



MAMMOTH JOURNEYS

BIKE GUIDE

When buying your bike there are a number of factors which need to be considered. Before committing do plenty of research and make sure you are confident in your decision. Do not spend an obscene amount of your budget on your bike, and then find yourself in a financial position unable to use it!

This guide will hopefully assist you to navigate through the minefield of choosing your bike for your Journey ahead.

These are only my opinions and should not be taken as gospel. Ask around and try to get information from a variety of sources and then come to your own conclusion before purchasing.

Price

This is an extremely personal choice and everyone will be different. Ultimately you get what you pay for. It's not to say that a bike that you get for less than £100 from Argos won't be able to make it through the Journeys we offer, it may just be a little difficult than if you spent more, it's all about finding a level for you that balances cost, ease, comfort and satisfaction. On the other end of the spectrum spending £3000 on something with as much technology as an F1 racing car won't make your arrival at the end of your Journey any more special. As the great Eddy Merckx said "Don't buy upgrades, ride up grades". I would budget around £500 - £1000, especially if this is your first bike. You can then get an idea what aspects are more important to you and what you want to concentrate on when you change or upgrade.

New vs Second Hand

If you are buying a bike for the first time and don't have someone you trust (and who knows their basics) who can come and look at the bike with you, I would steer away from second hand. If you know what you are looking for though you can find some really good deals; Ebay, Gumtree or the classifieds in Cycling Weekly are a good place to start.

Buying new then leaves you with the option of the local bike shop or online. If you are reading this guide then I thoroughly recommend making friends with your local bike shop. Have a google search, ask around and go in and chat – make sure you know 1. Your budget and 2. What you want to do on it. The reason I say this is that in good shops they will give you some kind of bike fit to make sure your knees don't instantly explode and your back still works off the bike. They can also help with saddle choice and may (if you find a good one) even switch stems, bars and saddles at the point of sale. Also they will generally give you a 3 month tune up and will help you install bits and bobs. I have learnt through painful experience that trying to save a tenner on Wiggle can cause you to spend three times as much getting the problem sorted out by someone that knows what they are doing.

If you are going to buy online then Wiggle have a great returns policy and the big German direct to consumer companies Rose and Canyon are excellent in all respects.

I have bought new and also used second hand for my trips and had good outcome on both. If your budget allows I would tend to go new, if it doesn't there are some absolute bargains on many second-hand websites of people who no longer use their bikes and instead have them as an ornament collecting dust in their shed.

Bike Style; Road vs Mountain vs Hybrid vs Gravel/Adventure

Obviously this is massively dependant on where you are cycling, how quickly you need/want to cycle, and how much comfort you would like to be in.

Road bikes are faster and lighter, will go up and down asphalt mountain roads easier (gear choice dependent) and will chew up the kms on the flat. However, when in town navigating the cobbles and kerbs will be a lot more troublesome. And for those not so confident, the downhill can be a touch nerve wracking on skinny tyres. Finally, the position which allows you to have such a great average speed can also make you uncomfortable if you are not used to it, or after a few long consecutive days. You want to be looking at 'endurance' road bikes rather than 'racing' road bikes. So to give an example with one of the classic brands, the Trek Domane would be a good choice, not the Trek Madone or Emonda.

Mountain bikes have a more upright riding position making them more comfortable to ride to begin with, and make light work of the town environment. The large gear ratio will make, unsurprisingly, the uphill mountain sections a breeze – albeit taking a lot longer. As they are designed to be thrown downhill, they are definitely sturdy enough to cope with the demands of cycle touring (£50 Argos bikes not included). However, that heavy frame and front suspension will mean the large distances on road you need to cover in a day will sap your energy. You can of course get a tyre which has minimal tread, and potentially lock out your front forks, but compared to a road bike, it will feel like a barge. The Marin Dual Sport is a lighter option in this category, or the Bolinas Ridge offers a bit more durability if that's your concern.



Hybrid bikes are a medium balance between the two. This, and the final option of gravel/adventure bikes, is where I would place my bets. An upright riding position so that you can observe your surroundings comfortably, and comfortably last 8 hours in the saddle without too much load or

strain on arms and lower back. Commuting width tyres make the urban environment easily navigable and also the weight and gear ratio means the tough uphill sections are reasonable. I would include 'touring' bikes in this category also. Usually drop handlebars, but potentially butterfly, usually steel frames and no front suspension is what you would get. A heavy yet reliable frame, with large gear ratios, upright riding position but a chance to keep low if you wish, these again are designed for multiple long days in the saddle. You won't beat a roadie on the flat, and won't be as comfortable as the mountain bike on bumpy roads, but it's a happy medium which can tackle the majority of what's thrown at it on our tours. Something similar to the Marin Four Corners or Fairfax would be great options for this style.



Finally is a relatively new style of bike called a gravel or adventure bike. The gravel bike is a 50% endurance road bike, 25% hybrid and 25% mountain bike. They don't have suspension, can fit big tires (therefore comfortable!) have disk brakes (more on this later). They have a less aggressive riding position for all day riding than a hybrid, and have a frame that is both rugged but also lighter than a hybrid. Most come with mudguard mounts and pannier mounts so you can do everything (almost) with one bike. These bikes are a perfect balance for most of our Journeys, as they transition so well from road to gravel - which is the surface of a number of the cycle highways along our routes. This is where I would put my money, and the style of bike I would get for riding the majority of our Journeys.

Great options here would be the Marin Gestalt range – road bike performance with hybrid comfort.



Makes

So you've decided whether you are buying new or second hand, online or in store, and also which style of bike. Now to decide what brand to go for. All of the top manufacturers will produce quality bikes that will be able to withstand the demands of our Journeys. Brands such as Marin, Scott, Specialised, Dawes, Kona, Giant, GT to name a few, the list is endless, all have great options at many different price options. When picking a make one thing to bear in mind is that each brand has a different geometry. So the set up, and ultimately how you sit on the bike, will be different for each bike. My advice is to try different makes to see which one suits your body type (remember the bike fit we mentioned earlier). You can alter the length of how far the handlebars are away from the frame (stem length) for example, but it is obviously better not to have to spend more money trying to get the wrong frame geometry to fit your body. The effect of bike geometry is a complicated topic that is a whole subject in itself. My advice is try a few, ask at a shop and pick one that's comfortable. I generally do not care about what make the bike is, price and componentry are what steers my preference. If you have a spare £100 then a proper bike fit can be worth its weight in gold – and remember if you have the choice of a complicated 3-D mapping computer algorithm or a skinny 65 year old man who owns the local shop having a look at your position; go with the 65 year old!

There are lots of bike size calculators online where you put in your vital statistics and they will get you started with sizing.

Bike Frame Material

The next thing is to pick what material the frame will be.

Carbon is lighter and arguably stiffer. The main draw back with carbon is durability and impact resistance. Generally they are solid and won't crack or snap during use but if an angry baggage worker at the airport lobs it sideways onto a trolley, then compared to a metal bike you could be in trouble. With the majority of our routes we will be within easy reach of a bike shop where you can get a replacement bike, as when carbon snaps or cracks there is no repair, however if you are unlucky enough to snap or crack the carbon in places such as Morocco and it becomes un-rideable,



you may struggle finding an appropriate replacement. Unless you are planning on doing a lot of road riding then I would not recommend a carbon framed bike as a first bike. Most importantly if you are spending less than £1000 then DO NOT BUY A CARBON FRAMED BIKE.

Steel on the other hand can be thrown about and is far less likely to be damaged. Brilliantly if it does get a crack you can usually find someone to weld it together and off you go – no worries. They will last forever, are comfortable over long distances and are timeless. Steel bikes though are still very expensive as the lightest steel alloys are still expensive.

Another option is aluminium, however it's downside is that you can't easily weld a repair, but the frame will be very strong and can easily deal with what it experiences on one of our Journeys. They also offer the best value in of the three major options.

Titanium – if you are thinking of a titanium frame, I am jealous and you already know what you are doing I hope!

In general any modern-ish bike (or any steel bike) will be absolutely fine as long as it is in good repair. It is not all about the bike.

Brakes

Brakes, 5 years ago this wouldn't have been a discussion as there wasn't any other options for road bikes than rim brakes. At the end of the day all braking systems, if well maintained, will be perfectly fine for this trip. If you are using a mountain bike it will definitely have disk brakes so no thought required. If you are buying a new road or hybrid/gravel bike, and have the budget then you need to make a decision. Hydraulic disks brakes are better at braking than rim brakes, far better in the wet and require less hand strength. Rim brakes are cheaper, easier to repair and have worked brilliantly for 100 years. Disc brakes whether you like it or not though, are the future.

So you've got a working bike that fits you, at the price you were happy to pay. Everything onwards from there is a luxury. These things just make the ride easier, more comfortable and you will no doubt tinker with everything as the Journey goes on, and throughout the years as you find a style and set up which works best for you.

Components

Here I am talking about the gearing and brake systems. Generally the most popular is Shimano, with others like SRAM also a good choice. Within each make there will be different levels of quality. For our riding the speed and smoothness of gear changing isn't a huge issue, so my advice would be go mid-level on componentry. For top spec road bikes the speed of a shift is very important, however generally for touring it's less of a factor. Check the bike has reputable components, be wary if everything apart from the obvious bits are from a different company than the advertised gears. Groupsets (gears and brakes) such as Shimano 105 or SRAM Rival or Apex are as expensive as you want to put on a touring bike.

Handlebar Options; flat, drop downs, bull bars or butterfly

Riding for up to 10 hours a day you want to be able to change your arm position. Shift the load around on your shoulders so that's not in the same position all day. For that reason I would not go for pure flats. I would at least attach some bull ends. A relatively cheap upgrade with no changes to brakes or gearing. Next step from there could potentially be butterfly handlebars. These give you a lot more options of where to put your hands, and shift the load even further.

Similar outcome to the drop downs, however realistically I wouldn't be in the drops for much of the day as I am not that flexible - each to their own here though.

With bull ends and butterfly, you need to be aware that in cities you will still adopt the normal riding position, on the flats, as you will need access to the brakes.



Butterfly handlebars

Pedals; Clip-in vs cages or just standard flat pedals.

Using clip-in pedals will make you more efficient. You can get a dual pedal with a normal flat pedal on one side, and a clip in mount on the other. You can now also buy touring clip in shoes so that when you get into town you can walk around with no problems, similar to the Shimano . Do not get racing shoes, you will be useless in towns doing your Bambi on ice impression. Down side to clip ins are the cost of buying the new shoes and pedals, and also the hassle or learning to use them. There is a fair chance you will fall at least once as you stayed clipped in when you get to a traffic light! Usually your ego is the most bruised. I really would recommend a set of budget Shimano MTB pedals and touring shoes, the effort you save is huge and we can set them up so they are loose enough that you (probably) won't ever fall over sideways at the traffic lights.

Cages are a good compromise however when not being used they can drag and scrap on the floor. They are more efficient than flat pedals but less so than clip ins. You still have the potential risk of not getting your foot out in time also. They are however less expensive than clip ins.

Finally just can stick with the standard pedals that come with bike. No new shoes and no new technique to learn. Try and get the pedal as big as possible to that you have a nice area to push down on. Less efficient than the above two but no extra cost.

I really would recommend a set of Shimano A530 pedals and touring shoes, the effort you save is huge and you can set them up so they are loose enough that you (probably) won't ever fall over sideways at the traffic lights.



Shimano A530 Pedal

Saddle

The “Gold Standard” of saddle choice for touring is Brooks. Tough and comfortable it’s all you need in a saddle, and they have a variety of styles for those who cycle upright and those who adopt a more racing positing. They take a while to break in, much like a pair of hiking boots, but the finished product is worth the wait. There is also an option to get an aged saddle, which doesn’t take as long to break in. Don’t turn up for your first day on the Journey with a brand-new leather saddle, it will be sore! As you are sitting on the thing for a while, it would also be beneficial to get a fitting. Your sit bones set up means certain saddles are more suited for you. If you have really narrow sit bones, having a wide seat will more likely result in chaffing, so it’s not always the case to pick the biggest sofa sized saddle.

I would choose a Brooks saddle for upright positioning, but in the past have used standard gel saddles, and a racing bike style saddle of the correct width if I use a gravel bike. **The key here is to make sure that it is well used beforehand and you know it is comfortable for you.** Do not buy a new bike and then struggle on with an awful saddle, get it changed.

Luggage

Even though your luggage will be carried in the vehicle it’s still beneficial having personal items on you such as tools to repair the bike, camera, jacket, and snacks. This could either be mounted on the front of your handlebars or in a small rucksack on your back. I would avoid a pannier rack and bag set up, as the amount you will be carrying wouldn’t justify the weight and cost of one.

The handlebar bag allows quick access to your stuff, you can see it so there is no risk of losing it. The downside would be the effect it has on the handling, so ensure you don’t load it too much, and also the aerodynamic compromise.

The alternative of a rucksack usually means no extra kit purchases as most people have a bag already. Downside would be having that weight on your back when riding for long periods, and as it is behind you if something were to fall out you wouldn’t know about it. Also, it’s more hassle getting stuff out compared to a handlebar bag, and it makes your back sweaty so if you are a big sweater go for a bike mounted bag.



I would choose to have a handlebar bag for personal belongings.

Make sure to attach a saddle bag for bike tools, and a bottle cage (or two) to carry water.

So there you go. Following this advice will hopefully give you some basic knowledge to start the process of getting a bike. As always, if you have any questions or feel like I've missed anything out, please let us know.

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