Buying a touring bike in 2008

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

By John Schubert

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.

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 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 differences 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 700x23C (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. 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
Why do we insist on a front rack? Well, if you’re only 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 carrying 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 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 hobs 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 24 years and it just isn’t very different.

Frame materials
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 boosts 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.

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 venerable 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?
### TOURING BIKES FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

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

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

The Trek 722 FX has a lightweight and rigid aluminum frame, low-mast mount bobbins on the worry-free steel front fork, 700x35C tires for great load carrying, an eight-speed Shimano/SRAM drivetrain and a 1x10 speed. A bike retailer will probably be disappointed to sell you such an inexpensive bike for an epic journey, because the FX is marketed towards bike path weekenders — but it has the capability of taking you on a long tour. 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 or aluminum forks, which don’t have rack eyes.

*Entry level production*

Inexpensive traditional touring bikes start somewhere around $500, 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-luxury earlier is a set of dropped handlebars with integrated brake/shift levers. Sun, 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 this bike was made for a low-mast front fork, a rear rack, and two water bottles. The low gear is 2.5 inches.

Janius now has a fancier model, the Aurora Elite, with integrated brake/shift levers 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 stares us down with worthy components such as Trek, because the aluminum frame gives it the minor high-tech advantage I described earlier. It’s made with flannel-shored welds in a stunningly modern, high-tech factory in Bedford, Pennsylvania.

Cannondale has two touring bike models.
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 retrogrrouch.

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.

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 Less of Hubhub 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 say 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.

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 epical feat, email schubley@aol.com.