

## **International touring bikes.**

Thoughts from the Road on my Tour from Alaska to Argentina

By Jessie Oppenheimer

**Frames** – make sure you have a heavy duty frame. A light weight road bike frame will shimmy going downhill under all the weight. You don't need to buy a custom made frame unless you are super tall or super short. I rode the Surly Long Haul Trucker (LHT) and it was great! Most importantly, **make sure your frame is made for 26" wheels.** In US and Europe 700c wheels & tires are common but not in Central and South America. A mountain bike is actually not a bad touring bike for developing countries. In terms of fit, I think the most important thing is to make sure your handlebars and saddle are on the same level. If you are in an aggressive riding position where your handle bars are lower than your saddle, you will hurt your body after a while, and bent over position will become uncomfortable.

**Wheels** – make sure you have 26" wheels. I would recommend 36-spoked wheels. I used 40-spoked wheels, but I think that was probably excessive. Also, there is nowhere in Latin America where you can find parts for a 40-spoked wheel, but 36 is definitely common. If you use Shimano hubs, make sure you service them along the way. A lot of guys I toured with had trouble with their hubs (bent axles and what not). I used Phil Wood hubs, and they held up great for the whole trip. The only down side is that they are expensive. Make sure you get a heavy duty rim. I used Sun Rhino Lite rims, and they held up great, no problems.

**Tires** – get Schwalbe tires. They are amazing. I toured from Alaska to Argentina on one set of tires and only got 6 flats the whole trip! Other guys I rode with had random tires, and they were literally getting flats everyday. I recommend getting the tire in 1.75" width. It seems really wide, but you will appreciate it on roads with a lot of potholes, or when you are crossing train tracks. It's also nice to carry a really cheap, lightweight tire for emergencies. There were a couple of times on the trip, where we couldn't find what was causing people getting flats, so we'd patch up the tube, and then they'd get a flat again right away. So if you are carrying an extra tire, you can just throw that one on the wheel as a short term solution.

**Shifters** – do not put Shimano STI shifters on a touring bike. They will constantly be out of adjustment. Another rider and I had them, and they drove us nuts. By the time I'd hit California, I'd already been to four different bike shops trying to get them adjusted right. Both of us who started with STI shifters switched to bar end friction shifters, and they were a lot better. With a friction shifter, you don't have to worry about everything being in perfect adjustment.

**Drive train** – I used Shimano XT drive train components. They held up super well. You could also use Deore LX and you'd be fine too. I used a 9 speed cassette, but you might consider getting 8-speed instead, just because 9 speed cassettes aren't that common in

developing countries. You could probably get them in a big city though. If you are doing a long trip, you might want to consider bringing along a rear cassette, a spare chain, and the front chain rings. That way when everything is worn out, you know you have exactly what you need with you, instead of having to shop around.

**Pedals** – don't put clipless pedals on your bike. You will be walking around a lot, and it will just make you look even more like a space alien. I used the MKS touring/cyclocross pedals, and they were great. You can take the dust cap off and service the hubs on these, but I never did. One guy's pedals fell apart on the trip, but I don't remember what brand he had.

**Bar tape** - I used bar "fat" (bar gel pads) and two layers of bar tape on my handle bars. I know that sounds excessive, but I wasn't using gloves. Gloves get stinky really fast, and they end up being just another thing to wash that takes a long time to dry. With the bar "fat" and two layers of tape, you have a pretty cushy ride, so your hands don't hurt even if you aren't wearing gloves.

**Panniers** – I had the Ortlieb panniers, and I was not that impressed with them. I read a lot of really good reviews on line about how "bomb proof" they were, but they didn't hold up that well. Their mounting system involves a plastic hook with different size plastic spacers that fit inside the hook to accommodate different rack tubing sizes. What ends up happening is that the plastic hooks stretch, and then when you hit a pot hole your panniers bounce off your rack, and the little spacer piece falls out of the plastic hook and gets lost, and now the pannier really doesn't stay on the rack. I ended up using zip ties to attach all the panniers. It wasn't the end of the world, but it wasn't optimal either. I guess the pluses of Ortlieb bags are that they are totally, 100% water proof. Down side – after about three months of cycling they didn't stay on the rack.

**Visiting bike shops** – think long and hard about whether or not you really need to go to a bike shop in a developing country. I had some really awesome experiences in bike shops, but also some really bad experiences (i.e. mechanics stole from me, or broke parts on my bike). If you do go to a bike shop, stay with your bike while they are working on it, that way no one can steal parts off of it. The more repairs you can do yourself the better. You might consider bringing along some extra cables, housing and brake pads if you are doing a longer trip.

### **Other stuff**

**Maps** – Buy all your maps before you go. The only places I found maps in developing countries were English book stores in major cities. If you can, find a map that has kilometer markings on the roads and also has elevation contouring. There are many online sources for purchasing international maps.

**Stoves** – Do not bring an alcohol stove. It's really hard to find denatured alcohol. I had a denatured alcohol stove and it was a pain. If you are set on using one you can sometimes find denatured alcohol in markets where people sell cleaning supplies, or in pharmacies.

But it's not something that people sell in hardware stores, the way we do here in the US. I would recommend getting one of those international whisper light stoves that can burn anything. You can always find kerosene.

**Tents** – they make a ton of really light weight tents these days, and I'm super impressed by the designs. I bought a tent from this guy and it held up pretty well and only weighed 2 lbs. You can check out his website, it is <http://www.tarptent.com>. Make sure that you get a ground cloth though, because otherwise the bottom of your tent will start letting in water (I know from experience, ha ha...) The Big Agnes Seedhouse SL is another tent that is "real cool." That tent is light weight, but it's not as big as the tarp tent.

**Sleeping bags** – I had a down sleeping bag. For part of the trip, we stayed in cheap (like \$3-5) hotels every night. I didn't take my sleeping bag out of the stuff sack during that period, and I think I kind of ruined it because the down lost a lot of its loft. So my advice is that if you are going to stay in hotels, maybe take your sleeping bag out every now and then just to fluff it up.

**Clothes** – bring a "town outfit". I really liked changing into normal clothes. I even had blue jeans (which probably negates the advantages of having a light weight tent). I also had two pairs of shoes. I had these Shimano touring bike shoes with stiff soles that were good for riding in (if you ride in sneakers, your feet can start to ach because they don't have a stiff sole) and then I had a pair of sneakers. This was great if we had a day of pouring rain because then I had dry shoes to put on afterwards. I also had Crocs. I wore the same shirt every day and it was a long sleeved white sports shirt from REI. It was awesome. When it was really hot, it kept me cool much better than a t-shirt did. I wore spandex shorts. I just think they are really comfortable. People looked at my butt, but I didn't care. (Note: Riding skirts and baggy shorts are available with seat padding.) I also had polar fleece pants, a polar fleece jacket and a super light weight down jacket. At times I needed to be wearing all of it.

**Rain** – It is much better to be too hot than too cold. The best biking rain jackets have a lot of zippers that allow you to vent them. Make sure your rain jacket has a rain hood otherwise rain will pour down your neck and get you wet. I put a baseball cap on underneath the hood, and that really kept the rain out of my eyes. In Alaska I actually had a big pair of rubber rain boots for my feet, but I ditched them in California. I've never used these, but I've heard that Gore-Tex socks can keep your feet really dry. For my hands, I just had regular wool gloves and then I had a pair of yellow dish washing gloves that I would put over them. There is no such thing as a "water proof" cycling glove as far as I can tell. They all seem to get wet after a couple hours in the rain. Dish gloves look stupid, but keep your hands dry and are way cheap. I also had rain pants. I bought a pair of rain pants that had a vent on the knee, which was a bad place to put a vent because the material stretched after a while, and rain started leaking in. ... don't get pants with a knee vent.

**Dogs** – 99 times out of 100 dogs will just bark, but they won't attack you. Out of all of the dogs that came out at me, I was only attacked twice. One thing you can do is get your water bottle out and squirt them in the eyes. That seemed to work.

**Diarrhea** – If you get sick and you are in Latin America, you can go into any pharmacy and ask for “ciprofloxacina” and they will give you antibiotics. In English we call it “cipro”, but its full name is ciprofloxacin similar to the Spanish. You can't ask for cipro though because no one will know what you are talking about.

**Laundry** – A good way to wash your clothes is to go into the shower with all your bike clothes on, and then just soap everything up, while it's on you, and then take your clothes off and rinse them out. Then the next day if they didn't dry over night you can hang them on your panniers and they will dry when you bike. It's important to wash your bike shorts every day or you can get a butt rash..

**Water** – you can drink the water in Costa Rica, parts of Colombia, and Argentina. Otherwise, you should buy water, or filter it. I had a water filter, which I used occasionally, but mostly I just bought water.