

Road Test: The Bruce Gordon BLT-X

*A touring bike that goes
anywhere and fits anyone*

By John Schubert

For decades now, framemeister Bruce Gordon has built some of the world's best expedition touring bikes. His \$2385 Rock N' Road, reviewed on these pages back in February 1993, is, or should be, on the short list of everyone contemplating a top-quality custom-built bike.

But Gordon, being a man of the people, has long sought to offer a bike that less well-heeled customers could afford. Some years ago, he had some bikes built overseas to his design, and sold them alongside his handbuilt frames.

The overseas bikes were fine, but the subsequent rumors

can name one that will accommodate a wide 700x45C tire or Gordon's superior steel touring racks. You'll also be hard-pressed to find a mass-produced touring bike sized so that a short adult can have a standover height of only 26.6 inches. The list of ways in which a BLT differs from the offerings of bigger companies is a long one, and it continues below.

Gordon gave me my choice of the 700C tire BLT and the 26-inch tire BLT-X for this article. I picked the BLT-X because I've long been enthused about 26-inch tire bikes on the road. I like 26-inch tires because they come in such a plethora of sizes

and configurations, and because the smaller wheels allow the frame designer to make a better-fitting frame for a short person. Scaling down the wheel size allows lower standover height and shorter top tube length while maintaining appropriate head tube and seat tube angles. This can make the difference between a bike that hurts and a bike that fits for these too-often-neglected customers. This doesn't affect me personally, but it affects some of my best friends.

Because the BLT and BLT-X come very much unassembled, the customer can customize handlebar height. The bike comes with an uncut fork, and your mechanic cuts the fork to length for the stack height you want. You can have your mechanic add spacers between the headset top race and locknut, raising your handlebar height. For the touring cyclist of a certain mature age, whose stiffening back may be a visible sign that you're not 29 anymore, those spacers spell comfort. (Kids, don't try this at home. If you saw the fork in the wrong place, you'll have to call Gordon, who will first say, "I told you so," before saying, "Replacement forks are \$300.")

When you buy one of these bikes, you buy it in mountain bike sizing, which differs from the road bike sizing you may be accustomed to. I'm 5'8", and I normally ride a 54-cm (21-inch) road bike with the traditional level top tube. The BLT-X test bike measures 44 cm, and it fits me just fine. (In fact, the supplied 360 mm seat post has 2.4 inches of unused length to spare.) The smaller sizing gives me an inch or two more standover height than I would have on a "normal" bike, and the smaller frame is stiffer. And, while wide off-road tires are available in 700C, they are much more widely available in 26-inch.

There are many other important ways in which the BLT-X rises above a mass-production bike. Among them:

- The BLT-X is equipped with cable splitters. This allows you to swap the supplied handlebars with your pre-arranged set of mountain bike bars in five minutes or less, so the bike can "become" a mountain bike.
- The cable splitters also allow you to disassemble the



PHOTOS BY KREG ULERY

The BLT comes in both 26-inch and 700c versions. The 26-incher is pictured here.

("All his bikes are built overseas now") didn't please Gordon. So he and his right-hand man Dave DiFalco now build all their bikes in their Petaluma, California shop.

These bikes come in two flavors: the 700C wheel BLT (stands for "Basic Loaded Touring") and the 26-inch wheel BLT-X. You get to choose the frame size and wheel size you want, but if you want to customize the bike more than that, you'll be redirected to a higher-price Rock N' Road.

At \$1485 plus freight and assembly, the BLT and BLT-X cost only a notch above many mass-produced touring bikes. While mass-produced bikes are very nice, I don't think you

bike to a very compact state. If you don't have racks and fenders on the bike, you can quickly and easily fit it in the trunk of a sub-compact car (by removing the wheels, seat, handlebars and pedals) and still have most of your trunk left over for luggage.

• While Gordon's racks are legendarily stiff and rugged (I was once privy to torture tests in which his racks endured the vibration tester many times more than any other brand), that only tells part of the story. The whole system is better. When you put fenders on your BLT, you attach your fenders to short fender stays that attach to the racks, rather than those long, fragile fender stays that attach to the dropouts. If you buy Gordon panniers, the pannier mounts are

extremely simple, sturdy and rugged.

• The gearing is well designed for loaded touring right out of the box, eliminating the need for that tedious discussion (see last month's Cycle Sense), or for the proud owner of a new bike to go searching for the right parts to fix a stupid factory design.

• Gordon equips the BLT-X with rims a full 27 mm wide. In an era when many full-on mountain bikes have rims in the sub-24 region, as do virtually all other touring bikes, this sets this bike apart. What's the advantage? It's sturdy. And if you use wide tires for expedition riding, a wider rim is a better mount for those tires.

• The workmanship is superb. On a good day, factory bikes look this nice. But not all

SPEC SHEET

■ **Price without racks, assembly or shipping:** \$1,485. Price with racks, \$1695. Shipping, \$55 to \$95 within the U.S. Assembly by a local mechanic, \$100 to \$150. Optional large panniers, \$209 per pair. Small panniers, \$165 per pair. Pannier rain covers, \$49 per pair. Add \$150 for 54 cm model.

■ **Sizes available:** 34, 39, 44, 49 & 54 cm

■ **Size tested:** 44 cm (measured center to center)

■ **Frame dimensions:**

- Seat tube: 44 cm (center to center) or 46 cm/18 inches (center to top)
- Top tube: 21½ x 1⅛"
- Head angle: 71°
- Seat angle: 73½°
- Chainstays: 17½"
- BB height: 11"
- Front center: 24⅜"
- Fork rake: 2"
- Trail: 2¼"
- Wheelbase: 41¾"
- Standover height: 30"

■ **Frame & fork:** Handbuilt by Bruce Gordon Cycles, Petaluma, CA. Bruce Gordon design chrome-moly double-butted tubing; lugless welded construction; 1⅛-inch top tube & seat tube diameter; 1¼-inch down tube diameter. Threaded bosses for three water bottles. Bosses for cantilever brakes front and rear. Single set of dropout eyelets front and rear

for racks and fenders; threaded rear rack bosses on seatstays; threaded holes for fender mounts in chainstay bridge and seatstay bridge; unthreaded hole in fork crown. Slotted top tube bosses for rear brake cable and slotted down tube and chainstay bosses for derailleur cables. Vertical rear dropouts. Shimano Deore LX headset. Tange fork (except 54 cm model). Round fork blades measure 1.15 inches in diameter at top.

■ **Rims:** Sun Rhyno Lite 6061 aluminum, 559 x 27; measured width, 27.4 mm

■ **Spokes:** Wheelsmith stainless steel, 36, 14 gauge cross-three front and rear.

■ **Hubs:** Shimano Deore LX sealed large barrel front and rear.

■ **Tires:** Avocet Cross 26 x 1.5, 85 psi inverted tread. Measured width, 1.54 inches (39 mm)

■ **Crank:** Shimano Deore LX 170 mm with 22/32/42 chainrings.

■ **Front Derailleur:** Shimano Deore XT triple

■ **Rear Derailleur:** Shimano Deore XT

■ **Shift levers:** Shimano Dura Ace Bar-end index/friction style

■ **Cog cassette:** Shimano nine-speed

■ **Chain:** Shimano HG

■ **GEARING in inches:**

22	32	44	
11	52	76	104
12	48	69	95
14	41	59	82
16	36	52	72
18	32	46	64
21	27	40	54
24	24	35	48
28	20	30	41
32	18	26	36

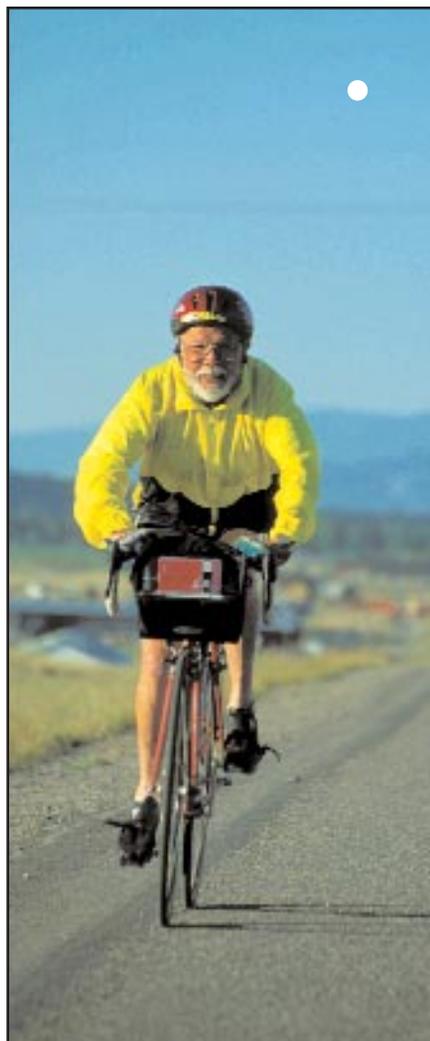
■ **Saddle:** Avocet Mountain 15M

■ **Seatpost:** Kalloy; one-bolt saddle clamp; 360 mm long, 26.4 mm diameter

■ **Brakes:** Avid Shorty Cantilever with Dia Compe 287 hand levers

■ **Pedals:** Dimention K2047 with Winwood nylon toe clips and straps. Handlebars: Nitto 42 cm wide MAES bend with Nitto 100 mm 15 degree rise stem.

■ **Manufactured and sold direct by** Bruce Gordon Cycles, 409 Petaluma Boulevard South, Suite B, Petaluma, CA 94952 Phone and fax, 707/762-5601; e-mail bgcycles@svn.net (they prefer you call on the telephone if you have a list of questions); a very informative web site at <http://www.bgcycles.com/>.



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Bruce Gordon's Well-Built Panniers

Bruce Gordon's racks will fit many brands of pannier. Standard pannier hooks fit over the top, and there's a bungee attachment at the bottom. But Gordon's own panniers are worth considering if you want a top-drawer pannier.

At \$209 per pair (large size) and \$165 (small size), these panniers are on a par with other top-quality panniers. They are less flashy than most other brands, but they have more of what you want and none of what you don't want.

What you want is reliability and ease of use. The bottom attachment strap is obviously designed to work well when your hands are

cold and all your equipment is muddy. The huge zippers are designed to last through rough treatment. Of course, all interior seams are capped, interior partitions are removable, and cinch straps keep the bag from being floppy when it's not full. The construction is so robust that you wonder how big a rainstorm it would take to make the optional rain covers necessary.

The rear pannier has two compartments with top zippers, and there's a third open-top compartment between them. The third compartment is handy for things you want to stow and retrieve quickly.

These panniers are made to fit only Bruce Gordon racks.

days are that good.

The BLT-X rides like one would want a touring bike to: it feels steady and secure, but it's plenty maneuverable. Gordon's rack system is rattle-free and dead quiet. (Tech-



nically, I have no doubt that a BLT or BLT-X could be a competitive criterium racer with lighter wheels and a different rider. But for reasons cultural and not technical, I don't expect criterium riders to seek out these bikes.) Tech heads will note that there are some theoretical differences in rolling



resistance and steering response between a 26-inch tire and the larger 700C tire. Even in theory, these differences are minute, and in practice, I could detect no difference. In any event, you get your choice of wheel size when you buy into the BLT family.

The 700C BLT is normally sold with low-mount front pannier racks. The 26-inch BLT-X is normally sold with mountain bike front pannier racks, because with the smaller wheel, the low-mount panniers are pretty close to the ground. For those who want the choice anyway, Gordon said he could be sweet talked into offering low-mount rack mounts on the BLT-X at additional cost.

The list of differences between the BLT family and the more expensive Rock N' Road is almost vanishingly small. The more expensive bike comes in a choice of colors, includes one larger frame size, has fork and handlebar stem made in Petaluma, and has more expensive components. Usually, when you buy a cheaper model, you wince at what you have to give up. But not here.

This is an impressive level of cost cutting, given that you can only have so many economies of scale in a two-man company.

Gordon's success at making the BLT and BLT-X more affordable, while retaining all the elements of his rock-solid rack/bike/pannier system, is exceptional. If you're looking for a new bike, regardless of your price range, these models deserve close scrutiny. ●

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