How to Buy a Touring Bike

In my various touring excursions, I’ve camped on a cliff over the Pacific Ocean, been pampered in a luxuriant country inn in Vermont, made s’mores over a campground fire for a couple of cute French women hitchhikers, seen the Northern Lights in North Dakota, and had thousands of other great experiences that make lifelong memories.

So the first thing about buying a touring bike is this: When you use the bike, you won’t want it to be the focus of your trip.

When you buy a bike you fret over tire width, gearing, rider position, and other minutiae; but once you’re on the road, you want the bike to take care of all those details for you. Then you can properly enjoy the vista beyond your handlebars.

The second thing about buying a touring bike is to find a shop that understands touring. Not all shops do. Even though touring is the single most common way in which “serious” bicyclists do something with their bikes, dwarfing all kinds of racing in participation levels, it isn’t on the radar screen at some shops. If you walk into a shop, ask for a touring bike, and they immediately herd you to a mountain bike, that’s a bad sign. Mountain bikes are, for some riders, a great choice. But they are not the only choice and they should not be the default choice.

To begin your selection process, you’ll have to make some initial decisions about what kind of bike best suits you. But before I take you through those, I have a general comment. Most of the decisions you make will involve how much limitation you are willing to accept in the bike: whether it’s made for front and rear racks; how much clearance it has for wide tires and fenders, whether the gearing is designed for a steep hill at the end of a long day, etc.

Many stylish touring bikes and semi-touring bikes have limitations in these areas. Think about your needs before buying one. You can take a heavy-duty touring bike on a sag-supported tour without skipping a beat, but the reverse is not true. And even if your immediate goal is a sag-supported tour, it just might whet your appetite for a self-contained tour in the future.

Okay, now that I’ve made that pitch, here’s that decision tree:

How much stuff do you want to carry?

Broadly speaking, touring cyclists fall into three categories: (1) self-supported camping touring; (2) self-supported motel touring, and (3) sag-supported.

If you’re a sag-supported tourist, you can ride whatever kind of bike you like, the only criteria being that you like that style of bike for hours and hours each day, and that the bike carry as many or as few knickknacks as you wish to bring along.

The motel-and-restaurant tourist will typically fill two small panniers with clothing and toiletries. (I’ve done it with only a
A special note: if you already own a touring bike, and it wasn’t designed for touring, you must replace it. More is not uncommon. For this rider, I insist on a bike designed for both front and rear racks, with robust tires.

A special note: those racks that just attach to the seat post are not touring racks! The weight you carry on a self-contained trip makes those racks unsuitable.

A special note: while you can learn just about everything I know about touring, the differences are wheelchair, tire size and provision for accepting panniers. Most (but not all) recumbent riders prefer a long-wheelbase and larger size tires for touring. Accommodations for panniers vary quite a bit.

A special note: there are more than 150 companies that build touring bikes. You can buy a bike for $1,750 with racks and panniers designed specifically for the frame. Comes in 4 models, each including one intended for off-road use.

Airborne offers the titanium Caper Diem frameset for $1,095, which is described as a “speedy” bike for the “eager touring/bikepacking” road bike. You can choose from a variety of Shimano, or one Campagnolo, component packages to build a complete touring bike. Airborne.net, 888.652.8624

Bianchi offers the Volpe, for $849.99, an all-around road bike they describe as “starting the hybrid revolution.” Comes with a wide, low gear range and 32c tires. Also, the San Remo, for $1,399.95, which is described as an “all-Italian light touring bike.” bianchiusa.com, 510.264.1001

Boulder Bikes offers a full range of custom bikes, including recumbents, and soon will offer a model called the Tourstar, according to their website. boulderbikes.com, 800.887.6570

Brompton Bikes offers folding bikes intended for touring, priced from $585 to $1,087. This company also offers a trailer for touring. bromptonbike.com, 800.783.3447

Bruce Gordon offers the Rock ‘n Road Tour and BLT, both of which are designed for “serious loaded touring.” The Deore XT-equipped Rock ‘n Road is hand-built and goes for $2,385, or $2,595 with racks. The Deore LX-equipped BLT is made in Japan and goes for $1,485, or $1,695 with racks. bicyclists.com, 707.762.5601

Burley offers a wide range of tandems and recumbents suitable for touring. burley.com, 866.246.5634

Cannondale offers the T2000 and 1900 aluminum touring bikes, both of which are proven performers. The T2000 features a mixture of Cannondale and Shimano 105 components; The 1900 uses a mix of Cannondale and Shimano Tiagra components. cannondale.com, 800.245.3872

Co-Motion Cycles offers the Americano, described as a bike able to handle transcontinental touring “without even breaking a sweat,” and the American Co-Pilot, which adds S&S couplings. The Americano goes for $2,825; the Co-Pilot for $2,350. Also offers the Nor-Westor and Nor-Westor Co-Pilot, described as event bikes that can also handle touring, they are $2,650 and $3,050 respectively. co-motion.com, 866.282.6336

Easy Racers offers the Tour Easy recumbent, which comes in two models: the SS - $1,750 for “light touring” and the EX - $1,990 for “expedition.” Both sell for $1,895, easyracers.com, 831.722.9797

Fuji Bicycles offers the Touring, which includes a rear rack. This is a full-on touring bike — it even has a spare spoke holder on the LH chainstay — priced at $839. fujibikes.com, 201.337.7100

Giant Bicycles offers the new, aluminum OCR Touring, which features “touring dedicated geometry,” and “giant brakes, fender and rack mounts, even a holder for spare spokes.” giant-bicycles.com

Gunnar Bikes offers the Sport frame set, which is described as ideal for light touring. The frame sells for $650, or $695 with a Gunnar Sportfork. gunnarkites.com, 262.534.4990

Heron Bicycles offers The Touring Frame for $1,045, which they describe as perfect for “true, loaded touring.” A complete touring bike, without pedals, sells for $715 with the “Club Touring Package,” or $715 with the “Fancy Pants Touring Package.” heronbikes.com, 805.223.3177

Independent Fabrications offers the Independent frameset, specifically designed for long-distance touring — a “full-featured touring bike,” according to their website. ifsks.com, 617.666.3609

Jami Bicycles offers the Nova, described as “absolutely perfect for touring,” plus many other things, like commuting and cyclocross. Features a nice mix of components from Mavic, Shimano, Ritchey and Truvativ. jamisbikes.com, 800.222.1570

Lightning Cycle Dynamics offers the P-38 Voyager, a recumbent that loads up and fits into a suitcase, for $3,800 with Shimano LX/Deore components. lightningbikes.com, 805.736.0700

REI offers the Novara Safari, which goes for $799 and comes with a rack and 26 x 1.9 tires for touring on and off road, and the Novara Randonee, for $749, which has long been REI’s “classic” touring bike. rei.com, 800.221.7570

Rivendell Bicycle Works offers custom, hand-built frames for $2,200 to $3,200, or complete touring bikes for $3,400 to $4,000. They also offer the Atlantic frame, hand-built in Japan, for $950; or $2,200 to $2,400 for a complete bike. rivendellbicycles.com, 925.937.3504

Sakkit Touring Bicycles offers the Sakkit Expedition, which builder Bob Beckman describes as a “fully integrated touring bicycle” with racks and panniers designed specifically for the frame. Comes in 4 models, each including one intended for off-road use. sakkit.com/~beckman, 541.388.5146

Santana offers a wide array of tandems suitable for touring, starting at $2,795. santanamic.com, 800.334.6136

Seven Cycles offers three touring frame-sets — the Tsunami, made of titanium and intended for “shorter, lighter touring”; the Tsunami Steel, described as “great for traditionalists,” and the Muse, another titanium frame intended for “longer, fully loaded touring.” sevencycles.com, 617.923.7774

Specialized Bicycles offers the new aluminum light touring bike called the Sequoia Sport, for $880. The Sport has a carbon fiber front fork, but does have rear rack mounts. specialized.com, 877.808.8154

Surly offers the Cross-Check, technically a cyclocross bike, but suitable for all kinds of riding, including touring. “Think of the Cross-Check” like an army jeep: tough as nails and used for everything,” says the website. surlybikes.com, 877.343.3911

Terry Bicycles makes bikes just for women, and offers the col de la Madeleine with “Ultegra triple and Deore XT components, fender clearance, extra-wide range gearing” for $2,000; and the Classic, with Deore and Ultegra components, for $1,550. Both bikes have flat bars. terracycles.com, 800.289.8379

Trek offers the venerable 520, priced at $1,099. This bike has proven itself as a solid performer over many years. Comes with a rear rack and Shimano 105 components. trekbikes.com, 920.478.4678

Waterford Cycles offers the Adventure Cycle frame in two different models, the 900 and the 744. The 144 is available for both 1” and 1 1/8” steerer tubes. Priced at $1,600. waterfordcycles.com, 262.534.4990

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recumbents is the Easy Racer, and many of its riders equip themselves with a fairing and body stocking to tour at higher speed. It’s quite the sight to see a group of Easy Racer tourists looking like cruise missiles on the highway, with middle-age heads sticking out of those sleek vehicles.

The Easy Racer has a long wheelbase (over five feet long), large tires, and handlebars above the seat. When you shop for a touring recumbent, you'll find that most other touring-oriented models share those attributes. There are exceptions, though, and I suggest you do enough reading, test riding and contemplation to make the selection that works for you.

**Upright handlebars or dropped bars?**

Although I just got done telling you to fret about racks and panniers, you also have the viable option of carrying your camping gear in a cargo trailer. Once again, this may be the way to go if you already own a bike that is rack mount-challenged, and many riders just plain prefer trailers.

In particular, they are popular among riders of full-suspension mountain bikes.

Trailers unhitch in seconds, and when they’re unhitched, you have your empty bike back. The trailer can be used as a campsite table. But the trailer adds length, complication and moving parts, so you have to decide which set of attributes you prefer.

Upright handlebars or dropped bars? I vastly prefer dropped handlebars, and many of us old codgers in the bike business believe they're ultimately more comfortable than upright (mountain bike style) bars.

Many riders disagree, and they’re not all bad people. Once again, I heartily recommend giving both a fair trial and making an informed choice. All the arguments about hand positions, aerodynamics, and so on are minor compared with the simple question: What feels good to you?

This decision drives many of your next set of choices. If you want flat handlebars, you may find it easy to buy a mountain bike with rack mounts and be on your way. (If you get one with a suspension front fork, remember Old Man Mountain is standing by to take care of your rack needs.) If you want dropped handlebars, you'll still be navigating the touring bike choices.

**How wide-range is your gearing?**

This is an area where the bike industry has yet to catch up with its slide-rule-enabled customers in understanding customer needs.

In my opinion, you should have a low gear adequate for climbing a long steep hill at the end of the day. This means a low gear of about 20 x 25 gear inches. (Spry young riders on a 9-speed supported tour may meet my low gear definition with a 30-inch low gear.) But the most common drive-train setup on new bikes is a standard Shimano package with a 26-tooth inner chainwheel, a 10-tooth large cog, and therefore a 2.57-inch low gear.

If your bike of choice is so-equipped, ask your shop to slap a 12-tooth chainwheel onto that bike, lowering the low gear to 2.27 inches. This change alone will meet the needs of many riders. The shop may be able to substitute larger rear cogs if the rear derailleur capacity permits, if the rear derailleur doesn’t permit, you have to decide if you want a more expensive retrofit.

It’s a shame to contemplate making changes like that to a gorgeous new bike. Fortunately, not all bike models require it.

Now we go from not enough low gear to the other end of the spectrum, where you may have too much high gear. You should have a high gear for the fastest
speed you would want to pedal at a brisk cadence. To me, this means a high gear of no more than 110 gear inches, which, at a cadence of 105 rpm, nets you 34 mph. I personally would be happy with a high gear of 95 inches, which nets you 30 mph at that cadence. But many of the bikes you’ll see have a 52-tooth chainwheel, an 11-tooth top cog, and a knee-crushing 128-inch top gear, which even I cannot pedal at 105 rpm for a 40 mph top speed.

So if you find yourself doing gearing retrofits, feel free to toss out that uselessly high gear.

Just in case it wasn’t obvious: unless you plan to do all your touring in Florida, get a bike with three chainwheels. It would be a shame to blow out your knees for the machismo of riding a two-chainwheel bike. Sadly, this requirement eliminates many of those oddly popular cyclocross bikes from your shopping list.

Exotic or assembly line?

Roughly speaking, production touring bikes from mass-production companies like Jamis, Cannondale and Bianchi span the price gap from $700 to $2,000.

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Usually, there is no right or wrong answer here. Production bikes do the job; exotics have delightfully irrational cachet.

However, sometimes you’ll find yourself driven to the exotics because they meet the needs the mainstream companies don’t. For example, if you want a bike more rugged than any production dropped-handlebar bike, with S&S couplers so it fits in a suitcase for travel, you’ll be looking at a Co-Motion Americano. If you want the ease of riding, your dropped-handlebars touring bike over rough surfaces on 39-inch tires (which actually share their 650c tires), you’ll be looking at one of Bruce Gordon’s models.

Other exotic and custom builders can meet these and other needs. Your choices are as broad as your patience and your wallet.

The decisions you’ve made in response to these six questions above should have narrowed your focus some. Now it’s time to look at the remaining selection with an eye to the core criteria.

The bike should fit you comfortably. The bike should accommodate the tire width you want.

Miscellaneous design criteria should meet your needs.

I’ll start with fit. You already know that a bike that fits you well will have the proper seat-to-pedal length. That measurement should be familiar to you. So right now, go out on your existing bike and do a tape measure, and measure the distance from the center of your crank spindle to the top of the saddle. Write the number down in your daily appointment book or (sigh) PDA.

But leg length doesn’t tell the whole story on fit, particularly when you’re going to be on the bike for four to six hours per day. You want a hand position that is kind to your neck and back.

In both upright bar bikes and dropped-handlebar bikes, there is a wide variation in handlebar height. Racers favor low handlebars for aerodynamics; you should favor a higher handlebar to avoid neck and back ache.

It’s not always easy to discern handlebar position by looking at the bike. Visual cues may fool you. (For example, the top...
In my opinion, loaded touring begins to make sense when your tire width reaches 28C, and I prefer tires wider than that (32C, 35C, or even more). The wider tires give you more durability and fewer flats, and reassuring traction and handling over rough surfaces. The wider tires will seem well worth the minor increase in weight the first time you route takes you upon an unpaved section of road. Your companions on skinnier tires will be worried and uncomfortable. You’ll be enjoying the ride.

Many people in bicycling will tell you that fatter tires are much slower. The data don’t support this. Fatter tires feel much different, but the actual measured changes in rolling resistance is far less than the difference in feeling. Moreover, my own experience has been that when I’ve toured on skinnier tires, I’ve had to slow down on rough surfaces to accommodate the tires’ traction and handling limitations. Besides, fatter tires get fewer flats, and I’ve never enjoyed patching a flat.

Those are my preferences on tire width. Go ahead and have your own.

Now you consider “miscellaneous design criteria.” Many things fit into this catch-all area. I’ll start with frame dimensions. Here is the list of standard dimensions:

**Head tube angle**

In racing circles, head tube angle is sometimes made ridiculously steep (75 degrees or more). On your bike, it will probably be 71 or 72 degrees, less if you have a small frame. There is usually little to shop for in head tube angle.

**Fork rake**

Rake is joined at the hip with head tube angle. Together, these two dimensions determine trail, which determines the bike’s steering stability.

**Trail**

You want about 1 1/2 to 2 inches of trail.

**Top tube length**

Even though our torsos vary greatly in size, our top tubes seldom do. Except for the small-front-wheel bikes made by Georgena Terry, the shortest top tube I’ve ever seen is 20.5 inches, and that would be on a bike sized for someone five feet tall. At 5’8”, I ride a top tube one to two inches longer than than the 20.5-inch top tube. Top tubes seldom go beyond 23 inches, even in large frame sizes.

If you have problems with upper body comfort, get fitter professionally and see what top tube length your guru recommends.

**Seat tube length**

Seat tube length is the same as your frame size, and it’s determined by your leg length. It’s measured from the center of the crank spindle, along the seat tube, to (pick one; the world isn’t standardized) the center or the top of the top tube.

**Seat tube angle**

In theory, seat tube angle should be married to seat tube length to position you properly over the pedals. In practice, a one-degree change in seat tube angle only changes the seat position about one third of an inch, which is usually accommodated by adjusting the seat position on the seat post. So I seldom get to exercised about seat tube angle.

On your bike, you want about 1 1/2 to 2 inches of trail. And when you go look at bikes in the shop, take their dimensions.

A change in handlebar stem length may help if stock bikes aren’t quite right. If this is an issue for you, I recommend seeking out bikes that use the Fit Kit and offers professional fitting consultations.) A few of you will find that your unique bodies are best served by a custom frame.

I recommend you consider future aspirations as well as this year’s trip. Many attractive bikes on the show-floor room have three chainwheels and racing tires (about 700 x 23C, with the “23” very roughly corresponding to the tire width in millimeters). Some won’t have rack mounts. Cute as they are, these bikes are strictly limited to sag-supported riding.

Fortunately, most of us have nearly average dimensions. A change in handlebar stem length may help if stock bikes aren’t quite right. If this is an issue for you, I recommend seeking out a bike shop that uses the Fit Kit and offers professional fitting consultations.) A few of you will find that a stock bike in your size fits comfortably. But do be aware of your options, so you can exercise them if they’d benefit you.

Now you consider tire width. This question determines how rugged a trip your existing bike. Measure your saddle height from the floor. And when you go look at bikes in the shop, take their measurements.

More and more, bike companies use a combination of frame design and handlebar stem design to raise the bars. Frames may use a rising top tube and/or an extension on the head tube. Handlebar stems are sometimes made so they can be adjusted up and toward the rider.

You can’t test-ride a bike enough to simulate the effect of long days of riding. But you can probably discern whether high handlebars may be of interest. I recommend that you give them serious consideration.

The horizontal distance between seat and handlebars may be of interest. Unfortunately, most of us have nearly average proportions of arm and torso length, and are well accommodated by stock frame lengths. A change in handlebar stem length may help if stock bikes aren’t quite right. If this is an issue for you, I recommend seeking out a bike shop that uses the Fit Kit and offers professional fitting consultations.) A few of you will find that a stock bike in your size fits comfortably. But do be aware of your options, so you can exercise them if they’d benefit you.

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Now you consider tire width. This question determines how rugged a trip you want about 1 1/2 to 2 inches of trail. And when you go look at bikes in the shop, take their measurements.

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A smaller frame — say, 19-inch frame size — may have a seat tube angle of 74 or 75 degrees. Larger frames may have a seat tube angle of 72 degrees. This moves the seat farther back, to accommodate the taller rider’s longer thigh.

Chainstay length

Chainstays on touring bikes range from about 16 1/2 inches to 18 inches. It has been a long-held belief that touring bikes should have long chainstays, and indeed, if you’re carrying extremely heavy loads, you’ll be better served by the longest possible chainstays. But my opinion on this dimension would be different.

The argument in favor of long chainstays is that they bring the rear panniers inside the wheelbase, to improve the bike’s handling. However, if you actually look at a bike, you’ll see that most of the rear pannier’s mass is behind the rear axle, no matter how long the chainstays. Adding an inch to the chainstay doesn’t change that much. The more important factor is to use frame and rear panniers and balance your weight among the four panniers.

Bottom bracket height

A lower bottom bracket makes a bike more stable. However, you won’t see much variation in bottom bracket height, because the bottom bracket has to be high enough to allow you to pedal around corners. Don’t expect to see bottom brackets lower than 10 1/2 inches or higher than 11 inches on touring bikes.

Wheelbase

Wheelbase is the sum of other dimensions, and is not an important dimension in and of itself (unless you’re trying to cram the bike into the back hatch of your Mini Cooper). Touring bikes usually range from just under 40 inches to about 42 inches. Your next question is frame material.

Basically, you have two choices: steel and aluminum. And you have people yelling with immense passion, favoring one or the other. I’m small in the middle, favoring both. I’ve toured on both. Both work. Both feel good.

The frame material question brings us to one unique aspect of touring: it demands a stiffer frame than racing. When you weigh down your frame with luggage, the frame flexes more than an unladen frame. In an extreme case, the frame may shimmy at speed.

Aluminum frames have one great attribute: they are more than rigid enough to avoid shimmy. This is not inherent in aluminum the material, but is a function of design attributes that all aluminum frames share.

Time was when some steel frames often weren’t built quite stiff enough, and were prone to shimmy. This is much less often the case today. To make a long story short, if a steel frame’s top tube is 1 1/8 inch in diameter or bigger (something you can measure), it is probably immune from this problem. I believe that most Shimmy anecdotals can be traced back to the older one-inch top tubes, which are generally less rigid (depending on wall thickness, which you can measure).

A steel frame can be repaired in, say, the village welding shop somewhere in Africa. For true expedition tourists, this is a consideration. But aluminum frames don’t break very often.

Does one material ride harsher than the other? Not necessarily. Bike shops are full of dogmatic opinions on this topic, but I suspect that the perceived ride quality can always be traced to fork design, tire size and pressure, saddle padding, or other factors.

Finally, I’ll touch on a few component issues.

Some touring bikes use bar-end shift levers, rather than the integrated brake/shifter levers. Why? They’re more rugged and cheaper to repair than integrat- ed levers, and they can be switched to fric- tion mode. Then again, some riders could- n’t live without a brake/shifter lever combi- nation. Pay your money and take your choice.

You’ll see a hootful offering of sad- dles. Consider yourself lucky if the stock saddle is the one you like most. And remember, almost everyone agrees that (a) the more you ride, the skinnier the saddle you want, and (b) fatter saddles sell better. Don’t expect me to fix this disconnect.

These days, most bikes you’ll see have nine-cog rear cassettes. There was a time when we curmudgeons ranted against nine-speed rigs with their narrow chains. “Too fragile,” we said.

We have lost that war, so we might as well win the peace. Nine cogs allow you a great selection of gears without double shifting. As for the narrow chain, buy a chain tool and spare pins, and learn how to use them.

Having inundated you with nuts and bolts, I fully expect you to behave as I would. You’ll go to the bike shop, see one you like, and become irrationally attracted to the handlebar tape, the saddle or the color. Know enough of the nuts and bolts that you know why you are making various technical decisions. Then don’t worry about the alternatives you didn’t choose. Enjoy the journey. My sunset over the cliffs on the Pacific Ocean was not to be missed, and I hope you enjoy similar memories.

Technical Editor John Schubert accepts comments and suggestions at schubly@msn.com.

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Waxed Cotton Sacks. Tough, good-looking bags for anything from a day trip to an expedition. Made in America from the best waxed cotton, brass, and bridle leather, our Baggins bags are expensive, but built to endure the worst conditions. From $75.

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