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Getting the Bike You Need

Andrew's Question.

I'm planning to go on an extended bike tour next summer, but I have no idea what type of bike would be best for me. Do you have any suggestions for bikes?

Ethan Gelber's Answer.

Many people have asked this question and others very similar to it, sometimes focusing more on specific brands, sometimes more on price tags, sometimes on functionality. I have hesitated to answer on the specifics because I do not like to recommend one company over another or suggest a price range for something as personal and sensitive as shopping for a bike. So let me tackle this in broad strokes.



[Ethan Gelber](#)

First, I would strongly suggest that everyone pondering a new purchase read Rick Lovett's excellent article about [Picking a Bicycle](#). Without pushing any one brand, he covers the five basic bike models out there — [racing](#), [mountain](#), [sport](#), [dedicated touring](#), and [crossover or hybrid](#) — describing the pluses and minuses of each. This article will be particularly useful to Andrew and other bike tourers since the focus is on each frame model's utility in touring.

Second, I encourage everyone to read Expert Mountain Biker Steve Jones's [thoughts on this subject](#). In response to similar questions, he too advises people not to worry about branding. And more than a few people posting in the [GORP Biking Forums](#) agree.

The most important thing when you buy a new bike is to get something you can afford and that feels comfortable. Go with your gut after you have tested a variety of bikes. And do be sure to experiment with many different frames and brands. Whatever happens, do not be lured into thinking that one brand name, price range, bike frame, or material is precisely the thing for

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January 13, 2007

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you just because an ad, a salesperson, or even a friend says so. Yes, some frames are stiffer and more responsive than others, but how comfortable is it? It might be what contemporary wisdom suggests you need, but it might be wrong for you.

The following is a good six-step approach to shopping for a new bike.

1. Think about your needs. Don't begin by saying to yourself, "I am going to be a racer." Begin by looking at what you can do, what you want to do, and what you can realistically expect to be doing after six months or a year. If you live in the middle of New York City, do not have a car, and hate trains, getting a double suspension mountain bike is probably not a good idea. On the other hand, if you live six miles down a gravel road in the Rockies and do not have a car nor intend to do any real road riding, a road bike isn't your good bet. Be honest with yourself. Are you going to be using the bike for recreational purposes? Do you like the backcountry? Are you already pretty athletic? Would you really take a week to bike from New York to Boston when you can drive it in five hours? Does busy traffic intimidate you even when you are in a car? What are you really going to do with your bike?

2. Understand the lingo. When you go into a bike shop and start shopping, salespeople are going to throw a new lingo at you. It's a good idea to learn what the parts of a bike are so that you understand what is being discussed. Either that or make sure that any ill- or undefined terms are described in normal English.

3. Express your needs in a functional way. This will be easy after step 1. When you go into a bike store and the salesperson asks you what you are looking for, instead of saying, "I am looking for a new mountain bike," explain how you intend to use the bike. A good salesperson will point you in the right direction. However, with your knowledge of the lingo, you will also be able to ask for reasonable alternatives and/or go into the details of why one recommendation was made rather than another.

4. Test as many bikes as possible. The most important thing when you buy a bike is to make sure that you like it, by which I mean that you think it is comfortable and will ably do what you want it to do. The only way you can figure this out is to take a bunch of models out for short test rides. Don't be shy about it!

5. Ask lots of questions. It doesn't even matter if they are the right questions. By asking, you will learn what is and is not important. You will also learn about the advantages and disadvantages of different makes, models, and brands of bikes. The most important thing is to make sure that there are reasons why a salesperson is urging you in a certain direction. "Just trust me on this" is an unacceptable answer. You want to know why!

6. Don't get roped in by anyone or anything. As Rick Lovett points out in his article, most bikes are sold with certain components. Do not feel like you must accept what the manufacturer or the bike shop puts on the bike. As you read and learn more, you will be able to ask for specific things that you know you need and explain to a salesperson that what he or she wants you to buy is not what you want.

So how does this all apply to Andrew and his plans to go on an extended touring trip? Well, it sounds from his needs like he will want a dedicated touring bike, the only model that is truly designed for long-distance weight-bearing travel. How about brand, components, and price specifics? Andrew, you are going to have to try out a bunch of bikes until you find one you like that costs what you are willing to pay. Anyone who tells you otherwise must have a good reason for doing so.

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