

## 30 CYCLING EXPEDITIONS

*Hallam Murray*

Weight for weight the cyclist uses less energy to cover a given distance than even the superbly constructed salmon or dolphin, not to mention birds, the great cats, the motor car, or any form of jet or rocket engine. The bicycle is simply the most versatile vehicle known to humans and, with bicycle technology having improved in leaps and bounds, it's hardly surprising that this form of transport has become so popular – for both long distance and locally based expeditions. It can be ridden, carried by almost every other form of transport from an aeroplane to a canoe, and can even be lifted across one's shoulders over short distances. And remember, you have virtually no transport costs, because a bike does not require feeding like a horse or a camel, or petrol to keep its engine running.

With the advent of Kevlar tyres and puncture-resistant inner tubes, it's now theoretically possible to cycle from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego without so much as a single puncture. For a traveller with a zest for adventure, ample time and reasonable energy, there is unlikely to be a finer way to explore.

One of the greatest advantages of cycling is fitness. On a long expedition, a cyclist's immune system soon gets beefed up and, with good hygiene and a little luck, it's possible to cycle for months without having any serious health problems. And with good cycle gearing, climbing hills is no longer a problem, because fitness keeps the cardiac and respiratory changes to a bare minimum and the onset of muscle fatigue is greatly reduced. It is the wind that is the enemy of the cyclist, not mountains. On long expeditions, through such areas as Patagonia or Tibet where strong winds can be a major factor, it is helpful to cycle during the least windy times of day – and this is often predictable. Strangely enough, after a tough day's cycling, it's possible to walk for miles feeling quite refreshed; the muscles we use cycling are quite different from those we use when out of the saddle.

I travelled over 17,000 miles – from California to Tierra del Fuego – largely on unpaved roads. The combined period of these two journeys was 3 years. Much of my time was spent in the High Andes visiting potters and weavers, sometimes in the



Figure 30.1 *Bärli von Toggenburg pushing his bike on bad roads near Mianeh, Iran, during a journey from Switzerland to India to raise money for leprosy sufferers (© Bärli)*

remotest villages with no public transport or electricity, and I was never seriously ill. This was achieved by my fitness, by boiling or pilling all drinking water (*never* getting dehydrated), by cooking most of my own meals (on an Optimus, low-grade petrol cooker), and by eating only meals – when in markets or cafés – that I could see boiling before my eyes. I carried a small but comprehensive first-aid kit on the basis of “a stitch in time”, and for me it worked.

If you do choose a bicycle for your expedition, you will often find yourself envied by travellers using more orthodox forms of transport. On a bicycle you can travel at your own pace. Your senses are more in tune with your environment. You can stop at will to admire a view, to talk or to camp. You can explore remote regions and meet people who are not normally in contact with tourists.

### **CHOOSING A BICYCLE**

The choice of bicycle depends on the type and length of the expedition and on the terrain and road surfaces likely to be encountered. Unless you are planning a journey almost exclusively on paved roads – when a high-quality touring bike such as a Dawes Super Galaxy would probably suffice – I would strongly recommend a

## EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

mountain bike or possibly a hybrid. The good quality ones (and the cast-iron rule is *never* to skimp on quality) are incredibly tough and rugged, with low gear ratios for difficult terrain, wide tyres with plenty of tread for good road-holding, cantilever brakes and a low centre of gravity for improved stability. Heavily laden bicycles take a great pounding when cycling over badly surfaced or unpaved and corrugated roads. Problems with breaking spokes can turn an expedition into a nightmare. So be sure that your wheels are well built with heavy duty spokes – and consider having these double-crossed on the back wheel. You can expect to pay upwards of £500 for a truly robust machine that can cope with desert and mountain and all the other difficult terrains that may get thrown at it.

Although touring and mountain bikes and some spares are available in the larger cities, remember that in the less developed world most indigenous manufactured goods are shoddy and rarely last. So be sure to kit out your bike with accessories of the highest quality *before* you leave, e.g. block and chain, chain rings, pannier racks and panniers. Imported components can be found in the cities of some less developed countries, but they tend to be extremely expensive. In North America, Europe, Japan, Australasia, etc. we are spoiled by quality and often don't appreciate this until it is too late.

Remember too that any broken aluminium components cannot be welded by conventional welding equipment. Some of the aluminium back and front cycle racks are extremely strong and light and well worth considering (Topeak and Blackburn are much to be recommended), but if they do break you may have to get yourself to the nearest airport, where specialist aluminium welding equipment is usually available.

Bikes need to be broken in and well shaken down *before* you leave. Consider making a short trial expedition. If travelling with a group, this also gives you a chance to get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses, and to check for compatibility.

When Michael Edwards and Philip Etherington cycled from Lhasa to Kathmandu, they chose identical bikes to cut down on tools and spares. It's probably a good idea to follow their example.

The best advice for someone without mechanical know-how is to find a top-rate cycle shop – of which there are many in the UK – and to ask for advice from their most experienced cyclist (who is usually to be found in the repair shop). My Ridgeback bike had its wheels re-built by an enthusiast who worked for Evans Cycles – one of the finest cycle shops in Britain. Without his expertise, my wheels would never have got me across Patagonia.

**TABLE 30.1 BICYCLE EQUIPMENT**

<p>Comfortable seat</p> <p>Mudguards</p> <p>Good front and back reflectors</p> <p>Fluorescent strip and eye-catching gloves (for busy roads)</p> <p>Cycle lights</p> <p>Robust cycle helmet with good ventilation (optional)</p> <p>Water bottle brackets</p> <p>Secure lock and chain (two keys)</p> <p>Pump secured by a pump lock (two keys)</p> <p>A small but comprehensive tool kit to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>adjustable spanners, pliers, screwdriver, tyre levers, etc.</li> <li>chain rivet and crank removers</li> <li>spoke key and possibly a block remover</li> </ul> <p>Spare tyre and two inner tubes</p> <p>Puncture repair kit with plenty of extra patches and glue</p> <p>Set of brake blocks</p> <p>Set of brake and gear cables</p> <p>Spares of all nuts and bolts</p> <p>12 heavy-duty spokes (best taped to the chain stay)</p> <p>Light oil for the chain</p> <p>Tube of waterproof grease</p> <p>Stopblock (my choice for the most invaluable accessory and it is easy to make and virtually weightless): a stopblock consists of a small rubber wedge to force the rear brake lever firmly on, thus preventing a bike from moving on sloping ground when propped against a wall, tree or lamppost</p> <p>Cycle computer: to show speeds, distances and times</p> <p>Loud bell or horn</p> <p>Altimeter</p> <p>Compass</p> <p>Good maps</p>
--

## LUGGAGE AND EQUIPMENT

Strong waterproof front and back panniers are a must. I chose the Karrimor Icelandic and found these to be excellent. Carradice also sell excellent panniers, which performed impeccably for a recent expedition in Asia.

A top bag-cum-rucksack makes a good addition for use on and off the bike. I used

## EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

a Cannondale front bag for my maps, camera, compass, altimeter, notebook and small tape-recorder. At the end of 15 months of travelling through tough terrain, all this luggage remained in good condition, which says a lot for the quality of materials and workmanship. My total luggage weighed 27 kg – on the high side, but I never felt seriously over-weight.

“Gaffer” tape is excellent for protecting vulnerable parts of panniers (preferably applied *before* they get worn) and for carrying out all manner of repairs. My most vital equipment is shown in Table 30.2.

**TABLE 30.2 ESSENTIAL LUGGAGE AND EQUIPMENT**

<p>Vango Zephyr tent          Three-season sleeping bag          Optimus petrol stove with small back-up bottle (the best I have ever used, because it is light and efficient and petrol can be found almost everywhere); the MSR XKG stove is also excellent – it roars at altitude but works cleanly and well with petrol          Plastic survival bag for protecting luggage at night when camping          A light, self-inflating sleeping mat can be a godsend for high-quality sleep          Four elastic bungees          Four 1-litre water bottles          Swiss army knife          Torch          Small but comprehensive medical kit          Money belt          Robust camera and slide film          Tape-recorder          Small “World Service” radio          Hat to protect against hours of ferocious tropical sun          Sunglasses          Small presents such as postcards of home, balloons and badges; a rubber mouse can do wonders for making contact with children in isolated villages</p>
--

All equipment and clothes should be packed in plastic bags to give extra protection against dust and rain or when crossing rivers. Keep clothing to the minimum, but be prepared to buy extra items en route. A T-shirt or jersey bought from a village market can become a prized possession when back home. Naturally the choice will depend on whether you are planning a journey through tropical lowlands, deserts, high mountains or a combination, and whether rain is to be expected.

Generally, it is best to carry several layers of thin light clothes rather than fewer

## CYCLING EXPEDITIONS

heavy, bulky ones. Always keep one set of dry clothes, including long trousers, to put on at the end of the day. I would not have parted with my incredibly light, strong, waterproof and wind-resistant GoreTex jacket and over-trousers for neither love nor money. I could have sold them 100 times over and in Bolivia was even offered a young mule in exchange. I took two pairs of Reebok training shoes and found these to be ideal for both cycling and walking. Some cyclists prefer stiff-soled shoes, but this is a case of personal preference.

**USEFUL TIPS**

Get your bike frame etched with a security number – your local police may be able to do this for you – and take a photo of the bike to keep among your valuables.

Give your bicycle a thorough daily check for loose nuts or bolts or bearings. See that all parts run smoothly. A good chain should last 2000 miles or more but be sure to keep it as clean as possible – an old toothbrush is good for this – and to oil it lightly from time to time. Only the rivets need to be oiled. Try to keep oil off the exposed parts of the chain because this simply attracts dust and dirt.

Try to make the best use of the times of day when there is little wind; mornings tend to be best but there is no steadfast rule. In parts of Patagonia there can be gusting winds of 80 km/h at some times of year. Do your research before you leave.

Your cycle is most vulnerable when it's being carried on other transport. Unless in a canoe, always try to keep the cycle upright, with the weight on its wheels. Bicycle bungees come in really handy for doing this. And travel *with* your bike – and not, say, in the cab of a lorry when your bicycle is being thumped to pieces all alone behind.

Take care to avoid dehydration by drinking regularly. In hot, dry areas with limited supplies of water, be sure to carry an ample supply; it is remarkably easy to run dry. For food, I carried the staples (sugar, salt, dried milk, tea, coffee, porridge oats, raisins, dried soups, etc.) and supplemented these with whatever local foods I could find in the markets. Eating regularly is a good rule. Keep fruit or vegetables or chocolate or biscuits in your front bag so that you can 'graze' as you go along.

*Always camp out of sight of a road.* You are most vulnerable at night. It is always best *not* to cycle after dark unless you absolutely have to, and remember that night falls very quickly close to the equator so it's best to start looking out for a suitable camp well before dusk.

Remember that thieves are attracted to towns and cities, so, when sightseeing, try to leave your bicycle with someone such as a café owner or a priest. Country people tend to be more honest. Most are friendly and very inquisitive. However, don't take unnecessary risks; always see that your bicycle is secure.

In more remote regions dogs can be vicious; carry a stick or some stones to frighten them off. If you stop and face them with a stick or stone in your hand, invari-

## EXPEDITION HANDBOOK

ably they will stop running and barking and hold their distance. You can then move off slowly after a couple of minutes.

Traffic on main roads can be a nightmare; it is usually far more rewarding and safer to keep to the smaller roads or to paths if they exist. (Always make use of capital cities to get hold of the best maps available.)

Most towns have a bicycle shop of some description, but it is best to do your own repairs and adjustments whenever possible. In an emergency it is amazing how one can improvise with wire, string, dental floss, nuts and bolts, odd pieces of tin or “gaffer” tape.

## INSURANCE

This is an important area, more especially so when cycling overseas. Remember that, as well as covering against theft, you should also get cover against accidents. Specialist expedition insurances should cover for this. The Cyclists’ Touring Club offers a specialised travel insurance for riders, with all the usual travel benefits such as medical expenses, plus a guarantee to transport rider and bike back to the UK in an emergency (see Chapter 14).

## FURTHER INFORMATION

### A selection of bicycle maintenance books

Bicycling Magazine’s *Complete Guide to Bicycle Maintenance and Repair for Road and Mountain Bikes*

*Haynes Bike Book*

*Richard’s Bicycle Repair Manual*. London: Dorling Kindersley

### Useful addresses and websites

**Adventure Cycling Association and Magazine.** Website: [www.adv-cycling.org](http://www.adv-cycling.org)

**Bicycle Association,** Starley House, Eaton Road, Coventry CV1 2FM. Tel: +44 2476 553 838, website: [www.bikehub.co.uk](http://www.bikehub.co.uk)

This is the national trade body for UK-based manufacturers and importers of bicycles, components and accessories. Its members supply over 80 per cent of all the cycling products available on the UK market. It works by providing a forum for the industry, lobbying government, developing technical standards, assisting exporters and monitoring the worldwide market.

### Bicycle Business

Benton Bridge Cottage, Jesmond, Dene, Newcastle on Tyne NE7 7DA. Email: [B3@bikebiz.co.uk](mailto:B3@bikebiz.co.uk), website: [www.bikebiz.co.uk](http://www.bikebiz.co.uk)

**British Cycling Federation.** Tel: +44 161 230 2301, website: [www.bcf.uk.com](http://www.bcf.uk.com)

**CORAX,** around the world by bicycle. Website: [www3.utsidan.se/Corax-e/](http://www3.utsidan.se/Corax-e/)

## CYCLING EXPEDITIONS

**Cyber Cyclery**

Website: [www.cycling.org](http://www.cycling.org)

Thousands of bicycle enthusiasts around the world use Cyber Cyclery every day to find a wide variety of biking-related information, resources and services.

**Cyclists' Touring Club**

Cotterell House, 69 Meadrow, Godalming, Surrey GU7 3HS. Tel: +44 870 873 0060, fax: +44 1483 426994, email: [cycling@ctc.org.uk](mailto:cycling@ctc.org.uk), website: [www.ctc.org.uk](http://www.ctc.org.uk)

Services include country information sheets (covering Europe and much of Africa, the Americas, Asia and Australasia), travel and cycle insurance, and a comprehensive cycling bookshop.

**Evans Cycles**

Website: [www.evanscycles.com](http://www.evanscycles.com)

A first-rate cycle shop with eight branches in and around London. They can work on any make of bicycle and will rebuild wheels with heavy duty spokes if required.

**L'ordre des Cols Dur**

37 Acacia Avenue, Hale, Altrincham, Cheshire WA15 8QY

Club for those interested in cycling in European mountains.

**International Bicycle Fund**

Sponsors environmentally friendly, rurally based cultural tours in all regions of Africa. Details are available at:

Bicycle Africa Tours. Website: [www.ibike.org/bikeafrica](http://www.ibike.org/bikeafrica)

Ibike Cultural Tours. Website: [www.ibike.org/ibike](http://www.ibike.org/ibike)

**Round-the-World Cyclists Registry**

PO Box 1065, Station A, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5W 1G6

**SJScycles.com** for good quality bikes and racks

**Sustrans**

35 King Street, Bristol BS1 4DZ. Tel: +44 117 929 0888, website: [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)

**Travel with your Bicycle.** Website: [www.bikeaccess.net/](http://www.bikeaccess.net/)