



BOOMERZ BICYCLE

The Boomerz Self-Directed Bicycle Touring Guide (V1.0)

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Introduction

My name is Peter and I am a bicycle touring addict. About the time I sold out my interest in a consulting engineering company several years ago, my wife and I started to integrate bicycles into our already established lust for travel and adventure. Our first trip was a 7 day self-guided and luggage supported bicycle tour across England from the west coast to the east coast with five of our close friends. The weather was much like the summers at home near Seattle; only a bit cool at times and no real heavy rain. Our route ran us through the Lakes District, over the Pennine Mountains (hills) and into Newcastle. I had toured parts of England by car and train in the past, but this new bicycle perspective was amazing. The slow pace allowed us to stop at will and actually smell the roses. The little backroads, country lanes and dedicated bicycle paths were quiet and almost without traffic for most of the journey. We cruised through countryside and neighborhoods, little towns and even some larger ones without the stress of driving in heavy traffic. And best of all, we met and talked with the people along the way. You simply cannot gain that level of intimacy with a country and the inhabitants when you travel by car, bus or train. We were hooked from that point forward.

Over the next several years we planned and executed a number of similar bicycle touring adventures. All of them were wonderful experiences and we treasure every memory. More recently we have developed a system for planning and executing our own adventures, including all the travel, lodging and bicycle arrangements. The internet has simplified these tasks immensely and I can actually say with all honesty that the time I spend doing the planning and organizing of a trip is actually a source of pleasure for me. As a dedicated dreamer at heart, I find myself engrossed in the research involved during the planning stages and even have laid sleepless some nights working through the possibilities and potential options in my mind. Planning a bicycle adventure is much like creating anything else from scratch, and the rewards of a well planned trip are yours to enjoy once the real adventure begins.

During one cycling journey through the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium, I was struck with the idea of creating a web/blog site that would concentrate on our specific genre of bicycle adventure touring. There are already many excellent blogs and websites related to bicycle touring (see the "Related Websites" section), but most of these seem to concentrate more on the really epic style of journey that is many times totally self-contained (camping) style touring on heavier touring style bicycles for longer durations. As part of the Baby Boomer age group, our desire for pushing the limits has long since expired and we now seek a slower, gentler and dare I say slightly more pampered approach. Thirty to forty miles a day is a good target distance for us and we enjoy the comforts of a hot shower, prepared meal and comfortable bed once we arrive at our destination. And starting the day with an available bathroom close at hand, a

prepared breakfast and conversation with the locals fits right into our current level of desired well-being.

Our approach to touring has evolved a bit now and we are committed to planning most trips without any support from tour companies or even luggage forwarding services. We have found that we can easily transport enough clothing and the critical supplies we need for even an adventure of several weeks in two good sized panniers for each rider. Modern cycle appropriate clothing can be purchased that is very comfortable and easily kept reasonably clean and fresh on a daily basis assuming you have access to warm water, a sink or bathtub/shower and somewhere to hang your clothes overnight. We carry no camping gear and never cook our own meals. Those are the basics; now let us look a bit closer at the details.

Tip: *A 1" 3-ring binder is what we use for assembling all the pertinent travel and bicycle journey related documents generated during the planning stages. I generally keep the documents in a chronological order with those that I will need first in the first position, and so on. I also print a general map of the destination area and a blank calendar to rough out the itinerary and keep track of the associated dates. This binder actually fits inside one of our pannier pockets and we reference it constantly over the duration of the entire adventure.*

Day Dreaming and Choosing Your Destination

If you are anything like me, you love to watch the exploits of noted world travelers like Rick Steves and Anthony Bourdain. Those guys are my heroes. And once you are seriously bitten by the travel bug the desire to explore our wide and wonderful world can never be extinguished. Many of our destination ideas come from watching the various travel related shows on TV, but more have come from "interviews" with friends or casual acquaintances that have been impressed by their positive experiences in various places. Of course some destinations have a deserved excellent reputation based on a number of important criteria including the people, the weather, the food and the scenery. While nearly all these places can be explored by bicycle, it is important to consider the "bicycle friendliness" of each location as a critical factor for making your choice. For example, one of our longer journeys was through the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium which are arguably three of the most bicycle friendly countries on earth. That fact can make a huge difference in how you plan and execute your bicycle adventure. Fortunately, the internet now makes researching the bicycle friendliness of all destinations much easier. And the good news is that many of the popular world travel destinations are rapidly becoming more bicycle friendly as they understand the importance of catering to this significant market of potential tourists.

Tip: *One good tip for planning an adventure is to review the advertising available from the many, many commercial bicycle tour operators. Almost without exception these companies post a fair amount of detailed information regarding their tours on the internet and this often even includes the actual day-by-day itineraries and maps. This level of information can be invaluable to the self-directed individual because you know that the routes and destinations have already been researched professionally to some level. In addition, some of these companies also produce excellent hard copy brochures with color pictures that you can drool over while day dreaming up your own adventure. And who knows, maybe they will do such a good job of advertising that you will be enticed to go with their offerings! Get ready to pay the premium though, as most of these trips can be a bit costly compared to doing it yourself. For example, we kept pretty good records for a couple major trips (Ireland and The Netherlands) and it worked out to costing about \$150 (\$75 per person) per day for both of us, not including the airfare and bicycle rentals. That would be hard to beat with a commercial tour operator. Still, a few of them have some pretty good deals and it might be worth it to consider them for your very first adventure. However, you will need to settle for the routes, lodging and dates they offer, and you will miss the fun and satisfaction of planning and executing your very own journey!*

Getting to Your Starting Point (and Back!)

OK, you have settled for time being on a potential destination and general time frame. Now it is time to consider your options for travel to and from the starting and ending points. Once again, the internet is your friend for this task. If your destination is within driving range, do a Google Maps route and estimate your travel time to and from your starting and ending points. You may even decide to take a multiple destination journey to include several starting and ending points, but either way, Google Maps can provide you with a clear cycling route and time estimates. Google Maps is my friend and useful for many planning and navigating duties. More on that subject later.

If your proposed journey includes travel by air, train or bus, I would once again suggest you use the internet to explore your options. The various (too many to list them all) travel related sites like Travelocity and Expedia can help to at least give you a general idea of the potential associated travel costs and available carriers. You can hire the services of a travel agent, but that is typically not the least expensive option and if you are like me, you will enjoy researching the possibilities and putting together the best package for yourself. Once you learn the basics, it really is an easy process to research and book your own travel.

Tip: *Make sure you check all the available carriers for the travel destinations you are considering. For example, a lower cost airline like Easy Jet may not show up on some internet*

search engines. Also, be sure to verify their bicycle policies if you plan to bring your own bike. More on that later.

Routes, Lodging, Bicycles and Gear

Routes

If you haven't done so already, do a Google search on: bicycle tours (routes, trips etc.) around the destination you have chosen. For example type: "bicycle tours in Western Ireland". Spend some time sifting through the results and digging down to the details of the various commercial tour offerings. And in many cases, the various local interests such as cities, regions and countries will have bicycle touring related information available as well. Some countries such as Germany and the Netherlands have an extensive amount of free information dedicated to their bicycle touring offerings and options, including recommended route maps and on-line route planning sites. And one of the main aims of our Boomerz website (www.boomerzbike.com) is to assemble an extensive library of potential journey overviews and accounts from information submitted by our membership. These first-hand accounts should be both informative and hopefully entertaining as well!

Once you have roughed out a potential general route for your adventure, it is time to once again call on the services of Google Maps. While I am certainly not even close to an expert at using their map generating interface, what I do is pretty easy and useful for firming up the actual routes we will travel. Generally speaking, once I have an idea of my desired starting and ending points, I begin to plug in the various daily destinations I have in mind and start building my Google Maps route. If I am using a general route idea gleaned from a commercial tour operator or other previously researched source, I might even initially use the same actual daily destinations and therefore approximate mileages they recommend.

Tip: *For many potential adventure locations, Google Maps allows you to choose bicycles as one of the travel options used to recommend the best routes and estimated mileages. This option can be chosen prior to developing your route maps and often several bicycle route options are provided.*

Don't worry about perfecting your route details with your first pass as you will likely make numerous revisions over the course of your planning, and you will likely even change your route plan many times during the course of your adventure. You will need to stay somewhat flexible all the way through the planning and execution of your journey. I firmly believe that maintaining a flexible attitude is a generally very important tip for enjoying all types of travel, and especially important considering the potential ad-hoc nature of self-planned and self-

directed bicycle adventures. If you can't handle dealing with the multitude of issues and changes you will inevitably encounter, you should consider a totally planned and guided bicycle adventure. But if you are like me, you like the challenge of sometimes adapting on the fly. Some people would rather be led along a prescribed route. Be honest about who you are.

Tip: *If you use a route generating application like Google Maps, remember that the mileages you generate are only accurate if you follow the actual route you have plotted. That is to say, many times you will elect to take another route once you actually get to the route location due to a number of potential influences such as weather, road construction and recommendations from locals. On our last trip to the Netherlands, we had all the routes planned with GM and based on our estimated daily mileages as generated for these routes, we felt each day was within our comfort range. When we actually began the trip it became evident that the very extensive "Fiets" routes <http://www.hollandcyclingroutes.com/> network developed in this region provided suggested routes that were most often far superior to the "fastest route" options that GM had generated. In addition, this wonderful Fiets route network was well sign posted and very easy to follow, with routes that were developed based on a variety of criteria (scenery, dedicated bicycle trails, points of interest etc.) other than simply the fastest route between two points. While following the Fiets routes was certainly the best way to travel through the Netherlands (and Belgium) on bicycles, it did increase our mileages a fair bit and we were often pushed a little beyond our comfort level. Just FYI, the Netherlands Fiet routes website (<http://www.hollandcyclingroutes.com/>) does include an actual route planner application that you can use to generate routes with accurate actual mileages. I will know that next time!*

Tip: *While you will generally use the hard-copy daily route maps that you have assembled from Google Maps, it is a good idea to have at least one larger scale driving style map that shows the major roads and destinations for your journey. As a general rule of thumb, I would suggest using a map with the most detailed scale you can find that also covers the entire range of your proposed journey. Another good source for map information on the fly is once again Google Maps. If you have access to the internet via Wi-Fi or otherwise (very common these days) you can create a map on your smart phone and then access it off-line during your day's journey. You can also "locate" yourself on the Google maps and that can be extremely helpful when you are lost. Also, there are various other sources for off-line maps available as apps for your smartphone. And of course there are also maps available for use on the various navigation devices such as TomTom and Garmin. Lots of navigation options these days!*

So regardless of what method you use to generate your route maps, once you have completed a tentative route plan for a given day, print it and put it in your binder in chronological order. Sure, many of these will be replaced over the course of your planning, but at least you have a

pretty good rough plan to follow for each day and now you can begin planning your lodging arrangements.

Lodging

At the end of the day, nothing is more enjoyable for me than finding our accommodations and taking a hot shower! That is always a joyful and relaxing event for us to look forward to. And if you have spent a little time doing your research in advance, your lodging will be your just-reward for all those sometimes hard miles of cycling through sometimes not-so-perfect weather.

When I plan our lodging I generally once again use the well-known internet options including sites such as Trip Advisor and Booking.com. Many of these sites have map based interfaces that allow you to easily search available lodging options near your anticipated daily destinations. Of course many of these lodging options also have websites available that you can use to contact them directly regarding availability, rates and policies, but I have found that it is easier for me to use a common interface such as Booking.com where I can more easily find the information important to me. In addition, booking through one of these “clearinghouses” often comes with additional advantages such as a better cancellation policy. And if I use the same reservation interface for all my lodging I can print look-alike confirmations for each property to include in my adventure binder, once again, in a chronological order next to my already existing proposed route map to that particular destination.

Tip: *If you are planning your adventure well in advance like I typically do, I would suggest only booking lodging reservations that allow you to cancel without payment up to very near your arrival date. While it may cost a bit more, it is certainly worth it to have the cancellation option available, especially if you have made multiple reservations and need to do a wholesale change of plans.*

Tip: *Many hotels and all Bed and Breakfast lodgings include breakfast with your reservation. Also, many lodgings offer full evening meals on-site or within walking distance. Both of these are conveniences worth considering as it may not be all that enjoyable to jump back on your bicycle to seek a meal, and often that may mean riding in the dark or after consuming a few alcoholic beverages.*

Tip: *Once you have your reservation confirmed, I would suggest you send a message to the lodging owner to let them know you are travelling by bicycle so that they can be prepared with storage options for your bicycles and also to let them know you may not arrive in a timely manner depending on the circumstances you encounter. A smart phone can really help in that situation. More on that later.*

Tip: *Finding your accommodations at the end of a day's riding can sometimes be more difficult than you might imagine. It can really help to print a separate detailed location map for your lodging so that you aren't wandering about too much when you are tired and ready to "be there".*

Warm Showers and Vrienden op de Fiets (Friends of the Bicycle)

You may or may not be aware that there is a non-profit organization named Warm Showers (www.warmshowers.org) that acts like a clearinghouse for bicycle adventure travelers in search of free lodging offers within their membership. There is also a similar organization out of the Netherlands called Vrienden op de Fiets (www.vriendenopdefiets.nl) that charges a reduced fee for B&B. If you join Warm Showers, you are only required to reciprocate by offering your place as a haven for other bicycle tourists as well. Too good to be true? Nah, just what you would expect from your bicycling brothers and sisters! My wife and I have used the WS hosts several times and have enjoyed meeting the other hosts. Funny, we always seem to talk about bicycle touring adventures. My kind of people! Be sure you confirm they have a bed available if you are not camping.

Ad Hoc Lodging

You can of course generally plan your route in advance and then make all or some of your lodging reservations on the fly. The internet makes this a viable option with sites like Booking.com able to make and confirm your reservations on little more than a moment's notice. The risk of not having a place to stay increases with the remoteness of your journey and also is dependent on your traveling dates as related to the local tourist seasons. While we haven't tried flying without a net thus far, based on what I have seen, there are typically many good options available last minute in most common tourist destinations, especially if you aren't that fussy beyond clean and safe. Going with this option also allows you to remain totally flexible in regards to your route and schedule, assuming you can still make it to your desired final destination in time to catch your ride home!

Bicycles

This is a topic dear to my heart as I enjoy working on my own rides and researching the various styles and options available for touring bicycles. I am not a skilled bicycle mechanic by any means but I do know some of the basics of bicycle maintenance and repair so I am generally capable of dealing with the majority of inevitable breakdowns you will encounter at some point.

From my perspective, there is no one best design for a touring bike. Depending on your desired style of touring, your physical condition and the size of your pocketbook, your ideal touring

bicycle might look much different than mine. However, I believe there are some basic features that are worth considering as requirements for any touring bicycle.

- Wheels and spokes should be robust enough for the anticipated load they will bear. While typically a light (no camping gear) bicycle tour will only require a moderate (20-35 lbs.) load in your panniers, a rider's weight of course can vary significantly. I feel most comfortable on a 36 spoke double walled rim. Also be sure to check the spoke tension and trueness of your wheels before any major ride. A wobble will only get worse as the ride continues.
- We generally use a wider (38 C) multi-purpose style of tire with some level of puncture protection. Choose a quality tire and tube. Closely inspect for wear before leaving on a trip of any distance. We have had good luck with Schwalbe Marathon Plus touring tires.
- Fenders, yes. For sure if you are going to see rain on your trip. Make sure they fit and are adjusted correctly. Nothing more of a nuisance than a rubbing fender.
- Brakes need to be reliable and strong enough to stop you on a faster downhill run. Disc brakes are the best for stopping power, but good conventional rim brakes will work if they are of a quality design and the brake pads are in good condition. Test and adjust them (on a downhill run if possible) with your actual touring load.
- Gearing should match your touring style and the type of terrain you will likely encounter. Because I like to tour at a relatively slow to moderate speeds, I am not too concerned about the high range of my gearing. However, I do appreciate the availability of a low climbing gear for easing the pain of those major hills you may encounter. Do a little research on the subject and find out what range is likely to be most appropriate for you.
- Seats are a very personal choice. Some folks like a wider seat and others prefer narrow. No telling what will work the best for you. My experience has shown that they all start to hurt a bit at the end of the day. Make sure your seat is adjusted correctly as that can make a big difference.
- Pedals are critical gear. We had some plastic pedals on one adventure and every time we hit some rain our feet would slip under pressure. Very annoying and potentially dangerous. Pretty easy to bring your own pedals if you plan to rent. I like open metal pedals with cleats.
- Because of my age and style of riding, I prefer handlebars that allow me to sit more upright. Most of the light touring rental bicycles I have used come with adjustable stem risers that allow you to raise and adjust the height and angle of the handlebars. This is a great feature and I typically make a few adjustments on the first day until I find the best combination for me.

- Pannier racks come in a wide variety of styles and construction. Very simply, you will need racks that fit your bike and hold your panniers. The possible combination of panniers and bicycle racks is amazing, so make sure yours are compatible.
- Panniers are now available in every style you can imagine. While my wife and I went with the standard Ortlieb Backroller rear bags, you can go on the internet and do a search. Amazing choices! And of course be sure your panniers are compatible with your pannier rack. Also, they should be designed to travel as either a carry-on or standard baggage if your bicycle tour plans do not include luggage transfer.
- Front and rear lighting is likely a necessity for this style of touring. Modern high output flashers make you visible from much further away. A detachable front light can be helpful in a variety of situations where light is low or it is dark. Bring your own lighting accessories if you can't find a rental bike with those features.
- Rear-view-mirrors are not that common in some places, but I find them really helpful. Find one that works for you as there are a variety of styles. A bell is really handy too. Ding, ding.
- Water bottle holder(s) for your bicycle down-tubes or elsewhere.
- Speed and mileage computers for your bicycle are pretty cheap (even the wireless models) and really nice for touring. Often you are tempted into exploring off the path a bit and it is nice to know your total miles (or Km) and approximate distance to your destination at all times.
- I have a plastic map holder that fastens to my handlebars.
- A small waterproof handlebar bag is handy. Good spot for the smart phone, snacks, and some come with map holder covers.
- You will need some common tools and supplies for potential repairs. These should include at least one spare inner tube, an air pump and tube patching kit, tire removal levers, wrenches for all common sized nuts and bolts on your bicycle, screwdriver, folding knife, electricians and/or duct tape (just bring a little), zip-ties, spoke wrench, hand cleaners, chain-lube & rag.

Tip: *If you are renting a bicycle for your adventure, make sure you allow some time to thoroughly check it out and give it a good test ride. We generally plan to stay around the rental location and take some "tester" rides for the first day. That way you can identify issues and get them fixed by the rental agency before you are out of their service range.*

Rent Bikes or Bring Bikes?

This is a good question to get answered fairly early. We typically use our own bikes when touring as it is simply much nicer to have a bicycle that you are familiar with. Otherwise, we use bicycle rental agencies. Packing your bicycle for airplane travel is definitely a bit of a hassle, but

it could be worth it depending on your preferred style of touring. For us it is most often simply worth the extra effort to pack up our own bicycles and we have developed a packing system that is light enough to get our bicycles on many airlines as normal luggage (under 50 lbs.) If you do decide to rent, you can often secure your bicycle near the arriving location and then jump on a train or bus with it and head for your starting point. Or some rental agencies will actually bring your bicycle (for a fee) to your starting point, but that may cost you more and you likely won't have them nearby if you have issues requiring resolution during the first day.

Some good questions to get answered when renting might be:

- Do you have bicycles available that meet these minimum requirements? (develop your own list)
- What are your business days, hours and pickup/return location(s)?
- Do you service all bicycles prior to rental?
- Will you reimburse for repair parts and/or labor expenses if the bicycle needs repair along the route?
- What is the total estimated cost of replacing the rental bicycle in the event I decline the theft and/or damage insurance?
- What is the total cost of the rental agreement and is there a deposit required up front?
- What is the cancellation policy?

Electric Boost Bicycles

One thing we have noticed is the recent explosion of the electric assist bicycles now available for purchase and rental. For many riders this could mean the difference between a possible bike trip adventure and one that just ain't going to happen. On one of our journeys we met two German brothers in their 80s who had toured for their whole lives together and now still could because of the electric assist bicycles they were using. We are all going to hit that level someday so I say embrace the technology and enjoy the ride, you probably deserve it!

Clothing and Accessories

I bring the following at a minimum:

- Two pairs of padded bike shorts.
- Four easy wash/dry tee shirts for use next to skin (two short sleeve, two long sleeve).
- Three easy wash/dry underpants for use next to skin, under my bike shorts.
- Two pair of cotton underpants for use after the daily bike ride (and on the plane ride).
- Light Merino wool, layer style pullover long sleeve shirt. Skip if going somewhere hot.
- Down vest with many pockets. My wife prefers a fleece jacket. Skip if going somewhere hot.

- Heavier wool shirt if cool weather is possible after the ride.
- Levi pants & belt (don't ask why, personal issue).
- Regular easy-dry camping style shorts that I could also use for swimming.
- Light cotton shorts and cotton tee shirt for sleeping.
- Lightweight but comfortable and good quality rain jacket and rain pants. If possible, try riding in them before buying to confirm adequate range of motion. Rain hood must fit over helmet or feel comfortable under it!
- Padded cycle gloves and warmer gloves if cold weather is possible.
- Light Gore-tex hiking shoes for riding and all around.
- Solid waterproof sandals you can wear with socks, or not.
- Three pair of solidly built wool socks. Not the real heavy ones, but good ones.
- Lightweight and comfortable high visibility vest to wear over anything if the traffic warrants it.
- Comfortable bike helmet. I always bring my own.
- Smartphone. Required for me. Internet, Email, maps, Skype, weather, location, time, camera.... What is there not to like?
- Sunglasses and also reading glasses if you need them.
- Condensed personal items kit for drugs, first-aid and cleanup requirements. I bring my own wash cloth. Remember sun screen lotion too.
- Some spare heavyweight zip-lock bags. I always end up needing them.

The above clothing and my other gear and trip binder will fit easily into my two panniers. Generally this leaves some limited room for artifacts you may be compelled to bring home or picnic style lunch materials you may have packed for the day.

Tip: *If you do it right, all your gear and clothing will fit into two panniers similar in size to the standard Ortlieb Backrollers. Panniers like these can be carried on most airplanes and fit nicely either overhead (preferred) or under the airline seat in front of you. That means no waiting (and worrying) about your luggage if you are renting a bike, and a quicker exit from the arriving airport. Do remember to remove your carrying straps if checking your panniers as they can become tangled in the luggage sorting systems at the airport.*

Some Other Things to Consider

This list will surely continue to grow as we edit and upgrade the guide on a regular basis. For now these are some of the items I can think of:

- Start planning early. Even if you eventually can't make the trip for some reason, you will hopefully be learning the method and if you are like me, you might even enjoy the effort!
- Expect your first few adventures to be rocky at times. Do it with a group of experienced touring riders if possible the first time, but make it your trip as well and help with at least some aspects of the planning process.

Tip: *If you are totally new to the world of self-directed bicycle touring, choose some easy and familiar destinations for your first couple trips. As you gain experience you will have the confidence to increase your range and do some longer and more distant explorations.*

- Yes, of course it helps to be in fair physical shape when you start. If not, plan a really easy journey and make it your mission to get in shape over time. This is supposed to be fun so my suggestion is to not over-estimate your current touring ability level in hopes that you will somehow will yourself to be in shape for a tougher tour. Also, don't worry too much if you can't keep up with others. Cell phones can probably be used to communicate and so long as your overall daily distances don't get out of hand, you will eventually show up and get your hot shower too.

Tip: *One safety tip I like to pass along is to always ride as though you were riding by yourself, regardless of who you might be riding with. Do not get in the habit of following the exact route and actions of others without considering them for yourself. Be aware of your surroundings and be responsible for making your own decisions regarding dealing with traffic and confusing situations. When things get too scary, get safely off your bike and take whatever time you need to think over your next move(s). Rest assured, bicycle touring does get more comfortable as you gain experience.*

Thanks for reading our guide and we look forward to hearing about your future adventures!