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## Expert Answers

### Keeping Your Spokes Healthy

#### Marc's Question.

I biked the east coast of North America last summer and I blew out 16 spokes on my rear wheel during the 4000 mile trip. I used both front and rear panniers and carried about 80 lbs of weight in addition to the 190-lbs body on my bike. What can I do to prevent this from happening when I ride from Florida to Alaska starting in March?

#### Ethan Gelber's Answer.

Spokes usually speak for themselves and it sounds like this case is no exception. In fact, it reminds me of a similar case involving my fellow long-distance cyclist, Anthony, who spent 10 months on a pedal circumnavigation of the Mediterranean Sea with me. Anthony is 6' 4" and weighs about 190 lbs. He was toting as much as 50 or 60 lbs. of stuff. He is also an aggressive cyclist, prone to push very very hard.



Anthony suffered more than a dozen broken spokes in just the first two months of the trip. I can say, optimistically, that he refined his spoke-changing skills while the rest of us learned to be patient and suck down hot roadside diesel fumes. A more measured thought is that almost anything is preferable to spoke replacement, especially repeated spoke replacement, and even more especially when you are not cycling alone.

The conclusion that we came to was that his wheel suffered from one or more of the following problems: it was inappropriate for the punishment to which it was subjected, it was constructed with flawed material (we liked to say that it had bad karma), or it was poorly built. In all three cases (and in the absence of a good bike shop that could replace the wheel), there was nothing to be done short of carrying less weight, not riding as hard, and carefully avoiding all road imperfections. Anthony was not willing to sacrifice

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speed, his gear, or the right to zone out over long stretches of desolate road.

Which brings us back to wheel replacement. If you are having consistent problems, you are a strong rider (unwilling to give up your drive), and you feel like you must carry as much as you do (which I would give second and third thought to), I would worry more about the wheel and less about the spokes. In short, I would replace the wheel. Buy a good quality touring wheel or have one custom built to fit your needs. Test ride it with a heavy load for a good 100 miles or so (not necessarily all at once). Then, if you don't want to do it yourself, have the spokes readjusted and tightened. If you are planning on having a wheel custom built, talk to a reputable counter person at your local shop and buy the best hub, rim and spokes you can find. This will help the shop to understand what it is that you really need. You should be good to go after this.

One last word: 80 pounds of gear is a lot. Try to trim that down a good twenty pounds. It might make a big difference. If nothing else, the hills will be easier. Good luck!

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