

traveling with a bicycle

by Dan D'Ambrosio

Over the past four years, my wife and I have taken two-week tours in Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Ireland. We have ridden different bikes on every one, bikes provided to us by the tour companies that arranged our tours, leaving behind the bikes we ride nearly every weekend in good weather when we're at home in Connecticut — the bikes we know and love.

Why, you ask? Why take your chances with an unknown bike on the most important two weeks of the year when you could be on your own trusty steed? Simple. It's because we don't want to deal with the hassle of taking our bikes on an international flight. And when we're wheeling through the airport in Shannon, or Amsterdam, or Lisbon, or Rome with just our one bag each, all of our bike clothes, regular clothes, and even bike helmets inside, it certainly feels like the right thing to do.

But, later, when I'm stretched uncom-

fortably over the frame of a Cannondale flat-bar touring bike with a top bar that's too long for me and front suspension I don't want — or I'm sitting up and begging on an around-town bike the Dutch consider to be the ultimate touring machine but which I would reserve for trips to the grocery store — I begin to second guess our method.

So just how bad is it to take your bike overseas? Well, never having done it, I can't speak from experience as many of you no doubt can, and we hope we hear from you on the subject. In the meantime, I can report on what I've learned, which is that it can be quite expensive. Delta Airlines, which recently merged with Northwest Airlines, will charge you \$300 each way on an international flight. That's \$600 for the roundtrip!

Continental Airlines also charges \$300 one-way if your boxed bike measures between 81 and 115 "linear" inches, which

is calculated by adding the length plus the width plus the depth of the box. If, however, your box measures between 63 and 80 linear inches, you will pay \$150 each way, half as much. And, if your boxed bike measures 62 linear inches or less, you could actually check it as a piece of luggage.

The only way you're going to meet that 62-inch standard is with a bike that breaks down with S&S couplings or something similar, such as a folding bike. The typical cardboard bike box measures about 93 linear inches — 32 inches high plus 52 inches long plus 9 inches wide.

Continental also imposes a 70-pound weight limit on bikes for international flights and will tack on an additional \$50 each way if your bike weighs more than 50 pounds. You'll find that 50 pounds is the typical weight threshold and 115 linear inches the typical size threshold on both international and domestic flights. That's before even worse things start happening

in terms of extra charges.

For most bikes packed in cardboard boxes, it should not be difficult to meet both size and weight thresholds. The linear measurement of a typical bike box is within the 115-inch limit as noted above, and most bikes are not going to push above 50 pounds if packed in a cardboard box. If you're using a hard plastic case to pack your bike, however, the 50-pound weight threshold could become much more problematic.

When I called airlines about charges for taking a bike along on international flights, the agent on the other end of the line often went scrambling for the rule book, which read like the fine print on an insurance policy. And sometimes I had to wonder if I could believe what I was being told.

At United Airlines, for example, I was informed that on domestic flights I would be charged \$175 one way as long as the boxed bike didn't weigh more than 50 pounds or exceed 115 linear inches in size — the typical thresholds I've discussed.

But I was also told by the United agent that on international flights, unlike domestic flights, my boxed bike would be considered one of my pieces of luggage as long as it weighed less than 50 pounds. I'm only allowed one piece of luggage on an international flight with United, so if I have the bike and a suitcase, I will be charged for the bike, but only \$50 as long as it's under that 50-pound threshold.

And what about size?

"We don't look into size," the United agent told me. "We have a different policy for going overseas than for domestic flights."

Really?! Hard to believe. And meanwhile, shipbikes.com, a very helpful website that offers shipping services for your bike along with the charges and policies of many airlines, shows a \$175-one-way fee for taking your bike along on domestic flights with United Airlines — identical to what I found — and a \$250-one-way charge for taking your bike on international flights. Oops, that's not what I was told.

You may be thinking at this point about shipping your bike to the trailhead overseas via UPS or Federal Express. Well, think again. I inquired about shipping my bike to Paris, because France is probably next on the agenda for my wife and me, and was told by UPS that it would cost \$311.05 one-way, plus duties and taxes, which the UPS agent couldn't quantify for me. I could take the boxed bike to a UPS

Store and drop it off, and it would only take about five days to get to the City of Light, which isn't bad. Again, that's \$622 for the round trip, plus those duty and tax charges. If you use a hard case, keep in mind that UPS will only insure your case if your bike is inside the hard case and they are both inside a cardboard box. They will, however, insure the bike only if it's shipped inside just your hard case. Crazy. Insurance is \$.90 per \$100.

Federal Express was about the same story, only more. It would cost \$384.90 to get my bike to Paris, although it would be a little faster — four business days instead of five. FedEx will insure both your bike and hard case, even if they're not both in a cardboard box. Insurance is \$.70 per \$100.

"It's very expensive to ship a bike overseas. You're better off bringing it as luggage," said Steve Thompson of Crate Works (crateworks.com), a New Hampshire-based company offering three sizes of cardboard or corrugated plastic bike boxes. "Also, I talked to somebody a while back who shipped his bike overseas and got held up by customs wanting a huge duty just to get it into the country."

I didn't discover anything that would convince me to abandon our current mode of operation on our overseas bike tours, which is leaving our own bikes behind, except for a folding bike that meets the size requirements for just another piece of baggage. And I haven't even talked about the hassle of dragging your bike through airports, putting it back together for the tour, and ditching your bike box after you're done.

When I was on staff at the Adventure Cycling Association, one of our enduring grievances, which we were powerless to do anything about, was the unfair treatment that cyclists received at the hands of the airlines. Skiers and golfers could saunter on board after paying little or nothing to bring along the tools of their trade — bagged skis or golf clubs — while we were faced with exorbitant fees to bring our bikes.

It seems like things have gotten better on the domestic front, although I don't speak from personal experience. But the agent at American Airlines told me over the phone that as long as my boxed bike was within the 115-inch mark in length, height, and width, and under 50 pounds, it would cost me just \$30 one-way to take my bike along on a domestic flight. If it weighed more than 50 pounds, however, the price would jump to \$100.

At Continental Airlines, I was told it wouldn't cost me anything to bring my bike along if it were under 50 pounds and within 62 inches in size. Again, that would require a folding bike of some sort. But even a regular bike in a regular box — under 50 pounds and 115 inches — would only cost me \$35 one-way checked in at the airport, or \$32 if I checked in online.

If, however, my bike weighed over 70 pounds, Continental would not accept it at all. If it weighed more than 50 pounds, I would be charged \$100.

The news remained good at JetBlue and Southwest Airlines. You'll pay just \$50 one-way to bring your bike along on a Southwest flight if the boxed bike is more than 62 inches in size. Under 62 inches, you don't pay anything. JetBlue exempts bikes from oversize and overweight fees and charges \$50 each way to bring them along.

If you're riding Amtrak instead of flying, it will cost you just \$10 one-way to bring your boxed bike along in the baggage car. But here's the hitch: Not all Amtrak routes offer baggage service, so check ahead of time. I asked about the New York-to-Denver route and was told that it did indeed have a baggage car. If you want to leave the driving to Greyhound, it will cost you \$20 one-way to bring along your boxed bike.

Fed Ex is a good option for domestic tours. I was told by the Fed Ex agent that it would cost \$121 to ship my bike via ground service to Denver from Milford, Connecticut, where I live. The UPS agent quoted me a price of \$131 for the same trip.

If you choose to ship your bike through a bike shop, keep in mind that they will box your bike for shipment for around \$50, and if you're not confident in your ability to put your bike back together again at the other end — some disassembly is required to fit it in the bike box — that could cost you another \$50 at another bike shop.

Several entrepreneurs have established businesses to help you travel with your bike. The most recent is BikeFlights, which was launched just last year by Bill Alcorn. An avid cyclist, Alcorn has been in the travel business for a decade. Over the years, he has helped many friends who were racers ship their bikes and get airline tickets, and it struck him he could do the same for any cyclist.

"You don't have to be a pro racer to enjoy uncomplicated travel with a bike," said Alcorn. "You can focus on enjoy-

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ing your trip, not being burdened with hassles."

BikeFlights, based in State College, Pennsylvania, offers airline tickets, bicycle shipping, and travel insurance in one package at bikeflights.com. Alcorn says his business is growing steadily.

"We're ahead of projection, which is good in a down economy," he said. "When we first started, we were helping one or two cyclists a week, now we're in the five-to-10 a day range. We're now starting to get into meaningful numbers."

Bob Lickton at shipbikes.com has been doing something similar for the past seven years out of Oak Park, Illinois. Lickton offers a unique triangular shipping box for bikes called the Air Caddy, which you can see at aircaddy.com. The box, which Lickton says you can use to ship your bike anywhere in the U.S. for between \$65 and \$85 via Fed Ex, requires you only to remove the front wheel, lower the seat, and rotate the handlebars before slipping your bike into the box. The wheel also goes in, of course. The Air Caddy box costs \$100 plus \$20 for shipping to your home.

You'll find another shipping service at sportsexpress.com. It will pick your bike up at your house, deliver it to the trailhead, and then reverse the process after your tour is over. That service would cost me \$354 for the round trip from my home in Milford to my tour destination in Denver. Forget about going overseas, however. We're talking \$1,276 to get my bike to France and back! This may be worth it to you as sportsexpress.com offers to rent you an equivalent bike or even buy you one if they don't deliver on time. They also offer a \$10 savings to Adventure Cycling members.

It appears to me that the best option, especially for international travel, is to set yourself up with a bike that folds down to meet that 62-inch size requirement so that it's just another bag to the airlines. To be honest, my wife and I will probably be riding whatever bikes the tour company in France provides. Traveling light is worth a little suffering to us.

In a future article, we'll cover folding bikes and S&S couplers as options to this persistent dilemma. **AC**

Dan D'Ambrosio is still trying to figure out a better way to travel with a bike. We'll let you know if he comes up with any good news.

Open Road Gallery

LATE START, STRONG FINISH

by Sarah Raz Photograph by Greg Siple



SISTERS RENEE ROCHELEAN (LEFT) AND MAYA HONEYMAN (RIGHT) DECIDED AS CHILDREN that one day they'd ride across America together. Their cycling dream percolated on the backburner for better than 20 years until 2005, when Maya was diagnosed with uterine cancer and was suddenly forced to re-prioritize in a way that few of us ever will. After she recovered from surgery, Maya and her sister told their family that 2009 would be their year to ride the Northern Tier. The sisters didn't train at all and did only one bike overnight with their gear ahead of time. After their first full day, Maya sent home almost 25 pounds of gear.

The sisters live in sun-drenched Arcata, California, and had never been to the East Coast. Their August start was late for a cross-country trip, and they didn't finish up until December. As a consequence, they found themselves riding in winter conditions during the final weeks of the ride. The freezing temperatures complicated their travel and made it especially difficult to sleep soundly — however, Renee and Maya were determined. "Despite the cold and achy joints, we were both too stubborn and strong willed to give up," they relate. And as they pedaled through the unfamiliar cold, they'd remind one another often of their encounter with a family of cyclists traveling with four children. "If they could do this with a seven-year-old," says Maya, "then we sure as heck were going to do it too!"

Loved ones warned the sisters of the dangers of traveling as women, but they say they were met with only kindness and compassion. After observing the goodwill generated by their bicycles and the open road, Maya marveled, "how quickly strangers can become friends!"

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