
**SO YOU WANT TO BIKE ACROSS THE COUNTRY? (OR
ANYWHERE ELSE)**

A guide for first-time tourers from a recent first timer.

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Morton Pass, Wyoming (Photo Credit: Jim G. Long)

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

There are plenty of books out there on touring, and the purpose of this guide isn't to compete with them. To get detailed discussions of sizing a bike and debates on the merits of wool clothing versus synthetics see the books and suggested blogs at the end of this guide. Instead, treat this as an anecdotal personal supplement to those books from someone you've met that has recently completed his own first cross-country trip. There were things I didn't find in my preparation to tour that I've learned and hope to pass along to you. Not only will this guide be useful to you if you're already planning a tour for the first time, but my hope is that through recounting my first major touring trip, this guide will get those unsure of themselves to feel confident in giving touring a try. In the following pages I show the details, the assumptions, and the failures that were encountered by a beginner through a solo cross-country bike tour.

INTRO: MY BACKGROUND AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF TOURING

What made me want to bike to San Francisco? I always wanted to take a road trip west. Prior to my trip, I spent some time living in Seattle, but, otherwise, I hadn't really been west of Colorado. Initially, I wanted to buy a motorcycle and do a tour west. However, having just graduated from college without many financial resources at the time, I decided I could make use of some of my new free time and freedom to take it slow and bike over to San Francisco.

I had been active in an outdoor club while in college through which I learned basic outdoor skills. That taught me the basics of backpacking. Additionally, through the club and my own time, I had three 50 mile bike rides to my name. Those two factors combined were sufficient to make me feel comfortable taking on a trip across the country, because, I thought, if I could do two or three 50 mile bike rides and camp, I could do them over and over again for several weeks until I got to my destination. And in reality, that was the case, and a lesson I emphasize to you about attaining large goals in general. 2,200 miles is a lot, but in 50 mile chunks it's not. That fact alone is at the core of why I put this together for you. Completing a cross-country tour (or anywhere else) is a matter of perspective.

I chose San Francisco because it was one of the cities I considered moving to once I start looking for work after the trip. It's also a place I had never been to and it was a good destination for a cross country bike trip because it's on the coast and thus an end to the map of sorts. And, of course, I was drawn to the fact that the road there would fluctuate from the corn fields and cities of Great Plains, to the Rockies, the desserts of Utah, Wyoming, and Nevada, and the mountains and coasts of California. After having traveled abroad, I decided it was time to learn more about the country I live in. That was my motivation.

Universally speaking, my belief is bicycle touring touches people for the perspective it gives you. I saw this with myself, and the tourers I met during my trip confirmed it. Biking is a great way to travel because it's faster than walking, but not as fast as motorized vehicles. The self-propelled "flight" biking gives you is its source of insight and appeal. The narrator in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* says it well when he writes that the difference between traveling in a car and a motorcycle is that looking through the window of a car is like watching the landscape through a television. Instead, being on a motorcycle (and on bike), you get to smell the air, deal with the

heat/cold/weather, and you're generally more included in the landscape you're passing through. And while the narrator in *Zen* writes with motorcycle touring in mind, those principles carry over even more so on a bike tour.

Bike touring is also inherently a very minimalist affair: your life is on your bike rack, you and your bike are one, and you are free to wander, limited only by resources, time, and physical ability. I think that's an important experience to have. As a bike tourer, you want to go as light and simple as possible. Despite the pressure to buy high-tech gear the commercialization of outdoor sports has established, my lack of money helped prove to me that it's not very necessary beyond establishing certain comforts that are superfluous in the big picture. My bike frame was an old Schwinn Le Tour that my roommate and I liberated from abandonment in front of our house the other year. And I did the trip on a single speed fixed gear for financial reasons later justified as challenge. I think this is an extremely important point to take home: *you don't need the latest technology. What you need is will power, patience, and a good plan.* The experiences of light-pack traveling forced me into situations that humbled me, but that have also put a new depth to my perspective on life to this day. The blog entries that I have included at the end of this guide retell some of those experiences for you to enjoy (I hope!) and learn from as well.

I'm sure the journey I took will remain one of the greatest milestones in my life, and in the experience I learned things about myself and our time that I otherwise would have missed. And now I've put together this guide to help get you on the road because I've learned if I could do it with the retrospectively inexperienced level of preparation I had, others can as well. So I hope to unleash some wanderlust in you with this guide and prove any back-of-the-thought desire to tour on two wheels into something tangible and valuable in your life.