

A first-timer's primer on planning overnight bike trips

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

One hardback was a bad idea. Two? Preposterous.

Last October, the night before I left for my first overnight bike trip, I examined all the articles spread before me on the floor and glanced at my list of nearly 100 items, including clothing, camping gear, emergency supplies and food for five days. Then I looked at the shiny red bags charged with carrying everything. I thought of the hardcore cyclists who drill holes in their toothbrushes to lighten their load and reminded myself — for the umpteenth time — that every ounce counts. Then I glanced at the second book and woefully added it to the reject pile.

For years, I'd been wanting to travel long distances by bike. In 2018, I bought an ultralight tent, which sat in my hallway for so long that I finally hid it to spare myself the guilt of having not yet planned a trip. But last fall, armed with a magazine assignment to write about biking the 184.5-mile Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath, I retrieved it from the depths of my closet.

Having contractually agreed to do something I had no idea how to do, I spent months soliciting guidance from friends and strangers, gearing up, training, organizing and practicing with heavy bags in tow. That — plus a fair amount of luck — yielded a trip with no falls, no flats, no rain and a solid packing list. I can hardly wait to do it again.

With bike sales soaring in the past year and travel still limited, many cyclists are considering taking trips on their bikes.

"I became an evangelist when I realized how easy it was," said Marley Blonsky, who lives in Seattle and writes a blog on bike travel.

Ben Folsom, who lives in Alexandria, Va., and takes a multi-night bike trip every year, compared bike touring to jazz. "It can mean whatever you want," he said. "You can stay in hotels or B&Bs, glamp or camp, go 100 miles or 10 miles a day, ride across the Great Divide or town to town."

Talking to long-haul cyclists, I heard countless stories about the generosity of strangers who offered a meal or shelter; the joy of experiencing our country in intimate ways; the serenity of empty spaces and quiet towns; and the memorable conversations with those who have wildly different beliefs.

"On a bike, you're approachable in a way that you never are otherwise," said Ed McNulty, whom I met biking on the towpath. "I've never experienced kindness like I have when I've been out on a bike. Not to mention you get to ride a bike all day."

If you have ever considered traveling on two wheels, this is your year. Read the tips below and get pedaling!

Let go. Toss out any ideas of what bike travel looks like. Some beginners think bike touring is supposed to be this "big epic thing across the country or around the world," said Dan Meyer, deputy editor of Adventure Cyclist magazine, "which isn't the case. You can ride from your house to the next town over and stay at a friend's or at a B&B, and that can be a great way to get into touring." You can even use public transit to position yourself five or 10 miles from a campground or inn, spend the night, and return. You'll also need to let go of strict schedules and expect the unexpected. During a trip in Patagonia in 2017, Danish cyclists Marie Stoubaek and Kenneth Jorgensen faced winds so strong they could pedal only 4½ miles an hour. They had planned to reach a mountain village that day, but they called it quits hours early and set up camp; they've learned to be in sync with nature, rather than fight it. "Remember that some days go as planned and others do not, and that's all right," Stoubaek said.

Decide how you want to roll. Want to pedal solo? With a co-pilot? A small group of friends? If you're riding with others, set expectations about pace and schedule ahead of time. If you're not yet comfortable taking the plunge, join a tour, like those organized by Adventure Cycling Association (ACA) or REI, and check with your bike shop for local events. Consider signing up for an extravaganza like Ragbrai, an annual, seven-day July ride across Iowa, or a fundraiser like the New York City-to-Philly Greenway ride in August. No matter how you go, you'll find a bike trip recharges your batteries unlike any other mode of travel.

Gear up. Got a bike? You're off to a good start. Generally, "bike touring" cyclists hang luggage called panniers from metal racks



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above the front and/or back wheel. Those who are "bikepacking" are more likely riding on dirt, perhaps in the mountains, so they tend to have smaller bags attached directly to the frame of the bike, making it more agile. But there's no mandate on how to pack a bike, so don't get hung up on the terminology. The gold standard for bike touring bags is Ortlieb: They're durable, waterproof and brightly colored. But you can also find less expensive options or pick up something at a second-hand outdoor store. A waterproofing hack: Line your bag with garbage bags. I used zip-top bags to store toiletries, snacks and trash, as I accumulated it. Get creative using straps to attach a tent, sleeping bag and mat to your rack or handlebars. (Some cyclists put their gear in trailers, which I'd discourage unless you're on a paved trail. I'd also discourage wearing a backpack; your back and shoulders will appreciate it.) Make sure you have easily accessible storage for your snacks, maps, phone and wallet. Some use a small handlebar bag; I used my jacket pockets and a CamelBak waist pack that also holds two extra water bottles. Don't have some of the gear? Borrow it for your first ride. If you find you're

hooked, invest in proper gear. Gloves with padding are helpful, especially if you're riding on a bumpy surface. Consider a slightly larger tent than you think you'll need. I used a two-person tent and easily filled it with myself and my panniers, which I emptied and reorganized nightly. Lisa Watts, a writer in Rhode Island who rode the East Coast Greenway from Florida to Maine with a friend in 2018, said if you're taking a long trip or touring regularly, it's worth investing in heavy-duty tubes to avoid flats. She also uses a separate handlebar odometer, so she doesn't have to rely on her phone for mileage.

Pack the items you hope you'll never need. As one of my cyclist friends quipped, no trip is complete without at least one mechanical problem. Sure enough, my bike rack broke, and I was thankful to have zip ties and a bungee cord in my emergency stash. I also brought two extra tubes, a pump, a multi-tool to tighten bolts, a patch kit, electrical tape and rubber bands. The just-in-case items for your body are more personal. I brought acetaminophen, because I know I get headaches when I'm hungry, and ibuprofen for muscle strains. I packed many things I never un-

packed: a knife, a whistle, toe and hand warmers for freezing nights, and a small first-aid kit containing blister pads and a reflective blanket.

Whittle down your weight. Whether one night or five months, you'll want to bring as little as possible, said Alex Retana, a physical therapy assistant in Tampa, who biked 5,200 miles last summer from Vancouver, Wash., to Portland, Maine. "It's easy to overpack," he said. "The more stuff you have, the less fun it will be." With variable weather, it's tricky to hit that sweet spot of packing enough to stay warm but not so much that you're toppling over. Bring items that perform double duty. My buff, for example, worked as a neck warmer, face mask, headband and rag — for wiping grease or sunscreen off my hands. My rain jacket came in handy for warmth, even without rain. Remember: Pack your bags before departure day to make sure everything fits.

Weigh your overnight options. While you'll travel lighter if you don't pack your own bed, you'll miss that awesome feeling of being self-sufficient on two wheels. "The less money you spend on hotels, the greater the experience, because it forces you

to immerse yourself in nature or to make contact with other people," said Stoubaek. In 2013, Dani Moore, a D.C. high school science teacher, biked from Arizona to D.C. over 68 days and camped most nights — opting for legal spots over stealth camping, a lodging tactic for some cyclists. She preferred campgrounds (or hotels in inclement weather) but occasionally knocked on doors to ask if she could pitch her tent on someone's property. Her last resort was behind a fire station or a church. If ending your day in a luxe bathtub is your jam, go for it. But also consider budget hotels, hostels and Warm Showers, a free hospitality exchange for cyclists.

Consider chow. If your route will take you through small towns with interesting restaurants and aromatic bakeries, use that opportunity to pack less and sample local fare. You can also stock up at grocery and convenience stores with premade items or cooking supplies. I carried all my own food, since restaurants along the canal had more limited hours earlier in the pandemic, and I ended up picking up restaurant meals twice. I borrowed a Jetboil — a compact stove and large mug combo — perfect for heating water for instant oatmeal, dehydrated soups and tea. Some cyclists turn to ramen, saltines, beef jerky, cans of tuna, or peanut butter and jelly; others enjoy cooking. Blonsky preps food for her short trips, chopping veggies and filling a Tupperware with spinach — which doubles as a cushion for her omelet eggs. This is not a time to skimp on calories. I carried trail mix, tortillas and peanut butter packets (more packable than jars) within easy reach. I also brought energy chews and gels which are good for quick jolts, but they can pack a lot of sugar and caffeine, too. Resupply your water (at least two bottles) and food whenever you can. Pay attention to your hunger and thirst. You'll be surprised how quickly you burn energy, and how suddenly ravenousness can take over your body.

Remember après-bike. Pack something super comfy for this time when you're blissfully off the saddle, including flip-flops or plastic shoes like Crocs or Birkenstocks. "I love that distinction," Blonsky said. "I'm on the bike. And then I'm in camp." She also packs downtime items, such as a journal, kite, slingshot or deck of tarot cards. Other cyclists say a lightweight camping chair is a must. When I crawled into my sleeping bag each night, I was thankful I'd brought the hardback — a historical novel about the C&O Canal — and a tiny book light.

Ruminate on your route. Before he sets out, Folsom looks up routes on Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's TrailLink and then zooms into the Google Maps satellite view. "I literally walk the entire route in Street View to check it out," said Folsom, who — bear in mind — works in logistics and planning for the Department of Homeland Security. "If it gets hairy, I back up on the map and find an alternative." He looks up food resupply spots and distances between hospitals, mapping out turn-by-turn directions. ACA has maps (and an app) of 28 routes, covering 50,000 miles across nationwide. McNulty used ACA

maps for his cross-country tour in 2014 and said they're extremely detailed and informative. "It'll say, 'Go into the corner store, ask for Annie, and she'll put you up in her backyard!'" he said, "or, 'This fire station will give you a meal!'"

Ponder your posterior. Hygiene and comfort are critical, and saddle sores are no joke — and can end an otherwise enjoyable ride. Good bike shorts and a comfortable saddle are worth the investment. Meyer said new cyclists often think extra seat padding means extra comfort, but it's more about the shape of the saddle. Ask your local bike shop if they have a demo program, which allows you to test different seats. And add Chamois Butt'r or other lubricant to your packing list. Trust me on this one.

Get real about risks. All of the openness and approachability we celebrate on a bike makes us vulnerable, too. I decided before my trip that I wasn't comfortable being the only one in a campground, so I made backup plans for each campsite. Moore said she was amazed how people went out of their way to help her. Nothing bad happened on her trip, "but that's not guaranteed," she said. "There's more risks for women, more risks for people of color." Blonsky said she has been fortunate to have not run into any issues, but she doesn't advertise when she's alone and trusts her gut — if a place doesn't feel right, she camps elsewhere. "I quickly set up camp, and I'll say my partner is coming soon," she said. She shares her plans with a friend so someone knows where she's supposed to be and when she's supposed to be there. In rural areas, she puts an American flag on her bicycle, which she said makes the locals feel like she's one of them, "even if I'm a hippie on a bike." Retana said he was cautioned about riding through Appalachia because he's Latino. "People told me, 'You're going to get hurt ... or worse,'" he said. "But it was the opposite. I met some moonshiners who let me camp on their property and sent me off with some moonshine." Use common sense with your belongings and take care not to throw around flashy gear. Finally, you don't have to bike overnight to know that car drivers are natural nemeses: They speed, inch too close, swerve and text while driving. If you can, ride on bike paths. If you must share the road with cars, use bike lights, even during the day.

Behold your bike. Before you set out, treat your bike to a tune-up, and be attentive on your ride to unusual sounds that may signal a malfunction. After my rack broke, I got smarter about checking and tightening bolts nightly. Had I needed to fix a flat, I was confident I could do so. "That's the absolute minimum," Folsom said. He carries a tool to fix a broken chain, spare tire and spokes (none of which I brought). "If things go wrong and you're out of cell range, you can't even call and complain to someone," he said. "Tackling something I'm not sure I can do is part of the enjoyment I get out of bike touring."

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MARIE STOUBAEK

FROM TOP: Bike touring means packing everything you'll need on your bike, whether it's a tent or a spork. The author rode on the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath for five days in October. Kenneth Jorgensen makes friends with the locals at the Bolivian Altiplano in June 2017.