

The mountain bike business looks at touring. . .

Or does it? Lots of manufacturers don't know this kind of riding exists!

By John Schubert

The perfect off-road touring machine, that mountain bike is. It has fat, puncture-resistant tires. Its smaller 559 mm bead seat diameter makes the wheel inherently stronger and more reliable than 622 mm "700C" wheels. Its frame is far sturdier than traditional road frames, and with more relaxed steering geometry and improved crotch clearance. Other benefits: go-anywhere gearing, a relaxed rider position, and

more cushioning from the tires' greater air volume.

All you need to do is add some bags to carry your gear and a handlebar bag to hold your map in front of you. Oh, and some handlebar add-ons for more hand positions, ably described by Roy Summer elsewhere in this issue.

What more could an off-road bicycle tourist ask for?

Well, rack mounting eyelets, for one thing.

Yep, it's often true. Hard-core mountain bikes, in imitation of their European road racing brethren, frequently come without rack eyelets. For these mountain bikes and their designers, the ultimate expression of communing with the bike is a manic NORBA race, not a week alone with your thoughts on the trail.

This racing mentality permeates the bike industry. In researching this article, I spoke with an assortment of prominent industry people. The attitude towards mountain bike touring ranged from a yawn to a "huh?" Why would these people rather flirt with a spinal injury than ride Adventure Cycling's forthcoming mountain bike trail from Canada to Mexico? I'll never know. Maybe I'm just not as macho as these other guys.

Because the industry is barely aware we exist, there are a few equipment idiosyncrasies to look for. And there are various reasons for them. Here's what I found:

If you bought a bike with front suspension, you can't attach front panniers. To my knowledge, no front suspension system makes room for front panniers. Ditto for rear





The tremendous potential of off-road touring seems to be lost on many mountain bike designers.

suspension and rear panniers. (Of course, you can buy a rigid fork to install on a suspension bike, and attach front panniers to that. An imperfect solution for an imperfect world.)

What about using only rear panniers? I disapprove highly. Putting lots of weight in rear panniers makes your bike handle very poorly. A bike so loaded is barely controllable, and sometimes not even that, on smooth pavement. On a trail, it will be certain disaster.

But who needs panniers? They aren't the only way you can carry your gear. Not in this day of mountain-bike-oriented single-wheel cargo trailers. The Wheele bike utility trailer, weighing eight pounds with bag and rack, can hold all your camping gear and follow you over singletrack trails. So can the 12-pound Bob trailer, which earns its extra four pounds by carrying double the 35-pound payload the Wheele is rated for. (Pay your money and tow your choice!)

And some industry bigwigs are bullish on these trailers: "We're doing quite well with the Wheele," said Jerry Rowan, vice president of purchasing for Bike Nashbar. "It allows you to carry your stuff into the back country, and then it detaches from the bike so you can go off riding without any additional weight." The Bob trailer got its own endorsement when the heavyweight distributor Riteway began carrying it.

Thus, either of these trailers allows you to go touring on a fully-suspended bike. If a suspended bike is what you had in mind for touring, it looks like you'll be using the Wheele or Bob trailer for some years to come—because no one is hurrying to make an alternative. I confirmed that with a call to Rock Shox, the giant among suspension fork makers.

"No one has brought demand [for mountain bike front racks] to our attention," said Tom Eagleton, spokesman for Rock Shox. "I don't think anybody in the R&D part of our company has addressed that.

"It is not likely to happen if it demands redesign of the major components, unless the demand gets pretty high."

Eagleton stressed that his company's limited R&D resources are focused on their core market, high-performance mountain bike riding. And, he explained, the tooling costs for his forged and die-cast components don't warrant offering a rack-compatible fork unless they're sure of the demand. But he did say Rock Shox would cooperate with any smaller company that wanted to fill the gap:

"The alternative is an adapter mechanism, to fit on existing forks, coming from a smaller niche company. That's not something Rock Shox would do ourselves, but we would cooperate with such a company," he said. Eagleton added that the structural engineering involved, to make sure any such adapter was reliable and sturdy, made this a "don't-try-this-at-home" modification.

Rock Shox isn't the only company that hasn't noticed customers touring on mountain bikes. I asked Tom Armstrong of Cannondale—a company which has steadfastly supported the touring market with bikes, bags and racks, and which currently makes a mountain pannier—if mountain bike touring had been a blip on his radar screen:

"If it's there at all, it's a small blip," Armstrong said. "It isn't where everybody's focus is, at least at the moment." He added that the company plans to continue offering the mountain pannier, and that most of its models are rear rack-compatible.

Slightly—but only slightly—more bullish on mountain

bike touring was Blackburn's Paul Thatcher. Thatcher gave an impressive list of Blackburn's ample offering of mountain bike touring products—his specialized racks, bags, and off-road-oriented pumps and seat packs, to name a few. But when asked whether he saw any kind of coordinated approach to promoting mountain bike touring, he said it didn't exist:

"There's not a real clear vision [of how much mountain bike touring actually occurs]," Thatcher said. He was optimistic that it would increase, because it's an exciting new alternative among campers and hikers. But he had no tricks up his sleeve when I asked him the suspension question. "Our biggest hurdle is how we are going to be able to put racks on suspension bikes," he added.

Another prominent industry insider, who requested anonymity, echoed the comments of Cannondale's Armstrong and Blackburn's Thatcher.

"I don't know that the product managers say, 'Let's make sure this is a good off-road touring bike,' when they spec a bike," he said. He added that most of his company's product line, except for its racing high-end models, was well-equipped with bosses and eyelets for racks and bottle cages, and that his frame geometries just happened to be good for touring.

"But as a long-distance tourist myself, I'm disappointed that we aren't more proactive in addressing this market," he said.

He and I both.

Backcountry touring is such a logical (and joyful) purpose for the mountain bike—and one so potentially demanding of the bike's capabilities—that bike companies should be dazzling riders with high-tech suspended touring mountain bikes.

In this perfect world I envision, suspended off-road touring bikes will bring a buttery-smooth ride on a gnarly trail—and the choice between panniers and a trailer will be just that—a choice. The people who sell these advanced bikes will profit handsomely, since their customers are (a) older and wealthier than NORBA racers, (b) willing to pay for

comfort, and (c) unlikely to ask the bike company to sponsor them with a free bike, the way the racers all do.

Some other futurists believe mountain bike touring will



PHOTO BY BLACKBURN/DENNIS COELLO

grow. Nashbar's Rowan, for one, anticipates enough growth in demand that he is going to start selling water purification systems—long essential for back country hikers, but ignored by most conventional bicycle tourists.

But don't wait for the world to be perfect before you start having fun. If these companies are correct, you still have the trail all to yourself for a few years. ●

*Technical Editor John Schubert says his Ballantine book *Cycling for Fitness* makes a great cure for insomnia!*

Don't wait for the manufacturers to catch up with you. Backcountry touring is well worth pursuing now.

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