

Self-contained Bicycle Touring: Personal Gear

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) of the equipment you choose and the style of bicycle, the gearing and the kind of tires you select, but in the end “spinning wheels got to go round.”

PERSONAL GEAR

Go light. (Come home loaded down if you like.) Because the weather is generally warm when people generally choose to bicycle tour, you can go a long way with a pair of shorts, a T-shirt and tennis shoes. For many destinations, it is possible to arrive with a pair of comfortable cycling shorts, a bicycle helmet, cycling gloves and multipurpose shoes and then buy local shirts and skirts to fill out your wardrobe; if that is the way you choose to go. It's also fun. Another strategy, for trips to less developed areas, which can be win-win, is to take items (cloths, bicycle, wellness supplies, tools, toiletries, flash lights – almost everything) that you are willing to give away at the end of the trip. It physically lightens your load, its spiritually liberating, it will allow more space for souvenirs, and it feels good to give things away. Whatever you take make sure that it is consistent with styles and standards of dress at your destination. As a rule select cool, sturdy, loose fitting natural fabrics.

As important as what to take is what not to take. You don't need to take most things -- that's a long list. Specifically, leave at home valuable jewelry that attracts attention and anything you couldn't bear to lose.

A few additional considerations are warranted. Whether you are off on a day trip to a village or riding the length of the continent for the experience, a few things are basic. Take them along and you can minimize any problem and possibly avert a disaster. The list includes:

1. Bicycle helmet & gloves
2. Water bottles, with water
3. Water purifier
4. Energy Food
5. Tools and spare parts
6. First aid kit
7. Clothing
8. Maps
9. Sunglasses
10. Lights

Consult the annotated packing list for a more comprehensive and nuanced record of things to consider bringing.

HELMETS & GLOVES- It is common to see people involved in sports wearing head protection. Helmets are part of the equipment for American football, rock climbing, river rafting and hockey. For good reason -- each sport presents a risk of head injury. Bicycling presents similar hazards and requires similar precautions. About 80% of all bicyclist deaths each year result from head injuries. Scrapes and broken bones heal, but scrambled brains may not.

Many serious bicycle accidents involve only the bicyclist falling or crashing into a fixed object. Accidents are a scourge not only of beginning riders or of young riders. Every bicyclist is wise wear an approved bicycle helmet regardless of his or her age, ability, or whether he or she is riding across the street or across the continent. Compared to the lifetime cost of a head injury or the finality of death, the cost of wearing a bicycle helmet is small. When bicycle touring there is the added factor that you might be a long way from advanced medical care.

In the central latitudes, a helmet also serves as protection of your head from the intense sun, which significantly reduces fatigue.

Protection from gloves is similar to that from helmets. Gloves don't avoid accidents but they can reduce injuries in the case of an accident. They are also invaluable in dampening road vibrations during normal riding and keeping gravel out of your palm in case of a skid.

WATER BOTTLES - Be sure you have sufficient capacity for the kind of travel you plan. Take a water bottle on every trip. Most bikes can be fitted with a couple of 28 oz. (3/4 liter) bottles. In hot weather it is possible to drink a liter or more of water every ten to fifteen kilometers (six to ten miles) – about an hour. In hot weather, on a loaded touring bike, it is reasonable to drink ten liters of water on an 80 km (50 mile) ride, and then drink a bunch more all evening. In temperate weather water consumption is usually proportionately less.

For extended trip consider an additional system of “reservoirs” – a large water bag or an appropriate number of two liter bottles – packed in or securely strapped on to your packs. A couple of regular water bottles and a couple of two-liter bottles will give you a capacity of over five liters. Some people like water bag back packs. Others complain that they are very hot on your back and add to shoulder and back strain. You should test the system before you travel. Safe drinking water is getting increasingly available around the world, but it is still problematic the most remote areas. It is still possible to run short of water in many areas at certain seasons or when a pump you expect to use is broken.

Tip: The contents of white colored water bottles don't heat up quite as quickly as those in clear and colored bottles.

WATER PURIFICATION - The feeling of dehydration can come on very quickly and after you are already in serious trouble. There is no substitute for drinking plenty of water in a timely manner.

Bottled water is increasing available in towns around the world, but they create garbage and have a high carbon foot-print. It is not ideal to rely on them as your primary source of safe drinking water. Iodine and chlorine tablets are useful in emergencies – if you have a half-hour to

wait and use them once a week at the most! For health reason, it is advisable not to drink iodized water more than once a week. And some people suggest that purifying chemical kill enough helpful stuff in your gut to leave you susceptible to other bugs, but because of this property they also work as a treatment for gut rumblings, in an emergency. If you want chemicals check the drug store for tablets.

If sources of bulk, safe drinking water are not available three better choices are; a filtering pumps, an ultraviolet light purifiers (search: SteriPen) or an oxidant purifiers (search MSR MIOX). These do have a little bulk and require an initial investment, but they can payoff rapidly. (If you process ten liters of water a day, at a value of one dollar per liter, in ten days you have recouped \$100 dollars of your investment.) Filtering pumps tend to be the most versatile and labor intensive, including requiring the most maintenance. There are several brands of differing quality available, priced from \$30 to \$200. People have had the most problems with models that don't have filters that can be completely cleaned in the field. The brand that seems to be the most durable, problem-free is Katadin, but it is also one of the slowest filtering pumps and the most expensive. The last two, hi-tech methods, require clear water, which is increasingly available, and use batteries -- which can be rechargeable. The MIOX also need salt and adds a little taste to the water, which is mostly an issue if you start with a high mineral water that already has a taste. The UV pen is the most fragile, but generally can be sufficiently protected. The UV pen is generally the fastest. For more discussion on water treatment see <http://www.rei.com/learn/Camping/rei/learn/camp/clwatertreatf> and read and click through the pages.

If you are going to an area without the certainty of sources of safe drinking water you should bring some apparatuses to purify the water.

In hot climates, two 32 oz. (3/4 liter) water bottles alone are on the low side -- if you like a lot of water, and expect predictably hot days, you will want additional capacity. A couple ways to reduce the amount of water you need to carry on your bike is drink like a camel overnight and in the morning (i.e. carry it inside) and/or wear light colored, loose, long sleeve clothing. The best strategy is to organize all your water needs for the next day the night before (you can top things off in the morning).

FOOD - Even if you start the day with a good breakfast and full of energy, as the day goes on you will burn it up. If you do not eat again, the calories will be consumed and you will reach a state of hypoglycemia, low blood sugar. It can hit you very quickly and leave you dead in your tracks. Take extra energy food along on every trip. It needs to provide not just quick, but also sustainable energy. Breads, local pastries, biscuits and bananas are widely available and good choices.

TOOLS & SPARE PARTS - To fully enjoy the self-sufficiency and independence that a bicycle can provide you need to carry a few tools and spare parts. They do not add much weight and could prevent you from having to push your bike on a long walk or having a long wait for a taxi. Select the tools and spare parts you need to do basic adjustments and maintenance on your bicycle and any special tools if your bicycle has esoteric components. A "Personal Bicycle Tool Kit" is included in the annotated packing list. It is a complete list of the types of tools and spare

parts you will want to carry and know how to use to have a basic level of self-sufficiency with your bike.

For long solo trip or any kind of group trip, when the supply lines are long, you want to bring enough tools and spare parts to completely overhaul a bike and repair everything short of a broken component, frame or rim. This is essentially a mini-portable bike shop. A suggested list is included in the "Packing Checklist" as "Group Equipment". Normally, in the case of a group of less than ten, only one set of these tools needs to be brought on a trip. Generally the group leader or his/her designate is responsible for organizing this kit and other participants need not worry about these items.

If you should need a spare part or tool sent to you in an emergency, worldwide overnight package services are now available to most world capitals and many other major cities. You will need a contact back home that you can cable or call who can buy a replacement part and then send it out via courier. The shipping is not cheap.

FIRST AID KIT - When people are in unfamiliar surroundings they receive more injuries than usual, hence when people are traveling they are more prone to injuries than they are the rest of the year. A lot of these are cuts and scrapes. Carry a first aid kit and be prepared to do the minor first aid. Prompt attention to even the smallest scratch is very important.

For any extended tour you should also prepare a medicine kit with prescription and over the counter medicine and remedies for allergies, headache, sinus and respirator infections, sore throats, indigestion (bismuth, Peptol Bismal), nausea, constipation, diarrhea, insomnia, motion sickness, pain, insect bites, rash, fungus, infection, other common ailments. If possible get pills in "blister packs," capsule or individually packaged forms. Bulk packed pills tend to vibrate into dust on long bicycle tours. If you take a prescription drug, carry a duplicate prescription that gives the generic name.

Suggestions for a first aid kit are included in the annotated packing list.

CLOTHING - In choosing your clothes consider comfort, visibility and social standards. You can never make yourself too visible as a bicyclist. Bright colored cotton T-shirts work well. Special shorts are made for cycling can significantly improve the comfort of the activity. Bike shorts have cushioning material in the crotch, relatively long legs and no heavy inseams. If you might be cycling at dawn, dusk or night, an oversize, long sleeve, secondhand white shirt from a used clothing market is an excellent purchase. It can be slipped on over anything and does not take up much space. A long sleeve shirt doubles during the day as protection from the sun. By covering your arms, you will reduce the amount of moisture you will lose. (For more information see the section: Body Maintenance: Liquids.) Worn separately and/or together a medium weight sweater (or pile jacket) and nylon wind jacket will prepare you for variety of changes in temperature and weather conditions. If you will be walking away from your bicycle during the ride, a pair of loose pants (men) or a wraparound skirt (women) that can be slipped on over your shorts will make you more presentable. (For more information see the section: Cross Cultural Barriers - Dress.)

Suggestions for clothing are included in the annotated packing list.

There are shoes specially designed for bicycling but they tend to be very uncomfortable to walk in. If you have a pair of shoes that you can bicycle in without getting cramps in your feet and also walking in then they are probably fine for general bicycle touring. If your feet get cramps using multipurpose shoes to cycle in then you will need to have two pairs of shoes.

Dust and exhaust are another problem. The irritation from exhaust can be the worst. When pollutants reach a choking level a bandana over the mouth and nose helps considerably.

SUNGLASSES - If you are use to sunglasses, you will want them most days. They will not only protect your eyes from the sun but also keep dust out of your eyes and reduce eye fatigue from wind drying. Get glasses with good UV filtering lenses DO NOT wear sunglasses with the side blinders! They restrict peripheral vision, which is very important if you have to swerve to avoid a hazard or maneuver in traffic. In the afternoon just when you are ready to take off your sunglasses, a new irritant appears: gnats and small bugs. If you ride at dusk, it is worthwhile to purchase a pair of glasses with clear lenses. If you are not a regular sunglasses wearer, clear glasses during the day are useful for keeping dust out of your eyes.

LIGHTS - Every effort should be made to stay off the roads at night. A disproportionate number of accidents happen at night, and they are disproportionately fatal. If you are on the road after dark, lights and reflectors are necessary. Plan ahead for your lighting system. A LED headlamp-style provides a bright light and allows you to cycle or do other work with you hands free. Minimally, you should rig a system that holds a flashlight. Next, mount a red light or red reflector in the rear. Check the bike shops for reflective accessories and other commercial products. There is a variety of choices available. Wearing light colored clothing also helps if you are caught on the road after dark. You cannot make yourself too visible for night riding.

OTHER ITEMS FOR BICYCLE TOURING - Depending on your plans there are a number of other special items worth taking or leaving home: If you will be staying in local housing or small hotels that don't necessarily provide linens, take sheets and a towel. If you are going to be sleeping in the highlands or going during the cold season you might want to supplement these with a sleeping bag or blanket. Rubber sandals for wearing in the shower. A flat rubber universal sink stopper for doing laundry in hotel sinks... Small gifts for new friends you'll make. A stack of business cards is an easy way to honor any requests for your address. Pictures of yourself are also a welcome gift and may be useful if the bureaucracy invents an unexpected new form or you need to apply for an additional visa. Binoculars if you are going to a bird or wildlife area, otherwise they are probably extra weight. Camera, data storage card/film, batteries and accessories -- be self-sufficient because these may be hard or expensive to re-supply in route... Reading and writing materials will help you pass the slow times or remember the good times... You only need camping gear if you are going to camp. If you are taking equipment like a tent or stove make sure you have all of the pieces before you leave.

Just like in the movie “The Graduate”, the advice for bicycle touring is plastic, plastic, plastic – at least when packing, not necessarily components. Whether we are talking about documents in a money belt or items in your panniers and it doesn’t matter if the concern is

torrential downpours or dust storms, packing clothes and other vulnerable items in plastic bags not only protects them from the elements, but also helps you stay more organized, find things easier and repack quicker.

Be sure to label your luggage with your name and address in several places inside and outside.

NOTE: A major source of revenue for many countries is import duty. These taxes may be applied to 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 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.