

# Touring Bike Buyer's Guide

## 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 diving into sub genres), the availability of stock, factory-made bikes suitable for loaded touring has shrunk. Yes, if you use a trailer, your selection greatly expands, with a "light" touring model (not to be confused with the bike being super light weight) serving quite well. For we old fashion tourists, who think panniers provide the ideal system, except in some circumstances (for which I'm sure to get passionate, logical arguments for trailers), I'll concentrate on LTBs for this article. If you wish to weigh the pros-cons of trailers, you can dig into *Adventure Cyclist's* publications archive ([adventurecycling.org/library](http://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) that you can take 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 concentrate on before ordering an LTB, which, typically, you have to buy before shipment, with a no-refund policy. Even if you can return it, it's likely you'll face a hefty reshipping/restocking 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

loaded touring?" If the answer is "not very often," then the range of bikes that will fit your needs expands to include many 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* will cover non-standard diamond-frame bikes in the June issue, so I'll put these aside for now. But don't get me wrong, my wife and I owned a recumbent tandem for years, so we have experienced the joy that a machine like this can bring.

If you live within a day's ride of a bicycle shop (arriving under your own power gives you street credibility), spend time talking with anyone on the staff who has toured. Stay away from department stores, sporting good stores, or anywhere that carries only one brand or that doesn't have a full-service mechanic. Of the many things you take on the road, the backup you'll need from a well-regarded bike shop is invaluable. Not only can they help you find the best touring bike for you and ensure you've got all the proper tools before sending you on your way, they can serve as your remote road-side assistance if you need a part shipped to (or near) an inevitable breakdown.

Assuming you already own an LTB, you've already begun the process of find-

ing a new one by having a well-researched data point — your current steed! But by all means, riding a few light touring bikes will give you great insights on whether one will work for you. If not, it gives you multiple data points to extrapolate from as to which LTB is worth purchasing. One of the first questions 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 Y-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 steeper, short-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) sprint. 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 or cars 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 good ride, let's back up half 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 designs, hopefully yours being one of them. Imagine for a moment that you were given a seat at the proverbial drawing board with nine renowned designers. Let's walk through 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 far 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 the best race-oriented fitting, a mechanic well versed in the needs of a tourist should be able to optimize your fit for just that purpose. A crude approximation is that your inseam should be two inches longer than the height of the top tube for road bikes. Old-school thinking was one inch of clearance, but this measurement has lately been sensibly increased. Straddling the top tube's midpoint, pick up the bike as high as you can, with front and rear wheels approximately the same height above the ground. Have someone measure the height of the wheels. Even if the average is three inches, go ahead and try this small size just to see how it feels compared with other bikes you're trying out. Make sure the seat and handle bars are adjustable with sufficient travel so that you don't have to excessively stretch to grasp all hand positions on the handlebars.



Kona Sutra

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

**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, rewash it and 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 introduce 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 gathering touring experts in a room. Encompass as many aspects of your tour as possible. Mountains? Ride mountains. Rough roads (with 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 (32 minimum) with three-cross lacing (each spoke crosses three other 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 with this slow-me-down package you ask? For touring, nothing at all. If you're a track-racer, where acceleration is king, every



Tout Terrain Panamericano

### Online Extras:

Need more tips and inspiration for your tour? Michelle Cassel and Ryan McAfee of America ByCycle are contributing four online exclusives this month to our blog. Read them on Tuesdays in April via this quick link: [adventurecycling.org/onlineextras](http://adventurecycling.org/onlineextras).

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 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

## Devinci Caribou



weight should not enter into the equation. Beefier 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 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! **AC**

*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 tourers only — not bikes that *might* make good touring bikes. Many of the bikes in this table come in several configurations, including

custom versions, with varying costs associated. No prices reflect shipping costs.

**611 Bicycle Company** Handmade Touring model (\$2275 and up). sixelevenbicycle.com, 540-929-0611.

**Ahearn Cycles** Custom Touring model (\$750 deposit). ahearncycles.com, 503-473-2102.

**Bianchi Volpe** (\$1200). bianchiusa.com/bikes/road/steel/volpe, 510-264-1001.

**Bilenky Cycle Works** Steel Midlands (\$3700 and up); S&S coupled Travel versions (\$3850 and up); Tourlite (\$3545 and up). bilenky.com, 215-329-4744.

**Boocycles** Boo T (bamboo with integrated rear rack: \$3215 and up). boocycles.com, 515-554-9226.

**Bowen Bicycle Works** Custom Touring frame, fork, headset (\$2195). bowenbicycles.com/TOURING.html#, 860-836-9765.

**Brodie** Elan (\$1649); Argus (\$1299). brodiebikes.com/2012/bikes/speed.php, 604-325-2033.

**Bruce Gordon** Hand-built 700C Rock 'n Road Tour and 26-inch Tour-Ex (\$2999; with racks \$3349; frame & fork \$1600); and the factory-made BLT – Basic Loaded Touring (fully loaded \$1725; basic \$750; frame & fork \$500). bgcycles.com, 707-762-5601.

**Co-Motion Cycles** 700C Americano (\$3845); Americano Rohloff with Gates (\$5200); 26-inch Pangea (\$3845); Pangea Rohloff with Gates (\$5200); 29er Divide (\$3925); Cascadia (\$3845). co-motion.com, 866-282-6336.

**Cyfac** Replica (\$2600 and up); RandoNerv (\$2600 and up); Vintage (\$3500 and up); Integraal (\$4800 and up); Custom Horizon

(\$11000 and up). Custom available for all models. cyfac.fr, +33 (0)2 47 24 67 42.

**Dawes Cycles** offers a line of nine touring models from the £599 Vantage to £1799 Ultra Galaxy. dawescycles.com.

**Devinci** Caribou 1 & 2 (\$949 & \$1549). devinci.com, 888-338-4624.

**Ellis Cycles** Lugged Tour/ Randonneur (\$3,400 and up). elliscycles.com, 262-442-6639.

**Fuji** Touring model (\$1119). fujibikes.com/bike/details/touring5, 800-631-8474.

**Gilles Berthoud** Highly-customizable 26-inch and 700C steel touring bikes (€1875 and up). www.gillesberthoud.fr (English also), +33 03 85 51 46 51.

**GT** Peace Tour (\$850). gtbicycles.com/Peace-Tour, 800-843-2453.

**Gunnar Bikes** Rock Tour, a 26-inch mountain bike designed for loaded touring and the Grand Tour, a traditional 700C touring (both \$1025 and up). gunnarbikes.com, 262-534-4190.

**Hewitt** Cheviot (£425); Cheviot SE (£625); Gram-pian (£899). All models frame & fork. Rohloff available. hewittbikefitting.co.uk, +44 01772 424773.

**idworx Bikes** A variety of trekking bikes with Rohloff hubs and Gates belt drives, including the Easy Rohler, Off Rohler, and Easy TiRohler (\$3400 and up). idworx-bikes.de, +49 228 184700. Site in German.

**Independent Fabrication** Independence touring and the Club Racer light-touring frame sets (steel \$2295; titanium \$4095). www.ifbikes.com, 603-292-5673.

**Innerlight Cycles** Hand-crafted Touring H1 and 26" H2 (Click on Options for price list). innerlightcycles.com/hybrid.htm, 530-795-3454.

**Ira Ryan Cycles** Touring model (custom only: \$2300 and up) iraryancycles.com/bikes/tour, 503-810-2504.

**Jamis Bicycles** offers three touring bikes with chromoly frames including the classic Aurora (\$950), the Aurora Elite (\$1600), and cyclo-cross-inspired Bosanova (\$1275). www.jamisbikes.com, 800-222-0570.

**Kona** Sutra (\$1499), a steel tourer with mechanical disc brakes. konaworld.com, 360-366-0951.

**Kross** Trans Sander, Trans Arctica, Trans Pacific, and Trans Global (all models 1519 PLN and up). kross.pl, 029 722 44 45.

**Littleford Custom Bicycles** Standard Tourer (\$3220); Classic Tourer (\$3990); Urban Utility (\$4725); Sport Tourer (\$5025); Randonneur (\$5150); Expedition Rig (\$5495). Many options available including frame sets. littlefordbicycles.com, 503-922-1934.

**LPY Cycles** Touring Frame and fork (£350). www.lpycycles.com.

**Marioni** Turismo (\$875/\$1000); Turismo Extreme (\$925/\$1050). marioni.qc.ca/html/Touring.html, 450-471-7133.

**Mariposa** Touring and Randonneur frame and fork (Custom only: \$1950). mariposabicycles.com, 416-423-0456.

**Mitch Pryor Bicycles** (map) Custom touring frameset (\$3000 and up). mapbicycles.com, 503-285-0446.

**Moots** Vamoots (various configurations: \$3195 and up). moots.com, 970-879-1676.

**Motobecane** Gran Turismo (\$800). bikesdirect.com/products/motobecane/gran\_turismo.htm.

**Mt. Airy Bicycles** Carries many hard-to-find and classic touring models. They have access to the remaining Koga Miyata touring models. www.bike123.com, 301-831-5151.

**Naked Bicycles** Hand-crafted Grand Adventure models Basic (\$1595); Americano (\$2495); Globetrotter (\$2295); Stainless: \$3295; Deutsche (Rohloff: \$3995). Custom also available. timetogetnaked.com, 250-285-3181.

**Nashbar** Double-butted Aluminum Touring Frame (\$99-\$199). nashbar.com, 877-688-8600.

**Novara** by REI Safari (\$899), Randonnee (\$1199), and light touring Verita (1199). rei.com/novara, 800-426-4840.

**Pākē** C'Mute frame (\$260). pakebikes.com/product/F8EF09/C'Mute+Frame. Opus Touring; Legato, Largo (PNA). opusbike.com/en/bikes-5-road.html.

**Pashley Cycles** offers the ultra-classic Clubman Country (\$2,695). britishbicycle.com, pashley.co.uk, +44 01789 292 263.

**Pereira Cycles** Touring and Randonneur Bikes (frame & fork: \$2700; complete bike: \$3900). www.pereira-cycles.com, 503-333-5043.

**Peter Mooney Cycles/ Belmont Wheelworks** Touring and Randonneur models (\$2650 and up). peter-mooney.com, 617-489-3577.

**Raleigh Bicycles** Sojourn (\$1200) and the Port Townsend (\$850): www.raleighusa.com, 800-222-5527.

**Rando Cycles** Basic (€999), the Camper (€1999), the Globe-Trotter (€2999), the Tourer (€1999), and the Voyager (€3999): rando-cycles.fr (click on Liste des valor), +33 01 43 41 18 10. Site in French.

**Raleigh Bicycles** Sojourn (\$1200) and the Port Townsend (\$850): www.raleighusa.com, 800-222-5527.

**Ridgeback Bikes** Panorama (£1249); Journey (£1149); and Voyage (£849). ridgeback.co.uk.

**Rivendell Bicycle Works** Atlantis (frame, fork, and headset \$2000), Hunqapillar, a touring-trail bike (frame, fork and headset \$1800); custom touring frames (\$3,500 and up). rivbike.com, 800-345-3918.

**Roberts Cycles** offers the Clubman (£995), Transcontinental (£1050), Cumbria (NA), Roughstuff (£1100), and Women's Compact Tour (£995). robertscycles.com, +44 (0)20-8684 3370.

**Rodriguez Bicycles** Adventure (\$1,899 and up); S&S-equipped (\$2,699 and up); the Willie Weir co-designed UTB (Ultimate Touring Bike from \$2,099); Custom models with Rohloff (\$3999 and up). rodcycle.com, 206-527-4822.

**Salsa** Vaya TI complete bike (\$2999); TI frameset (\$1999); Vaya 2 (complete: \$1699; Vaya 3 complete: \$1350); Vaya 2/3 frameset (\$599); 29er Fargo (titanium complete: \$3299; titanium frameset: \$1999). Fargo 2 (complete: \$1749; frameset \$599); Fargo 3 (complete:

\$1399; frameset: \$599); Casseroll (complete: \$1199; frame/fork/front rack: \$599). salsacycles.com, 877-668-6223.

**Santos** Travelmaster (\$1549 to \$3399); Trekking (\$1639 to \$3399), Trekking Comfort (\$1999 to \$3699), Trekking Lite (\$1749 to \$3599), and Travel Lite (\$3299). santosbikes.com, +31 (0)252 426123.

**Seven Cycles** Expat; Expat S; Expat SL (frame only \$2095; \$2795; \$3595): sevendcycles.com, 617-923-7774.

**Soma Fabrications** Heavy duty Saga Touring (frame and fork \$500), and the Tradesman Cargo front loading frame (\$699): somafab.com.

**Spectrum** Steel and titanium custom touring bikes (\$2850 and up). spectrum-cycles.com, 610-398-1986.

**Steelman Cycles** Steel custom touring bikes (\$2750 and up). steelmancycles.com, 650-364-3939.

**Surly** Long-Haul Trucker (LHT frame: \$469, bike \$1275; Deluxe frame \$849) and the 26" Troll (frame: \$430, bike: \$1399). surlybikes.com, 877-743-3191.

**Sycip** 26" or 700C steel Touring Roadster (production and custom models: \$1295 and up): sycip.com, 707-542-6359.

**Terry Bicycles** Valkyrie Tour (hand built by Waterford Precision \$3500). terrybicycles.com, 800-289-8379.

**Thorn Cycles** Expedition Nomad (£2099 and up); Raven (£1949 and up); Sherpa (£1330 and up). Rohloff hubs and Gates drives available. All bikes can be completely outfitted. PDFs online loaded with information on all models. thorncycles.co.uk.

**Tout Terrain** Full-suspension Panamericana (€3890 and up); Grand Route (€2790 and up); Silkroad (€1990 and up). en.tout-terrain.de, +49 761 20551000.

**Trek 520** (\$1,479.99). www.trekbikes.com, 800-879-8735.

**True North Cycles** 26", 700C, or 650B models from expedition to light touring; many options available (\$1500 and up). truorthcycles.com, 519-585-0600.

**Vanilla Bicycles** Touring and Randonnee models. Wait time currently over 5 years. www.vanillabicycles.com, 503-233-2453.

**Velosmith** Jota (\$A6360), Cyclotouriste (\$A4650), and Great Southern (\$A4650). Custom also. Available in Australia only. velosmith.com.au, +61 (0)3 6266 4582.

**Velotraum** Konzept (€1300 and up). velotraum.de/system/velotraum-konzept, telefax: (07033) 81505. Site in German.

**Waterford Cycles** T-14 and T-22 Adventure Cycle models (all bike custom built, check for pricing). waterfordbikes.com, 262-534-4190.

**Windsor Bicycles** offers the steel touring bike, the Tourist (\$1,495): windsorbicycles.com.

**Note:** The June issue of Adventure Cyclist will cover non-standard bicycles and will contain a table of tandems, recumbents, folding bikes, and more.

## Reflecting on 20 years of touring memories



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