

# How to Buy a Touring Bike

Picking the perfect touring bike for you shouldn't keep you up at night



Your decision has been made. The Transamerica Bicycle Route can't live another year without you, and you need a new touring bike.

Your objective in buying a new touring bike is to drastically reduce the time spent thinking about it (and its limitations) when you're on your adventure. You want a bike that easily carries your load, has appropriate gearing for the steepest hills on your route, and fits your body dimensions like a well-worn pair of slippers.

These goals are also compatible with the way most of us use our bikes the other ninety percent of our lives: weekend rides carrying no more than a patch kit, slogging to work on a misty November morning, and, if the spirit moves you, training in a peloton with the really fast guys. (I point this out to ridicule the myth that a touring bike is "only" good for touring. As if those cutie carbon-fiber weekend bikes were somehow versatile!)

In 2005, you are the beneficiary of a competitive marketplace that has made buying decisions relatively easy. You can pick a value brand and get bang for the buck by buying Jamis or Fuji or go for style and heritage with Bianchi. You can decide on American tradition with Trek or aluminum innovation with Cannondale. Or you can go for high-end, superb craftsmanship by choosing Bruce Gordon, Independent Fabrication, Co-Motion, or a variety of other quality bicycle builders. The selection isn't huge but it is adequate. And none of these bikes are turkeys with hidden traps.

What you probably will have to do is hunt for the bike you want. Some touring bike models are made in small quantities (in the hundreds) for a brand that may have 2,000 dealers. So the odds

of finding that model at any one dealership are small, and the odds of finding it in your size are even smaller.

It's not possible to cover all good touring bike options in one issue of a magazine. Our listings remain focused on the traditional upright touring bike with dropped handlebars. That said, we heartily endorse several "nontraditional" bike choices. A few comments on each:

#### Tandems.

Regular readers of this space know we are big tandem fans at Adventure Cycling. Touring on a tandem has interpersonal benefits you can't get on a single bike. The short version on picking a tandem for touring: think wide, in both gearing range and tire size.

#### Recumbents.

Some recumbents are made for touring, equipped with nice wide tires and sold with optional pannier sets. Others are pure go-fast machines with skinny tires. It should be obvious which of those kinds you want. One standout example of a touring recumbent is the Tour-Easy. They have a fiercely loyal owner's club, touring events for members, and the option of streamlining your ride with both a big fairing and a body stocking.

#### Hardtail mountain bikes.

Two decades ago, when the mountain bike was in its infancy, most mountain bikes doubled as terrific touring bikes for people who wanted upright handlebars and go-anywhere knobby tires.

But mountain bikes evolved away from a touring-friendly design. Many have a lean-forward rider position better suited to racing, and many frames lack eyelets for racks and fenders. Front suspension is now the norm, and it adds complications that road-riding tourists may not find worthwhile. At the high end, compo-

By John Schubert

nents can have complex maintenance requirements best left to a pro cycling team mechanic.

All that said, a mid-priced mountain bike is still a viable option. You can ignore the lack of eyelets by buying racks from Old Man Mountain or by putting your gear in a cargo trailer.

#### European-style “trekking” bikes.

Take a rigid mountain bike with upright handlebars, add racks, fenders and lights, install street-tread tires, and you have a trekking bike. If you want to go touring with upright bars, this is a good package for you. Some companies sell these in Europe, but not in the United States, assuming there's no demand here. One company that does offer them here is Koga Miyata.

#### Full-suspension mountain bikes.

I wouldn't bother with one of these for road touring. But for the Continental Divide Mountain Bike Route or other similar tours, a state-of-the-art full-suspension mountain bike pulling a cargo trailer such as a BOB would be my choice. I'd accept the greater maintenance requirements in return for less fatigue provided by full suspension.

The best full-suspension designs make ruts in the trail disappear in a manner so seamless you'll forget you're riding a suspension bike. The unwanted “boing” of early suspension designs is gone.

If this is what you want, don't buy an “economy” full suspension bike, and don't buy a me-too brand with a lesser design. The one I'm most familiar with, the

Specialized Stumpjumper, costs well over \$2,000.

#### Folding and collapsing bikes.

These are the vehicles of choice for people who think out of the box, and don't just tour from Point A to Point B.

A series of two-day loops or day trips interspersed with train rides is a great way to see the world, and the logistics get much easier if you have a bike that folds up quickly to fit in a bag or suitcase. The best-known of these is probably the Bike Friday, and a little web crawling will show you some incredible adventures by Bike Friday owners (who rival Tour-Easy owners for rabid loyalty). England's Moulton is another viable choice, and its space-frame design will be endlessly fascinating to the engineer in you. The full-suspension Birdy is a very sophisticated folder with excellent riding qualities.

Montague, DaHon, and Ritchey all make full-size diamond frame bikes that hinge around the seat tube to fit in a suitcase or small car trunk.

The well-known S&S Couplers can sometimes be added to an existing bike, or built into your new custom bike, and they make your bike easy to toss into a suitcase or travel bag.

So what's new for 2005, and what is the first thing you should do to make a buying decision? The answers are “not much,” and “have a fit.”

Why isn't much new in 2005? Planned obsolescence simply hasn't made it to touring bike designs. Manufacturers have wearily resigned themselves to the fact that touring bikes last many years in the hands of thrifty owners. We cycle-



TOM BOL

**Loyal steeds.** Two touring machines await the bidding of their masters at a store on the Southern Tier Route.

tourists ignore changing fashions. (That said, I thought the paint job on the new Jamis Aurora was inspired. Go check it out!)

Touring frames haven't changed much in the past decade. Components have evolved, mostly in positive directions: splined cranks are much nicer than the old square taper design, nine-speed cogsets sure are convenient, and the threadless headset is far easier to adjust than old-style headsets.

One component trend you should avoid is low-spoke-count wheels. Despite whatever reliability claims you may hear about these wheels, they are not suitable

for touring, for numerous reasons. They aren't made for on-the-road adjustments; their failure mode isn't something you want to experience; and they are comparatively delicate items for use in more controlled circumstances. Adjusting spoke tension requires use of a spoke tensiometer, a \$200 tool that is slow and cumbersome to use. When you evaluate a bike, count the spokes, and if there are fewer than thirty-six per wheel, move on to the next bike.

You won't find low-spoke-count wheels on stout touring bikes, but you will see them on some in-between bikes which would otherwise be viable choices for

lighter touring needs.

So what about that fitting session? Some bike shops and many frame builders offer customized fit sessions — use the Yellow Pages, your local bike club newsletter, or the internet to find one. It'll cost you somewhere around \$200, and deliver a better return on your investment than almost any other way of spending money. It may reaffirm the position on your existing bike, it may convince you to make some adjustments, and it just might get rid of a whole lot of pain and frustration you didn't know you could get rid of.

The odds are that a fit session will not tell you you “need” a custom frame. More

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Wayne Bodné — Alaska to California, 1996, 5,407 miles, 95 days.  
Maine to California, 1998, 3,892 miles, 29 days, 139 miles per day.

likely, it will direct you to adjustments that can be made on a stock bike. It may also direct you to improvements that have nothing to do with spending money. For example, I believe that if I were to get a fitting session, I'd be told that my position would improve, and I'd ride better, if I would stretch my hamstrings. (Another new year's resolution for a future new year!)

Most of us find that when a bike is sized for our leg length, the upper half of our body is accommodated reasonably well by a stock frame's top tube length. The fairly rare individual who is either all torso or all legs may need a custom frame to get optimal fit.

Here are some general guidelines for fitting yourself to a touring bike. You want a more upright riding position than you would for racing so that it's easier to hold your head up and enjoy the scenery. The handlebars should be level with the seat and should be within easy reach. If they're



not, you may need to buy a new handlebar stem. Overall, you want to feel like you are straddling the saddle — not sitting on it, spinning the pedals — not pushing them, and lightly leaning on the handlebars. Some of this is learned technique, such as putting weight on your feet while spinning the pedals. By learning it, you'll increase your comfort and the full days in the saddle won't seem so long.

My few words on this subject are a

sorry substitute for that fit session. Go get the fit session.

What's next?

Pick your maximum tire width. It will rule out bikes that don't accommodate tires that wide.

How wide should your tires be? Any rule of thumb is the writer's own personal preference. I'll tell you mine.

I personally favor 700 x 28C tires for unloaded riding and lightly-loaded motel touring. My tire width preferences go up from there, as more weight is loaded onto the bike. While I've done a lot of self-supported touring with 28C tires, I personally wouldn't buy a new bike that couldn't accommodate something wider. A 32C or 35C tire is a more secure platform for most loaded touring.

Most bikes will accept larger tires without fenders than with fenders. Touring bikes often allow for a choice: add fenders, or switch to a larger tire, but not both.

TOM BOY

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for full details of all the Iron Donkey tours, visit

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## Touring Bikes for Your Consideration

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

**Airborne** offers the Carpe Diem in many variations—with Shimano 105, Ultegra, and DuraAce groups. Campagnolo Chorus and Record available. Frameset (\$1,199). Full bikes range from \$2,500 to \$5,700. airborne.net, 888.652-8624.

**Bianchi** offers the Volpe (\$849.99), which comes with a wide, low gear range and 32c tires. bianchiusa.com, 510.264.1001

**Breezer Bikes** offers the Liberty (\$970) and Greenway (\$750). breezerbikes.com, 415.339.8917.

**Bilenky Cycle Works** offers the Midlands in a variety of models — Eco (\$1,795), Travel (\$2,395), Deluxe (\$2,795), and the custom Signature (\$3,500 and up). bilenky.com, 800-213-6388.

**Bruce Gordon** offers the Rock N' Road Tour and BLT for "serious loaded touring." The Deore XT-equipped Rock N' Road is hand-built (\$2,510, or \$2,745 with racks). The Deore LX-equipped BLT is factory-made, both made in California. (\$1,610 or \$1,845 with racks). bgcycles.com, 707.762.5601.

**Burley** offers the Hudson touring bike with Truvativ Rouleur GXP 175 52/42/30 crankset. Headlamp rack included for \$2,199. Also offers the Duet Tandem (\$2,449) and the Taiko Recumbent (\$1,999). burley.com, 866.248.5634.

**Cannondale** The T2000 (\$1,499) features Shimano 105 front derailleur and XT in the rear; the T800 (\$1,199) uses a Shimano Tiagra front derailleur and XT in the rear. cannondale.com, 800.245.3872.

**Co-Motion Cycles** offers the Nor'Wester (\$2,860 to \$3,150) and Nor'Wester Co-Pilot with S&S couplers (from \$3,320 to \$3,615); the Americano (\$3,070 to \$3,290) and Americano Co-Pilot with S&S couplers (from \$3,520 to \$3,740). co-motion.com, 541-342-4583.

**Fuji Bicycles** offers the Touring (\$840) and the World (\$1,572). fujibikes.com, 215.824.3854.

**Gunnar Bikes** offers the 26-inch Rock Tour (\$900, additional \$275 for a Vicious Rigid Fork or \$399 for a Rock Shox Duke SL suspension fork). gunnarbikes.com, 262.534.4190.

**Heron Bicycles** offers the Wayfarer (\$1,300) the Touring Frame (\$1,045) for "true, loaded touring." heronbicycles.com, 815.223.1776.

**Independent Fabrication** offers the Independence frameset (\$1,600) for self-supported, long-distance touring. Plenty of options available. ifbikes.com, 617.666.3609.

**Jamis Bicycles** offers the Nova (\$1,050) and the Aurora (\$750). jamisbikes.com, 201.768.9050.

**Koga Miyata** offers the GlobeTraveller (£1,375), GlobeTravellerS (£1,665), Randonneur

(£1,175), and the WorldTraveller (£1,325). koga.com.

**Litespeed** offers the titanium Blue Ridge, designed specifically for touring (price range: \$3,500–\$4,400). litespeed.com, 800.743.3796.

**Moots Cycles** offers the custom titanium Mootour (\$2,650). Frame and Fork only. moots.com, 970.879.1676.

**Orbit Cycles** offers the Expedition (£755-£945), the Harrier (£1,375-£1,475), and the Harrier Endurance (£1,435-£1,645). www.orbitcycles.co.uk, +44 0114 2756567.

**REI** offers the Novara Safari, a 26-inch-wheel tourer (\$799) and the Randonnee (\$899). 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 (\$1,300; or \$2,100 to \$2,200 for a complete bike). rivendellbicycles.com, 925.933.7304.

**Rodriguez Bicycles** offers the Adventure for men (\$1,699) and the Stellar for women (\$1,099-\$1,599). rodcycle.com, 206.527.4822.

**Sakkit Touring Bicycles** offers six models. All models start at \$1,800 for the frame and fork, start at \$3,200 for a complete bike, and start at \$3,800 for bike with custom front and rear racks. coinet.com/~beckman, 541.388.5146.

**Santana** offers a wide array of tandems suitable for touring (starting at \$2,995). santanatanandem.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). sevendcycles.com, 617.923.7774.

**Specialized Bicycles** offers the light touring Sequoia in three different aluminum versions (\$900; \$1,300; \$1,800). www.specialized.com, 877.808.8154.

**Surly** offers the Long-Haul Trucker frame and fork (\$400), Karate Monkey frame and fork (\$450), and the Cross-Check (\$410; \$910 for full bike). surlybikes.com, 877.743.3191.

**Terry Bicycles** offers the Col de la Madelaine (\$1,430) and the Classic (\$930) for women. Both bikes have flat bars. terrybicycles.com, 800.289.8379.

**Trek** offers the venerable 520 (\$1,210). This bike has proven itself as a solid performer over many years. trekbikes.com, 920.478.2191.

**Vanilla Bicycles** offers three touring models all initially priced at \$1,625. Options will increase the price. vanillabicycles.com.

**Waterford Cycles** offers the Adventure Cycle 1900 (\$1,600) and the T-14 (\$1,299). S&S Couplers additional. waterfordbikes.com, 262.534.4190.

### Recumbents

**Bender Custom Bicycles** offers three carbon fiber bikes designed for touring — the Radian, Lark, and Bolero (\$2,749 to \$3,149). benderbikes.com, 208.342.3200.

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

**Easy Racers** offers the Tour Easy recumbent, which comes in two models: the SS - Speed & Sport, and the EX - Expedition (both \$1,995). www.easyracers.com, 831.722.9797.

**Lightning Cycle Dynamics** offers the P-38 (\$1,800 for frameset or full bike \$2,700 to \$4,000). Add \$1,200 for the Voyager, a fold up that fits into a suitcase. lightningbikes.com, 805.736.0700

**Longbikes** offers the Eliminator and Slipstream (\$2,500). Prices will vary depending on options and accessories. tandembike.com, 303.986.9300.

**Rans** offers the long-wheel-base Stratus and the short-wheel-base VRex (both for \$1,595). www.recumbent.com/rans.html, 714.633.3663.

**Volae** offers the Expedition (\$1,995) and the Tour (\$1,250). www.volaerecumbents.com, 715.340.1133.

**WizWheelz** offers the TTR Performance Trike for touring (\$3,199). WizWheels.com, 269.945.5581.

### Folding Bikes

**Airnimal Designs** offers the Chameleon in conjunction with Carradice Limpet front pannier system. 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). bikefriday.com, 800.777.0258.

**Birdy** offers the Grey (£1,900) with a Rohloff hub, and Blue (£1,500). foldingbikes.co.uk/birdy.htm, +44 01225.442442

**Breezer Bikes** offers the i7 (\$800). breezerbikes.com, 415.339.8917

**Brompton** offers the T-type folding bike (\$1,050) with six gears, a dynamo-powered lighting system and rear rack. Add \$140 for hard transport case and \$100 for front touring pannier and frame. www.bromptonbicycle.co.uk, +44 208.232.8484

**Moulton** offers a variety of folding bikes (from \$885 to \$6,350). pashley.co.uk, +44 01789.292.263.

There is no downside to having a bike that can accommodate super-wide tires. The people who ride carbon fiber cuties may think your bike doesn't look as cool as theirs, but you're a rugged individualist who doesn't care what they think.

In general, you won't have much choice when choosing tire diameter: 700C is the norm. A few touring bikes are made with 26-inch tires, and these have two advantages: the smaller tire allows a frame better-designed for short people and the 26-inch size has a larger variety of tires available. Although 700C tires now come in a larger variety, from racing slicks to studded snow tires, the 26-inch are easier to find. Some people (I'm not one of them) believe the smaller 26-inch tire gives a harsher ride. I can't feel it.

No part of a 26-inch tire measures exactly 26 inches, and no part of a 700C tire measures 700 anything. These numbers are naming conventions with boring origins. The actual measured dimension is the head seat diameter: 559 millimeters on the "26-inch" tire and 622 millimeters on the "700C" tire. The differences in outside diameter is usually less, because 26-inch tires are typically taller than 700C tires.

Make the pannier versus trailer decision. If you know you'll use a trailer, this frees you up to get a bike that isn't rack friendly, such as a full-suspension mountain bike for trail touring. If you want the option of using panniers (and frankly, as much as I like trailers, I would always want that option on some of my bikes), buy the bike with racks in mind.

Identify your rack system. If you have your heart set on using a certain rack, make sure it fits before you buy the bike. Conversely, if you have no system in mind, enlist the shop's help in identifying a rack system before you buy the bike. Remember that self-contained tourist should always balance their load between front and rear pannier sets, and that Old Man Mountain racks will fit most bikes that weren't made to accommodate racks.

Ponder your shoe size. After you've done the fit exercise, most frame dimension questions come out in the wash, but one dimension may not. You may find

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yourself being picky about chainstay length if you have big feet.

People traditionally recommend that touring cyclists insist on long chainstays (17 1/2 to 18 inches, whereas chainstays racing bikes are 16 to 16 1/2 inches) so that their heels won't clip their panniers. But if your load is well balanced between front and rear panniers, this inch or two doesn't matter much. However, if you have big feet this inch or two matters plenty, because you may not be able to move the panniers back far enough to get heel clearance on some bikes. Obviously, this dimension varies with every combination of bike, rack, and pannier. So if you're a size thirteen guy, look for long chainstays, and investigate all this thoroughly.

Don't worry about frame material. With the exception of a very few titanium bikes, the touring bikes you see will be steel or aluminum. Both are good. Some people prefer steel because welders anywhere can repair it. Aluminum makes a slightly lighter, stiffer frame. Any ride reports about which gives the better ride

**Rolling recumbents.** Once rare, recumbents used for touring are now common.

must be discounted because of the placebo effect of subjective testing. The differences simply aren't as great as many other decisions you'll make that will affect the quality of your ride.

Don't fret over frame angles. Yes they're important. But I haven't seen a bike with messed-up frame angles sold in the U.S. market for many years, so we'll reserve that discussion for another day.

Go over your gearing. You want a low gear of 20 to 25 gear inches to cart a heavy load up a steep hill at the end of a tiring day. If the bike doesn't have a gear that low, ask about a component swap. Sometimes, this is as simple as changing the small chainwheel for a few bucks. A high gear of 90 gear inches allows you to ride 24 mph at a moderate pedaling cadence of 90 rpm, and that's all the high gear a touring cyclist needs. Yet you'll be hard pressed to find a bike with "only" 90 inches as its high gear. More likely you'll find a high gear well over 100 inches. Avoid using gears that high. They will destroy your knees. Sheldon Brown offers a great resource for gear information at [www.sheldonbrown.com/gears](http://www.sheldonbrown.com/gears).

Finally, after you buy the bike, learn enough about it so you don't have to fret over it when you're on tour. Use thread-lock adhesive on the bolts that hold the accessories onto the frame. When on tour, grab a rag and clean the entire bike every five or six days, and use the cleaning as an opportunity to inspect every fastener for tightness, and also to look for bends, cracks, or other possible problems. Clean and lubricate your drive train regularly, especially after you've been riding rainy or muddy conditions.

On a well-planned tour, you'll take care of your bike without having it dominate your activities. Instead, you'll spend your time meeting new friends, taking great photos, and sending postcards home. The ability to enjoy and embrace new experiences is what you really get when you buy a touring bike. ☑

*John Schubert has been Adventure Cyclist's informative technical writer since 1988. You can read more at [www.adventurecycling.org/magazine](http://www.adventurecycling.org/magazine) and he can be reached for further comment at [schubley@aol.com](mailto:schubley@aol.com).*

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