

Life On 2 Wheels

Choosing a Touring Bike

Issue #1 - Getting Started

August 2026

lifeon2wheels@autistici.org

lifeon2wheels.noblogs.org

anticopywrite.everything.in
the universe is in the public
domain.

I started bike touring in the summer of '24. I knew very little about the different types of bicycles or maintaining one, I just knew I loved riding my bike and wanted to do it as much as possible for a while, and that I wanted to be far from cars whenever I could be.

I spent a few weeks reading about all-road touring and ATBs (all-terrain bicycles) and decided I wanted a rigid (no suspension) bike with 29" wheels and plenty of mounting points (to screw bolts into the frame) for small bags and tools. I found one on Craigslist for \$600. It came with pretty skinny tires (35c) but had the frame clearance for 2" tires.

A steel 90s mountain bike with 26" wheels would've been about a third of the price and could've done most of what I was looking for, but I knew the larger wheels and mount points would come in handy. It also had a 10-speed drivetrain, a quick-release seatpost clamp, and touring bar-end grips to make long days more comfortable.

-Wildflower

Tips For Getting Into Cycling

A slow-paced social ride like critical mass is a great way to practice riding on the street. Bike co-ops and Craigslist are good places to look for a cheap used bike that's in good condition. Some shops will have all-ages beginner riding lessons, city riding lessons, and basic maintenance

classes like a fix-a-flat workshop. Co-ops are also a good place to learn maintenance skills.

Making sure your bike fits you is a must. The longer you're going to spend on the bike, the better the fit needs to be. You can start with looking at the size chart for your bike and asking someone at a shop for their thoughts (different from a pro bike fit). -Wf

Getting Ready for Going Far

Before I went on my first trip, I was already used to riding 30-50 miles at a time and did so multiple times a week. I would stay with friends and family in the country and in the city and ride my bike to get between them. When I had an odd job in town and no one to stay with, I used my hammock to camp near hiking trails in city parks, so I knew I could handle sleeping out in the cold and the rain.

Going far isn't about being fast, it's just about being able to spend more time on the bike. Going fast when you're only out for an hour or two and aren't carrying all your gear is a great way to build strength, but when it's time to hit the road it's important to pace yourself.

Having low enough gearing to make it up a steep hill without having to work too hard is really great. Taking the time to walk a hill that you can't *easily* pedal up is a good way to avoid overdoing it. Don't get impatient or stubborn! And stretching before you get on the bike is a big help too. -Wf

Touring Bike Fit

After a few hours of biking at a mellow pace, you'll be sore in a very different way than you would be after a 20 minute sprint. Your legs might be ready, but your hands, joints, butt, back, or

neck could be bothering you. Sometimes it's just about getting those stronger too, but making tweaks to your bike fit can help a lot.

Flat bars without backsweep or touring grips can cause hand pain. Headset spacers to move your bars up or a shorter stem to move them back can help with hand and back pain from being too far down and forward. A sore butt is usually a bad saddle/short combo. Make sure your saddle is the right width for your "sit bones". Some people swear by the padded "chammois"/"shammy" shorts, but many bike tourers find that they get too gross after many days of riding. Diaper rash cream works just as well as the cycling specific creams and is cheaper and easier to find.

Knee pain is usually caused by the saddle being too low or too high, but saddle setback, tilt, crank length, and foot position all play a part. Cycling can be much kinder to your knees than running or hiking, but going too hard and too far on a bad fit can give you pain that takes years of rest and strengthening to recover from. -Wf

Clothes

I like natural fibers, both the feel and idea of clothes without microplastics, but a lot of outdoor and athletic gear is polyester and nylon. I found a pair of merino wool women's "bike shorts" (short yoga pants not explicitly meant for cycling) that had good reviews from cyclists but they were too warm for hot weather and tore easily. Instead I have 2 pairs of spandex bike shorts that I can switch between. I don't like the sporty look, but anything else makes my butt hurt after a couple hours.

Natural fiber sun hoodies are also hard to find, but I like mine a lot. It's a cotton/bamboo viscose blend and SPF 50. It does tear easily so I

have to remember to take it off if I'm riding thorny trails but they're usually shaded anyways so it works out. I also have a merino wool sun hoodie for cooler days that's also great when it's raining but too warm for my raincoat. Long sleeves and thin pants have been more reliable for sun and bug protection than sunscreen and bugspray, which are easy to wash/sweat off. Thin, packable rain pants work especially well. The cheap stuff (frog togs) tears easily but I found a used pair from Marmot on ebay for \$30. I always look for "or best offer" on ebay. Never be afraid to lowball somebody.

On long trips I like to bring 3-4 pairs of socks, all wool. Lately I've had three lightweight pairs and one midweight pair for cold nights. I also have riding gloves, large sunglasses with a subtle enough tint that I can wear them at dusk to keep bugs out of my eyes, and a helmet with a large mirror. A pair of sandals that I'm comfortable hiking in is great for water crossings or washed out jeep roads. -Wf

Bike Bags and Camping Gear

I went to a shop that sells used parts and found a rear rack for the bike. Then I met up with someone from Craigslist selling 2 large panniers (bike bags, 27L each) to clip to my new rack. I also ordered a 12' camping hammock off eBay for \$80 and found an "underquilt" (wraps around the underside of the hammock to keep heat from escaping) on r/Geartrade for \$75. A XL combination poncho/tarp that measured 10' at its diagonal made a perfect rainfly.

Eventually I realized I wanted smaller bags with more sturdy clips to handle rougher off-road riding. One of the large bags went flying off when I took the bike down a steep rocky trail. I found the smaller bags (2x13L) on Craigslist as well.

I had a 20L dry bag that I could fill with clothes (almost everyone packs too many clothes on their first trip) and a 20L backpack I could fill with food. There was room on my handlebars and the top of the rack to strap them to.

Eventually I got fork bags and a proper handlebar bag. A toptube bag and stem bag have been great for snacking while on the bike. -Wf

Stoves

I started out with an alcohol stove. Fuel was easy to find, just getting rubbing alcohol from the first-aid sections of convenience stores, but it doesn't burn clean so everything was always covered in soot. I used it for 2 years before I lost it at a campout and someone gave me a "rocket" style propane/butane camp stove. There's a tool for safely puncturing canisters so they can be recycled/thrown away anywhere instead of needing to take them to a park/outdoor store fuel canister hazmat recycling.

I still use the windscreen from the alcohol stove and try to always carry 2 canisters since fuel is harder to find. I like that it's less messy, easier to light at low temperatures, and easier to control the intensity of the flame. -Wf

Food

Sometimes I'm in too much of a rush to take the time to cook. I'll eat Greek yogurt, applesauce, pretzels, granola bars, carrots, hummus if I can find it. Packets of precooked rice go nicely with packets of refried beans, tuna/chicken if you swing that way, or precooked vegetarian food like "tasty bites" Indian food packets.

When I do have time to cook, I like red lentils because they cook quicker than other lentils and you don't have to soak them like beans.

White rice also cooks pretty quick. When I have fresh produce I like to cut up a small onion and a small sweet potato before adding the rice & lentils and tearing up a few leaves of cabbage after. Or I'll cut up some of the carrots I've been snacking on.

A trip to the supermarket usually lasts me about an hour from start to finish. It's a good opportunity to charge my battery packs. There are often outlets on the outside of the building, but they can be hard to get to.

Stopping at ice cream shops in small towns is a favorite of mine. They often have full kitchens with cheap food and are a great place to run into locals. -Wf

Water

I use a platypus squeeze filter to treat water I find. Aquamira water treatment tablets also work well. I usually have 4 liters when I fill up and try to never have less than one, but how much water you carry will depend on how much weight you are comfortable with, how often you have opportunities to filter water, and how often you're willing to stop. Having multiple ways of treating water so you aren't out of luck if one fails is never a bad idea, especially on remote trips. Same with ways of starting a fire. -Wf

Routing and Navigation

Avoiding car traffic is a high priority for many cyclists. I started out riding on bike paths and following low-traffic routes that had already been scouted. Bikepacking.com and BikepackingRoots.org both have a mix of shorter mountain biking routes and long distance all-road touring routes.

OSMAnd is an OpenStreetMaps app for Android that allows you to download regions of the map. It's also a good tool for creating and importing route (GPX) files. The website gpx.studio is especially helpful for editing routes. And cycle.travel is my go-to for getting low traffic directions.

A basic bike computer will tell you your speed and distance covered by counting how many times the front wheel rotates. Writing the distance and directions of your turns on a "cue sheet" that you clip to your handlebars gives you reliable low-tech navigation. A bike computer/GPS is also an option, but much more expensive and more smartphone dependent. -Wf

Where to sleep?

Part of picking a route is being confident that it runs through places where you'll be comfortable camping. I'm often riding through forested areas, so a quick search for a hiking trail or public park will give me somewhere I can camp for the night. I've also camped on WMAs, state forests, and other public land. Some require a permit and others forbid camping but I've never had an issue setting up at dusk and breaking camp at dawn. I rarely ever camp within view of a road.

Warmshowers.org is a hospitality exchange platform (like couchsurfing.com) where cyclists offer to host other cyclists that are on tour. It costs a one-time \$40 fee to sign up. Sometimes it's not much more than a place to camp, but I've had hot meals, soft beds, and clean clothes more often than not. -Wf

Tubeless Tires

Soon after I got my bike, I took it to a bike shop and spent another ~\$100 on fast-rolling all-

terrain tires. I also got tubeless rim tape, valves, and sealant. Tubeless setups let you run lower tire pressure off-road where a tube would get a flat if it wasn't fully inflated. Plus the sealant closes up small punctures on its own and larger punctures can be plugged up without having to remove and patch a tube.

I took everything to the bike co-op nearby and they showed me how to tape the rim, make a hole for the valve, and seat the tire on the rim. The shop would've charged an extra \$35 per tire for the setup, but we got it done in the co-op after a couple hours of trial and error. -Wf

Bike Maintenance/Repairs

I have a toolbag with a bike multitool with a chainbreaker, a knife multitool with pliers, a spare 10-speed quicklink, chain lube, tubeless sealant, a "bacon strip" tubeless tire patch kit, spare tubeless valves and valve cores, 3 tire levers, 2 spare tubes, a tube patch kit, a spoke wrench, and 2 pumps (in case one fails). I'm planning on adding a spare derailleur hanger and spare spokes.

Again, bike co-ops are great places to learn repair skills. I've learned how to fix a flat, tighten a headset (#1 cause of speed wobbles), true a wheel, fix a broken chain, and replace a derailleur hanger, and straighten my bars after a crash. I've used my tools to adjust my handlebars and my saddle to find more comfortable positions that let me ride longer. And I've replaced parts of the drivetrain that were either geared too high for touring in the mountains or damaged.

I also carry a small thing of duct tape, superglue, a dozen zip ties, a couple very small bungee cords, and tear-aid nylon tape which is good

for patching up rips in tarps, hammocks, tents, sleeping bags, etc. -Wf

Full-Time Bike Tramping

I was living in a (mostly unconverted) van for a while before I started bike touring. It was a great way to ease into it, they're very similar. For me, bike touring is most everything I liked about vandwelling without the downsides. No paying for gas, registration, inspection, emissions testing, insurance, or parking. Sleeping in the woods instead of in parking lots. Fewer interactions with the cops (they basically never leave their cars, so if they can't see you from the road they won't know you're there).

Winter presents a challenge. Even if you can handle camping in freezing temperatures, living in them can be demoralizing. If you have friends or family to stay with, great. Some people find winter seasonal work with housing. Otherwise a month-to-month rental sometimes makes the most sense. Craigslist is, again, a good place to look, but I had FurnishedFinder.com recommended to me and I often see decent deals on there.

People ask me how I make money as a traveler. Sometimes I work odd jobs, sometimes I work seasonal jobs. I made 10k in 4 months as a veggie farmhand, and that was more than enough for the next year of traveling. I mostly spend money on food, bike parts, camping gear, train tickets, and pinball. -Wf

Excerpts From a Reddit Post by u/PaganBicycleTraveler on r/Bikedwelling

"Planet Bike Neoprene Shoe Covers and a pair of Neoprene Gloves. Walmart or any Sporting Good store sells Glacier Gloves in the fishing section. Stay warm and dry in rain and snow. Big bigger XXXL or XXL."

"Electronics. Most have modern cellphone, a few carry a laptop. AM/FM radio, mp3 player, kindle. Most just have the phone. I carry a rechargeable beard and moustache trimmer and buzz my head on the day of the new moon every month. I have a Sony AM/FM mostly for Coast2Coast AM and NPR."

"Ortlieb panniers are the gold standard. They come with a five year warranty. They start to look well worn after 2 or 3 years of continuous use. I buy replacement buckles and keep one in each bag. Buckles available at Ace Hardware. When you've worn out a set, keep the hooks and cut 1 of them up to use as patches."

"The Pacific Coast is a great way to spend a summer. \$5 camping and a hot shower twice a day. I've done it 6 times. All 420 recreational states. (lots of bicycle tourers). Only do it southbound!!!. Start in Astoria OR." (I wonder why they say to only do it southbound? Haven't seen anyone else say that... -Wf)

"You should have either a private mailbox or a trusted person living at a stable address... you still have to file your taxes."

"County and State Parks are more likely to have hot showers than National Parks. (Grand Canyon, both sides have showers)"

"Have a time consuming lightweight hobby that you carry with you. I know a guy who spends all his time traveling hot spring to hot spring. Another guy goes fishing for 5 or 6 months a year. He spends all summer/fall pedaling around a single state, the year I met him he was in Montana, the year prior was Colorado, this year it's Oregon (a nonresident annual fishing license runs about \$80, that \$80 investment pays for itself in food. Bluegill are the finest tasting freshwater fish). Another carries

a Kala Waterman ukulele. Read, draw, paint, write poetry, keep a journal, learn to crochet, learn to juggle, spin poi, learn to read tarot, Don't be afraid to grow, try new things. I'm thinking about doing some lino cut printing, but I'd really enjoy a metal detector, or maybe learn to play a Kalimba or Irish Tin Whistle. Get a hobby."

Electronics

I have 2 large (20000 mah) battery packs and 2 fast (60w) USBC chargers for power. I've thought about solar but would really like a dynamo hub (generator built into a front wheel). My ereader and mp3 player rarely need charging. Lights are the hardest to keep charged, but that's only an issue if I'm riding at night. My headlamp has a white and red light so it can replace my headlight or my taillight in a pinch. -Wf

Safety

Even if you have wide tires that can handle gravel and dirt roads, you'll eventually find yourself on some busy roads. Resupply often means a trip to the supermarket. A helmet mirror is a big help when riding with traffic. Work on figuring out when you're more comfortable staying as far to the right as possible vs when you like to "take the lane". Don't be afraid to ride off into the grass if you see a car trying to pass you without enough room.

"ABC" stands for Air, Brakes, Chain, and is a good check before you start riding. Make sure your tire pressure is within the limits on the side of the tire. If your pump doesn't have a gauge, get a feel for what the bottom and top end of the pressure range feels like next time you have access to a pump with a gauge. If you have disk brakes, avoid touching the rotors to keep oils off of them. -Wf

Entertainment

As I mentioned, I travel with an ereader and a mp3 player. My favorite thing about them is that I can plug them right into my smartphone when I want to transfer new files to them. I also travel with a penny whistle, a mandolin, and a deck of cards. -Wf

Cross-Country Plans: Seeking Travel Companions

In 2027 I'm planning on riding across the continent East to West through the Alleghenies, Smokies, Ozarks, Rockies, and the Sierra Nevada. I love the mountains and I want to see the West. I'll likely ride back east in '28. I'm comfortable riding 40-70 miles a day, but I love to take long breaks and rest days when schedules allow. I'm often on dirt roads that require mountain bike tires but not suspension. Reach out if you might be interested in riding together. -Wildflower

Thanks for reading!

Life On 2 Wheels is greatly inspired by Bert and Holly Davis's *Dwelling Portably* (1980-2015). I happen to have taken my pen-name from someone who regularly wrote in to *DP*. I'm hoping to fill future copies of this zine with interviews and reports from other travelers. I sign off each section because I expect future issues will have different sections with different authors.

Whether you're a full-time bike nomad, a tourer, a bikepacker, or just bike camp-curious, feel free to write in with stories, tips, personal ads, or questions. Just send me an email (lifelon2wheels@autistici.org) or fill out the PGP encrypted contact form on the website and include what name you'd like to sign off with and location/contact info if you'd like to include it. -Wildflower