

A History of Touring Bicycles

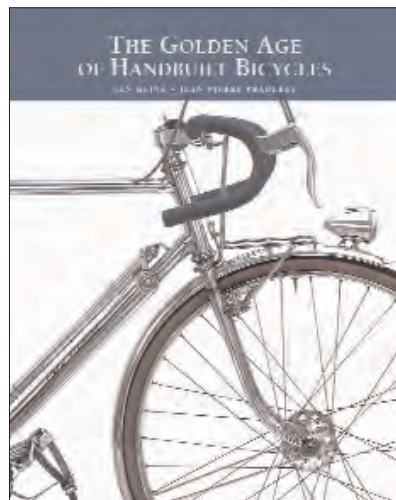
By Jan Heine • Photos by Jean-Pierre Pradères

Bicycle touring is a very individual experience, yet we all value similar things in our bicycles: safety, reliability, comfort, and the hard-to-define quality “fun to ride.” Knowing how these factors have been addressed throughout the history of touring bicycles can empower you to improve your bike or choose the best touring bike for your needs. Of course, history can be interesting in itself.

Early bicycle touring

Almost as soon as bicycles were invented, intrepid cyclists used the new machines to explore distant places. By the end of the nineteenth century, bicycles had evolved into the shape we recognize today, with two wheels of the same size, a “diamond” frame, and a chain drive to the rear wheel. For racing on flat terrain, the best of these machines epitomized modern technology, with lightweight butted tubes and quality components. However, bicycle tourists quickly found that these racing bikes, with a single speed and inef-

fective brakes, were inadequate for their style of riding. Especially in the mountains, bicycle tourists needed multiple gears to ride uphill and reliable, powerful brakes for the descents. The early 1900s saw experimentation with gear-changing



mechanisms and brakes, as well as racks and fenders. After many dead ends, such

as the “Bi-Chain” (two drivetrains engaged alternatively to provide two gears) or the “Retro-Direct” (chain running in a figure-8 over two freewheels so that backpedaling drove the bike forward in a different gear), derailleurs finally became accepted in France in the 1920s. British cyclists, on the other hand, favored internally geared hubs.

Bicycle touring boom in Europe

Bicycle touring became popular in many European countries with the introduction of mandatory 40-hour workweeks and paid vacations for every employee. In their newfound spare time, many workers and employees wanted to leave their congested, polluted cities to explore the country and enjoy nature. Train tickets were expensive, and cars were not even a dream yet for the masses, so tens of thousands took up cycling. A golden age of bicycle touring had begun.

In contrast, bicycle touring remained a “niche” activity in the United States for



This René Herse “coupler” bike was ordered by a member of the International Bicycle Touring Society in 1971. It features quick releases not only for the frame, but also the stem. Shift levers under the seat simplify the disassembly procedure, which takes less than 2 minutes.

a variety of reasons, including a lack of spare time and the more widespread availability of automobiles. However, some Americans did travel by bike. Many of these early American bicycle tourists were associated with the youth hostel movement. As time went on, American bicycle tourists ventured further. In the 1950s, Dr. Clifford Graves founded the International Bicycle Touring Society and led tours in Europe and the United States. Because American makers offered few bikes suitable for touring, many experienced American bicycle tourists looked to Europe for equipment. High-end touring bikes were made both in France and Britain, and bicycles from both countries were imported into the United States. Each of these two countries had developed a very different approach to touring bicycles.

The “British Framebuilder” approach

In addition to racing bikes, British framebuilders made sport-touring and touring bikes. These racing-inspired designs

were made suitable for touring through the addition of aftermarket racks, and sometimes also fenders and lights. Often they were equipped with lower gears. While British “time-trial” bikes had steep angles and ultra-short wheelbases, touring bikes used long wheelbases and “relaxed” geometries suitable for rough roads. Beyond these changes, they differed little from typical racing bikes of the era.

The advantage of this approach lies in its versatility. You can add or remove fenders, carry loads on the front or the rear, add lights, and change gear ratios and tire sizes, depending on the terrain, weather, and type of riding. As components evolve, you can upgrade your bike with little difficulty. The same bike can be used for many purposes — one maker even offered a model with multi-position rear dropouts that allowed conversion of a sport-touring bike to a track bike!

Many makers made beautiful frames, with elegant lugs and often unorthodox

frame configurations in an attempt to distinguish their bicycles from the competition. Famous examples include Hetchins’ curved chainstays, the Thanet Silverlight with its bottom bracket cradled above the downtube/seattube junction, and the Flying Gate with a vertical seat tube to achieve a shorter wheelbase.

The “French Constructeur” approach

Starting in the 1930s, small French “constructeurs” designed high-end cyclo-touring bikes as complete machines with integrated parts, rather than as racing-inspired frames and components retro-fitted with aftermarket accessories. Frame geometries were developed specifically for touring at all speeds on a variety of surfaces, rather than adapted from racing designs. Where off-the-shelf components were not satisfactory, these builders made their own stems, racks, front derailleurs, brakes, and even cranks. Maintenance-free cartridge bearings were used in hubs and bottom brackets as early as the 1930s.

These bicycles pioneered aluminum cranks, cantilever brakes, triple chain-rings, lightweight clincher tires, cassette hubs, low-rider racks, braze-ons for all components, and many other features not found on other bikes for decades. The result of this integrated approach: touring bikes that were lighter, more reliable, and more elegant than those made from a frame with aftermarket accessories. For example, the 1936 Reyhand weighed about 24 pounds and was equipped with powerful “roller-cam” brakes, easy-shifting derailleurs, and a stiff rack made from steel tubing. This bike could do almost every type of “event” riding without having to change a single component.

While few could afford the bikes made by these “constructeurs,” many of the features, especially the integrated racks, fenders, and lights, trickled down to mass-produced French touring bikes, which were completely equipped, reasonably light, and fun to ride.

In 1940s France, a top-of-the-line custom bicycle was a status symbol comparable to a sports car today. At the time, racing bikes were relatively crude, so the fully integrated touring bikes captured cyclists’ imagination. Features like chain-rests that allowed removing the rear wheel without touching the chain, light-



“Camping” bikes like this 1948 René Herse were equipped with special geometries, sturdy racks made from steel tubing, as well as integrated lights and fenders. A rear drum brake allows descending unpaved mountain passes, which requires constant braking, without overheating the rim.

ing systems with wires concealed inside the frame, and internal routing of brake and derailleur cables were popular. Inspired by a discerning public and an enthusiastic cycling press focused on touring bikes, many “constructeurs” flourished in the 1940s. Alex Singer won “technical trials” with a bike that weighed only 17.5 pounds yet was completely equipped with racks, fenders, lights, even a pump, and fat 35 millimeter tires as required by the rules. This bike was not for show only: It had to survive more than

400 kilometers of punishing roads without a single defect to win this reliability event. Another famous maker was René Herse. Herse had worked on prototype aircraft in the 1930s and used his aircraft experience to make lightweight, innovative cranks, stems, brakes, bottom brackets, and front derailleurs. To this day, many consider his bikes the best ever made. Nicola Barra’s superlight bikes were equipped with frames and racks brazed from aluminum tubing. Camille Daudon focused on elegance with refinements such as a tool kit hidden inside the steerer tube.

Unfortunately, this golden age did not last long. By 1952, affordable motorized transportation – first mopeds and then small cars – replaced bicycles in the European public’s dreams. Many builders closed their shops. The few remaining builders continued to build their amazing bikes for true enthusiasts, including some American riders. Through contacts with the French youth hostel movement, Dr. Clifford Graves had discovered the bikes of René Herse. He admired the maintenance-free hubs, bottom brackets, and other quality features, which allowed him to enjoy riding in remote locations without having to fear breakdowns. Helped by a very favorable exchange rate that made these bicycles relatively affordable for Americans, a number of International



Inspired by the technical trials, this 1947 Alex Singer “light randonneur” bike features a superlight front derailleur, cam-actuated brakes, a tubular aluminum rear rack and many other special parts.

Bicycle Touring Society members ordered custom touring bikes from René Herse and Alex Singer.

Bikecentennial: The birth of “modern” American bicycle touring

After remaining a “niche” activity for decades, bicycle touring was discovered in the United States in 1976. In that year, more than 4,000 cyclists crossed the United States as part of the Bikecentennial.

Most of these riders rode “ten-speeds” or other bicycles not especially suitable for loaded touring. This is reflected in the high accident rates of the participants who carried their own gear – up to three times as high as that of sag-supported cyclists riding unloaded bicycles over the same route. With flexible racks, poor weight distribution, and inadequate brakes, many ten-speeds were difficult to handle with a load.

Bikecentennial was not just a one-time event. It created a lasting legacy by popularizing bicycle touring in the United States. Many new bicycle tourists wanted bikes more suitable for touring, and the bike industry was happy to oblige. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, almost all manufacturers sold “touring bikes” of varying quality, and many of the emerging American custom builders offered touring frames. Classic production bikes from that era include the Trek 520, the Specialized Sequoia, and the early Cannondales.

Most of these bikes used the “British Framebuilder” approach – both easier to make and easier to sell in a bicycle world where racing bikes dominated the headlines. Some companies offered more com-

plete bicycles, such as the late 1980s Cannondale T1000, which came equipped with racks and fenders and was almost ready to go touring without further modification.

Far outside the mainstream, small builders like Bilenky in Philadelphia, R.T. Jansen and Bill Vetter in Vermont, Sam Braxton in Montana, and Mariposa in Toronto took their inspiration from the “French Constructeur” machines import-

followed the 1976 Bikecentennial diminished when mountain bikes caught much of the limelight in the 1980s. More recently, the race victories of Lance Armstrong have focused the “road bike” market on racing bikes. Most big makers have dropped touring bikes from their lines. A few continue to offer them, knowing that there is steady demand for these machines. While any bicycle can be used for touring, experience has shown that it



Early cyclotouring bikes used many different gear changing mechanisms. This 1910 “La Gauloise” has two chains. Either chain can be engaged, giving two gears. Two additional gears are obtained by placing the chain by hand on the second chainring/sprocket combination on each side.

ed by Dr. Clifford Graves and other bicycle touring pioneers. They crafted completely integrated bicycles equipped with everything required for loaded touring.

Touring bikes today

The focus on touring bicycles that

makes sense to spend a little more on a bike that will be reliable, safe, and fun to ride. Here are some of the choices available to bicycle tourists today.

Inexpensive (\$700-1,500)

At the lower end of the market, tour-

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By the mid-1930s, modern touring bikes had evolved. This 1936 Reyhand is an "event" bike that weighs 24 lbs. fully equipped.

ing bikes offer better value than ever. Today, even inexpensive bikes shift well, have frames rigid enough to carry a load, and are suitable for touring. Compared to bikes costing twice as much, the main trade-off is durability. Choices at the lower end of the market include the Surly Long Haul Trucker (\$420, frame only), Bianchi

Volpe (\$900), the Fuji Touring (\$900), the Jamis Aurora (\$825), the Novara Randonnee (\$950), the Trek 520 (\$1,100) and the Cannondale T800 (\$1,300). Most of these bikes require the addition of racks and other "accessories" to turn them into useful touring bikes. Fortunately, the flexible and break-prone aluminum racks that

were popular in the 1970s and 1980s finally are giving way to stronger, stiffer racks made from tubular steel similar to those of the old French touring bikes.

Mid-range (\$1,500-4,000)

In the middle range of the market, several makers, such as Bruce Gordon, Co-Motion, Heron, Rivendell, and Waterford, offer various frames that can be built into good touring machines. Once the cost of components and assembly are factored in, most of these cost from \$2,500 upward. These bicycles can be very competent touring bikes, but, because they were built using the "British Framebuilder" approach, the accessories necessary or desirable for bicycle touring can be difficult to integrate into a bicycle that was not designed specifically for these parts. Interesting alternatives are the production touring bikes with integrated racks and fenders made by Gilles Berthoud or the Heron "Randonneur", which would make a good bike for events or sag-supported tours.

Top end (\$4,000 upward)

The best touring bikes today take their inspiration from the French constructors. As fully integrated bikes, they match the sleek look of modern racing bikes.

Today, racing bikes have become fully integrated machines. Unlike in the past, when each brand of derailleurs required a specific matching derailleur hanger, today's components are standardized to a large

Touring Bikes for Your Consideration

All prices and specifications may vary to some degree. Please check with the manufacturers before making any decisions.

Bianchi offers the Volpe (\$899), which comes with a wide, low gear range and 32C tires. www.bianchiusa.com, (510) 264-1001.

Breezer Bikes offers the Liberty (\$1,099) and Greenway (\$799), both with fenders, generator light, reflective tires, and rear rack. www.breezerbikes.com, (415) 339-8917.

Bilenky Cycle Works offers the Midlands, a traditional steel touring bike, in a variety of configurations starting at \$2,150. www.bilenky.com, (800) 213-6388.

Bruce Gordon offers the hand-built Deore XT-Rock N' Road (\$2,550 or \$2,820 with racks) and the Deore LX BLT, which is factory-made in California (\$1,729 or \$1,999 with racks). www.bgcycles.com, (707) 762-5601.

Burley offers the Hudson (\$2,199) and Vagabon (\$1,599) touring bikes with hand-built wheels and custom rear racks. Also the Duet Tandem (\$2,199) and the Canto Recumbent (\$1,099). www.burley.com, (866) 248-5634.

Cannondale offers the T2000 (\$1,499) and the T800 (\$1,199). www.cannondale.com, (800) 245-3872.

Co-Motion Cycles offers the Nor'Wester (\$2,975 to \$3,360), a light tourer; the around-the-worlder Americano (\$3,150 to \$3,325), and the beefy, upright Mazama (\$2,895). www.co-motion.com, (541) 342-4583.

Fuji Bicycles offers the traditional steel Touring model (\$910). www.fujibikes.com, (215) 824-3854.

Gilles Berthoud offers highly customizable steel touring bikes from France (\$4,800 and up). www.gillesberthoud.fr, (818) 248-1814.

Gunnar Bikes offers the 26-inch Rock Tour (\$850, additional \$275 for a Vicious Rigid Fork). www.gunnarbikes.com, (262) 534-4190.

Heron Bicycles offers the Wayfarer (\$1,300) and Touring (\$1,045) frames, which they describe as perfect for "true, loaded touring." www.heronbicycles.com, (815) 223-1776.

Independent Fabrication offers the Independence frameset (\$1,750) for self-supported, long-distance touring. Plenty of options available. www.ifbikes.com, (617) 666-3609.

degree. And unlike past frames that relied on clamps to attach most components, today's racing frames are equipped with braze-ons for derailleurs and most other components. The result: elegant, lightweight bicycles that most cyclists covet.

This full integration is easy to achieve on racing bikes because each component (derailleurs, brakes, cranks, etc.) has only one attachment point. On touring bikes, standardizing the accessories is impossible because racks and fenders require multiple attachment points that vary with the geometry and size of the frame. The only way to integrate these parts is to make racks specifically for each frame and to make the frame specifically for the type of fenders it will wear. However, custom-made racks and frames customized for fenders are labor-intensive to make and thus expensive. Instead, most racks and fender hardware incorporate sliders and other pieces that allow adjustment for many different frame sizes and configurations.

As a result, most fully equipped touring bikes have brackets, sliders, and clamps. Racks sit high above the wheels or tilt one way or the other. Many bicycle tourists forgo useful parts, such as fenders and lights, because they are a hassle to mount on their bikes. Not only do the resulting bikes lack the elegance of racing bikes, but each slider or clamp is a weak point leading



The French “constructeur” bikes have not changed much in recent decades. The 1985 reinforced frame and sturdy low-rider racks of this 1985 Alex Singer allow riding no-hands with more than 50 lbs. of luggage.

to rattles, flex, or even premature breakage.

The “French Constructeur” approach treats every component as part of the original design instead of an aftermarket add-on. Instead of being equipped with “a full set of

braze-ons” and leaving it to the rider to figure out how to attach racks, fenders, and lights, their frames have only the braze-ons required, perfectly placed, with custom-fitted “accessories” that really are an integral

Jamis Bicycles offers the Nova (\$1,375) and the Aurora (\$825). www.jamisbikes.com, (201) 768-9050.

Kona offers the Sutra (\$1,499), a steel tourer with mechanical disc brakes. www.kona-world.com.

Litespeed offers the titanium Blue Ridge, designed specifically for touring (\$4,299). www.litespeed.com, (800) 743-3796.

Mariposa makes the custom steel Petite and Randonneur (\$1,700 frame and fork; \$4,500 average for complete bike) in Toronto with choice of fenders, lights, and custom racks. www.mariposabicycles.com, (416) 423-0456.

Peter Weigle makes custom steel touring and randonneur bikes. Email: bikesjpweigle@sbc-global.net, (860) 434-0700.

REI offers the Novara Safari, a 26-inch-wheel tourer (\$849) and the Randonnee (\$949). www.rei.com, (800) 426-4840.

Rivendell Bicycle Works offers custom, hand-built touring frames (\$2,495 to \$2,550; or complete bikes for \$3,400 to \$4,000). They also offer the Atlantis frame (\$1,400; or around \$2,700 for a complete bike). www.rivendellbicycles.com, (925) 933-7304.

Rodriguez Bicycles offers the men's Adventure (\$1,699), the woman's Stellar (\$1,099-\$1,599), and the S&S-equipped W2 (\$2,799), co-designed by Willie Weir. www.rod-cycle.com, (206) 527-4822.

Robert Beckman Designs offers three models: the Odyssey 700, the Expedition 26, and the Great Divide Tour. Each is \$1,800 (frame and fork), \$2,900 (complete bike), and \$3,500 (with custom racks). www.coinet.com/~beckman, (541) 388-5146.

Santana offers a wide array of tandems suitable for touring (starting at \$2,995). www.santanatandem.com, (800) 334-6136.

Seven Cycles offers three touring bikes – the titanium Vacanza (\$4,095 to \$7,595), the Vacanza Steel (\$2,595 to \$5,095), and the titanium Muse, (\$3,195 to \$5,995). www.seven-cycles.com, (617) 923-7774.

Specialized offers the light-touring Sequoia in three aluminum versions (\$770; \$1,200; \$2,200). www.specialized.com, (877) 808-8154.

Spectrum offers custom, hand-made steel and titanium touring bikes and tandems (average price \$2,400). www.spectrum-cycles.com, (610) 398-1986.

Surly offers the Long-Haul Trucker frame and fork (\$420), Karate Monkey frame and fork (\$460), and the Cross-Check (\$410; \$930 for full bike). www.surlybikes.com, (877) 743-3191.

Terry Precision Cycling offers a woman-specific, aluminum touring bike, the Madeleine (\$1,200). www.terrybicycles.com, (800) 289-8379.

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part of the bike. Racks that are custom-made for each frame have no sliders or brackets to flex or break. They are positioned to optimize the weight distribution for each bicycle. Aluminum or stainless steel fenders mounted without clamps and sliders don't break, rattle, or rub on the tires. They allow bicycle tourists to continue riding in comfort even during an afternoon thunderstorm or on a rainy day. Integrated, generator-powered lights always are available in case the going is slower than anticipated or a campground full of RVs with noisy generators makes it tempting to continue to the next town. While many modern cyclists, influenced by sleek racing bikes, scoff at fenders and lights, these components greatly add to the independence that makes bicycle touring so appealing. (Think of a modern sports car – nobody considers it less sporty because it has lights and fenders!)

Another benefit of the integrated approach is lighter weight. Each screw, clamp, and slider adds up. The integrated bicycles from the “constructeurs” often weigh up to 5 pounds less than similarly equipped bikes built with the “British Framebuilder” approach.

While most “constructeur” bikes are entirely custom-built for their owners, they fall into several general categories according to their purposes. For credit-card or sag-supported tourists, as well as

Frames made from oversize aluminum tubing were popular from the 1930s onward. This 1950 Barra “event bike” weighs only 21 lbs., completely equipped with racks, fenders, and lights.



event riders, light randonneur bikes are a perfect choice. Handlebar bags allow carrying the necessities for the day. With appropriate frame geometries and solid mounting, they do not affect the handling of the bike. A small rear rack can accept additional panniers for a change of clothes.

For loaded touring, camping bikes with their sturdy racks, carefully developed frame geometries, and wide tires offer safety and stability that have to be

experienced to be believed. Riding no-hands at moderate speeds with 50 pounds of luggage is no problem on the best of these machines.

The only disadvantage of the “constructeur” bicycles is their price. Completely handmade from the best materials and components, most of these bicycles cost \$5,000 and up. However, compared to high-end racing bikes costing as much or more, these machines offer a superior level of craftsmanship, real-world performance, and reliability.

Today, only a few makers are building fully integrated touring bikes. In North America, Peter Weigle specializes in light randonneur bikes with modern components and timeless performance. Mariposa in Toronto has been making integrated bicycles for many years. A number of other builders, including Robert Beckman Designs, Bruce Gordon, and Spectrum, also offer bikes using an integrated approach. The old French constructeur Cycles Alex Singer still turns out amazing bicycles the same way they have for more than fifty years.

Alternative designs

Recumbents have been popular for bicycle touring since the 1930s. Although they have not broken into the mainstream, many avid bicycle tourists enjoy these designs. Trailers (BOB, Burley, Chariot, and others) allow those who do

Trek offers the venerable 520 (\$1,240), a solid performer proven over many years. www.trekbikes.com, (920) 478-2191.

Vanilla Bicycles offers custom touring frames (\$1,850, frame only) from Portland, OR. www.vanillabicycles.com, (971) 570-3244.

Vicious offers the steel Casual Agent (\$1,625 frame and fork; around \$3,000 complete) with available disc brake-compatible rear rack (\$150). www.viciouscycles.com, (845) 883-4303.

Waterford Cycles offers the Adventure Cycle 1900 (\$1,600) and T-14 (\$1,299). The T-14 is available for both 1" and 1-1/8" steerer tubes. www.waterfordbikes.com, (262) 534-4190.

Recumbents

Bender Custom Bicycles offers the carbon fiber Radian and Bolero (\$3,749 to \$4,149). www.benderbikes.com, (208) 342-3200.

BikeFix offers the Street Machine (£1,430) designed for self-supported touring. www.bikefix.co.uk, +44 (0) 20 7405 1218.

Easy Racers offers the Tour Easy in two models: Speed & Sport and Expedition (both \$1,995). www.easyracers.com, (831) 722-9797.

Lightning Cycle Dynamics offers the P-38 (\$1,900 frameset; \$2,800 and up for full bike). www.lightningbikes.com, (805) 736-0700.

Longbikes offers the Eliminator (\$2,600 and up) and Slipstream (\$2,500 and up). www.tandembike.com, (303) 986-9300.

Rans offers the long-wheel-base Stratus and the short-wheel-base VReX (\$1,595). www.recumbent.com/rans.html, (714) 633-3663.

WizWheelz offer the TerraTrike recumbent tricycle in a variety of models (\$1,299 to \$4,499) including a tandem. www.wizwheelz.com, (269) 945-5581.

Folding Bikes

Airnimal Designs offers the 24-inch, rear-suspension Airnimal (\$2,100 and up) in multiple touring configurations. www.airnimal.com.

Bike Friday offers a variety of folding bikes, including the New World Tourist (from \$1,050-\$2,600) and the Air Glide (\$2,160-\$3,865). www.bikefriday.com, (800) 777-0258.


Birdy offers the Birdy Rohloff (£1,950) with a Rohloff hub, and the Birdy Touring (£1,080). www.foldingbikes.co.uk/birdy.htm, +44 (0) 1225 442442.

Brompton offers the P-type folding bike series (\$885 to \$2,105). www.bromptonbicycle.co.uk, +44 (0) 208 232 8484.

Moulton offers a wide variety of folding bikes (\$885 to \$6,350). www.alexmoulton.co.uk, +44 (0) 122 586 5895.

not own a touring bike to use almost any bicycle for touring and help to keep bicycle touring affordable.

The future of touring bikes

The future of touring bikes is bright. While the most exciting developments are occurring outside the mainstream of the bicycle industry, the equipment available to touring cyclists is better than ever. The “constructeur” bicycles have especially taken the craftsmanship and performance of custom bicycles to a level previously unknown in this country. With the increasing popularity of fully integrated touring bikes, new makers are emerging and established builders are switching to making top-end machines. Hopefully, this fully integrated approach can trickle down to the mass-produced touring bikes at the lower end of the market. 

Jan Heine has been a bicycle tourist for more than twenty years. Memorable tours have included the Baltic coast of East Germany just months after the Iron Curtain fell, getting married on a bicycle tour of Colorado and Utah, a trip through the Venezuelan



Modern “randonneur” bikes, such as this Peter Weigle, combine the elegance and speed of racing bikes with the versatility of racks, fenders and lights.

Andes, and two rides in the oldest long-distance event of the world, Paris-Brest-Paris.

Jan edits Vintage Bicycle Quarterly, a magazine that focuses on the history of cyclotouring as well as modern developments in the world of touring and randonneur bikes. Together with Jean-Pierre Pradères, he recently published The Golden Age of

Handbuilt Bicycles, a full-color, large-format book that explores the history of the French “constructeurs” of cyclotouring bicycles. Most of the photos in this article were taken from this book. For more information on Vintage Bicycle Quarterly or The Golden Age of Handbuilt Bicycles, check out www.vintagebicyclepress.com.

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