

# On your bike...



This month, we're bringing you a gear report straight from the field: **Andrew Welch** and **Tom Allen** write exclusively for *Geographical* about the kit they're currently using on their around-the-world mountain bike expedition

I feel the sharp, cold air hit the back of my nostrils as I inhale and watch my breath escape into the night sky. Chestnut vendors roam the streets. The smell of smoke from their stoves reminds me of home. Last night, we slept on the roof of an apartment block, having furtively sneaked onto it in the dark.

I was kept awake by the loud, relentless, driving rain that swept forth from the blackest of skies. It splashed onto my face as I shuffled my way under a broken table. Thunder and lightning belched from the heavens in an apocalyptic display of nature's might. I pulled the drawstring tight on my bivi bag, cocooning myself from the elements, and attempted to sleep.

The next day – despite the fact that I was a homeless tramp

wandering through a rainy Istanbul clutching a bundle of sleeping paraphernalia and wearing clothes that I hadn't taken off for several days – I was happy. My bivi bag, the outside of which was still dripping from the previous night's downpour, had kept me dry, and my sleeping bag had kept me warm. This was impressive, and reassured me of my equipment choices. By the time day broke, it was barely above 0°C and I had spent hours lying in several centimetres of standing water.

## PLAN OF ACTION

When planning a long-term, low-budget mountain biking expedition, it's important to prepare for what can, at times, be bare-bones survival. At the outset of our global odyssey, we didn't

know whether we would be facing a Tibetan winter or an Australian summer. Nor did we know whether we would be accommodated by locals on a nightly basis, or be forced to rough it for weeks on end. We knew we would have to equip ourselves sufficiently to deal with a huge range of conditions so, inevitably, compromises had to be made. Bringing all manner of home comforts had initially been tempting, but shortly after departure, these items were sent home.

On the other hand, being too minimalistic would have restricted our freedom: camping and cooking kit certainly add weight, but they also open up a wealth of possibilities for adventures in remote and urban areas.

We spent a year planning the expedition, and listened to a wealth of opinions from veteran cycle-tourers. Alastair Humphreys, who circled the globe by bicycle between 2001 and 2005 (and who wrote about the gear he used in the May 2006 issue of

*Geographical*), was very much of the same make-do philosophy.

Long-distance travel by bicycle has been going on for more than a century; the first recorded around-the-world trip, by penny-farthing, took place in the 19th century. Of course, cycling technology has advanced considerably over that period. Touring bikes with thin tyres and dropped handlebars are common, but another popular choice is to convert a mountain bike. Riser handlebars provide an upright and comfortable riding position. An adjustable stem allows the handlebar position to be changed quickly and easily.

Steel is the only sensible choice of frame material, as breakages can be welded the world over. It also offers a more forgiving ride compared to the harsher, more rigid properties of aluminium. Several companies, including Kona and Thorn, make suitable frames that are dedicated to the adventure/touring cyclist's needs. It isn't uncommon to see cycle-tourers riding all manner of steel



mountain-bike frames from the 1990s; Trek and Specialized make some of the more popular models for conversion to tourers. These can be picked up on eBay, but you must be certain the frame hasn't been abused or damaged. Ask yourself if the initial financial savings are worth the risk before going down this route.

The advantage of rugged mountain-bike components (such as drivetrain, wheel hubs and rims) is that your bike will fare much better when you

eventually tire of tarmac highways and decide to head into more rural areas. In these less forgiving environments, unpaved roads won't necessarily be marked as such on your map. Gear ratios are wider, easing the steep climbs. And once the luggage is unloaded, the bonus of having a mountain bike is that it can be taken for a day of off-road trail riding or used as rapid transport around a city.

A rear pannier rack is essential, and not only for

carrying panniers: we've seen other cycle tourists with all manner of bizarre accessories strapped to them. It's worth investing in the strongest steel rack you can lay your hands on. Our main luggage-carrying device, however, is the oft-overlooked trailer. We're in a minority here, but moving heavier and less-used items onto a single-wheeled trailer has reduced the stresses that our bikes would otherwise experience, making breakages less likely. A benefit of the light-but-sturdy Extrawheel trailers we use is that they provide us with a spare front wheel in an emergency. The handling of the bike is also noticeably improved.

### TECH SPECS

Another departure from standard cycle-touring practice was our decision to use suspension forks. The advantages are obvious – your wrists and backside will thank you – yet choosing the right fork can be

tricky. The best choice is a short-travel, coil-sprung model with V-brake bosses that sports as few bells and whistles as possible. Air-sprung forks will lose pressure if the seals wear out, adversely affecting the geometry and bike handling. There's no danger of this happening with a coil-sprung fork.

'Lock-out' is the only additional feature worth considering: this deactivates the suspension, making hill-climbing and riding on flat stretches of tarmac much more efficient. There are very few suspension forks out there that tick all of these boxes, but Magura's Odur forks fit the bill, as do older models of Fox's Vanilla fork.

Magura is also at the forefront of hydraulic-brake technology. We crossed Europe using their Louise brakes. After 5,000 kilometres, we still didn't need to change the brake pads. This would have been impressive even without the 30 kilograms of luggage on each bike. The reliability and stopping power of these brakes is remarkable: one-finger, well-modulated braking is possible on bumpy mountain descents. We carry a complete Magura HS-33 rim brake each as backup, rather than the full complement of hoses, hydraulic fluid and bleed kit.

By contrast, most cycle-tourers advocate the use of cable V-brakes. However, these require

more maintenance, burn through pads and wheel-rims faster, and offer less braking power than hydraulic versions. V-brakes also require more physical work, which can cause cramp after six hours of cycling in the cold.

Spares and tools will vary depending on your route. If you are going to be heading through Western countries, where compatible spare parts are relatively accessible, for no more than a few weeks, you can probably get away with a set of Allen keys, a multi-tool, a pump, a puncture repair kit and some chain lube.

Many emergency repairs can be made using common household items. Andy's bike suffered a cracked rear wheel rim, but he managed to ride it fully loaded for 500 kilometres thanks to the wonder that is gaffer tape. This magical material, together with a selection of cable ties, will form the mainstay of your maintenance arsenal on all but the shortest tours.

If you're heading out of the comfort zone of the West, the list of spares and tools will grow. An adjustable spanner, spoke key, cassette tool, bottom-bracket tool, crank extractor, chain breaker and some grease become vital, as do more extensive spares. We carry three chains each and rotate them every two weeks of riding to prolong the life of the drivetrain. Spare bearings to fit your hubs, pedals, bottom

bracket and headset are advisable, as are spare spokes and jockey wheels. We also carry a rear derailleur and chainrings for the more remote and undeveloped parts of the world.

Tyres may vary throughout the trip. Like most long-haul cyclists, we use the inimitable Schwalbe Marathon XRs, which regularly last upwards of 10,000 kilometres. These tyres may be pricey, but you'll get more than your money's worth of mileage out of a pair. We tend to switch the front tyre for an all-round off-road tyre, such as the Schwalbe Smart Sam, when extra grip and control are needed.

### CYCLING CLOTHES

When it comes to clothing, it's important that your garments are versatile enough to keep you warm on a chilly winter night, cool and covered in the blazing summer sun, and sufficiently smart when you stumble across a violin concert, wedding reception or art gallery opening.

Padded cycling shorts are great for reducing the inevitable soreness of one's posterior. Many cycle-tourists wear more socially acceptable garments over the top of them. Cycling mitts or gloves will keep blisters away. A wicking top will help keep you comfortably dry on the uphills and in cold weather, where the last thing you want is a buildup of sweat drawing your body heat away.



In the cold, layers are the order of the day. A technical base-layer, a long-sleeve mid-layer and a lightweight technical fleece will meet most cold-weather needs. A good waterproof breathable shell will help if it's particularly wet and windy.

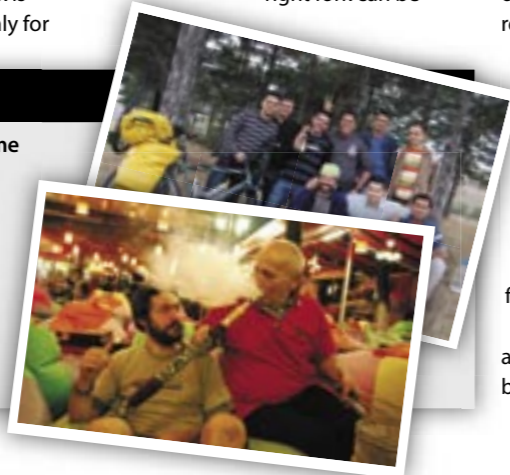
Finally, if your bike breaks down, your tent pole snaps and you run

out of food, don't panic. There will always be someone to help you, even in places you wouldn't expect to find a soul. As long as you keep smiling, you'll eventually find the solution. And remember – the journey is the reward.

■ You can follow Andy and Tom's continuing journey at [www.ride-earth.org.uk](http://www.ride-earth.org.uk)

### Break the ice, not your bike

Remember that your journey is likely to involve more time off the bike than on it. Photos from home and of your past adventures are a great ice-breaker when you're invited to share a family dinner or a cup of tea. And an inflatable globe and marker pen can say more than any attempt at verbal communication. Another around-the-world cyclist we met carried a portfolio with newspaper clippings, photographs and other memorabilia from her eight-year journey.



### Personal security

Westerners are predisposed to worry about personal security in many parts of the world. There are a few things you can do to increase your peace of mind. Our favourite is to let our bikes get as grubby as possible. A coating of multinational mud can work wonders at making your bike and luggage look fairly worthless, as well as saving hours of polishing. You can still keep the chain and sprockets imperceptibly clean and lubricated.

Personalise your ride with trinkets. Don't be shy with tape and stickers. The more ramshackle and weather-beaten you and your bike look, the better. Try to ensure that your bike is never left out of your sight. If you have to temporarily abandon it, leaving it in the highest gear possible will prevent an opportunist from making a quick getaway.

Documents and money aren't things you want to lose, but you can prepare for the worst. If travelling in a group, keep a photocopy of each other's passport and insurance details. If you're on your own, upload scans of essential pages to a secure email account. Keep some US dollar bills and a second credit card hidden away: down the seat tube is a good place to stash the cash.

Over and above all of this, being at ease in your surroundings without losing vigilance is key. We've spent nights in many rural 'traveller' communities, enjoying an incredible level of hospitality. On seeing photos of our experiences, city-dwellers have marvelled at our luck that these 'criminals' have never relieved us of our possessions. In our opinion, luck had nothing to do with it.



# ten of the best

When you're going to be cycling for thousands of kilometres, your mode of transport needs to be made from top-of-the-range components: strong, light, long-lasting, reliable – not to mention easy on the backside

## 1 Frame

**Kona Explosif**

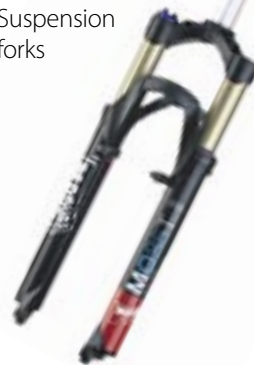


£600/1.99 kilograms

A solid cross-country steel frame featuring V-brake bosses and sliding drop-outs for emergency single-speed conversion. The frame is light and gives a responsive yet forgiving ride. It climbs impressively and offers excellent acceleration and power transfer

## 2 Suspension forks

**Magura Odur**



£225/2.08 kilograms

The perfect companion to the Explosif frame, this reliable, coil-sprung fork features 100mm of travel, V-brake bosses, dynamic lock-out and a sturdy dual-arch design. The fork action is smooth and soaks up bumps reassuringly well

## 3 Wheelset

**Sun Rhyno Lite rims, Shimano XT 36-hole hubs, DT Swiss plain-gauge spokes**



£150/1.17–1.38 kilograms

Tough and forging, the rims are welded and machined for extra strength and are the perfect companion to the Schwalbe Marathon XR 2.0- or 2.25-inch tyres. The Shimano XT hubs are reliable and easy to maintain, running on standard 0.25-inch ball bearings

## 4 Brakes

**Magura Louise**



£160/398–411 grams

Reliable hydraulic disc brakes with excellent stopping power and ultra-long brake-pad life. A full bleed and service kit is available. The performance isn't diminished in wet conditions and braking power is consistent on long downhills

## 5 Trailer

**Extrawheel single-wheel trailer**



£136 (with two 60-litre drybags)/3.1 kilograms

A lightweight, manoeuvrable trailer that gives you a spare front wheel in an emergency. It comes in three wheel sizes and has a choice of 40- or 60-litre drybags. The big wheel rolls well over uneven terrain and the design is simple enough for it to be repaired in the field

## 6 Tyres

**Schwalbe Marathon XR**



£37/790 grams

The tyre of choice for long-distance cycle tours, the Marathon XR is made from hard-wearing Kevlar and has a low-rolling-resistance tread pattern. Available in a variety of diameters and widths. Although not cheap, they reduce the risk of punctures to almost zero

## 7 Tent

**Vaude Hogan Ultra light**



£335/1.7 kilograms

A storm-proof, lightweight tent that features a small packing size (56 x 15 cm) and enough space for two people. Supplied in an inconspicuous shade of green, it features a ventilation zip, is easy to pitch and sheds water and reflects wind effectively

## 8 Saddle

**Brooks Champion Flyer**



£40/850 grams

Very comfortable once broken in, this saddle features long-lasting leather and a sprung frame for extra shock absorption. It needs just an occasional application of Proffide to keep the leather in good condition. An optional waterproof cover protects it from the rain

## 9 Rear pannier rack

**Tubus Logo**



£78/730 grams

A very strong touring rack with a low mounting point for stability and extra room at the rear for heel clearance. It can be supplied with mounting kits for frames without standard rack eyelets. This enables easy mounting on various frame shapes and sizes

## 10 Stove

**MSR Dragonfly**



£115/395 grams

A versatile multifuel stove, the Dragonfly provides variable flame control, offering a range of heat for simmering and boiling. When twinned with the expedition service kit it will burn most fuels, and is simple to maintain

## Don't forget...

...a British Army poncho. Inexpensive and indispensable as a raincoat, bike cover and groundsheet, as well as a rustic woodland shelter to keep the rain at bay when sleeping al fresco



**Next month:**  
Caving expeditions

## Stockists and information

**Blacks:** 0800 665 410; www.blacks.co.uk

**Brooks:** 0121 565 2992; www.brooksaddles.com

**Chain Reaction Cycles:** 028 9335 2976; www.chainreactioncycles.com

**Cotswold Outdoor:** 0844 557 7755; www.cotswoldoutdoor.com

**DT Swiss:** 0845 603 4612; www.dtswiss.com

**Evans Cycles:** 0870 142 0112; www.evanscycles.com

**Extrawheel:** +48 (0)18 264 1469; www.extrawheel.eu

**Fox:** 001 831 768 6500; www.foxracingshox.com

**Kona:** www.konaworld.uk.com

**Leisure Lakes Bikes:** 0800 083 0888; www.leisurelakesbikes.com

**Magura:** 01530 414142; www.magura.com

**MSR:** 01629 580 484; www.msrgear.com

**OutdoorGB:** 0870 748 5700; www.outdoorgb.com

**Shimano:** 020 8385 3443; www.shimano.com

**Schwalbe:** 01743 874 496; www.schwalbe.co.uk

**Silverman's:** 020 7790 0900; www.silvermans.co.uk

**Specialized:** 001 408 779 6229; www.specialized.com

**Sun:** www.sunbicycles.com

**Thorn:** 01278 441 500; www.thorncycles.com

**Trek:** www.trekbikes.com

**Tubus:** 0114 275 6567; www.tubus.net

**Vaude:** 01665 510 660; www.vaude.com

• All prices quoted are recommended/suggested retail prices **G**