For most of us on our daily rides, the bike is a flamboyant companion. You stand on the pedals and feel it sprint underneath you. You lean into a corner and feel its reassuring steering geometry. You surge up a hill, and the bike is an eager partner. You see a pothole, you jump the bike over the pothole, and all is well.

When you add a sizable amount of touring gear, the relationship changes. The bike is still there, but it’s less flamboyant. Loaded with panniers, it’s more like a slow-moving workhorse. It corners a bit more slowly (but still with that reassuring feeling) because you’re riding more slowly. It laughs if you try to sprint or climb quickly. And you can forget about jumping potholes. But the bike stays with you for thousands of miles.

The same bike can have both those personalities. A good touring bike will be your spry fun-riding around-home bike and your uncomplaining pack mule on an extended adventure.

If you decide you want to purchase a touring bike, you’ll probably have to order it because most shops keep zero to one touring bikes in stock, and Murphy’s Law dictates that they will not stock one in your size.

Now here’s the big secret, and the reason why I’m comfortable telling you to not sweat the lack of a test ride: they all ride very similarly to one another. That’s right! No caster-angle understeer, no divergent negative instability, no trail-braking induced instability in hard cornering, no self-energizing wheel flop, no way for jargon writers to make you worry about your purchase. Touring bikes don’t have quirky handling. I’ve been road-testing touring bikes for 31 years and I’m
If you want to purchase a touring bike, you’ll probably have to order it because most shops keep zero to one touring bikes in stock.

up for that long trip?

For people impatient with technical detail, here’s the short answer: Go into a shop where the sales folks like meeting cus-

tomer needs and buy a real touring bike. All of them will do the job, and all of them feel quite spry when the gear is off. Put on skinny tires if you’re inclined, and the bike will handle and ride quite similarly to a racing bike. (People in bike shops generally don’t believe that, but they haven’t done as much measuring, weighing, and side-by-

side road testing as I have.)

Mass produced (i.e., less-expensive) bikes include offerings from many of the major brands: Surly, Salsa, Cannondale, Fuji, Kona, Rocky Mountain, Norco, Raleigh, and Jamis, among others. More expen-

sive brands with fancier features include Co-Motion, Independent Fabrications, Bruce Gordon, Waterford, and many more (see table on page 14).

The typical modern road bike is de-

signed like a racing bike. It must be. It isn’t fit fenders or have more weight — and it should — so you ride relaxed,

The most important thing that chases away shimmy is a big, stiff top tube. The oversized aluminum top tubes on

Cannondale frames are as stiff as it gets, and are excellent for this. The Co-Motion Americans has a steel frame with a 1-and-

1/4-inch top tube, and that will clearly do the job. Most other steel frames now sold have top tubes of 1 and 1/8 inch, which is almost always fine. If you ride a pre-1990 steel frame, its top tube may only be 1 inch. At that point, shimmy may be a problem, depending on numerous other factors.

But again, new bikes have this question figured out.

Spokes: Lots of spokes

Fancy racing wheels with good spoke spok-

ing are a fashion necessity on some club rides. They are also a perilous maintenance headache on tour. If you break a spoke, the bike becomes unrideable. Replacement spokes are proprietary to that brand of wheel, expensive, sometimes hard to find, and require far more expertise to install.

By contrast, conventionally-spoked wheels are more forgiving. Lose one of your spokes and the wheel goes slightly out of true. If you didn’t bring a replacement, the next bike shop will have one for cheap.

Today’s touring wheels usually have 32 or 36 spokes arranged in a conventional tangential pattern. Accept no less. Avoid the “paired spoke” and other cute variations.

I’ve never seen a bike sold for touring that has good spoke spoking, but plenty of people have taken quasi-racing bikes on the long haul. A good touring bike can last for a lifetime of riding.

The Sam Hillborne is the antithesis of that bike. It fits tires up to 38mm, even with fenders, so you can ride comfort-

ably — and swiftly too — on surfaces rough or smooth, wet or dry. You can raise the bar an inch or more higher than the saddle, so you ride relaxed, with little weight on your arms. It’s frame is steel, a material known for its toughness & safety, so the Sam you buy today will grow old with you. If you wreck it in a crash, it’s not junk, it’s re-

pairable. If it a car kills the steel frame, it’s recyclable — over and over again.

The Sam Hillborne frame costs $1,000, with fork. A complete bike runs about $2,250 or so, and that’s with good parts on it. Not a bunch of third choices. Nothing you’ll want to upgrade.

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tour and discovered the hard way that goofball spokes can ruin a bike trip.

The frame should fit you
There is more to frame fit than I can cover in this space, but there are a few things to emphasize for the touring cyclist. You already know that the seat needs to be the correct distance from the pedals, and the top tube needs to be low enough for you to straddle with both feet on the ground. The handlebars need to be an appropriate distance away, so you’re neither too far nor too close.

Most men (but not all) have body proportions similar enough to each other that this is not an issue. For example, I’m 5’8” and bikes that can be adjusted to fit my leg length (32-inch inseam) have effective top-tube lengths ranging from about 21 to 22 and 1/2 inches. It so happens that I can ride any of these top tube lengths, but if my arms were unusually short or unusually long, I’d be more picky.

Women have it tougher. On average, women have shorter arms for a given overall height than men, and sometimes their arms are quite a bit shorter. I was reminded of this recently, when I attempted to help a woman find an inexpensive used bike. She was two inches taller than I, and her legs were 1 and 1/2 inches longer than mine, but her arms were about four inches shorter. She needed a short top tube, short stem, and higher handlebars, and we never did find that bike on the used market. For her, or any other short-armed woman, the touring options include the Terry Valkyrie Tour, the British Thorn Audax or Club (discussed in these pages last month), or the luxury of an all-custom frame.

Even after you’ve gotten a good fit, I have an additional strong suggestion: higher handlebars. Bars that are comfy in your day-to-day routine will be too low for an extended tour and will invite a sore neck. We tourists want our handlebars 1 to 3 inches higher than you’ll see on a racing bike. On a racing bike, the handlebars are typically an inch or more below the saddle. Most touring cyclists want the bars some-

Bikecentennial 76. On the historic ride, people rode whatever bikes were in their garage, and they all worked pretty well as “touring bikes.”

where between level with the saddle and 2 inches higher than the saddle.

Which company pays most attention to handlebar height? No contest: it’s Rivendell, the mostly-mail-order purveyor of classic old-school bikes and accoutrements. Rivendell founder Grant Petersen has written many articles about the benefits of sensible handlebar height — and he walks the walk. If you buy a Rivendell, the bars will be plenty high enough.

So how do you shop for fit? You find a dealer who will take the appropriate time to make sure the bike will fit well. Many retailers do this (of course, a fit session can be a very time consuming service, so don’t balk at the cost). Co-Motion is one of several companies that do a stunning job of fit by long distance. They take your home-measured numbers and make fit prescriptions from those numbers.

The right handlebars for you
The bike industry, and therefore this Buyer’s Guide, focuses on the traditional touring bike with dropped handlebars, largely out of institutional inertia. But what’s right for tradition may or may not be right for you.

This question ignites a holy war among many Adventure Cycling members. I have received many an impassioned email, eloquently argued, about how the other guy’s way of doing it is wrong. Both upright and dropped handlebars have strong adherents. Dropped bars are more aerodynamic and have more hand positions; upright bars are more comfortable for many people and place the hands farther apart for easier control. Neither is inevitably better than the other. I personally prefer dropped bars. It doesn’t matter which style you choose — as long as you make an informed decision.

The bike industry has seldom offered an upright-handlebar bike designed for touring, so upright bar riders are forced to pick among mountain bikes and hybrids, some of which don’t have all the touring attributes you want. In particular, look suspiciously for traditionally-laced steel spokes, all-metal construction, and rack/ fender mounts.
TOURING BIKES FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

All prices and specifications may vary to some degree. Please check with the manufacturers before making any decisions.

Bilenky Cycle Works offers the light-touring Tourist ($1,349) and the traditional, steel tourer (frame: $1,250; fork, and headstock: $695) at www.bilenky.com, 603-309-7050.

Midlands ($2,029 and up) and the ultra-light titanium Travel Tour Special ($2,465) at www.adventurecycling.org.

Bruce Gordon offers the hand-built Denis & Bock, ‘New Road’ ($2,699); the Alyssium ($2,435); and the adventure-made custom LK $2 ($2,349) at www.tigercycles.com, 707-266-2200.

Jimisi Bicycles offers the classic Aurora ($1,005), and the lightweight equipment Aurora Elite ($1,450) at www.jimisi.com.

Koga Miyata offers the Worldracer ($2,100) and the Wanderer ($2,500), all with front and rear racks and many more at www.koganbikes.com, 907-689-5081.

Masi Bikes offers the Speciale ($1,500) at www.masibikes.com/steel/speciale.html.

Nashbar offers bikes and frames at www.nashbar.com, 877-688-8600.

Soma Fabrications offers the expedition expat s ($1,495) at www.somafab.com.

Terry Bicycles offers the sutra ($1,199), a custom touring frame ($2,550/$3,400), and the Panamericana (frame with shock: $2,695). They also offer the adventure bike (frame: $540; complete bike: $999) at www.terrybikes.com, 800-282-3601.

Ritchey Bicycle Works offers the Steel Long Haul ($1,995) at www.ritchey.com, 866-282-3660.

Ridgeback Bikes offers the sojourn ($1,200) at www.ridgeback.co.uk.

Riding the Cowgirl ($1,995) and the Touring 2 ($2,029) and the Touring 3 ($2,565), and the Pangea ($1,850; complete bike: $3,631): www.co-motion.com, 866-282-1560.

Tout Terrain offers a wide array of handmade touring frames at www.toutterrain.com, 800-534-8176.

Seven Cycles offers the Margate ($1,695; complete bike: $2,365 and up), the Maynax S-frame ($2,695; complete bike: $4,095 and up) and the expedition Equal S-frame ($1,745; complete bike: $2,695) at www.sevencycles.com, 877-223-7774.

Soma Fabrications offers the light-touring frames the DoubleCross ($390); the Rivendell ($490); and the BigSur ($499). They are at www.somamlab.com.

Stuflinger Bicycles offers the light-touring Touring ($1,800) and the T-14 ($2,220) and 1900 adventure cycle ($1,495) at www.stuflinger.de.

Sumi Bicycles offers the light-touring club Racer ($1,145) at www.sumibikes.com. The Panamericana ($3,140) and the T-22 and 1900 adventure cycle ($3,025) are at www.sumibikes.com.

SunTour offers the steel Long Haul Tour ($1,995); the Karate Metal ($1,495); and the Cross-Chek frame ($420; complete bike: $3,000) at www.suntour.com. They are at 877-743-3191.

Terry Bicycles offers the T-14, T-22, and 1900 adventure bicycle ($2,314) at www.terrybikes.com, 800-282-3660.

Trek Bicycle offers the steel long-haul ($1,995) and the T-22 and 1900 adventure bike ($1,495) at www.trekbikes.com, 262-534-4190.

Willits Brand Bicycles offers the adventure Tour ($1,150) and the steel long-haul touring bike ($1,250) at www.willitsbikes.com, 877-558-4446.

Waterford Cycles offers custom built touring bikes, the new Tour 1 ($2,695) and the 510 Ti ($2,927) at www.waterfordcycles.com. They are at 262-934-4190.

Windsor Bicycles offers the Touring Tour (frame: $1,800) at www.windsorbicycles.com.

CUTOM DESIGN-Touring FRAME BIKES


is that longer chainstays allow the rear panniers to be placed more in front of the rear wheel axle, for improved weight distribution. But there’s more to it than that.

Yes, weight belongs between the axles whenever possible, and the results are very good when it is. Example: the excellent handling I have experienced riding a tandem with a 200-pound stoker. The stoker’s weight is between the axles. But look at a side-view picture of a touring bike: the rear panniers are almost entirely behind the rear axle. The inch or so by which you can increase the chainstay length doesn’t change that position very much.

For this reason, we repeatedly tell people that touring bikes need front and rear panniers to distribute the load. If your rear panniers are lightly loaded, it matters less that they’re mostly behind the rear axle. Long chainstays remain desirable, though, for two other reasons: 1) the effect they have on weight distribution, and 2) heel clearance. Riders with large feet have written me many times over the decades clamoring for more heel clearance, and the only way I know to get it is with a combination of longer chainstays and smaller rear panniers.

Since day one, Cannondale has made its touring bikes with 18-inch chainstays, the longest dimension commonly available. So if you have size 13 clogppers, Cannondale rises to your short list. By contrast, Fuji’s touring bike has 17.3-inch chainstays. They’re fine for me and my size 9s, but on that bike, the bigger your feet, the smaller your rear panniers should be.

For example, Cannondale puts a 25-inch low gear on its less expensive touring bike, and a 21-inch low gear on its more expensive touring bike. Bruce Gordon’s BLT has a 19-inch low gear.

Low gears

At some point on a long tour, you’ll encounter the perfectly bad confluence of events: a steep hill, a sore butt, and low blood sugar. That moment, and not the test ride at the bike shop, is when you discover the utility of low gears.

Gearing can be a lengthy discussion by itself, and if you’re unfamiliar with the terminology and want a full primer, I urge you to go to my website, Lymeport.org, and read the gearing article in the right column blog. You can also check out Sheldon Brown’s site (sheldonbrown.com/gearing).

Here’s the short version: Gearing is expressed as a single number called “gear inches.” A 100-inch gear is a high gear for riding downhills. A 70-inch gear is for cruising on the flats. A 40-inch gear is for medium hills, and it feels ridiculously easy during that test ride at the local shop. You need a gear between 20 and 25 inches for that moment on tour when the hill is two miles long and you’re already tired.

For example, Cannondale puts a 25-inch low gear on its less expensive touring bike, and a 21-inch low gear on its more expensive touring bike. Bruce Gordon’s BLT has a 19-inch low gear.

Only 9 rear cogs

In my youth, derailier-gearred bikes had 4 rear cogs.

When I got my first derailier bike, it had 5. One by one, the cogs have piled on, and now you can get 11 (in a Campagnolo racing component group). Far more common are 10-cog systems from Shimano and SRAM, found on most of today’s good weekend-fun bikes. So what’s not to love about more cogs?

There are several factors, but the one I’ll focus on here is the chain that works with these cogs. The cogs get narrower and narrower, and so does the chain. As the chain grows narrower, it gets more and more fragile.

In the days of fewer cogs, chains almost never broke. Now chain breakage is quite common. I would have liked to have seen touring bikes settle on seven or eight cogs for this reason. But my fellow retrogrouches and I have lost that war. We have regrouped behind our makeshift bunker, shouting, “We accept nine, but please, no more!”

There is something of a step function in chain width, and durability, between 9 and 10 cogs. But you’ll still want to buy a chain tool and learn how to use it before, not after, you go on the road.

Every stock bike whose specifications I reviewed while researching this article had 9 cogs. If you get an inexpensive hybrid or mountain bike for touring, you may find fewer — in which case, I say Bravo.

Reasonable steering geometry

This is an area where myth abounds. It’s also undoubtedly not a real-world concern. You’ll hear buzzwords like “relaxed angles,” “slower, more stable steering,” and so on. These words are exaggerated to the point of almost total inaccuracy.

The bike’s head-tube angle is picked to serve a number of functions. Among them are steering stability, front/rear weight distribution, and to keep the front wheel out of the way of your feet. There isn’t a lot of wiggle room in the design.

Because of the need for weight distribution, the head-tube angle gets steeper with larger frames. I compared the head-tube angles of Fuji, Cannondale, Trek, and Jamis touring bikes. At their smallest frame sizes, the head-tube angles vary from 69 to 70.5 degrees. At their largest frame sizes, the range is from 71.8 to 72.5 degrees.

By contrast, I would expect road racing bikes in these sizes to have head angles 1 to 2 degrees steeper. And I wouldn’t care if I had a touring bike with that slightly steeper head angle.

If these one-degree differences sound tiny, it’s because they are. There was a time when overly-steep head angles were a fashion among racers who wanted something silly to brag about. But that won’t affect you here.

Note that we haven’t talked about wheelbase, but we have talked about the pieces that add up to wheelbase: chainstay length, top-tube length, and steering geometry. Wheelbase is an outcome, not a starting point. If these other dimensions are correct for your needs, the wheelbase will be fine.

For the record, touring bikes typically have a wheelbase between 40 and 42 inches.

Lastly, don’t neglect the Recumbent option. Touring on a recumbent is low-stress, fun, and quite comfortable. We’ve written extensively about recumbents before, and we’ll cover them more fully in the June issue.

We believe in the power of the bicycle to get you where you need to go. Whether you choose a casual ride or going for the long haul, our line of bicycle accessories help you expand your horizons by keeping you safe, dry, comfortable, and prepared.

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