How do I find the loaded-touring bike that's right for me? by John Wider

Let's face it. How we use loaded-touring bikes (LTBs) has evolved from the 1970s, when you installed a rear rack on your trusty 40-pound Schwinn (didn’t they all come with a rack anyway?) and loaded it to the sky with baskets and bungee cords. Not to mention balance-defying backpacks designed for walking. Now we consumers demand a wide array of specialized bikes. Good if you have $1,000 or more to spend, bad if you're on a tight budget. While every imaginable type of bike exists (I could name seven without effort), you need to ask is “what is my budget?” Factory bicycles suited for fully-loaded touring can be had for roughly $1,000 to $2,000, with very few offered below the $1,000 mark. If you can’t afford that, a light touring bike might be had for $500. If you’re out for a custom hand-built touring bike, a minimum of $3,500 can be spent before you can say “What have I gotten myself into?”

Design qualities of a good LTB

I’ve ridden many a mile on my 16-year-old Trek carbon fiber V-22 mountain bike, and while I’ve done light-duty touring on the San Juan Hut System from Telluride to Moab, I wouldn’t recommend carbon fiber for any fully-loaded touring beyond civilization (i.e. bike shops and hospitals). Given this is the extent of my mountain-bike-touring exposure, I’ll narrow our search to road bikes.

Much has been said in the past about frame dimensions and the importance of a properly relaxed geometry to give the rider the stability needed to cruise for many hours a day. The shorter, wheel-base geometry of a typical road racing bike is highly responsive to a rider’s need to jostle in the pack and for an agile response to a high torque, high speed, rocking (literally and figuratively) race. A LTB is not optimized for acceleration or lateral responsiveness but for a naturally steady ride. One cautionary note is that the rider must look further ahead for potholes and other obstacles to avoid, given the touring bike won’t change direction as quickly as a racing bike.

As for specs, bicycle company websites can be a great resource. But rather than dwelling on technical minutia, get out there and try several bikes, including racing or sport bikes (it can be a sub $1,000 model) for the sake of getting the feel for what you do and don’t want in a LTB. Before I get too far down the road about what to look for in a loaded touring bike, let me do a wheel revolution and think about our future bike from a designer’s point of view.

10 Designers = 200 Opinions

Even most custom bikes will hit the road with many voices having influenced their design, hopes of them. Imagine for a moment that you were given a seat at the proverbial drawing board with some of the key design areas in order to consider a variety of options. Remember, imagination is a wonderful thing, but cold hard logic is what will keep you on the move when you’re heading off from civilization.

Frame size. A well-fitted $1,000 bike will serve you better than a misfitted $2,000 ride. Although most fit-kits seek to your needs more directly than gather- ing touring experts in a room. Encomasses as many aspects of your tour as possible. Mountains? Ride mountains. Rough roads? Not much construction you may get more than you bargained for! Ride those too.

Wheels. These are the most failure prone components of a heavily-loaded touring bike. When riding in most of the developed world, 700C or 26-inch wheels are the most easily replaceable. Replaceable? Plan for it and it is less likely to be needed. 36-spoke wheels (12 minimum) with three-cross-lacing (each spoke crosses three others spokes) provide maximum carrying capacity. Beefy rims with a box construction also reduce your chances of a seriously warped wheel after pothole diving. What am I giving up for the sake of getting the feel for what you do and don’t want in a LTB. Before I get too far down the road about what to look for in a loaded touring bike, let me do a wheel revolution and think about our future bike from a designer’s point of view.

*Online Extra* Need more tips and inspiration for your tour? Michelle Cassel and Ryan McAfee of America ByCicle are contributing four online exclusives this month to our blog. Read them on Tuesdays in April via this quick link: adventurecycling.org/home/newest.

Frame material. The gang of 10 have weighed in. Steel, aluminum, titanium, and carbon fiber, in that order. Steel is an affordable material that if maintained properly is less likely to fail catastrophically without warning, when put under excessive stress, such as hitting a large pothole. And, yes, it is also more serviceable abroad. Weight is a second- ary consideration given the need to sup- port a heavy load. When considering weight, keep in mind that you should concentrate on your load and your body. But going over- board in any of these categories can get you into trouble. Loaded touring should allow you to enjoy your surroundings, not minutes off an eight-hour touring day and miss the beauty around you. Life on the road is about more than your frame.

A frame is just one aspect of a bike, and a bike also needs maintenance and repair. More of the former results in less of the latter, but both should be factors in your bicycle purchase decisions. If your brain is race-dominated, resash and it start fresh. Rather than getting from Point A to Point B in the minimum amount of time, with mechanical breakdowns being a nuisance, your mindset should expand to embrace the maximum enjoyment between A and B. You’ll be pleasantly surprised that you don’t have to trade off much speed for peace of mind and panniers full of adventure.

This is as good a time as any to intro- duce the concept of “borrowed” rides. Even if you’re fortunate enough to find a touring bike that you can take for a pre- purchase trial, borrowing a friend’s bike for a long day ride allows voices to speak to your needs more directly than gather- ing touring experts in a room. Encomasses as many aspects of your tour as possible. Mountains? Ride mountains. Rough roads? Not much construction you may get more than you bargained for! Ride those too.

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Frame geometry. Many writers go on and on about geometry. I prefer to save my long-windedness for other topics as you’ll soon see. The main consideration for those with big feet is to ensure there is clear- ance from both the front wheel and both sets of panniers. If you wish to research further, head back to the archive for past “Cyclencise” articles and buyer’s guides (adventurecycling.org/features/buyersguide.cfm). You can also help out the researchers at the Bike Geometry Project (home.comcast.net/~pinnah/dirtbag-bikes/ geometry-project.html) who are doing some interesting things in this regard.

Online Extras:

Touring Bike Buyer's Guide

Touring in a “light” touring model (not to be confused with trailer, your selection greatly expands, with all the pros-cons of trailers, you can dig into (adventurecycling.org/library/ to find previous articles on this very topic.

So the primary challenge these days is to: A: find an appropriate bike in stock (possible in some urban areas, if you look diligently) and take it out for at least an hour and put through its paces. Or more likely… B: find a few “light” touring bikes that fit you well so you can get an idea of what features and qualities you want to concen- trate on before ordering an LTB, which, typically, you have to buy before ship- ment, with a non-refund policy. Even if you can return it, it’s likely you’ll face a hefty restocking/returning fee.

Before you begin looking for the perfect LTB (if there is such a thing), ask yourself “how much am I going to use the bike for that? The answer is “not very often,” then the range of bikes will be many. Some mountain bikes, hybrids, commuting, and light touring bikes. This article is focused on “conventional” LTBS, but can still be used to select a multi-purpose work horse. Adventure Cyclist is an online publication archive (adventurecycling.org/publications archive) who are doing some interesting things in this regard.

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extra ounce in the wheels slows you down as much as two ounces elsewhere due to a rotational property called moment of inertia. For steady speeds while touring, acceleration is minimal, so this property is not really a factor. A final bit of good news is that the extra stiffness will give you better handling and energy transfer (less flexing) than an expensive feather-light wheel. And make sure the wheels you buy have all spokes tensioned well and trued. Once the wheel is true, if some spokes are tensioned too loosely or too tightly, insist on a replacement wheel at no extra charge. Your life depends on it, so depend on your shop to make it right.

**Tires.** As for where the rubber meets the road, tires should have the same beefy qualities as the wheels they go on. Seat stays, rims, and brakes that accommodate wide tires are the primary consideration. How wide? It depends on what surfaces you’ll be riding on, and you guessed it, your personal preferences. Here we’ll focus on 700C tires, since 26-inch wheels are best kept for trails. While light touring on smooth roads, you can get away with 25-millimeter tires. Tackling rough roads with big loads? 35 millimeters should be your minimum. As with wheels, saving weight should not enter into the equation. Better tires not only save you money and give you superior handling quality, they are less prone to flats. And keep a close eye on the rear tire. It wears faster and is often covered from sight by fenders and gear.

When it comes to velocity change, most people gravitate toward acceleration. Given how much momentum has to be brought to a stop, the focus should be on deceleration. So how do you best stop your big rig? With highly-leveraged, dependable brakes.

Many prefer the tried-and-true cantilever type. While I’ve only ridden a few days with disc brakes, I was instantly drawn to their superior stopping power. Many people will speak about the pros and cons, with the most apparent drawback being susceptibility to damage, though these brakes are getting to be nearly bullet-proof these days. No matter what kind of rim brakes you use, if you’re descending steep mountains, you should stop periodically to check how hot the rims have become. Otherwise, you’re in for a not-so-nice surprise when the tire pressure becomes too high and the tire too pliable. Fortunately for this author, the load wasn’t too heavy when his tire blew, and surprise, he survived with only a small scar.

**What about the creature comforts?**

We handful of imaginary bike designers could go on and on about things such as drop handlebars giving your hands so many more pressure-relieving options than almost any other handlebar configuration. But alas, we’ve spent so much time talking about things critical to a safe journey, that you’ll have to scour other articles in *Adventure Cyclist* to pull out comfort-related tips. But hey, if you read this magazine, you’ll know the biggest challenge to getting (and staying) on the road is getting the fundamentals right. So get out there and do what it takes to make the right purchase so you can finally hit the open road!

John Wider is a 53-year-old spacecraft engineer living in the Los Angeles area, which he claims is more bike friendly than most people think, especially paths near the beaches. He has owned almost every kind of bike there is, racking up over 80,000 miles, with most of those on his 1996 Trek 520.

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### TOURING BIKES FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

We’ve tried to limit this table to true touring bikes and light touring only—not bikes that might go for long touring. Many of the bikes in this table can be found in several configurations, including custom versions, with varying costs associated. No prices reflect shipping costs.

**Cyfac**
- 6336.
- Gates ($5200); 29er Divide ($5200); 26-inch Pangea Co-Motion Cycles
  - 707-762-5601.
- $1725; basic $750; frame Loaded Touring (fully loaded with racks $3349; frame $3215 and up). Boo Cycles
  - bamboo ($3545 and up); Tourlite S&S coupled Travel versions ($1275). Boo T (bamboo
  - custom versions, with varying costs associated. No prices reflect shipping costs.
- TourLite (
- 700C steel touring bikes customizable 26-inch and 700C models ($2650 and up).<::>
- the Easy Rohler, and Easy包括的 Easy Rohler, and Gates belt drives, hubs and Gates belt drives, a variety of
- Gunnar Bikes
  - $899), Randonee ($1199), by REI Safari
  - $1399; Gunnar Bikes
  - Arctica, Trans Pacific, and Women’s Compact Tour
  - $1399; Gunnar Bikes
  - Steel and
  - $2650 and up). Boo Cycles
  - bamboo ($3545 and up); Tourlite S&S coupled Travel versions ($1275). Boo T (bamboo
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  - $1399; Gunnar Bikes
  - Steel and
  - TourLite (com, 215-329-4744. Bilenky
  - ($3850 an up); TourLite ($3599); and TravelLite ($3290; www.salsacycles.com, 619- 585-0600.
- Vanilla Bicycles Touring and Randonneur models. Site in German. Velotraum
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