



# Q&A

by John Schubert

## with the TE

### Conversations between our Technical Editor and *Adventure Cyclist* readers sheds light on buying a touring bike

Let's start with the good news: A lot of manufacturers make touring bikes and they are all reasonably well suited for touring. So be assured from the git-go that it's hard to bring home an unsuitable bike.

No, they aren't all exactly the same, but they're fairly close.

The major differences among touring bikes are fairly small. Some bikes are heavier-duty than others (wider tires, stiffer frame tubes, more weigh). Some have more or special brazed-on bosses. Some cost less, some cost more. (The difference can buy you fancier components, the mystique of "handmade," a custom-fitted frame if you spend enough, and some nice cosmetics.) Some disassemble and fit into suitcases (S&S couplers, Ritchey Breakaway system).

But I haven't seen any that are just plain too delicate for touring with camping gear on reasonable roads. Nor have I seen a self-named "touring bike" that didn't have rack mounts. Therefore, I haven't seen any I'd regret taking on a long-distance tour.

Usually, we use this space to remind ourselves (and you) of the basic requirements: chainstays of 17.5 to 18 inches, a low gear of 20 to 25 gear inches, a frame that fits you, and that all-important admonition to distribute your heavy camping load between front and rear bags. We mumble inconclusively about the difference between steel and aluminum (the short answer: it's inconclusive) and bemoan the fact that touring bikes are seldom in stock in most bike shops.

This last factor leads to another: a touring cyclist often must buy a touring bike sight-unseen and

not test ridden. The best advice I have is, "It's not so bad. Get used to it." Indeed, every touring bike I've test-ridden in the last 20 years rode exactly as I anticipated it would. You really can buy a modern touring bike with confidence. Sure, it would be nice to test-ride a half-dozen candidates, but that's not going to happen.

But what have you been asking us? Over the years, I've collected quite a few of your how-to-buy questions, along with my best shot at offering answers. You ask us what to buy, how to select it, and how to set it up for your needs after you've bought it. Or you ask if a bike you already own can handle a particular trip. (The people who ask that generally have ambitious trips in mind!)

And you ask us about replacing old bikes.

Tom from North Dakota wondered if he should replace his aging steel Trek 520, the "standard" touring bike if ever there was one, with a new bike with S&S couplers for travel, or get couplers installed on the Trek

my life. I want to be able to use this bike for recreational rides and the occasional tour, but since my early days of touring, I now have a bad back and need to get the most comfortable ride I can find. The local retailers all sing the praises of carbon frames as being able to dampen vibration and provide the most comfort. However, I am puzzled since in your recent buyers' guide article you don't mention carbon at all, and claim indifference to the question of steel versus aluminum. The retailers make it sound like carbon frames are almost on a par with the invention of the wheel when it comes to improving the riding experience. And even though steel and aluminum frames are much cheaper, I'm willing to spend the extra money if it is going to mean more pain-free riding. So I am wondering if, in your opinion, the retailers are correct, and in addition, whether you have any insights to offer on the three full carbon models they are recommending: the Trek Pilot 5.0, the Specialized Roubaix Comp, and the Lemond Buenos Aires."

capacity to accept wide tires. Two of the three have wheels with goofball spoking that requires a shop repair for a broken spoke, and Adventure Cycling has seen many riders find their dream-of-a-lifetime trips seriously bunged up when a spoke breaks.

"On conventionally spoked wheels, by contrast, a broken spoke is easily field repairable, and the wheel can normally be ridden a few miles to the next rest stop to do the repair there.

"How do you tell conventional from goofball? Conventionally spoked wheels have 32, 36, or 40 thin steel spokes in a regular pattern. Goofball spoked wheels may have steel spokes in odd-looking clusters (leaving large gaps in the rim between spoke holes) or may have a small number of bladed spokes made from carbon fiber or aluminum. These wheel configurations are all about style, not performance.

"Regarding your question about frame material: most people will tell you that carbon-fiber bikes should be handled more carefully than we sometimes handle our touring bikes, and with rare exceptions, carbon-fiber bikes don't have rack mounts.

"I'm not ideologically opposed to carbon touring bikes. If someone designs a carbon-fiber bike to be roughly handled the way a touring bike is, I'd be happy to try it out. Heck, they make carbon-fiber airplanes that are designed to be shot at, so this shouldn't be insurmountable. But I don't think the industry sees many prospective buyers waiting for a carbon touring bike, so they aren't pouring resources into this.

"No doubt, carbon has a comfort advantage — but that's not the whole story. Which is going to be more comfortable: a carbon-fiber bike with 25 mm cross-section tires at 110 psi or a steel/aluminum bike with 32 mm cross-section tires at 85 psi?"

"You haven't mentioned the single biggest factor in comfort, which is how well the bike fits you. Your back problem suggests that you should get some special attention so that your riding helps, not hinders, your back. Pony up for a good fit session, and get measurements that you can readily transfer to any other bike. You may find that your rider position can be adjusted to make cycling more comfortable, and you may find that various cycling habits — how you sit on the bike, where you bear your weight, etc. — can be modified to improve your comfort.

"I think everyone should have a True



**Welcome to America.** *There's nothing like a good touring bike for a cross-country trip.*

for thousands less.

My response, purely on a gut-feeling level: get the new bike. (Did I mention he had 30,000 miles on his Trek?) One can analyze this issue at length, but a bike that well-used may have metal fatigue and corrosion problems. Or it may not.

George from Seattle asked a question typical of what a lot of readers face: "I am a 54 year old looking to buy the best ride of

Here's how I answered George:

"We (Adventure Cycling) focus on bikes made to be practical for bicycle travel. That means the bikes have to accept pannier racks, wide tires, wide-range gearing, etc., and also have to be field repairable and not too delicate.

"The three models you mention, while very nice machines, flunk this litmus test. I believe none have rack mounts or the



**Wok and roll.** Andy MacIntyre heads for Alaska with his favorite wok/pannier shield in tow.

touring bike. It's far more useful and versatile than the go-fast bikes you mentioned, without being significantly slower. (You can always put skinnier tires on it if you want.) Trek, Cannondale, Raleigh, Jamis, Rocky Mountain, Surly, and Bianchi are among the major companies that make true touring bikes, and you're in a price range that would allow you to consider small-production bikes from the likes of Bruce Gordon, Co-Motion, and others."

Greg from Middlesex, Vermont was one of many people who have asked what I think of mountain bikes and upright-handlebar hybrids for touring.

"You said that a mountain bike could be used for touring, we just don't think of them that way," Greg wrote. "Could you elaborate on the pros and cons of using a mountain bike for road touring? I ride in Vermont, and I find that a mountain bike's low gearing and wide tires are handy for

our steep hills and rough dirt roads, but I didn't think it would be a good bike type for a multi-day or even all-day road tour."

Here's how I replied: "To oversimplify some: if one wants to tour on a mountain bike, have at it. If one doesn't, then one should get a road touring bike.

"The big difference is the handlebar configuration and rider posture. The arguments about this are endless, but at the end of the day the most important argument is 'what do you like?' One objective argument that may or may not be important to you is that the mountain-bike posture typically has more wind resistance because of (a) the upright posture and (b) the arms being farther apart. Historically, mountain bike riders on Adventure Cycling tours have been slower than dropped-bar riders because of this wind-resistance question.

"If your gut tells you you want dropped handlebars, get 'em. If you see someone out there riding on mountain-bike bars and he's happy with his choice, with all the various pros and cons, well, he's okay too."

Now here come the footnotes:

Make sure your mountain bike/hybrid will accept racks. Typically, this means either the bike has rack eyelets or will accept the eyelet-less rack mounting of



## Versa-Thrillity

The Casseroll Triple delivers Versa-Thrillity. Sure, that may be a made-up word...but let us explain.

The Casseroll is a road bike with real road bike geometry, not a cross bike or hybrid bike. It's definitely not about road racing though. Casseroll is about road riding, whether for commuting, fitness, or just looking at the scenery.

Our Casseroll recipe begins with double-butted Salsa Classico CroMoly tubing for both frame and fork. We utilize a semi-sloping geometry to provide a fit-friendly platform and increased rider comfort. The frameset accepts really large road tires so you can take on some potholes and rough roads or just add a bunch of comfort to your ride. Designed around long-reach brakes, the Casseroll can take up to 700c x 32mm tires while running full fenders. Add a rear rack if you like, and there's a good old-fashioned pump peg to boot.

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# TOURING BIKES FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

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

**Bianchi** offers the Volpe Steel 105/Tiagra (\$1,099): [www.bianchiusa.com](http://www.bianchiusa.com), 510-264-1001.

**Bilenky Cycle Works** offers the light-touring Tourlite (\$2,895 and up); the traditional, steel Midlands (\$2,520 and up); and the coupling-equipped Travel Tour Special (\$2,355): [www.bilenky.com](http://www.bilenky.com), 215-329-4744.

**Bruce Gordon** offers the hand-built Rock 'n Road (\$2,999; \$3,349 with racks), and the factory-made BLT (\$2,349; \$2,699 with racks): [www.bgcycles.com](http://www.bgcycles.com), 707-762-5601.

**Cannondale** offers the rack-equipped, aluminum Touring 1 (\$1,999) and the Touring 2 (\$1,439): [www.cannondale.com](http://www.cannondale.com), 800-245-3872.

**Co-Motion Cycles** offers the light touring Nor'Wester (\$1,685 frame & fork; \$3,245 complete bike), the around-the-world Americano (\$1,835 frame and fork; \$3,545 complete bike), and the Pangea (\$1,835 frame and fork; \$3,545 complete bike): [www.co-motion.com](http://www.co-motion.com), 541-342-4583.

**Fuji Bicycles** offers the traditional steel Touring model (\$1,100): [www.fujibikes.com](http://www.fujibikes.com), 215-824-3854.

**Gilles Berthoud** offers highly customizable steel touring bikes from France (\$4,800 and up): [www.gillesberthoud.fr](http://www.gillesberthoud.fr), 818-248-1814.

**Gunnar Bikes** offers the Rock Tour, a mountain bike designed for loaded touring (\$975 frame. Add \$375 for matching fork with rack mounts): [www.gunnarbikes.com](http://www.gunnarbikes.com), 262-534-4190.

**Independent Fabrication** offers the Independence frame set (\$2,100 steel; \$3,640 titanium) for long-distance touring, and the light-touring Club Racer frame set (\$2,050 steel; \$3,640 titanium): [www.ifbikes.com](http://www.ifbikes.com), 617-666-3609.

**Jamis Bicycles** offers the classic Aurora (\$865), and the carbon-fork equipped Aurora Elite (\$1,350): [www.jamisbikes.com](http://www.jamisbikes.com), 201-768-9050.

**Koga Miyata** offers the Worldtraveller (\$2,885), and the Traveller (\$2,250), all with front/rear racks and many accessories: [www.kogausa.com](http://www.kogausa.com).

**Kona** offers the Sutra (\$1,199), a steel tourer with mechanical disc brakes: [www.konaworld.com](http://www.konaworld.com), 360-366-0951.

**Litespeed** offers the new Merlin Aspen (\$3,000 frame), which can be built in numerous configurations, including touring: [www.litespeed.com](http://www.litespeed.com), 800-426-4840.

**Raleigh Bicycles** offers the Sojourn (\$1,225): [www.raleighusa.com](http://www.raleighusa.com), 253-395-1100.

**REI** offers the Novara Safari (\$849) and the Novara Randonee (\$1,049): [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com), (800) 426-4840.

**Rivendell Bicycle Works** offers custom touring frames (\$3,000 to \$3,300). They also offer the Atlantis (\$2,000, frame, fork, and headset): [www.rivbike.com](http://www.rivbike.com), 800-345-3918.

**Rodriguez Bicycles** offers the Randonneur (\$1,599); the Adventure (\$2,599 to \$4,499); the S&S-equipped W2 (\$2,949 to \$5,199), co-designed by Willie Weir: [www.rodcycles.com](http://www.rodcycles.com), 206-527-4822.

**Rocky Mountain Bicycles** offers two steel tourers, the Sherpa 10 (\$1,199) and the Sherpa 30 (\$1,599): [www.bikes.com](http://www.bikes.com), 604-527-9993.

**Salsa** offers the adventure-touring 29er Fargo frame (\$650) and complete bike (\$2,000): [www.salsacycles.com](http://www.salsacycles.com), 877-668-6223.

**Santana** offers a wide array of tandems suitable for touring (starting at \$3,495): [www.santanatandem.com](http://www.santanatandem.com), 800-334-6136.

**Seven Cycles** offers custom titanium touring bikes, the Vacanza (\$3,495 frame, \$6,000 to \$9,300 complete bike); the Muse (\$2,595 frame, \$4,100 to \$7,800 complete bike): [www.sevencycles.com](http://www.sevencycles.com), 617-923-7774.

**Soma Fabrications** offers the light touring frames the DoubleCross (\$399), the Smoothie ES (\$399), and the Speedster Road Sport (\$795): [www.somafab.com](http://www.somafab.com).

**Specialized** offers the light-touring Sequoia in two aluminum versions (\$880 to \$1,250): [www.specialized.com](http://www.specialized.com), 877-808-8154.

**Surly** offers the steel Long Haul Trucker (\$420 frame set; \$1,095 complete bike), the Karate Monkey (\$465 frame set; \$1,175 complete bike), and the Cross-Check (\$420 frame set; \$1,050 complete bike): [www.surlybikes.com](http://www.surlybikes.com), 877-743-3191.

**Terry Bicycles** offers the Valkyrie Tour (\$2,305) and the Isis Sport (\$2,395) for light touring: [www.terrybicycles.com](http://www.terrybicycles.com), (800) 289-8379.

**Trek** offers the venerable steel 520 (\$1,319): [www.trekbikes.com](http://www.trekbikes.com), 920-478-2191.

**The Urbane Cyclist** offers a variety of touring, recumbents, and folding bikes: [www.ucycle.com](http://www.ucycle.com), 416-979-9733.

**Waterford Cycles** offers custom-built touring bikes, the T-22 (\$1,800 frame) and the TIG T-14 (\$1,400): [www.waterfordbikes.com](http://www.waterfordbikes.com), 262-534-4190.

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

## RECUMBENTS

**Cycle Genius** offers the Falcon long wheelbase (\$1,350): [www.cyclegenius.com](http://www.cyclegenius.com), 866-901-2453.

**Easy Racers** offers the Tour Easy (\$2,495), the Javelin (\$1,595), the Gold Rush (\$3,495), the Fold Rush (\$3,995), the titanium Ti-Rush (\$5,900) and the new carbon fiber C-Rush (\$6,500): [www.easyracers.com](http://www.easyracers.com), 831-722-9797.

**Lightning Cycle Dynamics** offers the P-38 (\$2,000 frame set, \$3,000 and up for full bike): [www.lightningbikes.com](http://www.lightningbikes.com), 805-736-0700.

**Longbikes** offers the Eliminator (\$2,895 and up) and the Slipstream (\$2,795 and up): [www.longbikes.com](http://www.longbikes.com), 303-986-9300.

**Rans** offers the long-wheelbase Stratus LE (\$1,595) and the short-wheelbase VRex LE (\$1,485): [www.ransbikes.com](http://www.ransbikes.com), 785-625-6346.

**WhizWheelz** offers the TerraTrike recumbent tricycle in a variety of models (\$999 to \$4,999), including tandems: [www.whizwheelz.com](http://www.whizwheelz.com), 269-945-

5581.

**Turner Recumbents** offers the Transport (\$960): [www.turnerreccumbents.com](http://www.turnerreccumbents.com), 520-290-5646.

## FOLDING BIKES

**Airimal Designs** offers the 24-inch, Joey Explore and Explore Elite (\$1,550 and \$2,800) and the Rhino (\$3,500): [www.airimal.com](http://www.airimal.com), +44 (0) 1954 782020.

**Bike Friday** offers folding/touring bikes (\$895 and up): [www.bikefriday.com](http://www.bikefriday.com), 800-777-0258.

**Birdy Bicycles** offers five folding touring bikes with 14-speed Rohloff hubs (\$1,315 to \$3,815): [www.birdybike.com](http://www.birdybike.com), 503-391-7602.

**Brompton** offers the P6R (\$1,125) and P6R-X ((\$1,740): [www.bromptonbicycle.co.uk](http://www.bromptonbicycle.co.uk), +44(0) 208-232-8484.

**Moulton** offers the TSR-27, TSR-30, and the AM Esprit (\$1,320 and up): [www.alexmoulton.co.uk](http://www.alexmoulton.co.uk), +44 (0) 122 586 5895.

**Dahon Folding Bicycles** offers the Smooth Hound (\$999) and the Tornado (\$2,499): [www.dahon.com](http://www.dahon.com), 800-442-3511.

## CUSTOM BUILDERS

**Curt Goodrich Bicycles** [www.curtgoodrich.com](http://www.curtgoodrich.com), 612-788-6812.

**J. Peter Weigle** email: [jpweigle@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jpweigle@sbcglobal.net), 860-434-0700.

**Mariposa** [www.mariposabicycles.com](http://www.mariposabicycles.com), 416-423-0456

**Pereira Cycles** [www.pereiracycles.com](http://www.pereiracycles.com), 503-333-5043.

**Peter Mooney Cycles** [www.peter-mooney.com](http://www.peter-mooney.com), 617-489-3577

**Rex Cycles** [www.rexcycles.com](http://www.rexcycles.com), 916-446-5706.

**Spectrum** [www.spectrumcycles.com](http://www.spectrumcycles.com), 610-398-1986.

**Steelman Cycles** [www.steelmancycles.com](http://www.steelmancycles.com), 650-364-3939.

**True North Cycles** [www.true-northcycles.com](http://www.true-northcycles.com), 519-585-0600.

**Vanilla Bicycles** [www.vanillabicycles.com](http://www.vanillabicycles.com), 503-233-2453.

**Willits Brand Bicycles** [www.willitsbikes.com](http://www.willitsbikes.com), 877-558-4446.

racks made by Old Man Mountain.

Make sure your hybrid has clearance for wide tires (700 x 32C or better — and with fenders if at all possible.) A few hybrid models are urban go-fast bikes made to accept only skinny tires.

Make sure the bike has wheels with the traditional tangent-spoke pattern and plain ol' steel spokes. These wheels are field-repairable. The more contemporary wheel designs are not field repairable, and they give you no advantage other than edgy appearance.

Not long ago, I wrote an article about this very topic, citing the Giant Cypress as an inexpensive-but-good hybrid that makes sense for touring. I got a lot of mail, some of it from dropped-handlebar diehards who believe their way is “right” and flat handlebars are “wrong.” Even though I myself favor dropped handlebars, I disagree. There are many eloquent arguments in favor of dropped bars — but some people simply prefer the upright bars. Let them do so in peace.

Will, the college professor from New York, wrote: “I am seeing some bikes pitched at the touring market (e.g., the Kona Sutra) equipped with a straight fork. Why straight? Are there any inherent pros/cons? Are there any rake/trail limitations?”

At last! A question with a straightforward answer. Here 'tis: Straight is for style/appearance. As a side bonus, it's easier to make. You lose a teeny bit of fork flex, but it's so much less than the flex in the tires that it's not worth worrying about.



**Missed opportunities.** It's the rare bike shop that keeps touring bikes on the sales floor.

They can make a straight fork to any rake/trail spec they want. I once ran these questions by engineer extraordinaire Jim Papadopoulos, the nation's leading bicycle dynamics authority, and he gave the straight forks a clean bill of health.

Harv from Arizona asked how fat a tire he needed for off-road touring. “We'd like to do some off-road touring. Perhaps part of the Great Divide Route. Also, here in Arizona, we have a lot of dirt and gravel roads. We've considered getting hard-tail mountain bikes with town and country tires, but two more bikes would bring our total to seven for only two of us!

“If I got some Schwalbe Expedition Tires, would our Co-Motion touring bikes work about as well as mountain bikes for dirt and gravel roads and the occasional trail?”

After telling him he didn't have enough bikes yet, I prevaricated my way through an answer:

“It depends on the rider, the bike, the tire, and the gravel/dirt.

“At one extreme is a crushed limestone rail-trail. At the other extreme is the Great Divide Route, which in places is an unending array of football-size boulders.

“Riders vary just as much as trails. Some riders (not I) think they need a mountain bike for the crushed limestone; everyone needs a mountain bike for the rough boulders. For me personally, the tipping point would be when the trail has enough rocks, ruts, and roots that it isn't even trying to look like a groomed rail trail. At that point I'd want mountain-bike width tires.

“The easy answer is the conservative answer: buy mountain bikes, because you might find yourselves on some really rough trails and/or you might prefer the mountain bike on semi-rough trails.”

Brian from Michigan is one of several people who've asked what I think of switching a mountain bike into a touring bike by changing it to dropped handlebars. Here's what I told Brian:

“Replacing the handlebar reaches a financial tipping point. You also have to replace the brake levers, shift levers, handlebar stem, handlebar tape, and a bunch of cables. The cost will clear your sinuses.



**Versatility.** Old Man Mountain racks fit on virtually any bike, like this Great Divide rig.

# salsa fargo

a new breed  
of touring  
bike?



Good touring bikes have always been able to handle the rough stuff, whether it's cavernous potholes or remote dirt roads, but they've never been designed for *real* mountain biking. Mountain bikes, as you might guess, are in fact designed for mountain biking. With their stout frames, high bottom brackets, and meaty tires, they handle trails and rough, rocky roads with aplomb. In the good old days of the 1980s and early 1990s, mountain bikes made great touring rigs, with their steel frames, strong wheels, and rack eyelets (these bikes are still good options, if you can find them). Today's mountain bikes are typically made of aluminum or carbon fiber, lack rack eyelets, and come with things like hydraulic disc brakes and air-sprung rear suspension. They perform amazingly well on technical terrain, but their complexity and single-purpose design leaves them less suitable for all but the most rugged long-distance tours.

As more and more mountain bikers experiment with off-road touring, the question is what should they ride?

The crew at Salsa Cycles has come out with their answer: the Fargo.

As Salsa's Jason Boucher puts it, "The design intent of the bike was to create the category of 'adventure touring,' which we see as any combination of pavement, gravel, and trail."

Or, put another way, if bikes reproduced like humans, it's what you'd end up with if a mountain bike hit the sack with a touring bike. Salsa calls the Fargo an "adventure touring 29er mountain bike." We call it a

welcome addition to the bike market.

Like most touring bikes, it features drop bars, a long-ish load-friendly wheelbase, and a plethora of eyelets for racks and fenders. Unlike touring bikes, it's, well, a mountain bike. I've been riding one for several months and can report that it handles the rough stuff, including rocky singletrack trails, with ease. The Fargo's steel frame accepts mountain-bike tires up to 2.4 inches wide and its disc brakes deliver one-finger stopping power, whether loaded for touring or careening down a local trail. The bottom bracket is higher than a traditional tourer but low for a mountain bike, striking a nice balance between loaded stability and off-road agility.

The choice of big wheels — 29ers in mountain-bike parlance, but essentially stronger versions of 700C rims — is a good one. They're more stable, more comfortable, and roll over rough surfaces and obstacles better than traditional 26-inch mountain-bike wheels, making them perfect for a rough-stuff touring bike. The primary downside to 29ers is the availability of replacement parts outside of North America. If you're heading to South America or the Himalayas, 26-inch wheels are more readily available and might be a better option.

A few other eccentricities may limit the bike's appeal to some riders. While disc brakes, especially mechanical discs, are perfect for this bike, Salsa, in an effort to craft a bicycle with clean, classic lines, chose not to include mounts for rim brakes on the frame and fork. So if you don't want

disc brakes, you're out of luck. Ditto if you want a shock. The bike is not suspension corrected, so a front shock will raise the front end and throw the geometry seriously out of whack. If you want a shock, this is not your bike. It's worth noting that 29er wheels with meaty tires will approximate the vibration-reduction, bump-swallowing effect of front suspension (at least on non-huge obstacles).

A few other nice touches for touring include disc-brake mounts that don't interfere with rack struts; a whopping *six* water bottle mounts, including one on each fork blade; fork eyelets for low-rider racks; a pump peg on the headtube; and a top tube that slopes dramatically downward, making for easier mounting and dismounting when loaded. In other words, this bike was designed for touring from top to bottom.

If you're looking for a paved-road touring bike, you can find more efficient options, though the Fargo can do that. If you're looking for a serious mountain bike, there are plenty of better choices, though the Fargo can do that, too. But if you're looking for one bike that can do everything reasonably well *and* that can take you and your camp gear to just about any beautiful boondock you can imagine, then the Fargo might just be your bike.

Salsa is selling the Fargo complete with a Shimano XT mountain-bike drivetrain, Avid mechanical disc brakes, and bar-end shifters for \$2,000. It's also available as a frameset for \$650.

—Aaron Teasdale

"Part of this is a matter of personal preference: Do you enjoy playing around and replacing components, and is some of the cost outlay justified by your personal enjoyment? Some people love this stuff and are incredibly clever at it; others (myself included) never want to replace anything besides worn-out tires and chains.

"If it's a couple hundred bucks worth of fun, then, yeah, whatever. But since you've written to me, I suspect you're finding this a bit less fun.

"You never knew how many clamp diameters there are for handlebars and stems. Take your bike to the shop and see if suitable bars and stems are available in your diameter before you commit to the job.

"Also, if your mountain bike has V-brakes, you need either a set of Travel Agent cable adapters or a new set of Dia Compe brake levers specially designed for V-brakes and dropped handlebars.

"Circumstances vary too much for me to give you a price."

All this said, there are people who make this switch happily.

Al was interested in a somewhat-esoteric bike, a "29-er." That's a 700C rim with mountain bike tires, and no, it doesn't necessarily measure 29 inches.

He had a series of questions, and I had a series of answers:

"Would I save weight by going custom?"

"Probably not enough to even think about — the custom people have to work with the same periodic table of elements as factories. There are no magic tubing tricks the custom guys have that production guys don't have."

"And if so, does that matter in a fully loaded bike?"

## Recumbent Bikes in the Mix

If you are thinking of adding a bike specifically for touring to your existing collection, or even if it's your first bike, you might consider a recumbent. Over the years, thousands of touring cyclists have visited Adventure Cycling's headquarters in Missoula and a good chunk of these were riding recumbents. In conversation, they offer a variety of reasons for why they prefer riding these machines over the standard bike, or wedgie, as some call them. Some ride them because the back pain associated with riding standard bikes isn't an issue, some prefer the larger, more comfortable

seats, while still others like the increased view the supine position allows. If you are interested in exploring these bikes further, check the manufacturers listed on page 22. Other resources include:

- **Recumbent & Human Powered Vehicle Association:** [www.recumbents.com](http://www.recumbents.com).
- **Bentriider Online:** [www.bentriideronline.com](http://www.bentriideronline.com).
- **Recumbent Bike Riders:** [www.rbr.info](http://www.rbr.info)
- **ERRC:** [www.geocities.com/e\\_r\\_r\\_c](http://www.geocities.com/e_r_r_c).
- **Recumbent & Tandem Rider:** [www.rtrmag.com](http://www.rtrmag.com).

"Absolutely not."

"Also, would the price difference be worth going custom?"

"A very individual decision. I can't make that decision for you."

"On the Salsa Fargo (see sidebar on opposite page), I would put a front shock and straight bars."

"Then why aren't you starting out with a hardtail mountain bike? It's a more cost effective way to get the final result you seek."

At this point in our email dialogue, deputy editor Aaron Teasdale jumped in with some valuable insights: "The Fargo is essentially a 29er mountain bike designed for touring, with lots of eyelets for racks, etc. It is not suspension corrected — meaning that putting a front shock on it will mess up the geometry considerably. I wouldn't do it. The Salsa guys designed the bike to

be ridden rigid and rigid only.

"If you're interested in a mountain bike designed specifically for touring that takes a front shock, look at the Gunnar Rock Tour.

"It won't give you 29-inch wheels (unless you get a frame sized 20.5 inches or above), but it will give you the shock and flatbars you seek."

A reader named Larry thanked me for pointing out in a previous article that "wheelbase was just a fallout from the frame geometry and not such a big deal otherwise," and for my poo-pooing of the fear of greater rolling resistance on fatter tires.

And then he asked: did I recommend toe clips or a pedal binding system? Did I recommend integrated brake/shift levers or old-fashioned shift levers.

Let me re-explain the wheelbase item for

### Bike Friday Travel Truths #1

## THE BEST WAY TO GET FROM A TO B.

When Guinness Book of Records' "Most Traveled Man by Bicycle," Heinz Stucke, set out to break another record, only one bike would fold to allow him to hop, skip, and jump between remote GPS coordinates; Bike Friday's Custom Pocket Llama. We figure that with 45 years pedaling under his chamois and no rest stop in sight, he must know something about getting from A to B ...

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AARON TEASDALE

**Riding the Divide.** Mountain bikes work great, but as one rider shows, cyclocross and touring bikes are also capable dirt-road tourers.

those of you just tuning in. Cycling writers everywhere — well, almost everywhere — keep telling you that you need a “long wheelbase” for touring. That’s about one third true.

A bike’s wheelbase comes in three pieces: the dimensions of the cockpit (where you sit), the chainstay length, and the steering geometry (fork rake, head tube angle). Let’s take all three of these in turn: the cockpit dimensions should fit *you*, not anyone’s external notion of what they should be. The steering geometry is dictated by several factors, including frame size and the bike’s purpose. Chainstay length is the only one of these dimensions that the designer is free to modify.

The universe of chainstay lengths is pretty confined. Racing bikes are about 16 to 16 1/2 inches; sport bikes, 16 3/4 to 17 1/4 inches; touring bikes, 17 1/4 to 18 inches. Some designers feel that shorter chainstays yield better handling, but I was always hard put to notice any difference in handling among the various chainstay lengths.

This changes slightly when you put panniers on the bike. Rear panniers are almost entirely behind the rear wheel axle, and that’s a bad place for weight to be. It mucks up the bike’s handling. Longer

chainstays move a small portion of this weight in front of the rear axle. Or, in the alternative, longer chainstays allow you to set up the bike so your heels don’t collide with the panniers. (People with size 13 feet have written to remind me that this is an issue that we size-9ers don’t have.)

Now, do I recommend toe clips, or a pedal binding system? The answer is ‘yes.’ Over the years, I’ve heard from many cyclists who feel they need one (or the other) for reasons that may go beyond conventional wisdom in bike buying.

One-size-fits-most advice is as follows: get an SPD-compatible pedal binding system and shoes made for walking, with a recessed cleat. If you’re new to pedal binding systems, put your bike on a trainer and practice snapping your foot in and out until it’s second nature. Get pedals with adjustable tension, and set the tension loose. Do these things and there will be no on-the-road learning with the binding systems. What you get with a pedal binding system that is increasingly difficult to find in conventional shoes is a nice stiff sole, designed to support your foot.

On the brake/shift lever question: Touring bikes come both ways. A few touring bikes come with bar-end shifters because those manufacturers have heard

from riders desiring a simpler, more field-repairable system.

The vast majority of riders have made an informed choice for the integrated brake/shift lever systems. There’s no question that integrated levers make it easier to shift well. One drawback is replacement cost. So choose what appeals to you.

Other advice from me? Get a bike you won’t mind riding on irregular surfaces. The best scenery often comes with the bumpiest roads.

As I have often said, the goal of buying the right bike and setting it up properly isn’t so you can have a toy to fuss with. It’s so you can ignore the bike itself and enjoy the experience. No one has said this better than Ed Austin, an Adventure Cycling member from New Zealand: “Too often we immerse ourselves in technical details, forgetting the physical and mental benefits of cycling and the wonderful journeys that await us. On a sheer whim, I cycled across Borneo in 2006, and still remember every moment of the journey. I think I took my bike.” **AC**

*Technical Editor John Schubert invites you to visit his website at [Limeport.org](http://Limeport.org), and to respond to this article at [schubley@aol.com](mailto:schubley@aol.com).*