



Bike Bags FOR Everybody

*Po Campo looks at
on-bike luggage a little differently
— and it's working*

STORY BY DAN D'AMBROSIO

Maria Boustead named her company after a character in *Lonesome Dove*, Larry McMurtry's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel set during a late 19th century cattle drive from Texas to Montana.

"I was reading the book when I came up with the idea for the company," Boustead said. "Po Campo is a minor character, a cook on the journey who did everything his own way. I really liked the name. It's very circular. It reminded me of bicycle wheels."

Boustead is an industrial designer by training, born and raised in Chicago. She was working at a company that made bags and was able to transfer what she learned there to Po Campo when she founded the company in 2009.

"I was an everyday bike commuter," Boustead said. "I loved it in the morning. It wakes you up. Afterwards your ride home is your daily city adventure. Everybody who rides a bike knows what I'm talking about."

It was as a daily commuter that Boustead realized the bag she wanted for her bike was not out there — something that was easy to use on the bike and looked good enough to take to a meeting off the bike.

"I was struggling with how to carry what I needed," Boustead said. "With backpacks you get sweaty, especially in Chicago in the summer. Shoulder bags swing around and distract you. Bags attached to the bike are not designed to take to the office. I was surprised I couldn't find anything with that versatility."

It was an obvious design problem, one that Boustead believed she could solve. In her opinion, the bike industry overall still thought of cycling solely as a sport.

"It always felt like bike dudes were designing things for bike dudes," she said. "I thought there could be a lot of people like me. I felt like there was an opportunity for a new product and a new brand that wasn't so much about performance, speed, or grit."

Boustead wanted her bags to be stylish, fun, and sustainable.


"That's what we started with in 2009, and it's still the vision now," she said.

The colors and designs are bright and appealing, with geometric and floral patterns. Most of the bags, except the panniers, mount to the bike with Velcro, making them easy to take on and off. The panniers mount with a simple magnetic latch from Fidlock.

Two trends in the bicycle industry helped Boustead and her fledgling company: bike share and eBikes. As bike share spread to cities across the country, more and more people were encouraged to use the loaner bikes to get around, people who weren't hard-core cyclists and who, like Boustead, were looking for bags they could take into the office without feeling out of place.

"Especially with the bike boom last year, the building of bike infrastructure accelerated across the country," Boustead said. "As riding becomes better and safer in cities, more people are riding. It's all really encouraging."

Then came the rise of eBikes, and



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with it the conquering of hills and distance. The electric assist flattened hills and made the miles fly by for casual cyclists just trying to get to work or taking a weekend ride. Boustead herself was astonished at how her eBike changed things.

"I'm totally an eBike convert," she said. "Even for me, someone who rides 10 miles a day for 15 years and considers herself a serious cyclist in my own way, I bought an eBike last year during COVID."

Boustead and her husband, a composer, had moved from Chicago to upper Manhattan. She commuted by bike to her business in Brooklyn because she didn't feel safe on the subway.

"It's actually pretty hilly," Boustead said. "Coming home I had a six-mile straight hill. Going to work I had to

COURTESY PO CAMPO

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cross the Williamsburg Bridge. It was tiring.”

Once she bought her Gazelle eBike, it was like night and day, she said.

“I didn’t realize how many barriers would melt away,” Boustead said. “You don’t have to worry about wind or what you’re carrying. The eBike is really a game changer.”

Last year, Po Campo’s online sales almost tripled. Boustead credits eBikes.

“I do think the eBike trend is conducive to our growth,” she said. “When you have an eBike, carrying things is not a problem, whether it’s groceries or kids. It’s so much easier to replace car trips with eBikes.”

But why would the rise of eBikes benefit Po Campo specifically, rather than, say, some other brand that has been around longer? Boustead believes many of the cyclists attracted to eBikes and bike share are new to bicycling and are more open minded than traditional cyclists.

“Our bags are different from the traditional bike bag,” she said. “For the eBike person, or anybody using bike share, for them, why wouldn’t I buy a bag I can use off the bike for my normal bag?”

When she started her company in Chicago, Boustead used a small factory owned by a Korean woman to make Po Campo bags. Making the bags in small volumes at a U.S. factory led to sticker shock at the retail level.

“People would say, ‘Oh they’re just too expensive,’” Boustead said.

Boustead decided to try an experiment. She reduced the price on her bags to her own cost, just to see what would happen. The price of her handlebar bag, for example, dropped from \$120 to the \$70 range.

“For the first time, we were able to sell them online,” she said. “Okay, so price is the problem.”

The only answer was to take her production overseas, to China. The woman she was working with in Chicago had connections in China and offered to help. Unfortunately, Boustead said, the factory wasn’t the right fit.

“They did iPad cases, a very simple product,” she said. “They were a high-

volume factory, cranking out thousands a day of the same simple thing.”

The factory told Boustead that her next order would have to be for 10,000 units. She only wanted 500. But what she learned at the next trade show she attended was that she had popped up on the radar of many other factories in China.

“We had so many factories, or agents of factories, approach us,” Boustead said.

The next factory Boustead tried made luggage. It was a step up from the iPad case factory and worked for a year or two. Then Boustead moved to a factory that specialized in high-end diaper bags.

“They offered a lot of nice detailing and a super durable mix of fashion and function,” Boustead said.

She stayed with that factory another couple of years. Then in 2017 or 2018 — she couldn’t remember which — Boustead hired a woman living in Hong Kong who could visit factories they were considering before they made the leap to another supplier.

“She found a small, boutique factory owned by a French guy who did mostly outdoor European brands, really high quality,” Boustead said.

The factory also met strict European environmental standards, which helped Boustead meet her sustainability goal for her business. Best of all, she was able to get the price for that handlebar bag down to \$50 and still make money.

It was a good fit for Po Campo, but then came the tariffs imposed on China in 2018. Overnight, Po Campo’s prices went up by 25 percent, which was hard for the company to absorb.

“We struggled for a year, then the factory owner’s wife got a job in Vietnam,” Boustead said.

The former Chinese factory owner decided to resume his operations in Vietnam, where he was unaffected by tariffs. Po Campo was back on track. Sales tripled again in 2020, and Boustead expects another tripling in sales this year. She doesn’t share revenue numbers for her privately held company, but she did share that she sells to about 85 bike shops around the country in addition to her direct sales online. Perhaps most

significantly, REI is a customer, and she sells on Amazon.

Po Campo is raising its first round of capital right now in order to make two main investments: the first is to hire more people for her marketing team, and the other is to invest in new product development. The company currently has three full-time employees, including Boustead, and two part-time employees.

“This fall we’re launching a new product we developed called Visi-Hemp, the world’s first reflective hemp fabric,” Boustead said.

Developing her new fabric was more complicated than Boustead thought it would be. It took her two years to find the right supplier to make it happen. The new Visi-Hemp collection will be called City Lights because the pattern she developed reminded Boustead of the city skyline at night.

“I was looking at how to make the product more sustainable,” Boustead said. “Hemp is a fast-growing natural fiber. It uses less water and pesticides and is very strong. It’s the perfect fabric for an urban bike bag.”

To raise the money to launch Visi-Hemp, Boustead is using Republic, an online equity crowdfunding site similar to Kickstarter, except that instead of product, investors receive a small financial stake in the company. The minimum investment is \$150.

“It makes it easy for just about anyone to invest in companies and brands they love,” Boustead said. “For us, Po Campo has been around for a while. We wouldn’t have gotten to lift-off without loyal customers encouraging us and supporting us. It was important to me to offer them a way to have a bigger stake in our future.”

By mid-March, Boustead had raised nearly \$60,000 from 105 investors, with 13 days left to go. At the same time, she was in the midst of more traditional fundraising from accredited investors, mostly friends and family and so-called “angels,” investors who search for companies on the rise.

“With that one, we’re raising \$750,000,” Boustead said. “We’re almost there.” **AC**

Dan D’Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.