

TOURING ON A BUDGET



# SHOESTRING Touring

**Al Humphreys**, who spent four years cycling the world on a budget of just £7,000, explains how dream tours don't have to cost the earth



I can think of nowhere on Earth that you could not cycle for less than £5 a day. Even Japan is not very expensive, so long as you do not spend anything. There are two major barriers that stop cyclists going on longer trips: time and money. Making time is for another article, for a discussion on assessing your life priorities and for imagining looking back on your life from your death bed and deciding whether you would regret not having spent more time making money and chasing promotion or whether you would regret not making more time for big, beautiful, adventurous, life-affirming rides.

I was fortunate. I was relatively unfettered by commitments. The only difficult thing was making the scary decision to say, 'I am going to leave it all behind and head off on a long ride.' It was a hard decision, but so much preferable to looking back with regret. So I had taken the big decision to begin. The next difficulty was that I did not have very much money. During university I had managed to save my Student Loans. My entire worldly wealth came to about £7,000.

Now I was faced with more decisions. For £7,000 you could fly first-class to Las Vegas, have a wild weekend of champagne and gambling, and then fly home again. Or you could buy a beautiful bicycle for £2,000 and have a lovely time cycling round France for a long summer, staying in charming hotels and eating like a king.

Or you could decide to try to cycle round the world on a sub-par bike, to cross Africa on £1 a day, to sleep wild and free, to eat the cheapest food every country had to offer and to eke out your too-few savings into four years of adventure...

There is no great secret to what I did. You need only the determination to remember that, with every filling but dull meal rather than a lobster feast, you are saving money that will allow you to travel for longer, that every night in a field is a memory made and more money saved, that every breakdown is making you a stronger person. If you can always remember the simple equation that the less you spend the longer you can ride for then you are in a good position to make the very most of your time and your money.

### FUELLING THE ENGINE

You may think that living so cheap for so long was some kind of living hell, a constant struggle. It was certainly hard, and at times the urge to blow a quid or two on Coke and chocolate was hard to resist. But it was also fun and helped forge a deeper appreciation of all the good things in my life back home.

Wild camping saves money, not just in Russia (below) but across the world



## AL'S ROUND THE WORLD KIT LIST

### Bike

Two steel Specialized Rockhoppers, which were great, and finally a wonderful steel mountain bike with downhill rims made by a company who wouldn't give me even a tiny discount – so I taped over their logos

### Luggage

4 large waterproof panniers, 2 large 'Ark' dry-bags, bungees, granny-style shopping basket (so much better than a bar bag), Jandd Extreme front rack, Blackburn Expedition rear rack

### Bike gear and tools

2 water bottles, Brooks saddle, Schwalbe Marathon, tyres (1.9in), DT spokes, SPD pedals (one sided), bike odometer (wish I had the Cat-Eye with altimeter), bar ends, horn for amusing kids and easily-amused adults, Topeak Alien multi-tool, adjustable spanner, Leatherman Wave, freewheel remover, tyre levers, 2 pumps, puncture kit, 2 spare tubes, spare tyre, spare chain (switched every 3,000km), duct tape, superglue, zip ties, string, oil, spare nuts and bolts, strip of old tyre sidewall to wrap round innertube in case of split tyre

### Camping gear

Free-standing Coleman tent, Therm-a-rest, sleeping bag, LED head torch, MSR Whisperlite, pan, spoon, cigarette lighters, mug, 10-litre water bag, iodine for water purifying

### Clothing

2 zip-off trousers, 1 long-sleeved cycling top, 2 T-shirts SPD sandals, 2 pairs socks, lots of warm clothes in Siberia and none in, Sudan, Karrimor rain jacket, rain trousers, thin gloves, waterproof mitts, thin balaclava, multi-purpose cotton tube thing for hat, scarf, sandstorm face-mask etc., baseball cap, helmet (occasionally worn), Oakley sunglasses (worth the cash), cycling mitts

### Miscellaneous

Suncream, rechargeable AA batteries and charger, little first aid and needle kit, insurance and photocopy of all papers, blood group info, dollars cash, lots of credit cards, passport photos, maps, books, diary, camera (dream: tiny digital and big SLR), iPod, passport... oh, and my toothbrush



Al pushing through the desert in Sudan. Extra liquid went in a 10-litre waterbag

My top priority when on the bike is my belly. My appetite is vast and the miles drift by dreaming of bolognaise, burgers and cold, cold beer. Living cheap did not mean that I did not eat lots. I had to eat lots! It just meant that I thought carefully about what I bought and accepted that my food was going to be simple.

Normally I was so hungry after a long day that any food was going to taste good, just so long as it was hot and filling! My diet varied according to the regions of the world I was in. Perversely, the poorer the country I was riding through, the better I would eat. In China, for example, it was as cheap to eat every meal in cafés as to cook it myself, and far tastier. In Europe, by contrast, my diet would generally be this:

*Breakfast* – bread and jam. Cup of tea or coffee.

*Daytime* – many more jam sandwiches. Banana sandwiches. Snacks of any biscuits that happened to be cheap in that country.

*Evening* – I carried a small bottle of cooking oil. So I would prepare a pan full of popcorn (cheap, light, tasty) for a starter. Then I would fry garlic and onion in the oil, then add water and bring it to the boil. Throw in pasta and chopped bits of whatever is cheap in that country (tomato, peppers, cans of tuna, Russian salami, Sudanese beans, Alaskan dried salmon, llama meat) or just a packet of soup or a lowly stock cube.

I carried salt, a bag of herbs and peppercorns which I could grind each evening with the pliers on my Leatherman. Mop the whole feast down with as much bread as you want. Finish the evening with a cup of sweet tea lying outside your tent and staring at the stars above. A top-class evening feast.

#### THE MOBILE CHEF

Over the years on the road I fine-tuned the cooking gear I carried down to the key essential and luxury items that I considered worth carrying. Travelling fast and light, with saddlebag and credit card is fabulous, but it is far more limiting than carrying your kitchen with you. I had an MSR multifuel stove, which is very versatile as

it burns with petrol, paraffin, probably even Russian vodka. There is no worrying about where the next camping shop is to replace a gas canister. These stoves are also superbly strong and reliable.

For cooking I had one two-litre pan, with a plastic plate (also my chopping board/frisbee) to use as the lid. I had a spoon, a mug and a Leatherman for chopping, opening cans and grinding pepper. To supplement the food that I bought along the road, I also carried salt, pepper, oil, garlic, chilli seeds, dried herbs, tea or coffee, sugar and popcorn kernels.

To carry water I had, as well as the two bike bottles on my frame, a 2L Coke bottle and a 10L Ortlieb water bag. This was excellent for increasing the range I could travel comfortably between water re-supplys. It also served as a useful pillow, though the sloshing water did often make me need a pee in the night.

#### HOME A-ROAM

The other daily issue with travelling on a budget is accommodation. If you wanted to you could travel round the entire world without spending any money on sleeping. Depending on your financial situation you are more likely to occasionally want to treat yourself to a bed, a shower and a safe haven to leave your bike while you head out to do chores or sight-see.

My approach was to seek out a bed when I headed to big cities, for safety, for my own sanity, and some sanitation. I was fortunate on my ride as I set up lectures in most cities that I visited. From these I was invariably inundated with kind offers of hospitality from generous strangers. Whilst it is crucial not to become a parasite, these offers were certainly very welcoming, relaxing and enjoyable. Here I will focus on how I slept between cities.

Most nights of my ride were spent 'wild camping', i.e. camping but not in an official campsite. I slept on mountain tops and beaches, in mosques and churches, sewage pipes, rubbish dumps and even, in sterile Japan, on the floor of a public toilet! For beginner riders the thought of wild camping is unnerving. But, with practice, it becomes second nature.

A key thing to remember is that mad axe murderers are unlikely to think, 'I'll just go and have a look in that well-hidden field to see if there are any English cyclists there to murder.' Once my irrational fears had realised that, so long as nobody saw me nip from the road into the hidden field/wood/barn at sunset, I was actually incredibly safe. I came to relish my nights of free freedom in fun and beautiful spots.

"The poorer the country I was riding through, the better I would eat. In China it was as cheap to eat every meal in cafés as to cook it myself. In Europe, I ate a lot of bread and jam"

If, for some reason, I did not feel happy camping wild, or could not find a good spot, then there were two options. Either wait until darkness before putting up the tent, which makes you extremely safe, or else knock on the door of a house and ask permission to camp. It takes a while to pluck up the nerve to do this, but I was only turned away twice in four years, both times on the same



night in a rainstorm in Europe.

Once you are bold enough to do it you will open yourself up to adventures, to learning, and to making new friends. The worst that ever happened to me was that I was told I could pitch my tent outside. On other nights I was invited in to homes for showers, dinners, warm fluffy beds, even a birthday party or two! A bike and a polite smile are great assets. Another useful thing I carried was my 'magic letter', a letter translated into the local language explaining who I was and what I was doing pedalling across their nation.

I carried a small two-man tent. Even though I was alone I preferred the luxury of having slightly more space than in a solo tent. My tent was my home, indeed it was my castle, and I loved its sanctuary against sleet and rain and howling winds.

### PRICELY OR PRICELESS?

When planning your budget there are certain things you cannot get around paying for: flights, visas, vaccinations, insurance and so on. But other areas allow scope for compromise. A large area that requires careful planning is the equipment you take on the ride. I do not propose to talk at length about equipment because I am sure that most readers will know more about bikes than I do! I just like riding them.

I began on a £400 mountain bike, which was absolutely fine. With time I invested in the areas that I felt were important: DT spokes, Schwalbe Marathon tyres, good rims and gears. An odometer felt like a good use of money, as did a good quality tent, Therm-a-rest, Leatherman and down jacket. I began with average panniers, made waterproof by carrying canoe dry bags inside them. Quality panniers are probably worth investing in, as is a good Brooks saddle.

So you can easily spend a lot of money on equipment, and if your ride is long you will be glad you did. But if

Al toured on rigid, steel mountain bikes, the last (due to prior breakages) with sturdy, downhill rims

### FACT FILE: A LIST OF '-ESTS'

**LONGEST DAY:** 150 miles, Peru  
**SHORTEST DAY:** 2 1/2 miles, a Chinese snowdrift  
**HIGHEST POINT:** 4,900m, Peru and Argentina  
**LOWEST POINT:** -392m, the Dead Sea, Jordan  
**LONGEST TIME AWAY FROM LAND:** 24 days on the South Atlantic  
**FURTHEST POINT FROM THE OCEAN:** Urumqi, China  
**HOTTEST TEMPERATURE:** 45°C, Sudan and Turkmenistan  
**COLDEST TEMPERATURE:** -40°C, Russia  
**FASTEST SPEED:** 50mph, Germany  
**STEEPEST ROAD:** 35% gradient, Lesotho  
**LONGEST UPHILL:** 2 days, Peru and Argentina  
**LONGEST DOWNHILL:** 50 miles, Peru  
**HEAVIEST BIKE:** gear for -20°C, 8 days food, 18L water, Argentina  
**HEAVIEST ME:** a supersized, well-fed 85kg, USA  
**LIGHTEST ME:** a post-Siberian winter 70kg, Russia  
**MOST FOOD CARRIED:** 10 days, Alaska and Russia  
**MOST PUNCTURES IN A DAY:** 15, Bolivia  
**MOST VOMITS IN A DAY'S RIDE:** too numerous to count, Turkey  
**LONGEST BREAK FROM THE BIKE:** 2 1/2 months, Cape Town  
**LONGEST RIDE WITHOUT A BREAK:** 1 month, 4,200km, China  
**LONGEST TIME WITHOUT A SHOWER:** 1 month, China  
**LONGEST TIME WITHOUT A CONVERSATION (WITH ANOTHER PERSON):** 8 days, Argentina and Chile  
**FURTHEST NORTH:** 70°, Prudhoe Bay, Alaska  
**FURTHEST SOUTH:** 56°, Ushuaia, Argentina  
**FURTHEST EAST:** 179°, 59, 59: Pacific Ocean  
**FURTHEST WEST:** 179°, 59, 59: Pacific Ocean



the choice is between having rubbish equipment and a great adventure or not having enough money to buy your dream bike and therefore not leaving your house, then – for me – the decision is simple. Get out there and take a journey. You will never regret it if you do. If you don't, you may regret it forever.

*The books of Alastair Humphreys' journey round the world – 'Moods of Future Joys' and 'Thunder and Sunshine' – are published by Eye Books, at £7.99 each. You can buy them online: [www.roundtheworldbybike.com](http://www.roundtheworldbybike.com)*