

GIVE UP THE RACKS

If you try framepacks, you may never go back

by Jill Homer

In December 2007, I conducted a series of frustrating packing experiments while searching for the best way to carry winter camping gear on my Surly Pugsley for a 350-mile trip on Alaska's Iditarod Trail. I placed rear and front racks on the already-bulky bike and strapped standard stuff sacks on top. This proved less than ideal because it made my gear much more difficult to access in extreme cold

weather, and also made it difficult when I tried to throw my leg over the saddle. I tested traditional touring panniers, but the sizes were wrong for my large winter sleeping bag. Panniers also got in the way when I was off my bike, tending to bounce off the rack while riding the typically bumpy and soft trail conditions, even with reinforcements.

When it seemed like I wasn't going to find a solution for my admittedly unique packing needs, I received an email from Eric Parsons from Anchorage, Alaska. Parsons had just started a new business called Epic Designs (now Revelate Designs) building custom bags engineered to fit bicycles without the need for racks. "I have some ideas for you," he wrote. "Let me pimp your ride."

Parsons worked with me to design a reinforced and specifically-tapered frame bag that filled the triangle of my Pugsley. He also designed a large seat bag that clung to the saddle and, when filled, curved away from the rear wheel in a way that seemed to defy gravity.

Finally, he developed a handlebar bag that held not only my extra-large winter sleeping bag, but also a bivy sack and closed-cell foam mattress, without compromising the bike's steering. The handlebar bivy bundle was especially brilliant because it utilized a simple



Jill Homer's Surly Pugsley.

wrap-around system compressed with a series of straps. When I wanted to use my sleeping gear, all I had to do was click six buckles and my entire winter sleeping kit burst out like a pop-up tent, ready for snoozing. In subzero temperatures, the quickness and ease of the bivy bundle was a lifesaver.

When it comes to bicycle touring, a "rackless" system has several advantages: Less weight on the bike; less parts to break in rough conditions; well-suited for ultralight camping gear; improved weight distribution and handling; and more efficient use of space and less obstruction for the rider. It has disadvantages too: Less space overall; higher cost; and less adaptability. Also, the two American companies that specialize in custom frame bags, Revelate Designs and Carousel Design Works, often have wait periods of 10 weeks or more.

Ultralight bike bags come in several different forms but fit into a few general categories: Frame bags, which fit inside the main triangle of the bike frame and have one or more compartments for smaller, heavier items; top tube bags, which fasten to the frame bag and also hold small items and food; seat bags, which are designed to hang from the saddle and extend anywhere from several inches to a foot away from the seat post; and handlebar bags and harnesses with mounting systems that allow a cyclist to hang gear off the bike's handlebars.

These bags are made with heavyweight, laminated fabrics and designed to withstand the rougher conditions generally associated with mountain biking: bad weather, mud, and aggressive riding techniques. Because of their low profile and sturdy construction, and because rear and front shocks often prevent the use of traditional bike racks, these ultralight bags are becoming increasingly popular for bikepacking or self-supported mountain-bike tours.

However, these light-and-fast sys-

tems can work for road cyclists as well. Shortly after my Alaska winter tour in early 2008, I transferred all of my new bike bags to my road bike (I was lucky that the frame bag fit both fairly well), and embarked on a 350-mile tour of the Klondike, Alaska, and Haines highways in the Yukon and Southeast Alaska. A year later, I ordered a new system for my mountain bike. Those bags withstood thousands of miles of use and abuse while I was training for and riding the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route. I was firmly hooked on the lightness and ease of rackless touring.

So how do you know if a rackless system is right for you? Jeff Boatman at Carousel Design Works, who introduced the concept of ultralight bicycle-touring gear in 2006, said the main purpose of bike bags is to reduce weight and eliminate mechanical complexity. He tries to tailor his bags to his customers' specific needs, even when it doesn't include a full rackless system.

"I design bags to be ergonomically correct for riding singletrack," he said. "When a seat-post bag is packed too full, or is too large for the individual rider, it actually creates an obstruction where a rear rack might be better. So I talk to customers and try to work with their needs."

Boatman's passion is singletrack mountain biking, so he focused on developing packing systems that wouldn't compromise bike handling on technical terrain. However, he also sees a future where low-profile bike bags are the preferred system for road cyclists looking to reduce the weight of their touring gear.

"There's the group of lightweight randonnee riders who want to travel long distances and don't want to load their bikes down with a lot of gear, or want to use a lighter bike that isn't designed for touring," he said. "I can see a set-up for a carbon road bike ... where the full rackless pack system, gear, and bike all together weigh less than 25 pounds."

Boatman created his company after more than a decade of developing gear for his own personal use. He was bored



and restless following a knee injury in early 2006, and essentially opened Carousel Design Works by posting a single ad on an online forum. He has been sewing furiously ever since, and demand continues to grow at a faster rate than he

can keep up with. He continues to operate a single-person manufacturing shop near the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California, and mainly sticks with the designs and ideas he pioneered in the past two decades.

Revelate Designs has also picked up on the expanding demand for bike bags. Parsons began developing his gear for commercial use in late 2007 and within a matter of months transformed the basement hobby into a full-time career when he realized he was spending all of his free time sewing and filling orders — and still couldn't keep up.

"Growth has been explosive," he said. "The business caters to both those interested in lightweight touring, snow biking, and anything long-ride-related, even commuting. All of which are growing fast. And it's international; a solid 20 percent of my customers live abroad. Keeping up with demand has been my biggest growing pain."

Parsons and Boatman still run fairly small operations, but the market is expanding. Adventure Cycling now sells a few standard bike bags through *Cyclosource* (adventurecycling.org/store): The Escape Pod Saddle Pack and Fuel Cell Tube Pack by Carousel Design Works, and the Tangle Frame Bag by Revelate Designs. Revelate Designs is working to shorten the wait period for custom bags and develop a streamlined system so there are more bags on hand, ready to ship. Whether larger pannier manufacturers and companies decide to latch onto the rackless trend remains to be seen, but usually when demand expands, options follow.

For now, rackless bike bags are available through special order online at www.carousel-design-works.com or www.revelatedesigns.com. If you're like Jeff Boatman and Eric Parsons, both avid cyclists who like to travel light and unobstructed, bike bags are the way to go. **AC**

Jill Homer now lives in Los Altos, California, and is currently writing her second book. She is a prodigious writer and adventurer, and you can read about her latest endeavors at articglass.blogspot.com.