

A layman's take on the great debate

Life is full of tough questions.

Paper or plastic? Bottles or cans? Road or mountain? For us bike tourists, however, there is one question that still looms unanswered. Panniers or trailers?

Normally, an article on technical issues offering advice to the masses is written by someone acknowledged as an expert in the field. You want legal advice from Jerry Spence. Not Jerry Springer. But there are times when you must turn your back on the experts, and make up your own mind. That's what I did on the question of panniers versus trailers.

It began last summer when my wife hatched a surefire plan to get rid of me. Knowing that I needed to shape up a bit and lose some weight, she suggested I buy a bike and go for a ride. To a different

coast. Now, I've been married long enough to know that these are not words a guy like me hears from his wife very often. I wasn't about to pass this up.

So the adventure began. First, I visited a book store to find a beginner's guide to bike touring. None. Next, I visited the biggest bike shop in my very small town. Again, no luck. Everyone sells mountain bikes, a few places sell road bikes, almost no one knows anything about touring. I was on my own to figure this stuff out.

I did eventually find a shop that sold some touring stuff. They carried both panniers and trailers, but none of the employees had ever used them. Then some luck. On a trip to Montana, far back in the middle of nowhere, I saw a lone touring cyclist loaded down and climbing slow. I threw

the rental car in reverse.

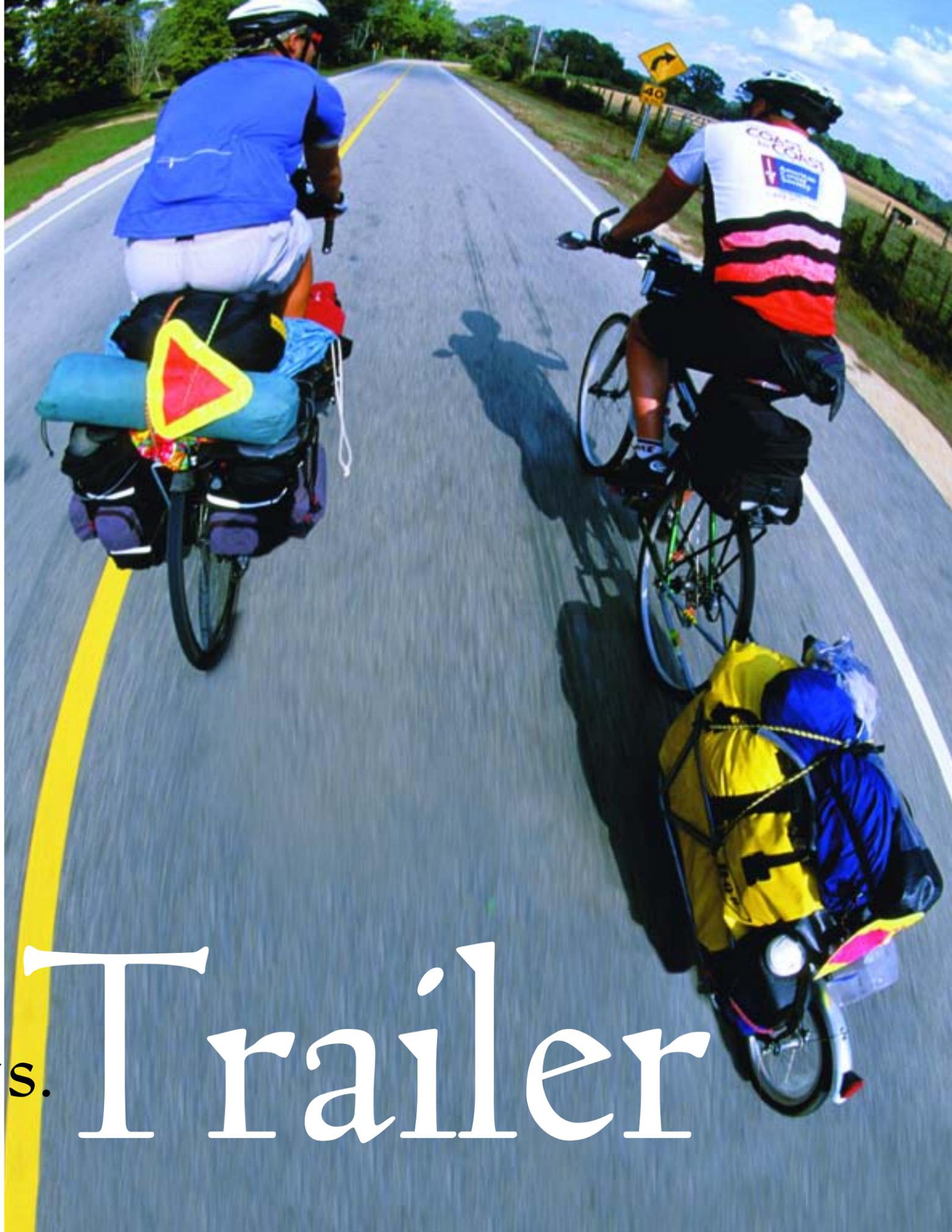
The way I was approaching him I wouldn't have been surprised to have the rider give me a quick blast of pepper spray. Instead, I got a big smile. Without missing a pedal stroke, he gave me the Web address to the only group in the nation that targets cross-country touring. A couple of issues of *Adventure Cyclist* later, and I was armed with enough information to safely leave money in bike shops all across town.

Except on one key issue: Trailers or panniers? While the issue has certainly been addressed, it is clear that the old schoolers writing the articles are fairly set in their ways, happy with what they like, and clearly not going to solve the issue for an open-minded neophyte like me.

By Richard P. Alden

Panniers vs. Trailer

TOM BOL



So it was time to take things into my own hands, on a 2,000-mile bike trip. I rode with my 8-year-old son the first 300 miles to Niagara Falls. Mom then picked him up and took him home. I crossed the Rainbow Bridge into Canada, tooled across Ontario, entered the United States in time for the 100 year flood in Detroit, rode south to Toledo, then back west to join up with the TransAmerica Trail starting in Monroeville, Indiana.

Somewhere in the middle of Illinois, I burnt out on the constant south-easterly headwinds, stopped in the middle of a million acres of soy fields and checked the map. Turns out I was exactly as far from New Orleans as I was from Vail Pass. I took a left at the next county road, and jammed straight south for the Mississippi River Trail, Graceland, the Natchez Highway, through the heart of the Delta swamps and eventually into the home of Mardi Gras and the southern blues. It was a great six weeks.

This was the first time I had ridden with all four panniers mounted on my bike. It took a bit of adjustment to ride with full panniers around sharp turns and navigate urban streets, but right from the start I never felt out of control with fully loaded front and rear panniers, even at speed.

I spent the next week pedaling across Ontario. On day three I wheeled into a campground on the shore of Lake Erie, and was pleasantly surprised to find that the only other camper was another cross-country cyclist riding from Toronto to Saint Clair. She spoke broken English from her French-Canadian upbringing, and said she had spent most of the last several summers bike-packing around the continent.

I took particular note of her well-worn, nylon panniers. They had lots of great little pockets compartmentalizing all of her gear. I had big bucket-style bags. All of my gear was forced to share the same room with the rest of my stuff.

The next day, while drafting my new companion, I noticed her tent wasn't in her panniers like mine. It was wrapped in a garbage bag and strapped to the top of her rear rack. This was my first exposure to



Fully Loaded Panniers only for these two travelers.

baggie-packing. With my waterproof Vaudes, I just rolled the top down, sealed them with their fast-tec clips, and never worried about water. Suddenly these waterproof buckets of mine were looking pretty good!

A few days after separating from my Canadian riding partner, and just as I was starting to pick up NPR again on my Walkman, signaling my proximity to the States, it started to rain. Three or four minutes later, the heavens opened and I was welcomed into Windsor, Ontario, by a monsoon. It was raining so hard that in minutes I was soaked, despite my double-layer Gortex rain gear.

Riding across Detroit was an experience. Being a rural boy, I am unaccustomed to the sprawl of the industrial cities of the Midwest. After a couple of hours of riding by headlamp through the rain, I was realizing that there would never be an edge to this city where I could pitch my tent. I started looking for golf courses or a park with some shelter, but with no success.

The water in the road was a bit deeper than the rims of my wheels. About 1:00 a.m. the water grew deep enough for my pedal. By 1:30 most of the traffic signals were out of service, and the water was up above my chain. I appreciated my waterproof Vaudes, as the bottom of the panniers were constantly underwater. At the

worst point, I had to ride through an underpass where the water was above my knees, and my panniers were literally trying to float off my racks for about 200 feet. I kept cranking along as hard as I could and managed to ride up the backside to where the water was just a few inches deep again.

About 2:30 a.m. I struck gold. There was a carnival being set up in a strip-mall parking lot on the side of the road. I pulled in under the big-top tent and found a platform that was up high enough to be out of the water running under the tent. I opened my panniers and sure enough, everything in the bag was bone dry. I changed into toasty dry clothes, laid out my down sleeping bag and climbed in, singing the praises of my Vaude panniers. I can't imagine dragging a trailer through the floods.

I calculated my half-way mark as best as I could, and arranged to have my wife ship my trailer to a bike shop in southern Illinois. I was very excited to try something new for the last 1,000 miles of the trip.

The trailer I selected was a Kool-Stop Wilderbeast (www.koolstop.com). The Kool-Stop trailer has a unique configuration in that it is rated for up to a thigh-burning 70 pounds of gear, and also has two pannier frames just behind the attachment point. I can't imagine ever coming up with 70 pounds and two panniers worth of stuff to bring on a bike ride, but if you have it, you can bring it all on this trailer. It also

has a composite gear platform, rather than the open grate style, to help protect your gear from road grime and moisture.

For those of us who want the best of both worlds, Kool-Stop makes another trailer called the Mule. It also has a unique design, consisting of a series of racks your panniers attach to. You can put up to six full-size panniers on this trailer, hanging three on each side. The Mule is a bit heavy, weighing in at 23 pounds, but if you have a crew to haul gear for, it's good to have a pack mule to carry the load.

The Kool-Stop trailer attaches directly to the frame rather than the skewer point which, while having some benefits, seems to be a weaker point of attachment than the frame. Once the small mounting piece is attached to the bike, the trailer comes on and off easily with the removal of a tethered pin.

Lots of things break on long bike trips, and carrying spare parts is a damn good idea. If you ride with a trailer that attaches to your rear wheel quick-release, definitely bring an extra. They do have a reputation for breaking.

I opted for the more traditional flat trailer for this trip. It assembled without much effort, and attached to the bike even more easily. The trailer comes with a large, denier nylon gear bag to protect your stuff. It is not rated as waterproof, but will keep off the road dirt and light rain. BOB Trailers offers a fully waterproof bag that comes stock with their Yak Trailer (\$279), and does a killer job of protecting your gear from the elements.

It was nice to detach the front and rear racks, and ride an almost naked bike again. After almost a month of packing panniers every morning, it took some experimentation to find the best way to get all my gear onto the trailer.

Now, I've read equipment reviews before where I thought the reviewer was commenting on ridiculous things that had no bearing on the performance of the product. Well, now it's my turn. I decided to get a hotel room the day the trailer arrived so I could set it up and get the bike repacked all in front of a TV.

Time to hit the road. I decided to

ignore the entire first day because I needed to get better acquainted with the trailer. But some of the things I noticed in the first few miles turned out to be the pattern that continued for the next several days.

First, the bike felt heavy. I had identical loads in the trailer as the panniers, but the load was now increased by the 18 pounds of trailer behind my bike. On flat ground, things were OK, but when the bike turned uphill, it felt like I was dragging an anchor behind me.

On the downhill, the bike required significantly more braking with the trailer than with the panniers. This was not a big deal, but I had to definitely get used to the new sensation of having something pushing my bike from behind.

One of the most terrifying moments of the trip was my first long downhill with the trailer. As the road turned around a bend, I quickly got a taste of what the trailer companies call "torsional stress." As your load gets at an angle on the trailer, it transfers this energy into the frame of your bike.

You must be prepared to compensate for these new torsional forces pushing sideways through the frame of your bike. It almost feels like something is trying to push you over.

The second night with the trailer I had to travel a short distance on a sandy

road to get to the cemetery where I was going to camp. The instant the wheel of the trailer found a sandy patch in the road, it was like having an anchor. It had been a long day's ride, and my legs were not up to muscling through. I ended up pushing the bike and trailer quite a distance that without a third wheel in the dirt, I would have been able to ride right through.

Just like panniers, after the first few days, I grew more comfortable with the trailer's effects on the ride. Downhills and sharp turns quickly became more comfortable. I never grew accustomed, however, to the feeling of dragging an anchor behind my bike on uphill climbs, or the extra difficulty in pulling a trailer on dirt roads. The argument has been made that trailers reduce the weight of your load by putting the burden on the rear wheel of the trailer. Now I'm no expert, but see if you don't follow my argument on this...

When I load a trailer to pull behind my car, I try to center the load evenly over the axle. This allows a 5,000-pound boat and trailer to only have about a 500-pound "tongue" weight. You can even lighten the load more by shifting the center slightly behind the axle. If you load your trailer incorrectly by putting most of your load in front of the axle, your tongue weight is enormously increased, transferring the weight of your load plus trailer to the



Double duty It's a little harder to transport a trailer.

pulling vehicle.

Now look at how bike trailers are designed. One hundred percent of the load is in front of the trailer tire, transferring the weight of the load onto the back of the bike — where your panniers used to be. Only now you have to deal with the torsional stresses of the load shifting around when you turn the bike and the added weight of the trailer itself. This does not seem consistent with the trailer companies' argument that a trailer lightens your load.

So what does all this mean?

The purpose of this experiment was to discover which I personally preferred — a trailer, or panniers. For me, panniers proved to be the only way to go. The trailer was inconvenient, hard to handle, and just plain heavy. I broke down the trailer, packed it into its own gear bag, and shipped it back home with some postcards for the kids.

That said, let me make a hypothetical argument for trailers. A lifetime ago, when I was going shop to shop trying to research this stuff, I found one guy who had actually used a trailer before. He was involved in mountain bike trail development and maintenance. He loved his trailer because it made hauling a chain saw and a week's worth of food and gear back to base camp possible.

So that in mind, here is my final anal-

ogy for trailers vs. panniers. Most cars we drive have a trunk or a hatchback area we can load with gear. Even when full, the car may feel a bit heavier, but there are negligible effects on handling. Sometimes, however, we can't fit everything we need into the back of the car, so we haul a trailer.

We love the extra space and convenience the trailer creates, but we know there is a price to pay for the convenience. Our cars don't handle as well, we get worse gas mileage, they don't climb hills as well, and they are a pain to back up and maneuver. And good luck finding a parking space. Shifting to two-wheeled vehicles, how often do we really need so much gear that we can't fit it in some quality panniers?

As in everything, to each his own. For me, over-the-road bike touring is much better done with a quality set of watertight panniers. Next time you are looking to haul a bunch of chainsaws and sledge hammers down some singletrack, set up base camp, and leave the trailer behind while doing day rides from camp, a trailer might be a good tool to have. In the meantime, keep it light, and pack it in a pannier. **AC**

This is Adventure Cycling member Richard Alden's first story for Adventure Cyclist.



CHUCK HANEY

The best of both worlds Some cyclists opt for a combination of trailer and panniers.