

Seeing the Light

Breakthroughs in lightweight gear open a new world of adventure for bicycle travel

by Aaron Teasdale



The goal was simple: go as light as humanly possible and take bike travel to the mountaintops. We wanted to take the current ultralight ethos of the backpacking world and apply it to cycling — specifically, backcountry mountain biking. We — two-time Great Divide Race winner Matthew Lee, veteran adventure photographer Bob Allen, and myself — thought that if we could get our gear weight down to around fifteen pounds, it would free us to tackle terrain not previously considered possible for conventional bicycle travel.

Not ones to let careful planning or caution interfere with our plans, we headed straight for the most rugged terrain we could find — an alluring, long-distance trail high in the secret Adventure Cycling testing grounds in remotest northern Montana. If our ultralight gear strategies could work here, we figured, they could work anywhere.

What we discovered — that you can load a mountain bike with minimal weight and ride for three, four, five days at a time — opens up a whole new world of adventure for backcountry bike exploration. Sections of the trail we rode had likely never seen bicycle tires before.

The good news for all multi-day veloadventurers is that the lessons we learned, and continue to learn, apply not just to mountain bikers, but to all self-contained bicycle travelers. Lightweight gear strategies can be used for trans-continental road rides or long weekends on country lanes near wherever you call home.

Getting your load this light does require some sacrifices. Ultralight gear can be less durable than its portlier counterparts. However, if treated with care, much of it, including all of the gear in this review, will last a very long time. Traveling light can also mean leaving behind extraneous (yet comfort-giving) items. Camp life may be slightly less

Riding High. Matthew Lee, the Cannondale-sponsored, two-time winner of the Great Divide Race, joins Adventure Cycling for ultralight gear testing and mountaintop exploration in northern Montana.

posh, but the tradeoff is better riding, a sacrifice many will gladly make. The theory is simple: a) cycling is inherently fun, and b) the less weight you carry, the more fun it is. If this sounds enticing, the following gear is for you.

For a more in-depth look at our gear and tactics, a detailed packing list, and a photo gallery from our trip, log on to www.adventurecycling.org/features/ultralight.cfm.

How to carry your stuff:

The key to ultralight bike travel is to keep your gear-carriers simple. That means no trailers or panniers. Before anyone pops a blood vessel, know that I have nothing against panniers and trailers. I've happily used both many times. But you can eliminate anywhere between four to seventeen pounds by traveling without them. The key to doing this is to use light, compact gear and divide it between a backpack and a compression sack that you lash to a rear rack. Riders who prefer to ride without a backpack can explore other creative options for securing gear to their bike's frame tubes, seats, and handlebars. If you're riding on the road and can't do without panniers, consider a small, light set on the front of your bike only.

Old Man Mountain Sherpa Rack

(\$100, 888-439-6445, www.oldmanmountain.com)

The best choice, and in some cases the only choice for mountain bikes, Old Man Mountain racks have three vital attributes: strength, simplicity, and versatility. For inexplicable reasons, many mountain bikes lack eyelets for mounting racks. Old Man Mountain artfully overcomes this by making racks that mount to your rear axle and brake bosses. They even fit on bikes with disc brakes. If you lack rear brake bosses, OMM sells stout band-clamps for attaching their racks directly to seatstays. In other words, no matter

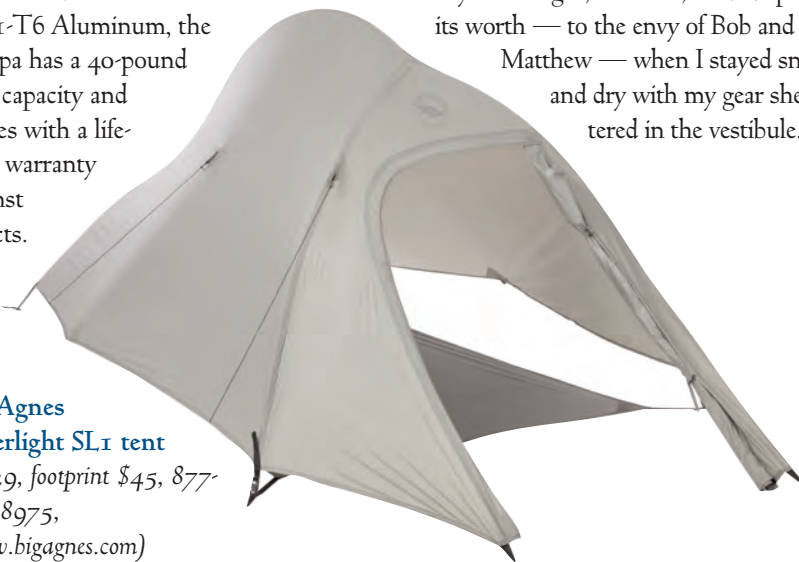


what kind of mountain bike you have, Old Man Mountain racks will probably fit. I chose their Sherpa rack because, at 11 pounds, 9 ounces, it's their lightest non-eyelet-requiring rear rack and it worked beautifully on my disc-brake equipped Santa Cruz Blur. Made of 6061-T6 Aluminum, the Sherpa has a 40-pound load capacity and comes with a lifetime warranty against defects.

Big Agnes Superlight SL1 tent

(\$229, footprint \$45, 877-554-8975, www.bigagnes.com)

We reviewed the 3-pound, 4-ounce Superlight SL2 two-person tent in the Nov/Dec 2005 issue, and praised it for being both storm-worthy and the lightest freestanding tent on the market. In an effort to go even lighter, I used the Superlight SL1 one-person tent in its fast-fly formation, which eschews the actual tent body and mates the tent's fly with its footprint (purchased separately). Lightweight aluminum poles hold the waterproof silicone-nylon fly up into a tent-like roof and the footprint clips together with the fly at each corner. After



staking out the corners and vestibule, you are left with a spacious, waterproof shelter that weighs only 2 pounds, 2 ounces (with 10 stakes). My only concern with this shelter was blood-thirsty bugs, but I found that the fly pulled close enough to the ground that most bugs didn't find their way inside. Of course, the bugs weren't bad on my trip. A head-net or Buz Off bandana from ExOfficio could provide extra protection if mosquitos were swarming.

My riding partners were using a

tarp and bivy sack respectively (the traditional shelters for ultralight travel), and after our first two hard days in the saddle I was jealous of their ability to get in bed more quickly than me (setting up the SL1 fast-fly takes about 4 minutes). On our rainy third night, however, the SL1 proved its worth — to the envy of Bob and Matthew — when I stayed snug and dry with my gear sheltered in the vestibule.

Marmot Atom sleeping bag

(\$249, 888-357-3262, www.marmot.com)

One of the lightest 40-degree sleeping bags you can buy, the Atom is the cousin to the 30-degree Helium we reviewed in the March issue. Marmot touts the Atom as a 16-ounce bag, though our sample weighed in at 18.5 ounces — still a 5-ounce savings over the Helium. Like the Helium, the Atom keeps its weight down by using ultra-high-loft 850-fill down, a Pertex Quantum Ripstop shell, and a half-length zipper (this same architecture is also used by a few smaller manufacturers to produce bags of similar weight). The 850-fill down is luxurious and an easy-access drawcord cinches the hood down snugly around your head on cold nights. I found the temperature rating to be accurate, though if you don long underwear and, say, a down vest, the bag could serve you well in conditions much colder. The Quantum fabric is outstanding — it's soft, down-proof, and supremely packable. For its weight, the fabric is surprisingly durable, though probably not as durable as bags that weigh twice as much. But, hey, the Atom can pack down to the size of a large grapefruit, which is worth a lot when

you're traveling svelte.

Patagonia Spraymaster jacket and pant (jacket \$249, pant \$190, 800-638-6464, www.patagonia.com)

The Spraymaster jacket and pant are perhaps the premier lightweight, waterproof combo for cycling. Not only are they feathery (10.8 ounces for the jacket, 8 ounces for the pant), but they are breathable during exertion and, here's the kicker, super soft and stretchy. They are more supple and comfortable than any waterproof pieces I've

worn. I'm not sure what kind of voodoo the mad scientists at Patagonia put into the Spraymaster, but they don't feel like technical, waterproof shells — they feel like a cozy shirt and sweatpants. Their softness translates to high compressibility, as well, making them an excellent choice when space is at a premium. The cut on both pant and jacket is trim — read: no flapping — and, in the spirit of ultralight gear, the feature-set is pared down to a few well-chosen essentials. The jacket has the ever-important drop-tail and is limited to two side pockets that double as air vents when left open, i.e., no separate pit-zips. The waist and hood feature drawcords for battening down in wet weather, and a small interior pocket doubles as a stuff sack. The hood won't fit over a helmet, though the thin fabric fits easily under one. I prefer velcro cuffs, but the Spraymaster's elastic ones work well.

The pants feature full-length waterproof side zippers, a drawcord waist, one internal back zipper pocket, and smooth, ripstop nylon fabric in the crotch/seat and inside lower legs for greater durability and easy glide on bike seats, etc. Their contoured cut, articulated knees, and full-length, two-way side-zips (for easy venting) make them excellent, lightweight cycling pants. I haven't ridden with them



yet in extended, driving rain, but I did wear them in my fairly powerful shower for 15 minutes and they both kept me

completely dry. You can actually find lighter waterproof jackets (Patagonia and Marmot both make them in the 6-ounce range), but they won't be as comfortable or breathable. You can also find waterproof jackets with more bombproof

durability, but they'll be much heavier. In my eyes, the Spraymaster strikes the perfect balance.

Marmot Silkweight Crew LS (\$32, 888-357-3262, www.marmot.com)

Marmot makes a range of Silkweight base layers, from short-sleeve T-shirts to long-underwear bottoms. I used the Crew LS, a basic long-sleeve top, on my trip and was extremely impressed by two things: its durability and its anti-odor properties. Like most gauzy, synthetic base layers, Marmot Silkweight is light (my shirt weighed 5.25 ounces, the only product in this test to come in under its claimed weight, which was 6 ounces), wicks sweat beautifully, and dries in minutes. Unlike many light base-layers, it's incredibly durable — I bushwacked for an hour through thick tangles of alder without a single mark or run. Taking it to unprecedented levels of base-layer greatness is Marmot's BacteriaStat technology which imbeds anti-microbial silver polymers into the fabric. Most synthetic base-layers get odiferous fast, but I wore my top for three straight sweaty days, including sleeping, and it never stunk. Not even a tiny bit. I'm not kidding. My wife confirmed this, making her as big a fan of Marmot Silkweight as I am.

Western Mountaineering Flash Vest (\$125, 408-287-8944, www.westernmountaineering.com)

Western Mountaineering is a small California-based company known to gear cognoscenti as true artisans of down and makers of some of the lightest down camping gear available. Their latest creation is the Flash Vest, a shockingly light 850-fill goose down vest that weighs a scant 4.1 ounces (claimed weight: 3.5 ounces). It makes a perfect insulating layer for camp on cool nights. It also worked beautifully when I wore it in my sleeping bag on a particularly cold night. Being the lightest down vest the world has ever seen, it does come with some compromises. There are no pockets, the fabric is very lightweight (don't wear it bushwacking through bramble), and there is no collar. But, hey, it's 4.1 ounces. For the weight, it's the finest insulating layer available for bicycle travel. The Flash Vest, like all Western Mountaineering products, is made in the United States and comes with a lifetime warranty against defects.



Vargo Titanium Jet-ti Stove (\$65, 877-932-8546, www.vargooutdoors.com)

For trips of two weeks or less, canister stoves are a much lighter option than traditional liquid-fuel stoves. One of the lightest available is the Vargo Jet-ti, a 2.9 ounce marvel of titanium and brass (claimed weight: 2.7 ounces) that is exquisitely simple and durable. Like all canister stoves, the Jet-ti screws directly

onto a standard butane fuel canister (available at any outdoor store), which then becomes the stove's base. This can make for a top-heavy setup if you're boiling a large pot of water, but is not a problem for the careful cook. Ignition couldn't be simpler: just twist open the fuel valve and light the burner. The fuel valve itself features a solid, flip-out handle that easily adjusts the flame from simmer to Apollo-rocket blow-torch. No joke, this stove really cooks. Best of all, the titanium pot supports swivel together, the fuel-valve-handle neatly folds in, and the Jet-ti packs up small enough to easily fit in a coffee cup. Its biggest drawback is that butane fuel canisters are not reusable, though they can be recycled. This quibble aside, the Vargo, and other stoves like it, are superlative lightweight options.



little weight burden. The Ion is also waterproof, has an adjustable head angle, and comes with a 3-year warranty.

Bits:

KlearWater water treatment (\$13, 858-273-2446, www.klearwater.com)

Who needs a water filter when you can drop a little KlearWater chlorine dioxide (also frequently used for municipal water treatment) in your water, wait 15 minutes, and, kazow!, all bacteria, viruses, and any other little buggers that can wreak havoc in your intestines are gone. I noticed no chemical flavoring whatsoever. If sediment is a problem, strain water through a bandana first. KlearWater also works well as an antiseptic wash on cuts and scrapes. One 2.5-ounce bottle can treat 32 liters, or 1,000 ounces of water.

Granite Gear compression and stuff sacks (various prices, 218-834-6157, www.granitegear.com)


Matthew Lee used Granite Gear's Drylite Rock Solid waterproof compression sack on our trip, the very same sack he used to carry his gear in the Great Divide Race. The sizes medium and large, which weigh only 4 and 5 ounces respectively, lash perfectly to a rear rack. For

internal storage, Granite Gear's siliconized nylon stuff and compression sacks are waterproof and featherweight.

Kelty Triptease Lightline (\$15, 800-423-2320, www.kelty.com)

If you're traveling in bear country, or anywhere pesky critters like to chew your food and gear, you'll want a food-hanging line. Kelty Lightline weighs only an ounce for fifty feet of strong (188-pound breaking strength), reflective line that held our food and pots without a hitch, or with a hitch, depending on how you look at it.

Exped AirMat 7.5 (\$39, 888-467-4327, www.orgear.com)

As reviewed in our Jan/Feb issue, the AirMat 7.5 is an incredibly comfortable, full-length, 3-inch thick sleeping pad that weighs only 19 ounces. It's durable and packs down to the size of Nalgene bottle. A summer mat only, it contains no insulation — below 45-degrees or so you'll want a different pad. While you can find lighter pads, if you're like me, a comfortable night's sleep isn't worth any sacrifice. For light weight and comfort in warm weather, the AirMat can't be beat. 

Aaron Teasdale rode mountain ridgelines for four days with a base gear weight of fifteen pounds. To see more gear reviews, packing lists, and a photo gallery from the trip, go to www.adventurecycling.org/features/ultralight.cfm



Black Diamond Ion headlamp (\$19.95, 801-278-5552, www.bdel.com)

This is the lightest headlamp we are aware of in the known headlamp universe. With battery, it weighs 1 ounce. Yup, 1 ounce. That's a seriously light headlamp.

Of course, at this weight, it's not the brightest headlamp. If you want a bright headlamp that you can mount on your handlebars and safely ride with at night, look at the PrincetonTec Eos (reviewed in the July, 2005 issue). The Ion, though, with its 2 LEDs, is plenty bright for use around camp and, if that's all you need a headlamp for, is the lightest choice out there. One of the ways it achieves this is with a small, 6-volt battery that Black Diamond says will last for 15 hours of use. While this isn't as convenient as AA or AAA batteries, the batteries are readily available and carrying a spare is certainly

