



The Bike & The Road Ahead

Tauru Chaw



The tandem bike at the beginning of our ride across America.

We bought this tandem on eBay in January 2009 for our then intended trip across America later in the summer. These bikes usually run about \$3,000 or more, but we found this one (used) for just under \$1,000, including shipping.

We added front and rear panniers in order to carry camping equipment. The warm (if not hot!) summer months kept our gear to a minimum: a tent, lightweight sleeping bags, sleeping pads, some clothes, a stove, a cooking kit, and various other things like headlamps, tools, patch kits, and so on.

Without cold-weather gear, everything fit into the panniers. We didn't even carry rain gear—for the 72 days we pedaled across the country, we only got caught in the rain three times!

Riding in Tandem

The Bike & The Road Ahead
"I've Got Your Back"

For *the Americas 2012-13* ride, the setup will be similar except with the addition of a pull-along trailer. We'll need the extra storage space since the many climates we'll ride through require heavier/warmer sleeping bags and clothing. And though 18-months sounds like a long time, we'll only carry what we need week-by-week since we'll be hopping from town to town, or city to city where we can always pick up things. And that will largely be food.

When we rode across America, the longest we went without passing a town was only two days. Most of the time we only carried enough food to last us until the next meal; towns sprinkled along our route often had grocery stores – at worst, convenient stores – to get provisions. It'll probably be the same in South America. We'll gauge our on-board food supply as we review maps and determine distances between villages, towns, or cities.

On a tandem, there's the captain (aka pilot) and the stoker. I ride as captain because Christi never learned how to ride a bike. And with my vision, clear though peripherally impaired, I can see details of the road ahead like debris, potholes, traffic, rumble strips, signs, etc...

I spend the long hours on the bike concentrating on the road. I can't take for granted what I do see because, sometimes, things that were "not there" appear on a second passing as I scan. The complete picture may take time to fill in, by which point I'm already 20 to 30 feet down the road.

Riding through busy towns or cities is a huge stress for me. Not only am I constantly assessing the ground immediately in front of us and navigating through the streets, there's also the traffic around us. Christi is invaluable here

because she provides me with additional information so that I can focus only on what's directly ahead rather than also having to assess everything that's around me (Christi will elaborate on this role below). And when it's too much, we simply get off the bike and walk it.

I get excited when I look through other people's photos of their bike trips through the Americas. Though most show open highways that stretch far into the horizon, I know that the roads also pass through crowded cities. People

usually don't care to capture those moments. But I know they're there. We'll have to deal with the cities when we get there.

And if we need to, we'll walk the bike across them. How big could Santiago be? Or La Paz, or Panama City? Ten? Fifteen? Twenty miles? That's only a day's walk! It'll be worth it in order to ride the open roads.

Adventures have their challenges—rewards make them worthwhile. Rewards for a trip like this? One can imagine.

“I've Got Your Back”

Christiana Bruchok



Christi's view—en route to Shiprock, NM.

Because my handlebars are nestled behind the captain's saddle, the scenery for me always involves a prominent image of Tauru's back. There it is in the picture. My view, all day, day after day, week after week. This was what I saw for those 72 days across America back in 2009.

Since I don't have to worry about shifting or steering or even most braking, a lot of people ask me if I don't get bored.

If you've never been a stoker on a tandem bike, let me take you for a quick spin in my seat.

First, you need to get on the bike. Some people choose to do this simultaneously, but we've found it to be easier for Tauru to balance the bike while I clip into the pedals. Once I'm situated and have the pedals set at the right position for Tauru, I say, “OK!” He pushes forward as I pedal slightly to propel us forward while he hops on. And we're off.

I'm half the pedaling power of the bike, but there's more to just that.

One of the most important things I do is help fill in Tauru's visual gaps. Wait, what? Me? Help someone to see better? With *my* eyes? The thought still bewilders me!

Tauru needs to keep his eyes scanning the road ahead all the time. Turning to check for cars, landmarks or signs could result in all kinds of problems.

When Tauru looks for a sign, he can't just look over and see it right away. He has to first scan the general area, find the sign, determine if it's what he's looking for, and then refocus on the road again to regain control and direction of the bike. Enter my role as the stoker.

I announce anything that may be relevant during the ride. This could include describing major features of stores or restaurants that we pass. I can't see the details, or read the signs, but when I see something we might be looking for, I'll say, “Building with blue and white sign ahead

at two o'clock." This way, he only needs to take a quick, precise glance to see it.

Additionally, since my handlebars are fixed, it is easier for me to turn and watch out for vehicles coming up from behind. Or, as we've experienced, dogs running up to us from the side. Tauru can hear them, but it's better that he concentrates on the road ahead rather than try to see where they're coming from.

The biggest challenge for a stoker is simply learning to put all of your trust into the hands of the captain. I can't see the road through his back, and even if I could, I have no control over where we are heading. People ask me how I can trust a captain who can't see well – I think this comes from the many (sometimes intense) experiences I've had with Tauru.

We've spent countless hours tent-bound through Alaskan blizzards on Denali, shared rope-ends climbing granite walls, and survived hellacious bus rides in northern India. I have a good sense of what he will and will not do. I also know that he is incredibly cautious because of what he can or cannot see.

A tandem bike can really fly. On steep descents, the weight of two people and a fully loaded bike can propel a tandem to over 60 mph. It's scary enough in a car through these windy mountain roads let alone on a bike - with a visually impaired captain!

The V-brakes on the bike clamp the sidewalls of the rims to brake. Keeping them engaged while descending heats up the rims, which are in contact with the tires' inner tubes. A blow-out at a high speed would definitely compromise bike control.

We added a front disc brake for "dragging" to control our downhill speed. The disc doesn't touch any part of the front tire or tube, so it doesn't matter if it heats up on those long descents as it drags.

In the photo in Tauru's article above, you can see a single brake lever on the rear handlebars. This is the drag brake that I manage.

When descending, we are subject to the whims of the downhill grade. As we pick up speed, Tauru's ability to process information (what he sees as we fly by) diminishes. We've developed verbal cues for these situations. Through the wind, Tauru calls, "Brake!" or "Stop brake!" depending on our speed and his ability to control the bike.

This brake also provides me with a sense of security. I have control of our downward momentum. Without it, I can only hope our speed is commensurate with the captain's abilities.

When we pass through cities, I can feel Tauru's anxiety. He's quiet. We only communicate critical things, like "car coming at 9 o'clock" or "red light ahead." I help him identify these things so that he can maintain his concentration to simultaneously avoid riding into something and determine where we need to go.

Even at streetlights, letting him know that the light has turned green helps. Tauru uses the time at red lights to study all the street signs to determine where we need to go. He can see details, like street signs; but he just has to find them, and that takes time.

Communication is key when riding a tandem. You have to be in sync with your partner.

"I've got your back," I tell him. We are a good team in this way.

Join us as we ride the Americas and help us raise awareness about blindness and the abilities of the blind.