What Kind of Bike Should You Buy?

By John Schubert

The American consumer in 2007 gets to be mighty picky when he buys something. We have a baffling array of choices. This is true even with touring bikes, even though the neighborhood bike shop is likely to have somewhere between zero and one touring bike in stock (and probably not in your size). Search a little wider and you will find a broad spectrum of nuances in touring-bike design.

But before I continue, let me remind everyone not to feel that you have to be too picky. Consider that forty-seven years ago my brother-in-law rode a camping transcontinental tour on a Schwinn three-speed, carrying much of his gear in a steel front basket, and he thoroughly enjoyed himself. Take inspiration from him. I'm not suggesting that you seek out a Schwinn three-speed for this trip, but rather that you should get decent equipment and then stop worrying about minor attributes your bike does or doesn't have.

We racked our brains and came up with the primary subcategories of touring bikes — general road touring, light road touring, heavy-duty road touring, mountain bike, recumbent, tandem, and folding — and spotlighted a good example from each category. As always, you could argue with our choice of examples, as did we. But we think we nailed a good example in each category.

General Road Touring

Smack dead center in the touring bike's universe is the "typical" touring bike sold by, well, by several companies. You could be well-served by bikes from Trek, Cannondale, Fuji, Jamis, Rocky Mountain, or Bianchi.

A good example of a well-designed touring bike is the Novara Randonee, sold at REI stores. Its $950 price tag and its specifications are typical of general road touring bikes. It comes with dropped handlebars (which many of us still prefer for their more aerodynamic riding position) and an REI aluminum rear rack. The rack saves you the trouble of buying your own, and it broadcasts a signal: this bike is made to carry stuff.

The frame is Reynolds 520 steel tubing. Steel is still popular among touring cyclists, partly because of its retro-grouch cussedness, partly because of its field repairability, and partly because it simply offers a great ride.

The Randonee comes with Vittoria Randonneur 700x32 tires. These are wide enough to be flat-resistant on pretty bad road surfaces, even as you bog down the bike with camping gear. It's my tire width of choice for unpaved rail trails. I'm currently testing a pair of Randonneurs, and they are very durable, long-lived tires.

GREG SIPLE

Then there's the gearing. The front chainwheels are 26/36/48 and the cog cassette is a nine-speed 11-34, giving you a good low gear of 21 inches and an overkill high gear of 118 inches.

In this $950 price range, you're paying enough to get an actual brand name on your components, and in the Randonee's case, that name is usually Shimano. Brakes, hubs, chain, crankset, crank spindle, and of course, the derailleurs. You'll also get a pair of unprepossessing platform pedals with toe clips. This is pretty standard: bikes either come with usable-but-inexpensive pedals, or no pedals at all, on the theory that most riders will want to use the clipless pedal system of their personal choice.

The Randonee, and other bikes like it, will go almost anywhere and endure for decades. There's a reason why bikes in this class have remained the staple for transcontinental and similar rides.

REI Novara Randonee.

Light Road Touring

But what if you're a confirmed credit card tourist? You need carry very little stuff for a multi-day ride (I've done it with an eight-pound rack trunk that held all my clothing and other stuff). You plan to avoid unpaved roads, or use some combination of skill and caution to ride on them. And you want your bike to be as spry as possible for this kind of riding.

Four years ago, Specialized reignited the choices for this kind of rider with the Sequoia, which is pretty much a hybrid between a racing bike and a full-on touring bike. For 2007, the Sequoia comes in a $770 model and an $1,100 model. It has skinny rims to fit skinny tires (It comes with Specialized 700x23C), but frame and fork clearance to fit tires up to 700 x 32C. Both models have carbon fiber forks (advantage: less vibration, less weight. Disadvantage: don't clamp pannier racks on those carbon fork blades); the more expensive model also has carbon seatstays. Both models have "Zertz" elastomer inserts to reduce vibration. You get three chainwheels, mounting bosses for a rear rack, a more upright (and more comfortable) rider position than you'd find on a true racing bike and cheapie resin pedals awaiting the pedal replacement of your choice.

Specialized Sequoia.

The more expensive model has nine-speed gearing, with a low gear of 31 inches and a high gear of 113 inches. The less expensive model has eight-speed gearing, 32 inches and 113 inches. If you're in good shape, these low gears may be tolerable for very lightly loaded touring. Some riders may choose to have their gearing modified at the time they buy the bike.

To underscore the core point: you get an almost racing bike, lightweight and spry, with good tire clearances and rack mounts. Don't overload it and you can have some terrific adventures.

Other companies have started to follow Specialized's Sequoia formula. If one of them intrigues you, double check the tire clearances and rack mounting capability, because the marketplace is full of otherwise-wonderful bikes that lack these two key attributes.

Heavy Duty Road Touring

What if you are just plain hard on equipment? You carry a lot of weight, you bash through potholes, you ride on rough unpaved surfaces, your weight just has more metal bending karma than other people's weight. Maybe you plan on riding vast distances over rugged terrain in remote country. You want a bike that is overbuilt and reliability is your top concern.

While there are several good examples of heavy-duty touring bikes, the ones that many people will think of are made by frame builder Bruce Gordon, whose $2,550 Rock 'n Road and more affordable $1,849 BLT