



PHOTOS CASS GILBERT

SINGLETRACK TOURING

Bikepacking has come to mean 'multi-day off-road adventures by mountain bike'. Journalist **Cass Gilbert** offers suggestions on bikes, gear, and ride ideas

Bikepacking is a relatively recent phenomenon. In a sense, at least. People have been strapping bags to handlebars and donning backpacks since the dawn of mountain biking, and using their knobby-tyred bikes to explore remote routes unreachable on day trips. What differentiates this new wave of bikepacking is the specialised gear that's emerged, and the popularisation of long-distance mountain biking routes.

The term bikepacking is borrowed from US bike-tourers of the 1970s. Today, bikepacking is perhaps best described as lightweight, multi-day bike touring, largely on dirt roads or singletrack trails. The lightweight element is a response to the demands of riding such terrain. You want the bike to be light enough to enjoy the trails that you can ride and to heft over technical sections you can't.

Conventional touring favours racks and panniers. And for most road-based trips, these remain perfect for the job. On

off-road terrain, racks and panniers add unnecessary extra weight; weight that isn't tightly distributed across the bike, making for an unwieldy ride. Instead, soft-bags are preferred. Frame-bags are the most obvious: zippered bags that make use of the centralised, low-to-the-ground area that is otherwise wasted but for a couple of water bottles.

The real appeal in bikepacking is its ability to offer the best of all worlds: the sense of remoteness I so value when mountain biking, the sense of self-sufficiency I savour when I tour, and the thrill of singletrack on a bike that's light enough to really enjoy riding. Plus I can cover greater distances with less effort.

BIKEPACKING BAGGAGE

The heart of a bikepacking setup includes a frame-bag and a roll-bag strapped to the handlebars, often with a front pouch for sundries. In the UK, handlebar slings that allow the use of waterproof roll-bags without fouling brake and gear cables are

particularly useful. Additionally, most bikepackers favour a 'snack pack' on the top tube, and a large volume, expandable seat pack. The latter is different from a traditional Carradice saddlebag, being lighter, more slimline, and using an attachment system that mounts directly to the rails of a standard saddle, rather than the need for the saddlebag loops.

All of this doesn't mean you need to invest in a whole load of new gear to go bikepacking. Two roll-bags, attached directly to the handlebar and to the top of a rear rack and cinched down with straps, already offer a considerable weight saving over panniers. This said, the makeshift approach is more awkward to attach and access during the day. If you intend to embark on such adventures regularly, it's worth using dedicated bikepacking gear.

Weight savings are greater than you might imagine. Typically, a full set of bikepacking bags weighs around a kilo, with a capacity of around 32L depending on the size and width of the frame-bag.



In the photo
1 Riding in
Peru's remote
Huayhuash
mountains >

FEATURE
Bike-packing



“ANY CROSS COUNTRY MTB MAKES A GOOD BIKEPACKING BIKE”

› In comparison, a rear rack and a couple of large panniers will likely weigh 2.5-3kg, albeit for 40-48L.

Bikes without panniers are a whole lot easier to push – which, as any mountain biker will know, comes as part and parcel of most off-road trips. Even better, any mountain bike can become a touring bike, thanks to a system that doesn't rely on rack eyelets. You can even invest in a smaller, custom frame-bag designed around the likes of suspension linkages. Anyone handy with a sewing machine can create their own gear, with a wealth of information available on the bikepacking.net website.

The compromises? Bikepacking gear tends to be more fiddly to pack – at least until you become familiar with the system – and without careful preparation, it's less water resistant than modern, seam-welded panniers. Similarly, it's not as convenient to travel with if you're staying in hostels or B&Bs, as the bags are less easily removed. The ability to carry food is more limited, though with careful packing, 2-4 days between resupplies should be possible.

Many bikepackers wear a small rucksack, such as Osprey's Talon (ospreypacks.com). Mountain bike touring tends to involve far more movement in the upper body, so

In the photos
1 Bikepacking on the Arizona Trail, USA
2 Ultralight gear, like a titanium pot-set, helps shave some extra grammes from your load
3 Singleskin tents and tarps also save bulk and weight

you end up with strain on one part of your back. Even so, it's best to use a backpack for just water, which is drunk throughout the day, or light, bulky gear; keep heavier items on your bike. On longer, multi-week trips, I still prefer to do without weight on my back.

Packing light has other knock-on effects too. Climbs become far less of a chore. Descents become safer and more assured. Steering becomes more nimble. And there's considerably less wear and tear on components. In short, both you and your bike will be less fatigued. This also opens the possibility of running lighter components and wheels, making for a livelier, more enjoyable ride.

A friend of mine commented: 'When embarking on a trip that includes technical singletrack, running lighter kit and carrying less gear makes a noticeable difference in the fun factor. In going light, I really don't feel I make a compromise in comfort, contrary to some people's belief.'



BAGGAGE CHECK

GET YOUR GEAR

● US bikepacking fabricators will post internationally and the options are growing in the UK. Ison (ison-distribution.com) distribute Revelate frame-bags (revelatedesigns.com) for Salsa and Surly frames. Alpkit (alpkit.com/bikepacking) now build batches of custom frame-bags (p22), as well as waterproof roll-bags for a rear rack or handlebar. Wales-based Wildcat Gear (wildcatgear.co.uk) specialise in custom work, with a full range of bikepacking gear available, as do Buggybags (bike-bag.co.uk). In Poland, bikepack.eu make well designed and economical gear.

ADVICE & INFORMATION

● The go-to site for bikepacking information is bikepacking.net, based in the US. Its UK equivalent is barebonesbikepacking.co.uk. Also visit Bike Packing Life (bikepackinglife.com) and Velo Dirt (velodirt.com), as well as the blogs: gypsybytrade.wordpress.com, whileouttriding.com (my site), pedallingnowhere.com, and joecruz.wordpress.com.

CARE

● As with most lightweight kit, bikepacking gear requires a little more TLC than heavy duty racks and panniers. Be sure to apply duct tape to any areas where there might be cable rub – and if you're precious about your frame, apply tape where paint might rub off. Be thorough about cleaning and lubricating frame-bag zips, as these are weak points. And don't overstuff your frame-bag.

GO BIKEPACKING

START WITH a simple S240, a sub-24 hour overnigher, to hone your gear and setup, and just get out of the house. It's surprising how satisfying overnight trips can be. After that, here's a few multi-day routes to get you started...

UK TRANS CAMBRIAN WAY

www.imba.org.uk

A 100-mile route from the English border to the Irish Sea across the remote hills and moorland of central Wales. Takes 2-3 days.

SCOTTISH COAST TO COAST

www.mbruk.co.uk

An off-road traverse of Scotland, from Skye/Fort William to Montrose. 270 miles over 4-6 days.

HIGHLAND TRAIL 550

highlandtrail.net

A 560-mile self supported race, in the style of the Canadian/US Tour Divide (tourdivide.org), that can also be toured independently.

● **In brief:** *other multi-day routes include the English Coast to Coast, a loop of the Cairngorms, the Pennine Way (the bike version) and the Devon Coast to Coast. Visit mbruk.co.uk for guidebooks and gpx files.*

INTERNATIONAL TRANS ANDALUS

transandalus.org

A 2,000km circular mountain biking route of Andalucia, Spain, along dirt roads and quiet backroads.

GRENZSTEIN TROPHY overnigher.de

A 1250km race, which can also be ridden as a tour, that traces the German East/West divide, following dirt roads, tank tracks and singletrack.

COLORADO TRAIL coloradotrail.org

A 500-mile route, between Denver and Colorado, which takes in some of the finest singletrack in the world.

ARIZONA TRAIL aztrail.org

An 800-mile traverse of Arizona (60% singletrack), that begins in Utah and finishes on the Mexican border. Includes a magnificent hike-a-bike through the Grand Canyon.

● **In brief:** *other European offerings include the Trans Pyrenees, the Transcantábrica, and various alternatives of the Camino Santiago (visit www.labiceta.com for guidebooks) in France and Spain.*



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Carrying a lot of gear only complicates the experience for me.'

THE IDEAL BIKE

Almost any cross country mountain bike can make a decent bikepacking machine, whether it's full suspension or a hardtail. I prefer a rigid 29er with large volume tyres, ideally run tubeless for extra comfort and grip. Such a bike is extremely capable off-road, surprisingly efficient over tarmac stretches, and easy to maintain. I ride a Surly Ogre (surlybikes.com), a versatile bike designed with off-road touring in mind. Details I appreciate include eyelets for water bottles on the fork and under the down tube, as well as a surplus of braze-ons for when I want to tour with panniers.

Salsa are also well known for their adventure-orientated bikes, with their drop-handlebar Fargo popular for racers of the Tour Divide, the dirt road traverse of the US. Similarly, the fully rigid Genesis Fortitude Adventure is worth checking out. It's no longer in the range but you can still find it for sale.

For more extreme terrain, a fat bike such as the Salsa Mukluk or Surly Pugsley can work. Both come with eyelets on the fork legs for water bottles (if your bike doesn't, hose clamps work well), as does Genesis' fat-tyred Caribou. Singular's Puffin (singularcycles.com) is in the pipeline too. Surly's brand new ECR, using the 29+ format, is another interesting option.

At the other end of the spectrum, a cyclo-cross bike can also be great for those

looking to clock up the miles on better-surfaced dirt roads.

SLEEPING AND EATING

Camping and cooking gear is another area where saving weight and bulk pays dividends. Look at lightening your cook-set, tent, sleeping bag and sleeping mat. I like Tarptent (tarptent.com) from the US, with their wide range of single-skin, fully-enclosed offerings, such as the roomy, 0.9kg Rainbow, which sleeps 1-2. When the weather looks good, I'll use an even more minimal option, like Six Moon Designs's (sixmoondesigns.com) Wild Oasis tarp (0.4kg), which has midge protection.

I use a Clikstand (klikstand.com) as a means of streamlining my otherwise bulky Trangia. On a tight budget? Cut costs by buying a cheap tarp or even a bivvy bag (alpkit.com/hunka), making an alcohol-burning stove (zenstoves.net), and investing in a summer down sleeping bag. A summer bag can be extended for autumnal use through the use of a silk liner or a vapour-barrier liner.

There are plenty of prepared, hydrated meals available in outdoor stores that save weight and bulk, but they can be expensive. As an alternative to them (and instant noodles), here's a simple, quick, cheap and high-carb recipe I favour for overnight trips: red lentils with basmati rice.

Pre-soak the red lentils, which cook quicker than green ones, while pitching the tarp. Start by putting a pot of water on to boil. Chop up fresh ginger, garlic >

FEATURE Bike- packing



› and a small onion. A little jalapeño will add some spice. Chop up a carrot small, so it cooks quickly. Throw all into a pot at the same time, adding in lentils and basmati rice. Mix in some pre-prepared turmeric, coriander and cumin (equal parts) or a curry powder. Sprinkle in some salt. Simmer and stir for 20 mins. In the meantime, blow up your mattress, fluff up your sleeping bag and have a stretch.

NAVIGATION

While back-up paper maps and a compass are always recommended, bikepacking lends itself particularly well to touring with a handlebar-mounted GPS; my favourite is the Garmin eTrex 20 (garmin.com/etrex). As singletrack trails are often unmarked or easily missed, a GPS helps to keep you moving, negating the need to stop and consult a map at every junction.

Alternatively, a smartphone is a very useful device if you have the means to keep it charged. I use a Son 28 dynamo hub and a Bright Bike Revolution USB charger (37g, brightbikelabs.com). When using my iPhone, I like Gaia's (gaiagps.com) navigational app best.

GPX files can be found online, swapped on forums, or created and shared with Google Earth or the likes of programs like Topofusion (topofusion.com) and Ride With GPS (ridewithgps.com). Wikiloc (<http://es.wikiloc.com/wikiloc/home.do>) is a great source for European gpx files.

MORE LUGGAGE, MORE TARMAC

While a bikepacking setup makes an ideal option for multi-week off-road trips, its limited cargo capacity can be an issue for those planning several months on the road.



This doesn't mean you need to revert to a full pannier setup. I've found that two small panniers, teamed with a frame-bag, front roll-bag and a seat bag, is a great way to add extra capacity without compromising handling adversely. Pack bulky and light gear in the panniers, keeping the heavier items in your frame-bag. Remove rack and panniers for shorter bikepacking loops en route.

Currently riding round the world, Kurt Sandiforth has a particularly interesting setup, using home-sewn bikepacking bags and slimline, rattle-free panniers, fixed to a Surly Pugsley with 4in tyres. Visit his website, bikegreaseandcoffee.com for dirt road touring inspiration.

Although the topic is beyond the scope of this article, frame-bags and front handlebar roll-bags can work equally well on road bikes assuming your handlebars are wide enough. Bear in mind that a short seat post might exclude the ability to carry a seat pack, though there are more compact models around, like Revelate's Pika. Check out Mike Hall's (normallyaspiratedhuman.com) record-breaking round the world

CASS'S KIT LIST

HERE'S MY default pack-list, which I'd adjust as needed.

• CLOTHING

- › Padded cycling shorts
- › Loose-fitting riding shorts
- › Riding shirt
- › 2 × long sleeve tops
- › 1 × underwear
- › 2 × socks (*one pair for riding, one pair kept dry for sleeping*)
- › Long underwear for sleeping
- › 1 super-light windshell
- › Leg warmers
- › Lightweight wool cap
- › Ultralight down jacket for wearing around the camp
- › Waterproof shell and ¾ length trousers
- › Riding gloves, with overgloves for cold/rain
- › Sunglasses
- › Rugged SPD cycling shoes/boots

• SLEEPING

- › -1°C down sleeping bag
- › Vapour barrier (*for colder temps*)
- › ¾ air mattress
- › Tarp plus pegs and pole
- › Tyvek groundsheet

• WASHING

- › Toothbrush and toothpaste
- › Tea tree oil
- › Suncream
- › Biodegradable soap
- › Basic med kit, inc Ibuprofen

• KITCHEN

- › Lightweight stove, fuel and pot-set
- › Fold-flat camping bowl
- › Spork, knife, lighter, matches.
- › Steripen Freedom water filter plus emergency puri tabs

• OTHER

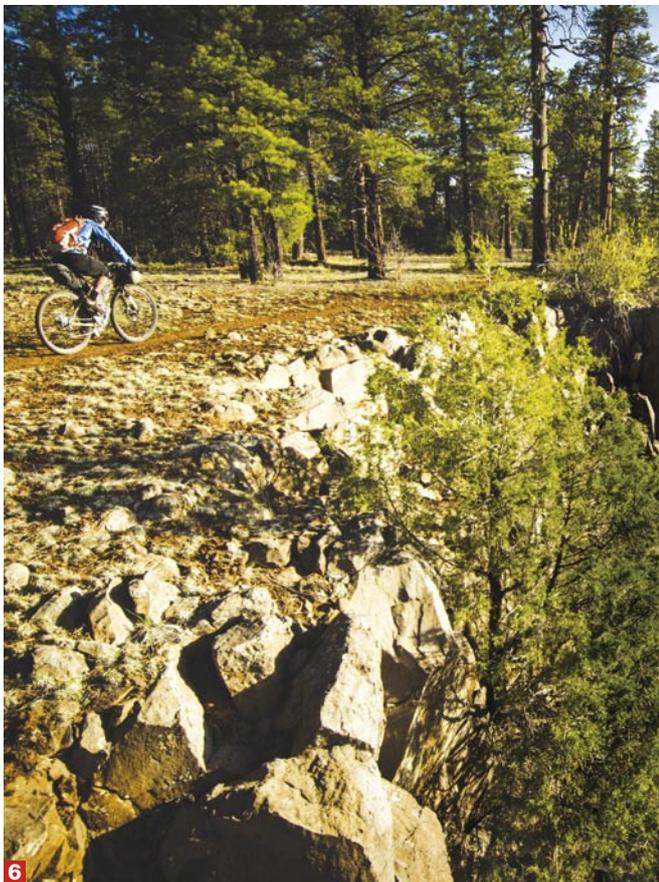
- › Paper map and compass
- › Extra strap, in case anything fails

• ELECTRONICS

- › Headtorch
- › Compact camera (*plus spare battery*)
- › Smartphone – camera/books/music/navigation
- › GPS (*plus spare battery*)

• SPARES/TOOLS

- › 2 × innertubes, 1-2 2oz bottle of Stan's sealant, multitool, Leatherman Squirt, extra water bottle cage bolt, chainring nut and bolt, cleat bolt, tyre boot material, needle and thread, tyre plug kit, superglue, patch kit, 1 set of brake pads, emergency FiberFix spoke, 1 spare spoke of each length, 6 extra chain links, 2 extra quick links, zip ties, compact pump, Duct tape wrapped around pump.



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ride for an example of super-light road touring. Of course, you can also readily use conventional saddlebags and bar bags for lightweight road touring.

LEAVE IT (NEARLY) ALL BEHIND

The main advice I can offer for aspiring bikepackers is to enter a different state of mind for travelling by bike: minimalism. Bring only what you need. What you *really* need. It's a discipline, and a good one. Pare down your gear to the bare necessities and you'll be surprised: rather than being restrictive, travelling light becomes incredibly liberating.

Wherever you roam has the potential to become part of your tour – a singletrack trail, a rutted jeep road across a moorland, a rock-strewn track down a mountain side. In turn, this will usher in a new world of landscapes to your touring experience, and add a sense of wilderness to your rides that was previously only attainable by backpacking. It's a world you might otherwise not have experienced with a heavier, more traditional setup – simply because it wouldn't be half as enjoyable getting there. ☺

In the photos

- 4 A full bikepacking setup, spreading weight evenly
- 5 A cue sheet and GPS prevent missed turns
- 6 Bikepacking opens up terrain hard to reach by touring bikes
- 7 Run a dynamo hub or solar panel to charge devices such as a smartphone and Steripen

OWN THE NIGHT



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