

Buying a touring bike in 2008

Whatever your price range, there's a touring bike for you

By John Schubert



Co-Motion's Americano

Touring cyclists come from all stations in life, from well-heeled retirees to financially-strapped teenagers. We are all equals on the road. We all get to photograph the same scenery, climb the same hills, and meet the same local people on that great conversation-starter — the self-contained bike.

But we aren't quite equal when we go to buy a touring bike. Some people struggle to meet the \$300 to \$450 nut for an entry level bike; others simply don't care what four-

figure sum their bike will cost. And I hear from all of them when they roam around the Internet searching for answers.

I'm going to tell you in this article what to expect in each price range. But first, here's a quick recap of what every bike used for touring should have, regardless of price. These are the attributes that keep you comfortable not just at the end of a long day, but comfortable at the end of day three when you're even more tired. They're the attributes that allow you to carry stuff on the bike securely.

They're the attributes that make the bike's handling forgiving when you have stuff on the bike and you're tired. These are the attributes that make your bike durable, in an era when many expensive quasi-racing bikes have a fairly silly level of delicacy in their design. Here they are:

A shop that matters

The best thing you can do to ensure happiness with your bike is buy it from a shop that wants you to be happy riding it. That's far more important than the differ-

ences among various touring bikes. Shops that stock touring bikes and accessories are the minority, and if you have one, treasure it. If a shop doesn't stock touring bikes, but will order one and make sure it's working for you, that's okay too. A shop that looks down its nose at touring cyclists doesn't deserve your business.

Wide-range gearing

Don't leave home without it. Even a flat trip has small steep hills and headwinds. Even the strongest among us can be

tired and have depleted blood glucose ("the bonk," that annoying lack of all energy and motivation) at the end of a day. Even a strapping young athlete can decide that they want to climb a long hill slowly to preserve that blood glucose to last the entire day, the better to feel fresh and lively at the beach that afternoon and evening.

What constitutes wide-range gearing? To condense many previous magazine articles in a few words, you should have a low gear of no more than 30 gear inches if you're riding a bike with little or no baggage on the bike. If you'll carry camping gear, your low gear should be at most 25 gear inches, and preferably closer to 20 inches.

Almost all bikes with three chainwheels (front sprockets) will meet the 30-inch requirement. Most meet the 25-inch requirement. If your bike shop doesn't want to explain the gearing specs of the bike you're considering, that doesn't speak well for the shop.

Sufficient tire width

The racer-wannabees in cycling have an irrational affection for skinny tires. Don't let them influence you. Your bike can have fine riding qualities and still have tires wide enough to have the durability, better traction, better weight carrying capacity, and comfort that you'll want for touring.

So how wide is sufficient? Other people will have their own preferences; here are mine. On smooth roads with no more

than 10 pounds of baggage (i.e. credit card touring), you can get by with tires measuring 700x28C (about 28 mm or 1 1/8 inch wide). Add camping gear and 700x35C (35 mm or 1 3/8 inch) becomes highly desirable, although many of us have skimped by with 700x32C (32 mm or 1 1/4 inch). As the roads get rougher or you add more camping gear, you want 700x38C, or even a two-inch mountain bike tire. Many tourists select mountain bikes so they can carry large quantities of gear.

There are two aspects to tire width: the tire that the bike comes with and the maximum tire the bike can fit. And if you want fenders (which I heartily recommend), fenders restrict your maximum tire size. Most production touring bikes come with a tire close to the maximum the bike can fit. Some of the more expensive handbuilt bikes have clearance for much wider tires.

When you're in the bike shop, you'll be surrounded by people who think a 700x23C tire is wide. Don't let them sway you. Bicycle touring is not about sprinting; it's about steady riding and enjoying yourself. Once you're out on your trip, you'll never regret that your tires were too wide, but on really rough roads you may well regret that they're too narrow.

A rider position that's right for you

What's right for you? That's a personal choice. The traditional dropped-handlebar touring bike, the one that looks like a racing

bike to the untrained eye, is the main focus of this article. But not all dropped-handlebar bikes have the same rider position, and some riders prefer upright bars, like you'll see on a mountain bike or hybrid. (Even then, mountain-bike bars may be higher or

Why do we insist on a front rack? Well, if you'll only be carrying a 10-pound rack trunk for credit-card touring, we don't insist. For such light loads, you only need one rack and it doesn't matter whether it's front or rear. But camping tourists, or anyone carry-



Jamis' Aurora

lower, depending on how racing-oriented the bike is.)

Touring cyclists don't ride in a racer's tuck all day long. You typically see them with their hands on the tops of the handlebars. Even so, dropped handlebars make for a faster touring bike. That's because your arms are in a narrower, more aerodynamic position than with mountain bike handlebars, and, secondarily, because the dropped hand position is available for when you're in the mood to use it.

For the most part, the choice of handlebar type is sheerly personal preference. The only exception I can think of would be if you had upright bars and were riding with people with dropped bars. You'll have to be a bit stronger than they are to maintain their pace.

Attachment points for front and rear racks

It simply astonishes me how many bikes are sold without rack-mounting bosses. It's like a car with no trunk and no glove box.

Fortunately, the venerated rack company Old Man Mountain makes good quality touring racks that can be attached to bikes that came without rack mounts (as does the European rack-maker Tubus). But if you're buying a new bike, why not get real rack mounts?

ing more stuff, will find the bike's handling vastly improved with four panniers instead of two. I've done it both ways, and I'll tell you it's hard to exaggerate the difference. A heavily loaded touring bike can be benign and easy to handle, or it can be a reluctant



Cannondale's T-1

beast with which you are always struggling. Front racks make the difference.

Some racks mount on the seat post only, requiring no other attachment points. But

they're completely unsuitable for anything heavier than the windbreaker-and-sunglasses kind of load. Ride behind one sometime — it bobs up and down. You really don't want your touring load doing that.

You can get all these attributes in an inexpensive bike that will do the job well.

Notice what I didn't talk about. I didn't repeat the myth that touring bikes have "slower" steering than other bikes — because I've been reviewing the steering geometry of touring bikes for 29 years and it just isn't very different.

Frame materials

Most touring bikes are steel or aluminum, with a few top-end bikes being titanium. Steel is field repairable — the village blacksmith in Africa can at least attempt to weld a crack in a steel frame. (He probably doesn't have much experience welding metal less than one millimeter thick, so don't bet on his success.) Aluminum isn't field repairable, by most people's standards, but in return for that you get a frame that's probably, oh, a half pound lighter and somewhat stiffer. If these sound like fairly minor differences, that's because they are. I alternate between steel and aluminum bikes for my daily rides and quickly forget which bike I'm on. Titanium is a terrific material that dampens vibration and beats aluminum in its stiffness-

to-weight ratio by a small margin. But don't bother thinking about titanium if you're on any kind of limited budget. Carbon fiber has yet to become used much for touring bikes.



Trek's 7.2 FX

Also worth noting: It's ironic but true that you may go to a store with hundreds of bikes in stock and yet have to order a

bike without a chance to test-ride it. This is because touring bikes sell in such small numbers. A shop that has five touring bikes

in stock has a lot of touring bikes in stock, but what are the odds that the model, size, and color you wanted are one of those five?

So what about buying a bike sight-unseen? The shop can make sure it will fit properly, typically by eyeballing you on a like-size non-touring bike (like one of their many racer-wannabees in stock) set up on a trainer. I can assure you that these things all handle very similarly and that the major differences you can get in handling and perceived comfort come from your selection of tires, saddle, tire pressure, and rider position. Therefore, I say do a bit of research and then buy with confidence.

Here are some prices and examples.

As inexpensive as possible

This means \$300 to \$500, depending on what your local shop has in stock. At this price, you can't get a traditional touring bike with dropped handlebars, but what you can get is a mountain bike or hybrid with upright handlebars. If the upright bars aren't a deal-killer for you (and they'll actually be a plus for some riders) you have a lot of bikes to choose from. Most of them have suspension forks — an unnecessary complication

Vacation for these guys is a little different from the norm.



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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 steel Volpe (\$999), with a wide gear-range and 32C tires: www.bianchiusa.com, 510-264-1001.

Bilenky Cycle Works offers the light-touring Tourlite (\$2,645 and up); the traditional, steel Midlands (\$2,300 and up); and the coupling-equipped Travel Tour Special (\$2,245): www.bilenky.com, 800-213-6388.

Breezer Bikes offers the Liberty (\$1,099) and Greenway (\$799), both with fenders, light, reflective tires, and rear rack: www.breezerbikes.com, 415-339-8917.

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

Cannondale offers the rack-equipped, aluminum Touring 1 (\$1,920) and the Touring 2 (\$1,390): www.cannondale.com, 800-245-3872.

Co-Motion Cycles offers the light touring Nor'Wester (\$3,325), the around-the-world Americano (\$3,295), and the beefy Mazama (\$2,895): www.co-motion.com, 541-342-4583.

Fuji Bicycles offers the traditional steel Touring model (\$950): www.fujibikes.com, 215-824-3854.

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

Gunnar Bikes offers the Rock Tour, a mountain bike designed for loaded touring (\$975 frame only): www.gunnarbikes.com, 262-534-4190.

Independent Fabrication offers the Independence frameset (\$2,100 steel; \$3,640 titanium) for long-distance touring, and the light-touring Club Racer frameset (\$1,995): www.ifbikes.com, 617-666-3609.

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

Koga Miyata offers the Globetraveller (\$3,150), the

Worldtraveller (\$2,885), and the Traveller (\$2,250), all with front/rear racks and many accessories: www.koga.com.

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

Litespeed offers the Sportive titanium touring bike (\$3,500): www.litespeed.com, 800-229-0198.

Raleigh Bicycles offers the Sojourn (\$1,200): www.raleighusa.com, 253-395-1100.

REI offers the Novara Safari, a 26-inch-wheel tourer (\$849); the Randonee, a traditional touring bike (\$949); and the Element, a cyclocross/light tourer (\$1,099): www.rei.com, 800-426-4840.

Rivendell Bicycle Works offers custom touring frames (\$2,700 to \$2,900; complete bikes for \$3,400 to \$4,000). They also offer the Atlantis frame (\$1,500; or \$3,000 for complete bike): www.rivbike.com, 800-345-3918.

Rodriquez Bicycles offers the Adventure (\$2,349 to \$4,449); the S&S-equipped W2 (\$2,949 to \$5,149), co-designed by Willie Weir: www.rodcycle.com, 206-527-4822.

Rocky Mountain Bicycles offers two steel tourers, the Sherpa 10 (\$1,199) and the Sherpa 30 (\$1,399): www.bikes.com, 604-527-9993.

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

Seven Cycles offers custom titanium touring bikes, the Vacanza (\$3,195 frame, \$5,700 to \$9,000 complete bike); the Muse (\$2,395 frame, \$3,900 to \$7,600 complete bike): www.sevencycles.com, 617-923-7774.

Soma Fabrications offers the light touring frames the DoubleCross (\$376), the Smoothie (\$376), and the Speedster Road Sport (\$795): www.somafab.com.

Specialized offers the light-touring Sequoia in two aluminum versions (\$850 to \$1,500): www.specialized.com, 877-808-8154.

Surly offers the steel Long-Haul Trucker (\$420 frameset; \$985 complete bike), the Karate Monkey frame and fork (\$465), and the Cross-Check (\$410; \$930 for full bike): www.surlybikes.com, 877-743-3191.

Terry Precision Cycling offers woman-specific touring bikes, the Fast Woman (\$1,615), the Isis Pro (\$2,430), and the Susan B (\$650): www.terrybicycle.com, 800-289-8379.

Trek offers the venerable steel 520 (\$1,240): www.trekbikes.com, 920-478-2191.

The Urbane Cyclist offers a variety of touring, recumbents, and folding bikes: www.ucycle.com, 416-979-9733.

Vicious offers the steel Casual Agent (\$1,775 frameset; around \$3,000 complete) with available disc-brake compatible rear rack (\$150): www.viciouscycles.com, 845-883-4303.

Waterford Cycles offers custom-built touring bikes, the Adventure Cycle 1900 (\$1,600 frame) and the T-14 (\$1,299 frame): www.waterfordbikes.com, 262-534-4190.

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

Recumbents
Cycle Genius offers recumbent touring bikes (\$700 to \$2,000): www.cyclegenius.com, 866-901-2453, 713-666-2453.

Easy Racers offers the Tour Easy (\$2,495), and the Javelin (\$1,595), the Gold Rush (\$3,495) and the Fold Rush, a folding version (\$3,995): www.easyracers.com, 831-722-9797.

Lightning Cycle Dynamics offers the P-38 (\$2,000 frameset, \$3,000 and up for a full bike): www.lightningbikes.com, 805-736-0700.

Longbikes offers the Eliminator (\$2,699 and up) and the Slipstream (\$2,599 and up): www.longbikes.com, 303-986-9300.

Rans offers the long-wheelbase Stratus (\$1,350) and the short-wheelbase VRex LE (\$1,350):

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, 269-945-5581.

Folding Bikes

Airnimal Designs offers the 24-inch, rear suspension Airnimal (\$2,100 and up) in multiple touring configurations: www.airnimal.com.

Bike Friday offers folding touring/travel bikes (\$999): www.bikefriday.com, 800-777-0258.

Birdy Bicycles offers folding touring bikes with 14-speed Rohloff hubs: www.birdybike.com, 503-391-7602.

Brompton offers the P-type folding bike series (\$885 to \$2,105): www.bromptonbicycle.co.uk, +44(0) 208-232-8484.

Dahon Folding Bicycles offers folding touring bikes the Smooth Hound (\$850) and the Tornado (\$2,000): www.dahon.com.

Moulton offers a wide variety of folding bikes (\$885 to \$6,350): www.alexmoulton.co.uk, +44 (0) 122 586 5895.

Custom Touring Frame Builders
Curt Goodrich Bicycles www.curtgoodrich.com, 612-788-6812.

J. Peter Weigle email: jpweigle@sbcglobal.net, 860-434-0700.

Mariposa www.mariposabicycles.com, 416-423-0456.

Pereira Cycles www.pereira-cycles.com, 801-209-9301.

Peter Mooney Cycles www.peter-mooney.com, 617-489-3577.

Rex Cycles www.rexcycles.com, 916-446-5706.

Spectrum www.spectrum-cycles.com, 610-398-1986.

Steelman Cycles www.steel-mancycles.com, 650-364-3939.

True North Cycles www.true-northcycles.com, 519-585 0600.

Vanilla Bicycles www.vanillabi-cycles.com, 971-570-3244.

Willits Brand Bicycles www.willitsbikes.com, 877-558-4446.

for touring in my opinion — but one that does not, and therefore makes our exemplar list, is the

The Trek 7.2 FX has a lightweight-and-rigid aluminum frame, low-mount rack bosses on the worry-free steel front fork, 700x35C tires for great load carrying, an eight-speed Shimano/SRAM drivetrain and a 25-inch low gear. The retailer will probably be disappointed to sell you such an inexpensive bike for an epic journey, because the FX is marketed towards bike path weekend rides — but it has the capability of taking you on a long trip. There are a total of five FX models, but only the cheapest two (the 7.2 and 7.3) are suitable for touring. The top three models have paired-spoke wheels, which can't be serviced in the field, and carbon-fiber forks, which don't have rack eyelets.

Entry level production

Inexpensive traditional touring bikes start somewhere around \$800, although in this day and age, any number we put in print may be outdated in the time it takes the magazine to reach your mailbox. What you get for the price premium over the hybrid listed earlier is a set of dropped handlebars with integrated brake/shift levers. Surly, Fuji, Jamis, and Bianchi are among the companies that offer bikes in this price range.

I reviewed a Jamis Aurora in 2005, and the \$865 Aurora is a very good example in its price range. It has a steel frame and fork (because product managers think all bicycle tourists prefer steel), Shimano Deore/Tiagra derailleurs, and, yes, better quality components all around than the less expensive bike mentioned above. Of course it has bosses for a low-mount front rack, a rear rack, and two water bottles. The low gear is 25 inches.

Jamis now has a fancier model, the Aurora Elite, which has rack bosses on its carbon fiber fork, among other upgrades.

Fancier production

Spend more, get more. My sentimental favorite for nicer production bikes is the Cannondale. It wins by a nose over worthy competitors, such as Trek, because the aluminum frame gives it the minor high-tech advantage I described earlier. It's made by flannel-shirted welders in a stunningly modern, high-tech factory in Bedford, Pennsylvania.

Cannondale has two touring bike models.

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The \$1,900 T-1, the fancier of the two, has that 25-inch low gear, an impressively rigid frame and fork, low-mount rack eyelets, a Shimano Ultegra/105 drivetrain, and comes stock with a fancy modern Fizik saddle, the better to show that you're not just a leather-and-wool retrogrouch.

We think of touring bikes as looking, well, extremely classic, but the Cannondale, by dint of its frame detailing, finish, and cosmetic touches, is more modern and sleek.



Seven's Vacanza

Custom/handbuilt

It causes me great agony to mention only one bike in this category, because there are so many good ones. I often get letters from readers asking, for example, whether the Waterford is better than the Independence or the Co-Motion or the Bruce Gordon, and, frankly, I just don't know. All these folks are experts, and they work hard to provide a good customer experience, with careful

attention to rider fit and a flawless product arriving on your doorstep.

If you want a bike with S&S couplers — so the frame can disassemble and the entire bike fit in an airline-legal suitcase — custom builders are your vendor of choice.

I asked one of my favorite retailers, Diane Lees of Hubbub Cycles in Chesterland, Ohio, for her favorite. After some agonizing, she gave the nod to Seven Cycles, because she likes working with them to customize

bikes for the rider.

Seven offers steel, carbon, and titanium frame bikes. If your long arms make you hard to fit, or you stand and mash when climbing hills, or you insist on an extra-rigid frame that will not wobble at all under a touring load, their custom-building capabilities come in handy. The bikes look gorgeous, and the appearance of yours depends on what you want it to look like.

A steel Seven Vacanza touring frame will cost you about \$1,800, and the complete bike will range from \$3,300 to \$6,100 or more, depending on how carried away you get with component selection.

The Muse and Vacanza titanium touring frames are \$2,400 and \$3,200 (the extra money gets you double-butting). A complete Muse bike is \$3,900 to \$7,600, and a complete Vacanza titanium bike is \$5,700 to \$9,000.

In comparison with a cheap bike, a hand-built bike is expensive, but in comparison with anything else that beautifully made, it's cheap.

Others

We haven't covered mountain bikes, recumbents, tandems, folding bikes, and a host of other bike categories. So I'll pass in passing that a Gunnar Rock Tour, a Greenspeed recumbent trike, a Santana Enduro tandem, a Tour Easy recumbent, and a Bike Friday are fine examples of their respective breeds. I'll also carefully say that I have not attempted to name the best bike in any particular category. Usually there is no true "best." The bikes I've mentioned, and many others like them, stand ready to take you on the journey of a lifetime.

And as I always say, once you've bought the bike, don't focus on it. Maintain it so it's a reliable companion, but focus on the scenery, the people, and the experiences that make cycletouring the world's finest way to travel. **AC**

John Schubert is Adventure Cyclist magazine's long-time technical editor. This is his ninth touring bike buyer's guide. To congratulate John on this epic feat, email schubley@aol.com.

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