

Bike Packing

By Casey Flynn

Pack It On for a Two-Wheeled Multi-Day Adventure

Combine the freedom of backpacking with the increased mobility and speed of cycling and you get the fast-growing sport of bike packing. At its core, bike packing is exploring and camping from your bike. The variety of trips, terrain, and gear options make bike packing accessible to any level of cyclist. Travel on pavement, a bike path, fire roads, or singletrack. Haul gear with a trailer, panniers, frame bags, or bungees over your rear rack. Go on a leisurely overnighiter or a week-long race. Whatever flavor of bike packing you fancy, the following skills will help you squeeze more enjoyment out of your journey.

Route Planning

Bike packing routes range from steep singletrack to wide open fire roads and stretches of pavement. Knowing your route helps you figure out any adjustments you'll need to make to your bike and plan what gear to bring. Follow these tips to chart a solid trip.

- **Be flexible.** Weather changes, bikes break, legs turn to lead. Plan several camps along your intended route so you don't feel pressured to push on to your final destination if something happens.
- **Keep distances conservative** until you have a better idea what mileage you can cover on different types of terrain. Riding 10 to 15 miles a day is a good place to start. If you get into camp early, dump your gear and explore with a lightened load.
- **Remember, no bikes are permitted in designated wilderness areas.** If an area is slated to become wilderness, it might get closed to biking early—get in touch with the local management district to find out.

The Right Bike

Hardtail mountain bikes (with front shocks) are a solid choice for bike packing—affordable, versatile, and often lightweight. Change out your tires for different surfaces (thicker and knobbier for rough trail vs. skinny and smooth for paved roads).

Nowadays, 29ers (bikes with 29-inch wheels) are an increasing favorite among bike packers and racers for their ability to roll over obstacles and carry momentum. If traveling and packing, consider a folding bike like those from Bike Friday (bikefriday.com).

Get Away

Trips and organized tours are a great way to meet other bike packers, learn new skills, and spark ideas for your own tours. The Adventure Cycling Association (adventurecycling.org) runs a variety of tours all over the country and publishes extensive maps for self-supported trips.

The newly opened Whitefish Bike Retreat (whitefishbikeretreat.com) in Whitefish, Montana, is a hub for cycling and bike packing and cycling in the region, where people can come together to meet partners, tell stories, learn skills, and find out about new places to ride. The retreat offers tours, classes (including women's clinics), lodging and more, and only a couple cranks from Glacier National Park.



Packing Tips

Getting everything to fit on the bike is the most challenging step for beginning bike packers. The balance of accessibility and weight distribution is a nuanced art that takes lots of trial and error to master. Mo Mislivets, Tours Specialist with the Adventure Cycling Association, shares her strategy for frame bags.

- Seat bag: food, heavier items, things you don't need immediate access to
- Frame bag: emergency equipment, rain shell, rain pants, toiletries
- Top tube bag: camera, phone, quick access items
- Handlebars: sleeping pad slid underneath cabling, dry bag with sleeping bag, down jacket, change of clothes
- Backpack: mountain bike-specific hydration pack, clothing layers for riding, pockets for light and easy access items
- Everyone's setup is a little different, so try out yours and adjust to your style!

Riding in a Group

Varying paces will string your group out over the route, so communication is key to staying on track. When you come to a junction, wait for the next people in line. When they arrive, you can head off, and they'll direct the next rider on down the line.

Gear

Most mountain biking and backpacking gear crosses over to bike packing—with a stronger emphasis on compressibility and weight. Once you have what you need, get out and try it. “Put the time in on the bike so that you feel more comfortable with the equipment you’re using. If you don’t like it, you’re going to find out pretty quickly and you’ll go buy something else,” says Cricket Butler, 2010 women’s winner of the Tour Divide. “If I get to the point where I can’t find what I’m looking for, I just make it.”

- **Frame bags** (check out revelatedesigns.com) keep your gear tight to your bike and reduce flopping and shaking. If you’re sticking to open, flatter surfaces, a trailer allows for more packing freedom.
- Go with **quality tires**. The heavy load increases wear and tear and the chances of getting a flat.
- Compression **dry bags with clear windows** keep critical gear dry while helping with organization.
- Keep a **gear list** to streamline your setup. After each trip, note items you had but didn’t use and things you wanted but didn’t have.
- **Adjust** your gear for the route and conditions. Lots of dirt roads? Use touring tires with less tread. No bugs? Go with a lightweight tarp instead of a tent.



Mechanical Savvy

When you blow a tire or break your chain, you need to know how to fix it well enough to get yourself out to the nearest road or town. These basic skills and tools will help you get your bike functioning again. And never underestimate the power of duct tape!

- **Keep these key items** on you at all times: bike tool, chain lube, rag, pump, spare tubes (1 or 2 depending on terrain), pieces of chain, extra cable, extra brake pads.
- **Know these basic skills:** patching a flat, fixing your chain, tightening your cables, adjusting your brakes, and tightening your bolts.
- **Lube your chain often.**
- **Learn from more experienced riders and bike packers** while on the road or trail by asking questions and paying attention when they work on their rigs.
- **Attend a class.** Free classes are offered at a variety of outdoor stores and bike shops, with more women’s-only classes becoming available.

Do a Practice Run

“You don’t want to go out and have a bad time and think, I don’t want to do this again,” says Tracey Petervary, who with her husband Jay holds the record for fastest tandem time on the 2,745-mile Tour Divide bike packing race. To get comfortable with your gear, Tracey recom-

mends packing up your bike as if you were going on an overnight trip and going on a short daytime ride. Find a mock-campsite and practice setting up camp in the daylight so you can troubleshoot any problems you discover. Then you’re ready for your first overnighter.



Adjusting to the Weight

- **Be more conservative on down-hills.** It’s easy to lose control when you’ve added 30 pounds to your rig.
- **Be prepared to hike-a-bike** on steep uphill grades. There’s no shame in getting off and pushing!
- **Loosen up your clipless pedals** so they release more easily. If your bike starts to go down, you want to be able to get out quickly.
- **Adjust the front shock**, if you have a lot of weight on your handlebars, so it doesn’t bottom out.

Racing

Homegrown bike packing races are cropping up all over the country. Organized by enthusiasts, they are “show and go” races—no fees, no support, and nobody waiting for you at the finish line. “If you’re the type of person who likes all of bike packing’s elements put together, then you’re naturally going to progress to wondering, how fast can I go?” says Cricket. Here are Cricket and Tracey’s tips for ramping up your bike packing game.

- Relatively shorter races—like the Huracon 300 (FL), Arizona Trail 300, and Allegheny Mountains Loop 400 (WV/VA)—are good places to test your mettle.
- Slim down your gear for weight and efficiency. Leave the stove, pots, and fuel behind and eat and resupply in towns.
- Dial in your packing and camping. If you know you can be unpacked and in your bag in five minutes, you can squeeze the mileage out of that last bit of daylight.