

Self-contained Bicycle Touring: Loading Up

In most circumstances, the theory and practice for bicycle touring in Africa, Asia and South America is little different from that used in the North America or Europe. The duration, geography and the surface characteristics of the roads you plan to use, and the kind of load you will be carrying, will influence the quality (durability) and type of the equipment you choose. In the end “spinning wheels got to go round.”

LOADING UP

If you are flying to the start of your adventure, before dismantling and packing your bike for the plane, do a dry run with all of your equipment setup on the bike. After your bike is serviced and you have planned what you are taking, assemble everything (racks, panniers, water bottles, pumps, clothes, tools, first aid kit, etc.) to make sure you have all the pieces, including every last screw, nut and bolt. Make sure that all the pieces fit!

If you are using four panniers for off road riding you can distribute the weight 55% rear, 40% front, and less than 5% in the handlebar bag (the rear/front percentages should be reversed if you plan to stay on smooth paved roads).

There are many techniques for arranging things in panniers. You will need to discover which is most comfortable for you. Right off the top people usually divide into the “packers” and the “stuffers.” The packers will carefully fold, group and bag associated items together (shirts, underwear, socks, trousers, bike gear, sleeping gear, cold weather gear, wet weather gear, sun gear, toiletries, tools, mess kit, wellness kit, office supplies, etc.) and place them tightly into their panniers. The stuffers might group items, but rarely demean themselves by fold or bag anything before stuffing them into their panniers. Ironically, there are packers who neatly pack groups and then fairly helter-skelter places bags of things in the panniers, and there are stuffers who are very organized in how they associate like-items in a particular pannier. Go figure.

Whether you are a packer or a stuffer, the majority of people find that their aggravation is reduced if they can figure out a logical pattern for packing their panniers, and stick to it. If done well, you will be able to find things much easier and faster without as much frustration, and without tearing everything apart every time you need a tooth brush or sunscreen.

As you develop you system it is keep in mind that the bicycle will ride better if it is balanced left to right and heavy items are towards the bottom and closer to the wheels. It is probably better to let ride-characteristics trump organization, but it is usually possible to stay pretty true to your organizing pattern.

One approach for finding your organizing pattern is to look at your preference for dismounting and leaning your bike when you stop. If you tend to dismount on the left and lean your bike on its right side when you stop, put things you most frequently use on the left (easy access) side of your bike and less frequently used items on the right (back) side of your bike, or visa-versa. Toilet articles, sunglasses, and sun lotion might be near the top or in an exterior pocket on the easy access side, while the first aid kit, tire repair kits, tools, and other articles you

may need while riding or in an emergency are on top or in easily accessible pocket on the backside. Bury heat sensitive, fragile or valuable thing in the middle of your clothes. For heat sensitive items it will help them stay insulated from rapid changes in temperature. A little deeper on the easy access side is a good location for layers of clothes, maps, guide books, resources and paperwork. A little deeper on the back side is a good location for your sleeping kit, shower kit and laundry supplies and other things that you are likely to use at most once a day, and at the end of the day at that.

Packer-types find it helpful for keeping things organized and clean if they package similar items together in plastic bags or nylon stuff sacks. Because not all panniers are waterproof and there are no guarantees on the weather, there are additional reasons to package clothes, diaries and equipment separately in heavyweight plastic bags, waterproof nylon stuff-sacks or other waterproof containers. It is useful to bring a few extra plastic bags for laundry and unforeseen needs.

Be selective about what you bring. Anything you pack that you don't need is going to be extra weight for the entire trip. Suggestions for what to bring are included in the annotated packing list.

PACKING TO FLY

Packing for air travel is a different ball game. Your overall strategy should be to be streamlined and compact for moving relatively unencumbered through airports. At most, this usually means two checked bags, ideally at least one with wheels, plus a carry-on. It is a challenge, but it is well worth trying to achieve. Remember nothing that cuts or pokes, and nothing over three fluid ounces in your carry-on bags. Panniers and handlebar bags can serve double-duty as they work well as carry-ons.

Opinions on packing bicycles differ. The four popular strategies are:

- 1) Rigid commercial cases (\$250 - \$600).
- 2) Bike boxes available from bike shops, airlines or Amtrak.
- 3) Rolling it on as is, without packing.
- 4) Soft bike travel bags.

1) Rigid Case

Cases offer the most protection, but unless you know someone at the other end to keep your case, and you plan to leave from the same airport, they can be impractical. Most airports will not store items that big, and hotels are only somewhat more amenable to the idea – high-end more so than budget hotels.

2) Bike Box

If you use a bike box consider it disposable – it will often be pretty tattered after its first trip. The secret ingredient for reconstituting and resealing a battered box is a roll of packing tape – it is good to bring along a roll. Similarly to rigid cases, bike boxes can be difficult to store for retrieval for the return flight and most airlines do not keep boxes at most of their stations for this purpose.

3) Rolling It On

Some airlines will fly bikes out of Africa unpacked with the pedals and seat removed and the handle bars turned sideways – but if you have a connecting flight once you get to Europe or the United States you may find yourself scrambling for a box while also trying to make the connection.

4) Soft Bag

More dismantling and reassembly of your bike is usually required to use a bike bag than for the big bike boxes, but bike bags are easier to roll-up and take along or store at a hotel and in the long run bags are easier to handle in many situations. To use a soft bicycle bike bag you must detach both wheels, both pedals, any racks and fenders and the handle bars. It is also advisable to take off the rear derailleur and right side crank arm/chainring assembly. In either case take extra care to protect the derailleurs, frame, wheels and forks -- a bike shop can help. Firmly tie the handlebars to the top tube, secure the rear derailleur between the rear stays and pad, pack and tie or tape everything else so no piece will do damage to any other. Axles, forks and chainrings are the most likely points to tear through your packing, so take extra care packing around them. Try to obtain a plastic axle from a bike shop or cut a piece of 1/2 inch dowel to fit between the front and rear dropouts.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

If you are using a box or a bag, after you have your bike stowed, fill it up to 50 pounds, with tires, tubes, tools, clothes, etc. These can be used to further protect the bike. Try to avoid putting things in the box or bag loose because they might fall out if a hole should develop. Include in your checked luggage any tools, knives and long metal objects that the airport security might consider a security threat. This is your checked luggage. If you can't fit everything that is left in your carry-on bag you will need a second piece of checked luggage. Be sure to label your luggage with your name and address in several places inside and outside.

Whether the first leg of your trip is on a domestic or international flight, try to check your bike through to your final destination so that you only come up against the surcharge problem once. Hint: Don't volunteer the contents of the mini-hippopotamus you set in front of the baggage check-in agent. You may avoid the fee.

Airlines have multiple baggage allowance depending upon origins/destination and class of service. This is covered in more depth at www.ibike.org/encouragement/travel/bagregs.htm. Some airlines charge a hefty fee for bikes-as-baggage on international flights (up to \$400 roundtrip) and some charge nothing, if you are otherwise within your baggage allowance. You might want to take this into consideration when booking your flight. If you plan to take a stand alone intra-Africa, Asia, America or Europe flight bear in mind that the baggage allowance may be by weight and generally much more restrictive than the allowance for flights that include a trans-ocean segment.

As the airlines increasingly reduce their baggage allowances and increase their excess baggage surcharges, folding suitcase bikes become a serious consideration.

NOTE: A major source of revenue for some countries is import duty. These taxes may be applied to high-value personal belongings entering the country at borders and airports. Duties are less likely to be assessed, or pressure to pay them is reduced if the item is clearly not new. When cleaning your bike for packing leave a bit of grit that you can point to as evidence that the bike is used.