

## 650B LIVES!

*"The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."* -- Mark Twain

by Sheldon Brown

Back in the glory days of French touring bikes, roughly the '40s through the '70s, the French used two different tire sizes for most adult bikes: Light, fast road machines would generally use the ISO 622-mm size, commonly known by its French designation of 700c. This size is used on most modern bikes intended for pavement use. The more serious "loaded" touring bikes, however, the ones intended to carry camping and cooking gear, usually

used the ISO 584-mm wheel size, known in the French sizing system as "650B." This size was also used on most French tandems, as well as the typical French utility one- or three-speed city bike.

With a bead seat diameter of ISO 584 mm, the 650B size falls roughly halfway between the 700C (ISO 622-mm) road size and the decimal 26-inch size used on mountain bikes (559 mm).

For this reason, 650B fans like to say that this wheel size is the ideal one for all-around use.

There's a good case to be made for this point of view, and French "cyclotouristes" have been working assiduously to revive 650B, which had been on the verge of extinction under the assault of the mountain bike. There is a French organization dedicated to the preservation of this wheel size, called Confrérie des 650. You can see the English section of their website at: [www.cyclos-cyclotes.org/650/index\\_ang.html](http://www.cyclos-cyclotes.org/650/index_ang.html).

650B has never been a common size in the United States, but Schwinn used it for some high-end tandems in the '50s and '60s. Schwinn and Raleigh USA gave 650B a bit of a flyer in the '80s, marketing it as an on/off-road tire on some early hybrids and, in Raleigh's case, a couple of rather nice tourers.

Most recently, California's Rivendell Bicycle Works has been reviving the 650B size with a new bike line called Saluki.



*There is no shortage of tire sizes and options.*

This is sort of an attempt at recreating a classic French cyclotouriste bike. They're also doing a couple of semi-mixte frame versions called Glorius and Wilbury. A number of smaller custom builders have also gotten on the bandwagon, including Gilles Berthoud, Phil Brown, Mariposa, Moots, Seven, Waterford, and a number of Japanese custom builders.

Is 650B for you? 650B is a very versatile tire size, suitable for either on-road or off-road use, and it can be an excellent choice for touring. The only drawback of the size is the issue of replacement tires and rims. You will not currently find these in North America outside of major metropolitan areas, which might become a problem on a longer tour in the event of tire failure or a crash. The same was true of 700C as recently as the early 1980s, so this may well change.

If you plan to travel in Europe or any former French colonies, you'll have no trouble finding replacement tires or rims.

Inner tubes won't be a problem anywhere. 650B tires work fine with mountain bike tubes, or with 650A (ISO 590 mm, 26 x 1 3/8) tubes, which are avail-

able everywhere.

### Retrofitting 650B Wheels

Some owners of tight-clearance road-racing-type bikes have "tourified" them by switching to 650B wheels. The ISO 36-mm smaller rim diameter requires the use of brake calipers with 18-mm longer reach.

Converting to 650B makes it possible to install reasonably wide touring-type tires and even fenders on a bike that otherwise might be limited to naked 25- or maybe 28-mm tires.

Such a modification will also lower the bottom bracket, but not as much as you might think. The rim radius is 18 mm smaller, but the plumper tire will make up for this to a considerable extent. For instance, going from a 622-25 (700 x 25 C) to a

584-38 (650 x 38 B) will only lower the bottom bracket by 5 mm.

This can be an excellent way to recycle a racing bike into something more versatile and more comfortable.

### Please Don't Say 650!

Sometimes you'll hear cyclists refer to 650 wheels or tires. This is an error, one that I hope my readers will avoid. 650 is just the metric equivalent of 26 inches. Neither of these is a sufficient descriptor of any individual wheel or tire size.

There are at least six different, non-interchangeable 26-inch sizes, and three of these are also known as 650[some letter]. Saying 650 without a letter after it is liable to lead to confusion and waste.

The letter part of a French tire size refers to the width of the tire originally used with that rim size. Back in the day, all 650 tires had the same outside diameter, so you needed a smaller rim for the fatter sizes. A would have been the narrowest tire, then B, then C.

### The three 650 sizes are:

- 650A (590 mm ISO), also known as 26 x 1 3/8 E.A.3. This is the size used on most English 3-speed bikes.

- 650B (584 mm ISO), also known as 26 x 1 1/2. This is the size under discussion today. Also sometimes known as Demi-Ballon.

- 650C (571 mm ISO), also known as 26 x 1. The skinny versions of this wheel size are commonly used on race time-trial bikes, triathlon bikes, and some road sport bikes built for smaller riders.

This bead seat size was also used by Schwinn for many years for balloon-tire cruisers, typically marked 26 x 1 3/4.

For more details on the arcana of tire sizing, see my online article by visiting <http://sheldonbrown.com/tire-sizing>.



*Sheldon Brown maintains one of the most in-depth technical websites related to bicycles and bicycle parts on the Internet. If you thirst for more of this type of information, visit <http://sheldonbrown.com>.*

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