

S240s

Bicycle camping for the time challenged



Story and photos by Grant Petersen

You never sit around with your family or friends and say, “Hey, let’s go touring next week.” Everybody knows bike touring, even a short tour, takes planning and coordination, and on short notice you won’t get everybody’s schedules to jive. That’s a problem with touring.

I work about fifty-five hours a week and take about two weeks off every year. I don’t have time to tour, but in the past five years I’ve spent more than fifty nights out on my bike, and I’ve done it without being gone a single weekend day or using up



any vacation time.

That's because I don't go bike touring per se, I go *bike camping*. Specifically, I go on something I call "sub-24-hour overnights," or S24O, for short. It's pronounced "ES-Two-Four-Oh," and by definition it has to last less than a full day, doorstep to doorstep. The shortness is key, and the concept is simple: You leave in the afternoon or evening in time to get to your camp while there's still enough light to set up the tent. Then you cook, eat, talk, go to bed, and ride home the next morning. The ones my friends and I go on last about fifteen hours.

The S24O is the closest you can come to touring when you can't actually tour, and rather than thinking of it as a poor substitute, think of it as a mini-tour that's about a hundred times easier to plan for, commit to, and just do. Look at the S24O this way:

- It requires almost no planning. You can pack in fifteen minutes. If you forget something or something goes wrong, it's no big deal because you're home the next morning.
- Compared to a longer tour, it's easier

to find companions because "I can't get off work" doesn't work this time.

• It's good practice, and you can refine your style like Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*. Because it's only one night, you can bring the two-pound sleeping pad or the six-pound bag. You can bring the 4-D cell flashlight and a hardcover book. You can carry fifty pounds (and find out whether you can tolerate fifty pounds), or you can try out a minimalist style and shoot for eight pounds. I bring what I want, and it changes.

I've always liked camping and hiking, but hadn't done much since I got married and started a family and took a job that I couldn't just leave at the office. Finally I just *had* to get out, so at 7:30 on a dark October evening, I packed a rucksack and took off for the closest hills beyond the houses. I got there in twenty-five minutes. That night I read 100 pages of a book or about twenty times what I read when I go to bed in a bed too late. There's nothing wrong with 100 pages.

The next morning I got up at about 5:30 after a typical lousy night's sleep (I'm

not a champion sleeper), and pedaled home before my wife and two daughters woke up.

I did another S24O a few weeks later, at the same place, and this time with my older daughter, who was twelve at the time. The wind battered the tent most of the night, just like it does up in the mountains. We could look out and see the lights of the town in the distance and imagine where our house was. I'd spent hundreds of nights up high in bad weather, and this wasn't that much different. But my daughter enjoyed it more because she knew we were relatively close to home, and that made the overnight better for her.

You might think a less-than-a-day trip is so short, why bother? Well, you can bother because it's no bother. Bother is what stops longer trips from happening.

Remember, it's an overnight. One of the beauties of the S24O is that it's a short ride and a long night, and the darkness is a great equalizer. Once you're up there and it's dark and you can't see anything, it might as well be the beautiful boonies. It's not as if you'd be awake and stargazing all night long if you actually were in Yosemite or the Havasupai



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Canyon or anywhere else. If you're in a tent, the view is the same. If you sleep under the stars, you might not see as many of them because the lights from the mall two miles away are lighting up the sky too much, but if that's the case, you get the lights of the city and traffic to look at, too. As you do that, you'll feel enveloped by a blanket of smugness as you pity the sad sacks down there driving cars and watching bad TV. Then you read a book until you can't stay awake, finally try to go to sleep, and your real camping experiences all come back to you. You still hear spooky sounds and sleep with a knife and wish the ground weren't so lumpy. That doesn't change just because your house is only an hour away. Unidentified noises still give you the creeps.

With more than fifty S24Os to look back on (by means of about 700 photographs), there's a lot to remember because things just happen.

I forgot a sleeping bag once. The initial panic lasted about a minute. Then I thought, "Don't be a baby. The coldest it'll get tonight is about sixty, and even Zsa Zsa Gabor could survive that." I survived, of



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course, and when I was packing up the next morning I found the sleeping bag hidden on the other side of the tent under the rain fly. I shouldn't have put the fly on in the first place — it wasn't going to rain. I haven't lost or forgotten a sleeping bag since, but if I ever do again, I'm not going to panic. At some level, I think everybody should try to sleep through a night that's too cold. Looking back on that lost-bag night now, I wish it hadn't been such a bland and balmy night. It would be more satisfying, now that it's over, to have actually shivered through a cold night. And it would have made a better story.

One February, at about 3,000 feet up on our local mountain, a full water bottle froze solid overnight. From outside my tent, I could look down on four cities and two highways, not seven miles away as the crow flies. There wasn't a cold body among the more than 150,000 people down there. I'm not saying a frozen water bottle is any big deal, but it's nice evidence that you're not on the path of least resistance.

The S240 gives you a chance to live

through experiences that would make touring miserable — things you don't want to happen two nights in a row, and on an S240 they don't have to. I've had cold, wet nights with blown-down tents and hard winds, and the next morning it's still so cold and miserable that you can barely pack your stuff up and leave. On a tour you'd think, "Criminey, I can't stand another night like that one." On an S240, you know you won't have to.

The same with bugs, which brings me to tents and tarps and such. Everybody likes the idea of sleeping under the stars, and it's a good way to go when the weather's fine and there are no bugs. I don't know where you live, but I live in California, a state not known for its bugs — but it has plenty, let me tell you. I've been eaten alive by mosquitoes in November on a night when I took only a floorless tarp-style tent because it was dry enough and mosquitoes aren't around in November. But there they were, mosquitoes, and I was miserable all night, waking up with a swollen lip and itchy knuckles.

Another time, four friends and I pedaled away from town on a cool March

evening with overcast skies. It started to drizzle about an hour outside camp, and by the time we got there the wind was so strong we could hardly hear our laughter as we set up the tents. One guy who'd planned to rig his poncho to his bicycle as a makeshift tent couldn't peg it down securely, and he bailed out at sunset. My tent was an I-pole floorless pyramid, and another guy and I slept in it until the wind pulled a peg and it came down around 1 a.m. I was asleep in my bivy sac, but he didn't have one, and he woke up yelling, "Grant, I'm soaked to the bone and freezing!"

Still in our bags, we hopped over to the one standing two-person tent with two people already in it, yelled "Open up, we're coming in!" and spent a long night cramped and awake but out of the elements in a tent that was too small.

The next morning we were freezing, and we packed up in bad weather, but otherwise we were in good spirits because we knew we'd be out of the elements in a few hours no matter what. On a tour you'd think, "This stinks, I want to go home," and

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if you went home, you'd feel shame for wimping out. On an S24O, going home is the plan from the get-go, so it's not wimping out. You can have a miserable night like we did, your gear can get battered and soaked and packed away wet, and it just doesn't matter. Plus you'll have good stories to tell afterward. Like mine, they may not be the most hilarious stories and maybe they won't be death-defying, but they're just the kind of experiences you need now and then to appreciate your day-to-day comfort — and they're best done on S24Os.

Where to go on an S240

You're limited to a day or less, so it has to be close. I suggest state parks, regional parks, open spaces, or wherever there's a good view and you won't get into trouble. My friends and I have been known to put down for the night in some places that weren't strictly legal for camping, but only when the legal options weren't as inviting. Sometimes you can make reservations and get permits, and sometimes you have to be John Muir. The price you pay for clandestine

camping is nervousness and the risk of a fine. For the record, I recommend legal campgrounds whenever they're available. The main thing is, don't set the hills on fire and never leave a trace.

If you live in the middle of a huge city, it's okay to drive to a better starting point. The clock starts ticking at your first pedal stroke. Use the car if it gets you out of some dreadful riding.

Who to go with


Friends, of course. Make them feel bad and unadventurous if they can't get out for just one short night. If they still decline to accompany you, go alone and brag to them about how fine it was. After a while, they'll want in on it, too.

What to bring

A camera, film, your favorite pillow, something to sleep on and in, some food, a book, and a light. Bring a tripod if you want some self-pictures. Bring your iPod if you want music, and a cellphone if you want to call home to taunt your friends who didn't come. Bring a toothbrush and toothpaste unless you don't care about oral hygiene.

Bring anything you want because it's only one night, and after you've done a few of these, you'll know what you need, what you want, and what you won't use even if you bring it.

How much to take?

I've gone on S240s with as few as thirteen pounds and as many as thirty-five. On paper, I can do it with seven pounds, but that's on a hot summer night, and I haven't actually done that yet. The important thing is: don't be a slave to weight because it doesn't matter for just one night. Go out, have fun, take pictures, and do it again. You'll get the hang of it, you'll be surprised at how close you are to sleepable spots, and if you ever do get the chance to go on a longer tour you'll be all ready for it. 

Grant Petersen founded Rivendell Bicycle Works in 1994 and reports that "business seems good." Married for 21 years, he has two bicycle-riding daughters age 12 and 18. Learn more about Grant and Rivendell's unique philosophy and bicycles at www.rivbike.com.

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