

# The REI NOVARA SAFARI

*Comfort features abound in this off-road-capable touring machine.*

by John Schubert

The road testing crew at CycleSense Institute has waited long, far too long, to sample the bicycles of Recreational Equipment Incorporated (REI). This Seattle area-based outfit has offered the Novara Randonee classic touring bike for about two decades, and we have heard repeatedly that the Randonee is a trusty companion. REI has another, more exotic touring bike, the Safari, and it was with great glee that we borrowed one for road testing. "The Great Divide Mountain Bike Route was very

much the inspiration for the Safari," designer Steve Gluckman said. Thus, the Safari answers a question that many of you are asking: "What kind of bike might I buy for rugged, self-supported touring that will include unimproved, unpaved roads?" While there are other worthwhile bikes that address this question, they will all have to answer to the mechanical simplicity, ergonomic touches, and low cost of the Safari.

At \$799, the Safari is one of the less expensive touring bikes out there and, along with its cheaper stablemate Randonee, are must-see items for any touring cyclist on a budget.

Having said that, I note that some people will say the term *touring bike* is too restrictive to encompass the Safari's many unusual attributes. First of all, it has mountain bike rims and wide 1.9-inch hybrid tires. It has its own unique handlebar shape, with three distinct hand positions. And, of course, it has a suspension seatpost, advanced design gel saddle, and foam grips.

The 2003 model has a suspension handlebar stem which works quite elegantly to smooth out bumps in the road without being at all noticeable the rest of the time. The 2004 model replaces the suspension stem with a position-adjustable tilting stem, replacing one comfort feature for another. Gluckman noted that the cushy tires served to make a suspension stem less important, and that his customer feedback made him want to increase the user's fitting options. Much as I liked the suspension stem, I think the prospect of custom fit right out of the box



sounds enticing too.

All this attention to your comfort promises you a sunnier disposition after a day's riding, on a bike that makes it possible to go loaded touring in forlorn, rugged places. While this has also been possible (and often done) on conventional mountain bikes, the Safari is optimized for touring in many ways those bikes are not.

The Safari's frame design is neither that of a road touring bike nor a mountain bike,

but rather one that takes the most touring-friendly attributes of both. Here are a few:

The bottom bracket height is 11 and 7/8 inches, about 1 to 1 and 1/2 inches higher than classic, road-touring bike designs. That additional inch is much-needed pedal clearance when you're pedaling over rocks and roots, or those man-eating potholes in the Alaskan Highway. The down side of a higher bottom bracket is that it raises the bike's center of gravity. Some people can tell the difference and don't like it. I can't tell the difference and therefore I don't care.

The Safari includes a gusset on the underside of the down tube, a valuable structural addition that increases the bike's resistance to front-end crashes. These gussets are common on mountain bikes but rarely seen on road bikes.

The Safari's chrome-moly steel fork has brazed-on bosses for low-mount front panniers. While hardly an earth-shaking invention, a fork like this is hard to find on good-quality mountain bikes. Instead, you get suspension forks, which were not