How to Buy a Touring Bike

Picking the perfect touring bike for you shouldn’t keep you up at night

Your decision has been made. The Transamerica Bicycle Route can’t live another year without you, and you need a new touring bike.

Your objective in buying a new touring bike is to drastically reduce the time spent thinking about it (and its limitations) when you’re on your adventure. You want a bike that easily carries your load, has appropriate gearing for the steepest hills on your route, and fits your body dimensions like a well-worn pair of slippers.

These goals are also compatible with the way most of us use our bikes: the other ninety percent of our lives,携东西、打气泵、口袋。You can decide on American tradition with Trek or aluminium innovation with Cannondale. Or you can go for high-end, superb craftsmanship by choosing Bruce Gordon, Independent Fabrication, Co-Motion, or a variety of other quality bicycle builders. The selection isn’t huge but it is adequate. And none of these bikes are turkeys with hidden traps.

What you probably will have to do is hunt for the bike you want. Some touring bike models are made in small quantities (in the hundreds) for a brand that may have 2,000 dealers. So the odds of finding that model at any one dealership are small, and the odds of finding it in your size are even smaller.

It’s not possible to cover all good touring bike options in one issue of a magazine. Our listings remain focused on the traditional upright touring bike with dropped handlebars. That said, we heartily endorse several “nontraditional” bike choices. A few comments on each:

Tandems.

Regular readers of this space know we are big tandem fans at Adventure Cycling. Touring on a tandem has interpersonal benefits you can’t get on a single bike. The short version on picking a tandem for touring: think wide, in both gearing range and tire size.

Recumbents.

Some recumbents are made for touring, equipped with nice wide tires and sold with optional pannier sets. Others are pure go-fast machines with skinny tires. It should be obvious which of those kinds you want. One standout example of a touring recumbent is the Tour-Easy. They have a fiercely loyal owner’s club, touring events for members, and the option of streamlining your ride with both a big fairing and a body stocking.

Hardtail mountain bikes.

Two decades ago, when the mountain bike was in its infancy, most mountain bikes doubled as terrific touring bikes for people who wanted upright handlebars and go-anywhere knobby tires. But mountain bikes evolved away from a touring-friendly design. Many have a lean-forward rider position better suited to racing, and many frames lack eyelets for racks and fenders. Front suspension is now the norm, and it adds complications that road-riding tourists may not find worthwhile.

By John Schubert
Full-suspension mountain bikes. I wouldn’t bother with one of these for road touring. But for the Continental Divide Mountain Bike Route or other similar tours, a state-of-the-art full-suspension mountain bike pulling a cargo trailer such as a BOB would be my choice. I’d accept the greater maintenance requirements in return for less fatigue provided by full suspension.

The best full-suspension designs make ruts in the trail disappear in a manner so seamless you’ll forget you’re riding a suspension bike. The unwanted “boing” of early suspension designs is gone. If this is what you want, don’t buy an “economy” full suspension bike, and don’t buy a me-too brand with a lesser design. The one I’m most familiar with, the Specialized Stumpjumper, costs well over $3,000. Folding and collapsing bikes.

These are the vehicles of choice for people who think out of the box, and don’t just tour from Point A to Point B.

A series of two-day loops or day trips interspersed with train rides is a great way to see the world, and the logistics get much easier if you have a bike that folds up quickly to fit in a bag or suitcase. The best-known of these is probably the Bike Friday. And a little web crawling will show you some incredible adventures by Bike Friday owners (who rival Tour-Easy owners for rabid loyalty). England’s Moulton is another viable choice, and its space-frame design will be endlessly fascinating to the engineer in you. The full-suspension Birdy is a very sophisticated folder with excellent riding qualities.

Montague, DaHon, and Ritchey all make full-size diamond frame bikes that hinge around the seat tube to fit in a suitcase or small car trunk. The well-known 5050 Couplers can sometimes be added to an existing bike, or built into your new custom bike, and they make your bike easy to toss into a suitcase or travel bag.

So what’s new for 2005, and what is the first thing you should do to make a buying decision? The answers are “not much,” and “have a fit.”

Why isn’t much new in 2005? Planned obsolescence simply hasn’t made it to touring bike designs. Manufacturers have wisely reigned themselves to the fact that touring bikes last many years in the hands of thrifty owners. We cycle-tourists ignore changing fashions. (That said, I thought the paint job on the new Jamis Aurora was inspired. Go check it out!)

Touring frames haven’t changed much in the past decade. Components have evolved, mostly in positive directions: splined cranks are much nicer than the old square taper design, nine-speed cogs are much lighter than the old ten-speed cogs, and there are fewer ruts in the trail.

One component trend you should avoid is low-spoke-count wheels. Despite what you may hear, they are not suitable for touring, for numerous reasons. They aren’t made for on-the-road adjustments; their failure mode isn’t something you want to experience, and they are comparatively delicate items for use in more controlled circumstances. Adjusting spoke tension requires use of a spoke tensive tool, a $200 tool that is slow and cumbersome to use. When you evaluate a bike, check the spokes, and if there are fewer than thirty-six per wheel, move on to the next bike.

You won’t find low-spoke-count wheels on stout touring bikes, but you will see them in some in-between bikes which would otherwise be viable choices for lighter touring needs.

So what about that fitting session? Some bike shops and many frame builders offer customized fit sessions — use the Yellow Pages, your local bike club newsletter, or the internet to find one. It’ll cost you somewhere around $200, and deliver a better return on your investment than almost any other way of spending money. It may reaffirm the position on your existing bike, it may convince you to make some adjustments, and it just might get rid of a whole lot of pain and frustration you didn’t know you could get rid of.

The odds are that a fit session will not tell you “need” a custom frame. More
likely, it will direct you to adjustments that can be made on a stock bike. It may also direct you to improvements that have nothing to do with spending money. For example, I believe that if I were to get a fitter session, I’d be told that my position would improve, and I’d ride better, if I stretched my hamstrings. (Another new year’s resolution for a future new year!)

Most of us find that when a bike is sized for our leg length, the upper half of our body is accommodated reasonably well by a stock frame’s top tube length. The fairly rare individual who is either all torso or all legs may need a custom frame to get optimal fit.

Here are some general guidelines for fitting yourself to a touring bike. You want a more upright riding position than you would for racing so that it’s easier to hold your head up and enjoy the scenery. The handlebars should be level with the seat and within easy reach. If they’re not, you may need to buy a new handlebar stem. Overall, you want to feel like you are straddling the saddle — not sitting on it, spinning the pedals — not pushing them, and lightly leaning on the handlebars. Some of this is learned technique, such as putting weight on your feet while spinning the pedals. By learning it, you’ll increase your comfort and the full days in the saddle won’t seem so long.

My few words on this subject are a sorry substitute for that fit session. Go get the fit session.

What’s next? Pick your maximum tire width. It will rule out bikes that don’t accommodate tires that wide. How wide should your tires be? Any rule of thumb is the writer’s own personal preference. I’ll tell you mine.

I personally favor 700 x 35C tires for unloaded riding and lightly-loaded motel touring. My tire width preferences go up from there, as more weight is loaded onto the bike. While I’ve done a lot of self-supported touring with 35C tires, I personally wouldn’t buy a new bike that couldn’t accommodate something wider. A 35C or 37C tire is a more secure platform for most loaded touring.

Most bikes will accept larger tires without fenders than with fenders. Touring bikes often allow for a choice: add fenders, or switch to a larger tire, but not both.

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www.irondonkey.com
Touring Bikes for Your Consideration

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

Airborne offers the Carpe Diem in many variations—with Shimano 105, Ultegra, and Dura-Ace groups. Campagnolo Chorus and Record available. Framed ($1,999). Full bikes range from $2,500 to $3,700. airbornemt.com, 888.652.8624.

Bianchi offers the Volpe ($849.99), which comes with a wide, low-rise handlebar and 32-tire. bianchinoua.com, 512.264.1001.

Breizhe Bikes offers the Liberty ($197) and Outdoory ($275). breizhebikes.com, 451.339.6697.

Bilenky Cycle Works offers the Midrang in a variety of models— Eco ($500), Travel ($2,995), Deluxe ($2,995), and the custom Signature ($3,500 and up). bilenky.com, 800-203-6388.

Bruce Gordon offers the Rock N’ Road Tour and BLT for “serious loaded touring.” The Deore EX-equipped Rock N’ Road is hand-built ($2,500, or $2,966 with racks). The Deore LX-equipped BLT is factory-made, both made in California. ($610, or $625 with racks). bcybikes.com, 707.897.6540.

Burley offers the Huntington touring bike with Truvativ Reuser 41T 175/200mm crank. Headbad rack included. Includes a wheel carrier for the Dual Tandem ($2,449) and the Taiko Recumbent Tandem ($2,868). burley.com, 866.248.5634.

Cannondale offers the T2000 ($1,199) with six models. All offer a wide array of tandems suited for touring starting at $2,995. cannondalem.com, 800.334.6136.

Cyclo-Motion offers the Nor’wester Co-Pilot with S&S couplers (from $1,320 to $3,615), the Americano ($3,070 to $3,290); the Americano with S&S couplers (from $3,320 to $3,615); and the Adventure Cycle ($3,120). co-motion.com, 541-342-4583.

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Folding Bikes

Airnalim Desits offers the Chameleon in conjunction with Carradice Limpet front pannier system. airnalim.com.

Bike Friday offers a variety of folding bikes, including the New World Tourist ($1,300-$1,650) and the Air Blade ($2,460-$3,865). bikefriday.com, 800.777.0258.

Pashley offers a variety of folding bikes (from $885 to $6,350). pashley.co.uk, +44 (0) 20 7405 1218.

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There is no downside to having a bike that can accommodate super-wide tires. The people who ride carbon fiber cuties may think your bike doesn’t look as cool as theirs, but you’re a rugged individualist who doesn’t care what they think.

In general, you won’t have much choice when choosing tire diameter. 700C is the norm. A few touring bikes are made with 26-, 650b-, and 700c-tires. Touring bikes have two advantages: the smaller tire allows a frame better-designed for short people and the 26-inch size has a larger variety of tires available. Although 700c tires now come in a larger variety. From racing slicks to studded snow tires, the 18-inch is easier to find. Some people (I’m not one of them) believe the smaller 26-inch tire gives a harsher ride. I can’t feel it.

No part of a 26-inch tire measures exactly 16 inches, and no part of a 700c tire measures 700 anything. These numbers are naming conventions with boring origins. The actual measured dimension is the bead seat diameter: 590 millimeters on the ”26-inch” and 635 millimeters on the ”700c” tire. The differences in outside diameter is usually less, because 26-inch tires are typically taller than 700c tires.

To make the panier versus trailer decision. If you know you’ll use a trailer, this frees you up to get a bike that isn’t rack friendly, such as a touring mountain bike for trail touring. If you want the option of using panniers (and frankly, as much as I like trailers, I would always want that option) you need a fully-equipped bike, full bike).

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yourself being picky about chainstay length if you have big feet.

People traditionally recommend that touring cyclists insist on long chainstays (17 1/2 to 18 inches, whereas chainstays racing bikes are 16 to 16 1/2 inches) so that their heels won’t clip their panniers. But if your load is well balanced between front and rear panniers, this inch or two doesn’t matter much. However, if you have big feet this inch or two matters plenty, because you may not be able to move the panniers back far enough to get heel clearance on some bikes. Obviously, this dimension varies with every combination of bike, rack, and pannier. So if you’re a size thirteen guy, look for long chainstays, and investigate all this thoroughly.

Don’t worry about frame material. With the exception of a very few titanium bikes, the touring bikes you see will be steel or aluminum. Both are good. Some people prefer steel because welders anywhere can repair it. Aluminum makes a slightly lighter, stiffer frame. Any ride reports about which gives the better ride must be discounted because of the placebo effect of subjective testing. The differences simply aren’t as great as many other decisions you’ll make that will affect the quality of your ride.

Don’t fret over frame angles. Yes, they’re important. But I haven’t seen a bike with messed-up frame angles sold in the U.S. market for many years, so we’ll reserve that discussion for another day.

Go over your gearing. You want a low gear of 20 to 25 gear inches to cart a heavy load up a steep hill at the end of a tiring day. If the bike doesn’t have a gear that low, ask about a component swap. Sometimes, this is as simple as changing the small chainwheel for a few bucks. A high gear of 90 gear inches allows you to ride 24 mph at a moderate pedaling cadence of 90 rpm, and that’s all the high gear a touring cyclist needs. Yet you’ll be hard pressed to find a bike with “only” 90 inches as its high gear. More likely you’ll find a high gear well over 100 inches. Avoid using gears that high. They will destroy your knees. Sheldon Brown offers a great resource for gear information at www.sheldonbrown.com/gears.

Finally, after you buy the bike, learn enough about it so you don’t have to fret over it when you’re on tour. Use thread-lock adhesive on the bolts that hold the accessories onto the frame. When on tour, grab a rag and clean the entire bike every five or six days, and use the cleaning as an opportunity to inspect every fastener for tightness, and also to look for bends, cracks, or other possible problems. Clean and lubricate your drive train regularly, especially after you’ve been riding rainy or muddy conditions.

On a well-planned tour, you’ll take care of your bike without having it dominate your activities. Instead, you’ll spend your time meeting new friends, taking great photos, and sending postcards home. The ability to enjoy and embrace new experiences is what you really get when you buy a touring bike.

John Schubert has been Adventure Cyclist’s informative technical writer since 1988. You can read more at www.adventurecycling.org/magazine and he can be reached for further comment at schubley@aol.com.