



THE SECRETS OF GOING SMALL

Short, near-home tours can be a great way to go

Story and photos by Russ Roca

At first blush, bicycle touring can seem daunting. Especially when reading about epic treks in far-flung locales. Many would-be tourists are stopped dead in their tracks when contemplating bike equipment, logistics, camping, and the physical demands involved in touring.

But here's a secret: not every tour has to be an epic undertaking. If you wait until you have enough time off from work, or the perfect bike, or the lightest tent, or for every star to align to do that dream tour, you'll never leave.

The key is to just get out there and do it. This isn't always as easy as it might seem, of course, and the biggest obstacle to bicycle touring is often just getting out the door and pedaling that first mile. After that, it's all downhill — figuratively speaking, of course.

This is why quickie tours of one or a few nights can be the perfect way for beginners to get started and for veterans to bring the adventure of bicycle travel into their “regular” lives. After all, it's a lot easier for most people to find time for a two- or three-day trip than a two- or three-month trip.

Touring comes in various sizes, from S24Os (sub-24 hour-overnights), to open-ended, multi-year adventures, and everything in between. I'm a big advocate of short tours, or trips that last anywhere from three to 10 days. They're longer than overnights but shorter than two weeks, and let you cover enough ground so you feel you've gone somewhere without the huge time commitment longer tours require.

My girlfriend and I have done several short tours over the years, exploring local state parks and taking nibbles out of Adventure Cycling's Pacific Coast route. Each short tour lets us test out our gear and refine our techniques. Three days into a short tour is just long enough that you're able to shed your former self and feel like an adventurer.

Existential Gear Crises

I'll let you in on the big secret about gear: there is no perfect bike, both panniers and trailers will work fine, and the best tent is the one you have when the rain starts coming down. Some equipment is more nicely designed or more comfortable than others, but just because you can't afford the absolute top-of-the-line gear shouldn't stop you from hitting the road.

Perhaps the most essential ingredient to bicycle touring is, of course, the bicycle. There are many great new bicycles on the market designed specifically for touring, and while bicycles designed for touring are great, you don't necessarily need a brand new bike to tour. Remember, the goal is to get on the road and to not fuss and fret indefinitely over the details. The right bike for you may already be in your garage or just a Craigslist search away. This is the beauty of the short-tour format — since you aren't riding for months at a time, you don't need the absolutely perfect bike. Many older bikes that have been reasonably maintained will do. Older mountain bikes with braze-ons for racks make excellent tourers because they are already equipped with low gears. Older steel road bikes that can take a rear rack also make great tourers (though some modification of the gearing, i.e. lower gears, may be necessary if you're riding hilly terrain).

In addition to the bicycle, the means to carry your gear is the other essential ingredient to touring. A holy war rages over which of the two major methods is better: panniers or trailers. Either side of the cargo-carrying divide will wax eloquent about why their chosen method is superior. For a short tour, rest assured that either will work admirably.

If you plan to go the pannier route, you'll need racks that are able to carry the load you are packing. Racks and panniers run the gamut from inexpensive commuter setups to bombproof expedition rigs. If

you're doing a short tour and the weather looks good, you can have a wonderful touring experience with a simple inexpensive bike-commuter setup (basic rack and two panniers). For the do-it-yourselfers, there are even instructions online for constructing your own panniers using kitty litter boxes or oyster buckets!

Trailers are another great way to carry gear on tour. One advantage of using a trailer is that they can be attached to most bicycles. Racks require special braze-ons to work while trailers attach to the bicycle either by clamping to the rear triangle of the bike or latching on to a special skewer. You can use specially-designed touring trailers like the popular BOB and Burley offerings or you can adapt a children's trailer for touring use. Children's trailers tend to be more readily available and can often be found in thrift shops and garage sales for a song. One added benefit of using a trailer is you can use any old duffel bag you already own and toss it in the trailer without buying specialized bags.

Riding the Pacific Coast this summer I saw myriad bikes, from fully-loaded Long Haul Truckers, custom handmade lugged bicycles, to someone who was touring on a Schwinn Continental — the veritable boat anchor of the bicycle world — and all of them were having the time of their lives.

Remember, the goal here is to grab your bike (whatever bike it may be) and go!

To Camp or Not to Camp

Here's the secret of camping while on tour: you don't have to. Many cyclotourists cherish the camping experience as an integral part of the experience, but for those who prefer to sleep indoors, there are many excellent options. B&Bs and privately-owned inns are a great way to add a touch of refinement and comfort to the rigors of bicycle touring. If you're on a budget, cheap motels are a perfectly suitable option — remember, every room looks the same

after you close your eyes. Youth hostels can also be great places to stay and meet fellow travelers, and some offer private accommodations that are competitively priced when compared to motels and hotels.

WarmShowers.com is a great resource that helps bicycle tourists find homestays while on the road. Members are encouraged

to reciprocate by offering accommodations when they aren't traveling. I've stayed with a few WarmShowers.com hosts and it has been a delightful experience, since many have toured before and are a great source of information and tips for the region.

Let's not forget your family and friends (and friends of friends) also make great possible

homestays. By making a few quick phone calls or sending out emails to people you already know, you may be able to find a guest room or futon on every step of your journey.

The Kit and Kaboodle

Your choice of whether you are going to camp or not will greatly determine what you will need to bring. For those staying indoors, you'll need little more than riding clothes, street clothes, some basic repair tools (enough to change a flat and tighten bolts on your bike), your debit card, and a sense of adventure. Be sure to check the weather report before you go on your trip so that you pack the appropriate layers and are prepared for inclement weather.

If you are going self-supported and plan to camp, you'll need a tent (or if the weather looks good you could just sleep under the stars), a sleeping pad, sleeping bag, and stove and cooking utensils if you plan to cook your own meals. Remember, since you aren't going out for more than a few days, you can get along fine without expedition-grade gear. Even if you're a little uncomfortable, it'll only be for a few days and you can always weave it into your tales of daring.

It's a good idea to make sure your bike

is in good working condition before you leave. A bicycle that has been tuned up and looked over by a good mechanic prior to leaving is much less likely to have problems while on tour. If your bike is in good shape, a short tour shouldn't stress the frame or its components to the breaking point. You should, however, know how to change a flat, the most common bane a tourist will encounter. Ask a mechanically-inclined friend or your local bike-shop mechanic to give you a walk through some basic bike maintenance.

A journal and a camera are an absolute must when going on your short tour — how else will you make your friends envious of your adventure? Tech-savvy tourists may opt to bring a smartphone or a netbook to journal or blog about their trip.

For a more in-depth packing list check out the How-To Department of the Adventure Cycling website.

Planning Your Route

Now that you have your bike and you've figured out how you're going to carry your gear, where should you tour? For those that like to camp, areas around state parks and forests are wonderful areas to tour. If you're not fortunate enough to live close to



Pit stop. On trips short or long, convenience stores live up to their name for the cyclist.

an Adventure Cycling route, Bikely.com is a great way to find touring routes around your area of interest. Bikely.com is a site that uses Google Maps to inventory rides people have done. You can search for routes by location or by type (road, commute, touring, etc.). Contacting cycling clubs in the areas you plan to tour is also a great way to tap into local knowledge.

Creating a themed tour is a great way to get others to come with you that may not necessarily identify themselves as serious cyclists. You could plan a tour around used bookshops, breweries, cafes, historic sites, small bike shops, fishing holes, museums, or whatever it is that piques your curiosity. Bicycle touring is a great way to explore the countryside and turn your personal inter-



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ests into an adventure. For example, the first tour I ever took with my girlfriend was a wine-tasting tour. Inspired by the movie *Sideways*, we hopped an Amtrak train from Los Angeles to just outside Solvang, California, and rode around beautiful country roads visiting various wineries. We did it on the cheap, staying in a motel and going out on day rides with a local map as our guide. A quick Google search on “Solvang” and “bicycle” brought up lots of recommendations for good roads to ride.

Another important thing to consider when planning your route is terrain and mileage, which are inextricably linked together. Needless to say, it is much easier to go 30 miles on a flat road than 30 miles on a road that climbs several thousand feet. Being able to read maps and knowing the topography of where you’ll be riding will allow you to more accurately gauge how long it will take you to cover certain distances. In general, if it’s your first tour, a gentler route lets you feel out your bike and gear without too much suffering. That said, don’t let a few hills scare you! All the great vistas and rewarding descents are to be found on top of hills.

Get Outta Dodge

Some of you live in or near dense urban centers that require lots of stressful city riding before you can hit any open road. Living in Long Beach, California, for almost a decade, it took real commitment for me to go touring. I would have to ride through 40 miles of urban sprawl before finding a quiet road. This brings up the question of how you should start your trip. A “short tour,” as its name implies is short — you want to spend your time having fun, not inhaling car exhaust.

If you live close to a rail line, using the train is a great way to give yourself a little



Campsite social hour. Bicycle travelers often meet up for impromptu camp gatherings.

head start out of the city. Many passenger train lines offer some accommodations for bicycles for free or at a fraction of what airlines charge. For example, to take my boxed touring bike with me from Los Angeles to Portland, Oregon, on Amtrak cost a mere \$20 for the bike box and handling fees.

Another option is to get a ride via public transport or from a friend to the outskirts of town or close to the area you want to tour. Remember, the point is to have fun! While being able to ride every mile from your door is very satisfying, going multi-modal and using the train or bus is a great way to extend your touring range.

Hit the Road ... Now!

For those with limited time and a limited budget, the short tour is the perfect means to scratch that adventure cycling itch. It

requires less time, less gear, and less planning than big trips. You don’t have to fret about whether you have the perfect bike or perfect gear, because you’re not going to be gone for months at a time. That is the beauty of a short tour; because of its shorter time duration you are more likely to go or convince your friends to go with you. You’ll be amazed that even though you’re gone for only a few days, you’ll feel like you’ve completed a great adventure. Beware, however, because they do become addicting and are definitely “gateway tours” to longer and longer travels! **AC**

Russ Roca, is a freelance photographer and writer who took one too many short “gateway” tours and decided to sell most of his belongings to bicycle around the U.S. with his girlfriend, Laura. Follow them on www.pathlesspedaled.com.

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