikes as fast as companies can make them. And as cycle tourism becomes more popular, the recumbent's traditionally strong foothold among that segment is expanding. Anecdotal evidence on touring-journal sites like Crazy Guy on a Bike (crazyguyonabike.com) shows that more and more cycle tourists are "getting 'bent" every day).

One of the easiest ways I've found to describe a recumbent is that "It's one of those kinda funny-looking bikes where you sit in a chair and have your feet out in front of you." These days, it may even be easier to say, "it's like those sit-down bikes in the gym but it has wheels."

Recumbents first became popular in the 1930s in Europe. Then, in 1934, a recumbent rider broke the one-hour world record on a velodrome in France. The sport's governing body immediately banned recumbents from competing in their events, and the handful of European companies manufacturing them almost immediately stopped their production.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that recumbents started to reappear in significant numbers. First, a few companies popped up on the West Coast of the U.S., then a few in Europe, and so on and so on, until



the worldwide network of dozens of builders came into existence as it is today. Recumbents still make up less than one percent of the overall bicycle market, but most manufacturers have reported double-digit growth for the last several years.

So why would a person choose a recumbent over a conventional touring bike? What are the advantages? What are the disadvantages?

We'll start with the advantages. First of all, they're very comfortable. This isn't really much of a secret. In fact, it's the primary reason that most people get on a recumbent in the first place. Complaints of wrist-, neck-, and saddle-related discomfort are the most common reasons that riders of conventional upright bikes decide to make the switch.

Although it may be true that recumbents aren't as fast as uprights in some situations, they still may allow you to cover more miles in a single day. Fatigue comes from more than physical effort. Nagging pains you may not have even noticed or have simply accepted over the years can also shorten your day. The simple fact is that the more comfortable you are, the longer you'll stay in the saddle. Or, in this case, the longer you'll stay in the seat.

Recumbents are also easily adapted to people with disabilities. Several manufacturers focus almost solely on special-needs cyclists and adapt their bikes and trikes to assist those riders. Even those who aren't focused entirely on these riders offer a few accessories



Lightfoot - long wheelbase

that can help with minor disabilities. Recumbents have helped many disabled or pain-suffering riders regain their freedom.

However, it must be said that pain or handicap isn't the only reason to get on a recumbent. Scores and scores of recumbent riders are perfectly capable of riding a more traditional bike and are still relatively comfortable on recumbents. I include myself in that list.

Another advantage of the laid-back seating position is that it allows the rider to take in more of the scenery around them. Getting out there and seeing the world at a more moderate pace than an automobile provides is one of the primary reasons that most of us travel by bicycle. You can see a lot more of the wonders around you from a reclined position than you can while you're bent over the handlebars. Some

of my best touring photos were taken right from the seat of a recumbent.

Of course, recumbents have their flaws as well. They have a reputation as being rather slow climbers because they're usually heavier than their more conventional counterparts. Recumbent seats weigh a lot more than any standard saddle, and the steering mechanisms also use a lot more material in their design and construction. The frames of the bikes and trikes themselves are often more complicated as well, but that isn't universally true anymore.

Some people are afraid to even try a recumbent because they assume it will be foreign to them and difficult to ride. It's true that riding a two-wheeled recumbent can take some getting used to, but I would never say it's more difficult than riding an upright bike — it's just different. The best advice I can give is to sit back, relax, try not to pull on the handlebars or grip them too tightly, and give yourself some time. Also, bear in mind that recumbents do use slightly different muscle groups, so it may take some time to get your "recumbent legs."

On some recumbent bikes and trikes, mounting accessories and panniers can be a bit of a challenge. Fortunately, several companies offer solutions for just about any bike or trike you can find. The more the market grows, the better this gets. It's now fairly easy to get your hands on recumbent-specific light and accessory mounts, fenders, panniers, and racks. Companies such as



Bacchetta - above seat steering

TerraCycle (t-cycle.com) and Power On Cycling (poweroncycling.com) are good places to start looking.

Visibility is also frequently mentioned as a disadvantage of recumbents. It's true that some very low designs and some trikes will be less visible in a handful of traffic situations. I'm referring mostly to multi-lane roads or parking lots where a recumbent may be hidden behind a car, however, a flag can go a long way toward alleviating that concern. I've also found that in most situations drivers actually give me more room when I'm on a recumbent than they do when I'm on a conventional bike. There's a bit of a "what-the-heck-is-that" syndrome and they take more notice. As always, and with any bike, I find it best to just ride with the assumption that no one sees me and act accordingly.

I also hear a lot of talk about the "dork factor." Recumbent riders are stereotyped as being older, fatter, bearded white men who probably watch a lot of *Doctor Who* and the History Channel. It's true that there are a lot of people like that on recumbents, but the market is getting younger and younger all the time. Whenever I attend rallies, I'm always surprised by the large number of younger people — usually couples — in attendance.

Dorky or not, there's no denying that recumbents definitely draw attention. If you ride a recumbent in public very often, people *will* ask questions. It's just a fact. More often than not, they're very nice and it's a good way to meet people. However, if you're the shy type, it can be bothersome. As with most things, the vast majority of negative comments I receive while riding a recumbent have come from groups of teenagers. Almost everyone else shouts "Cool bike!" or asks polite questions when I stop.

One of the most frequent concerns that I hear from potential recumbent converts is related to the price. It's undeniable, these machines are expensive. If you compare any particular recumbent to its upright equivalent, the recumbent is often twice the price and comes with inferior parts. There are many reasons for this, but it mostly boils down to economy of scale. The largest recumbent

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manufacturer in the world only builds about 25,000 units a year. Conventional bike builders considered by many to be very small “boutique” companies build several times that amount. But recently prices do seem to be coming down.

The world of recumbency can also be a very bewildering place with its own lingo and unwritten rules. Once you’ve decided to switch to a recumbent, the process of actually choosing one can be a bit staggering. Recumbents come in so many shapes, styles, sizes, and configurations that it’s terribly easy to become very, very confused. From here on out, I’ll try to explain some of the types of recumbents and a bit of the jargon with the cycle tourist in mind.

For years, the most popular long-distance touring recumbents were long-wheelbase (LWB) two-wheelers. LWBs are identified as having a front wheel that is located in front of the bicycle’s crankset. They often feature rather relaxed riding positions with the rider’s feet near the ground and his or her body in a fairly upright position.

The LWB’s long length also allows panniers to be mounted underneath the seat in addition to a conventional rear rack. This not only allows the rider to carry the same four-pannier combination as a conventional touring bike with front and rear racks, it also puts the heaviest load close to the road and greatly lowers the center of gravity. I toured Europe on an Easy Racers LWB with an underseat rack, and I swear it was more stable when it was loaded than when it was unloaded.

The primary disadvantage of a long-wheelbase recumbent is the “long” part. If you’re planning to use public transport during any portion of your trip, this probably isn’t the best choice. This is especially true if you choose a model with a large front wheel. There are models that come apart with S&S couplers for airline travel, but they’re still rather large, even when disassembled. Also, if you want suspension for your trip, it’s possible to find a few LWBs that have it, but it’s still quite uncommon.

Short-wheelbase (SWB) recumbents have also become very popular choices for recumbent tourers. They are much easier to transport, easier to negotiate



in crowded road or trail situations, and suspension options are plentiful if you need them. Most SWBs can also take an underseat rack but won’t get the load down quite as low as it will be on a similarly equipped LWB.

Some SWBs can be a bit more difficult to master than the average LWB. The rider’s feet are usually much

higher up off the ground and the seating position is often much more reclined.

A growing subset of the SWB market is the dual 26-inch or 700C highracer. When these bikes first started to make headway, they were primarily designed for racing and fast riding — hence the catchy name — however, many dual

big-wheel SWBs are designed for loaded touring now.

One last style of SWB is called a lowracer. As the name would imply, lowracers are low, long, and aerodynamically slippery bikes that are primarily designed to go fast, however, there have been a few notable exceptions that make excellent touring bikes. Unfortunately, riding with your butt a foot off the ground is great for aerodynamics but not so good for visibility.

Even a casual observer of the market has probably noticed that trikes have taken the recumbent world by storm. Their complete lack of a learning curve, their decreasing price, the fact that many fold and are easier to transport, and the simple fact that they handle and perform infinitely better than they did even a decade ago, has been attracting both new and experienced riders in droves.

But are trikes good for touring, or are they better suited to staying on the bike path due to their wide track and low visual profile? I’ll answer



with a personal anecdote. I review recumbents for a living. Because trikes are so popular right now, most of the recumbents I review are trikes. I have to ride what I review so, more often than not, I’m riding a trike. This means recreational riding, running errands, and, yes, even touring. I firmly believe that a trike can make an excellent touring platform and so do scores of others who use them for that purpose.

There are three types of trikes. The most popular by far is called a tadpole (see picture on page 18). Tadpoles have

two wheels in front. The rider usually sits rather low, and these trikes are known for their somewhat go-cart-like handling.

Tadpoles usually will accept a somewhat conventional pannier rack over the rear wheel, and some are even designed to take four panniers.

Some people find most tadpole trikes more difficult to get in and out of, and they may have issues with the very high bottom brackets that some models

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Goodbye France, hello Spain. Heading up into the clouds while bikepacking the historic Camino de Santiago. Photo by Kelly Mac

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feature. However, more and more manufacturers are producing tadpoles with higher seats and lower bottom brackets.

Tadpoles do take up more road space than a two-wheeled recumbent, but the difference isn't as great as you'd think. Most tadpole trikes are no more than a few inches wider than the rider's shoulders. Tadpoles are also very low, which again raises the visibility issue. I do highly recommend that tadpole trike riders use a flag on the road to help alleviate this. I do think that with a good flag and an alert rider, a tadpole trike isn't any more dangerous on the road than any other form of human-powered transportation.

The second most popular kind of trike is called a delta. Delta trikes have two wheels in the back and are usually a bit taller and narrower than the average tadpole. Some of them also feature very relaxed and user-

friendly riding positions similar to an LWB two-wheeled recumbent. Cargo is usually carried in some sort of rack or shelf behind and/or under the rear seat. Some deltas have a positively cavernous cargo capacity.



Sun Delta Trike

The disadvantages of the delta trike are that they are often much heavier and slower than the average tadpole. Many of them will store sitting straight up on the back end, but that isn't much help when trying to get it on and off a

name indicates, a quad is a recumbent with four wheels. Most are made from converted tadpole trike designs with delta-style rear ends and combine the advantages and disadvantages of both designs. They are heavier and more complex than a tadpole but offer more stability and a larger cargo capacity.

Once you've chosen which style of recumbent you want, the good news is that you're about halfway done! Recumbents not only come in several

major configurations, they also come with several other sub variations.

One of the most notable differences is the location of the steering controls. Most two-wheelers have the handlebars over the seat (OSS) whereas most trikes have them under the seat (USS). Of course, there are deviations.

Many long-distance touring riders prefer USS because it's a bit more relaxing on the hands and wrists and it offers them a completely unobstructed view of the road ahead. However, it does add to the learning curve just a bit.

Recumbents all used to be cursed with at least one 20-inch or smaller wheel. That's not necessarily the case anymore. There are dozens of options out there with larger 26-inch or 700C wheels, however, if you choose a model that has smaller wheels, it doesn't have nearly as much of a downside as in the past. There are plenty of high-quality, high-pressure tires available now in a wide variety of widths and sizes.

Suspension has also become very popular in the recumbent market, especially on trikes. My general advice is that if you're not terribly concerned about speed and can afford the option, it's probably a good idea. It isn't possible to stand up and use your legs and arms to soak up the bumps on a recumbent. Suspension can also aid in stability on rougher descents.

My last bit of advice is that, if you're truly interested in a recumbent, you should get out and try as many as you can. Many regional dealers stock several brands, and most of them realize the time and effort it will take to choose the right one. Also, don't be scared to join a message board or two and ask some questions. Like almost everyone in the cycle tourist community, most recumbent riders are pretty good people and very willing to help.

Don't be afraid to join "the dork side." Recumbents can be a bit intimidating at first, but it can also greatly enhance your cycling life. 

Bryan Ball is the managing editor of BentRider Online (bentrideronline.com). He contributed "Getting Down, The Lowdown on Recumbents" to the July/August 2007 issue of Adventure Cyclist.



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Riding with Angels

PHOTOGRAPH BY DEREK GALLAGHER STORY BY MADELINE MCKIDDY

→ WHEN GARY HAVAS left his home in San Luis Obispo, California, last summer, he was planning to take Adventure Cycling's Southern Tier Bicycle Route to St. Augustine, Florida, a plan which grew into a circumnavigation of the U.S., and a journey which totaled 9,632 miles. "Shipping my trike back would be troublesome at best," Gary explained when asked about the evolution of his tour, "so why not pedal it back? Sure, and while I'm at it, see both coasts!"

"How can you do this?" Gary said this was a question he was asked all along the route by cyclists and motorists alike. "I'm the most fortunate man I know," he answered, "I have angels. They come in many forms and do many wonderful things that grease my life's workings. They follow me in clouds of merriment and mirth. I live very frugally and concentrate on simplifying my life. I have great health and motivation to explore my abilities and this country's offerings. In return I got something I'm finding difficult to express that amounts to a new appreciation for serendipity (angels, if you like) and an ability to see the fortunate side of things."

The flag pictured above became a talisman for Gary during the journey; he called it the Flag of Signatures, because he had nearly all those he met along the way add their name. "Originally, it had been a whim. What it turned out to be was a vehicle for meeting friends and sharing the tour or the idea of the tour, or both. As the journey progressed and with much flapping in the wind, these signatures faded and some were lost, only to be overwritten with new well-wishes."

Of course there were hard days and setbacks, but each time frustration started to get the best of him, Gary would be met with a bit of luck — whether in the shape of a roadside pub he'd have passed by or a hidden gem of a road he'd have missed if all went according to plan. "It took a little while to develop the appreciation, I'll admit," he said, "but, with repeated exposure, it became an adventure and not a chore when expectations went unmet. This is, of course, a very transferrable life skill. It's my shtick. By whichever method one chooses to sit back in wonder at the goodness one has, use it. I use a trike and angels. That's how I did this."

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