How to Buy a Recumbent Bike for Touring

Imagine sitting back in your most comfortable chair as the mountains and rivers glide by. While your legs move at the effort level of a brisk walk, every muscle above your hips is relaxed, your fingertips occasionally flexing to make a steering correction. At the end of the day, you experience almost none of the stiffness and soreness that “regular” cycle-tourists suffer.

This is why recumbent cycle tourists are fiercely loyal to their bikes. “I enjoy being comfortable. I enjoy being able to see and experience things,” said Hans van Naerssen, a Philadelphia area management consultant. “Touring means just enjoying getting there, in addition to being there. For me, the real defining quality of a recumbent bike can be the comfort. On a normal bicycle, you’re trying to convince yourself that all those hurts don’t exist.”

Van Naerssen is an Adventure Cycling Association member, a veteran of numerous long tours over many decades, and owner of single and tandem recumbents since 1996.

“I can ride and see a hawk, because I naturally look up and out. I see the clouds,” van Naerssen said. “I see around the corner. I can feel the wind, because I’m sort of upright. That’s part of this experience of getting places and enjoying the moment.

“At the end of the day, even with lots of hills, I’m not sore. I’m able to enjoy the moment. That, to me, is the redeeming feature of a recumbent. It’s so much more comfortable.”

Recumbent touring is a fabulous way to see the scenery. You will see more of it than on an upright bike, because your head is naturally in a more upright position. The days are less stressful because fewer body muscles are

You want choices? Boy, do we have choices!
The first choice is wheelbase. You’ll note that these dimensions overlap, and a quick visit to your local store is likely to find bikes that contradict these general numbers, or simply fall outside of these categories altogether. That’s the nature of recumbents.

And, if you want to have your cake and eat it too, recumbents from Burley and Vision can be switched from long wheelbase to short wheelbase.

Another choice is where to put the handlebars. Most recumbents you see have handlebars in front of the rider, but a charming minority have handlebars below the seat ("ASS" (above-seat steering) and "BSS" (below-seat steering), respectively).

Your wheel diameter can be 16 inches or 26 inches. Or anything in between. Most recumbents can accommodate an aftermarket fairing, the better to make you aerodynamic and protect you from weather. Some have a "body stocking" option, a large spandex thing you use to increase aerodynamics even more.

Recumbent frames can be welded from steel or aluminum (the conventional way of making a bike), extruded from aluminum (as is the enormously successful Bike E), or, for the well heeled, made from carbon fiber (the 14-pound dual-suspension Lightning R-84) or Titanium (Easy Racers’ Ti-Rush).

There are recumbent tandems from makers too numerous to mention, fold-into-a-suitcase recumbents from Bike Friday and Lightning, three-wheel recumbent trikes from a growing legion of manufacturers, and the unique Bilenky Viewpoint tandem, in which the captain rides in back, in an upright position, while the stoker rides in front in recumbent position. If you need a magazine as your recumbent accessory, the Easy Riders Recumbent Club chronicles the traveling joys and competitive successes of Easy Racers over their 20-plus years. For press coverage of all the brands, there’s Recumbent Cyclist News and Recumbent & Tandem Rider Magazine. These magazines are absolutely stunning in the amount of information they present in each issue, by the way.

Different recumbents have different seats. I’ve sat on dozens of recumbent seats, and never found one I didn’t like, but that doesn’t stop the manufacturers from trying to build even more comfort into their seats, and designs and features vary substantially among the brands. And, for those of you who want to ride Adventure Cycling’s rugged Great Divide route on a recumbent, the Lightfoot Cycles Ranger is a LWB recumbent mountain bike specifically designed to be good enough over uneven surfaces to do loaded touring on the Great Divide route and similar trails.

On a more prosaic level, recumbents also vary in those minor details that upright bike riders obsess over: gearing, tire width, number of water bottle bosses, and so on. Recumbents vary substantially in the choices they offer for mountingpaniers and other accessories.

Hey, is that enough choice for you?

So far, only two major conventional bike companies have dipped their toes in the recumbent market. Trek did, with a reasonable-but-not-fantastic design, and discontinued it after two years, amid trade press reports that many in the company didn’t support a recumbent. More recently, Cannondale has a recumbent with many promising design features. But other than those two, this is a business of little companies.

I don’t know how many recumbent companies there are, and some of the smaller boutique companies straddle the line between hobby and business. Even though you’ll be buying your recumbent from a small firm, many of these companies have proven their staying power and their ability to service a national distribution chain and customer base. In the brand names mentioned in this article, I’ve made no attempt to mention every worthwhile company, or every company above a certain size.

Let’s return to the choices. What choices should you make?

“There is no right recumbent for touring. There is a right recumbent for you, touring,” said Rick Comar, director of marketing for Vision Recumbents. Comar has done 500-plus miles of touring in the Washington State mountains, and he favors his company’s short wheelbase Model 44. Vision Vice President Grant
Bike size: Most recumbents have a 16-inch or 20-inch wheel in front, and rear wheels ranging from 20-inch to 700C.

Wheel size: Most recumbents have a 16-inch wheel, while some recumbents have a 18-inch to 20-inch wheel. (There are two different incompatible wheel sizes called both “20-inch” and “20-inch wide.”)

Foot pedals: The conventional wisdom is that smaller wheels are better suited for touring, while larger wheels are better suited for road racing.

Foot height: One of the more interesting questions is how you describe the foot pedal. Pedals give the designer options in design-
ing predominates: The contrarian view is that higher foot height leaves you undecided, you can put this question to rest forever by adding a third view.

Foot steering: “Above seat steering feels more natural,” said Rideout. “I run into a certain percentage of people who absolutely can’t master under seat steering. At my high school, almost all my students hop on my [BSS] recumbent and ride right away. Maybe 5 percent can’t ride the under seat steering. I don’t know why. My brother can’t ride one to save his soul. My wife can’t do it. So she rides the RANS Stratus, which is a real nice recumbent.”

ASS is more aerodynamic than BSS, because the rider’s arms are within the profile of his/her body. With BSS, the arms are wider than the body. Hence, ASS has the advantage in full-size road racing.

Where to put the handlebars? Most customers vote for “up where you can see them,” but think twice before blindly accepting this advice. I remain partial to below seat steering (whosoo, BSS), which allows both arms to be completely released. As you cruise down the road, steering and balancing require minimal wrist effort, and you can easily have one hand free simply resting on your lap. Talk about relaxed?

However, Rideout has a well-documented opinion on why above-seat steering predominates.

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The conventional wisdom is that long wheelbases are more stable, but I thought both bikes would be stable. The Rans Stratus has a well thought out dual suspension, which goes a long way toward mitigating the drawbacks of small wheels. The choice is yours.

Wheelbase: Long wheelbase is the conventional favorite, but there are exceptions. If any recumbent stands out as the Fender Stratus of touring of recumbents, it’s the long-wheelbase Easy Racers Tour Easy. That bike’s wheelbase has its roots in the cur-up tandem that was designer Gardner Martin’s first prototype, back in the 1970s.

The conventional wisdom is that long wheelbases make it easier to pedal, and you can easily have one hand free simply resting on your lap. Talk about relaxed? Where you gonna call?

“Having a high crank spindle, spending too much time with your feet spanning above your seat, affects body comfort,” said RANS’s Mark Fischer. (RANS makes models with a variety of crank heights.)

“Longer periods of time, the lower crank spindle is a more natural position. For a longer distance, that is more desirable.”

If this question intrigues you, take a tape measure to the store. Measure the crank spindle height above the floor, and the seat bottom height above the floor, on every bike you test ride. These measurements can help you quantify the “seems to be easier to get started on” impression as you do your test riding, so you’ll know if the fifth bike of the day was really different from the first bike, or if it was just that you can use the bike you choose.

And, of course, you’ll want to take into account how the bike handles. But no tape measure can help you there.

Pannier mounting. Many of these bikes take standard front and rear panniers, but there’s more to it than that. Recumbents offer more and better options for how you carry your gear, when compared with upright bikes.

Here’s why: On a “tandem,” as recumbent riders refer to conventional bikes, your rear panniers are almost entirely behind the rear axle, placing that weight outside of the wheelbase of the bike. You have to put the panniers that far back because your felling heels occupy the space beside the rear wheel in front of the rear axle.

For that reason, I keep telling wedge
Fairings, seldom seen on upright bikes, are an important part of the recumbent package, and not just for racing. Although they came out of the recumbent’s racing heritage, they add an important benefit for touring: keeping you warm and dry. “I like the fairing for longer rides, mostly for weather protection,” Vision’s Comar said. “It keeps your feet from getting cold. The bubble goes right around your feet. You don’t need to worry about booties to try to keep your feet warm.” He added that the fairing didn’t overheat him in the summer.

Many riders are charmed by the fairing’s speed. “The fairing on one of my previous recumbents, an Infinity, would increase my cruising speed by five mph,” teacher Rideout said. “My speed in headwinds increases at least that much.”

“Five is a lot, and not everyone will report such an increase. Still, Fold Gold rider van Naerssen also reported substantial results: “A fairing, according to a couple of studies, doesn’t kick in until you’re going over 12 or 13 mph. At that point, it does make about a five percent difference,” van Naerssen said.

“I can keep up a pace of about 22 mph with the fairing on for four to five miles. And I’m an ‘old fart.’ I don’t think I can do that without the fairing.”

Easy Racers Founder Gardner Martin is particularly enthused about the combination of fairing and body stocking (a spandex cover that meshes with the fairing and you to make an aerodynamic package without the complications of a hard shell).

“This is another kind of touring. People are riding body stocking bikes,” Martin said. “It’s almost a whole new level of experience. Once people get the fairing, they don’t want to ride without it. The Zzipper fairing adds 10 percent to your speed. They spandex body stocking adds 15 percent, plus weather protection. We have one 50-year-old rider riding 140 miles per day with this combination.”

To most of us at that age, 140 miles per day sounds like a death sentence. But many recumbent riders say it’s no big deal. The bikes are simply that much different from wedgies.

I promised you choice. Lots of choice. The recumbent industry has delivered. Try several brands, be patient with yourself as you learn the new riding position, and these rabidly enthusiastic recumbent cyclists will cheerfully welcome you to their ranks.

All kidding aside, Technical Editor John Schubert extends a hearty thank you to all the recumbent fans who called and wrote to help us with this article. Your expertise was downright awesome.