



Beyond the Galaxy

The Dawes Super Galaxy is a classic British touring bike. We find out if it is still a benchmark. Reviewed by Chris Juden, ridden by Ian Taylor

The Dawes Galaxy is perhaps the most enduring model name in the history of cycle manufacture. Since its appearance in the 1970s as one of the first off-the-peg quality touring bikes, the Dawes Galaxy has been the standard by which others were and are still judged.

As tourers have demanded even better bikes, Dawes have responded by improving the specification and adding superlatives. Ultra means the best, but £1,000 is a price point at which many other manufacturers offer competing tourers, so we made the 2007 *Super Galaxy* the subject of our review. (A few changes are due in the 2008 model, which I'll point out as we go along.) I chose the large size to fit Ian Taylor, our 6-foot computer expert and touring cyclist. His comments also pepper this review.

FRAME AND FORK

I'm not saying that aluminium or carbon are useless for touring, or that

titanium isn't even better, but steel is most unlikely to snap and easy to fix if it does. A little extra weight is not much to pay for holiday insurance. Super and Ultra Galaxy have the same frame, with three tubes of Reynolds 853 steel. When it first came out, this material was available only in thin-walled race bike sizes. Orbit nevertheless built some Romany tourers from it but they were too flexible for touring except by the truly petite. Now that racers hardly buy steel any more, Reynolds have butted their bread on the touring side in the shape of slightly thicker 853 that suits our purpose pretty well. This is neatly welded, together with cromoly stays etc. somewhere they call a tube a 管. Isn't everything these days?

Ian tested the bike unladen, with full rear panniers and a bar-bag, plus several miles with front low-load panniers too. He commented that under some conditions the steering felt a bit light and this I would expect from the rather short trail. A bit less

fork offset should steady things up, but Super-Gal always went where she was pointed without any wobbles nevertheless.

The three key aspects of a touring frame design are clearance, clearance and clearance: from tyres to mudguards, mudguards to toes, and heels to panniers. Dimensions of the large (55cm) size tested are close to optimum, whilst the smaller sizes in the range could even afford to be a little shorter. All have quite steeply sloping top-tubes, so the seat-tube lengths bear no relation to traditional ideas of frame sizing, but give more stand-over clearance. Yup, that's a fourth one.

Perhaps to be a bit more traditional, in 2008 those top-tubes will be a few degrees closer to horizontal but the same length, so each size in effect becomes about 5mm shorter. A bigger deal is the extra 2cm of head-tube, which will suit those who prefer a more erect riding position.

When comparing other touring frames, look for front centres of

625mm (more or less depending on crank length and shoe size) and at least 440mm chainstays. Beware that frame designers will often shorten those dimensions to make a touring bike look even more like a racer. Only you get less convenience at exactly the same speed.

TRANSMISSION

Gearing is another misunderstood aspect of touring bike design, compromised by a failure of component manufacturers to conceive of a bike with dropped handlebars carrying any more load than its rider. A road triple groupset merely gives ordinarily fit people the gears they need to haul themselves up Alp d'Huez. It doesn't allow for the extra burden of luggage, or the extra steepness of smaller roads preferred by tourists. That calls for actual mountain bike gears.

There's no problem indexing a Shimano mountain cassette and rear mech with road shifters, as Dawes have done here. The resulting 32T bottom sprocket is good, but 34T is better and would have kept Ian pedalling up our local 1:4.

Front indexed shifting differs from road shifting. The usual way around that problem is to fit bar-end shifters that don't index the front shift; but those are not as convenient for touring as the Super Galaxy's ST1 (Shimano Total Integration) combined gear and brake levers. It's the first time Ian had used these and he really appreciated the facility to shift without moving his hands from a tourist's usual 'on the hoods' grip. The disadvantages of these controls, for touring, are the lack of a friction-shift option, should anything go wrong with the indexing during your holiday, cables that conflict with a handlebar bag (but we managed to bend them out of the way), and the chainring size limitations of compatible mechs.

According to the catalogue, a Tiagra front triple mech should be used with a 50/39/30 chainset. From a study of front shifting and feedback from CTC members, we know there are other possibilities. But it takes courage for a mass-manufacturer to defy the Shimano catalogue, as this exposes him to spurious complaints from every cack-handed rider of a badly adjusted bike! So kudos to Dawes for fitting a chainset intended for flat-bar trekking (= touring) bikes that's a few teeth smaller all round. The front mech on our model did need some pre-sales adjustment, but shifted well enough



Above: road mech shifts trekking chainset

Below: Ian Taylor 'on tour'

Overleaf: stem height and both brakes are easily adjusted

after I'd lowered it as close as possible to the chainset teeth. When the middle ring wears out a 37T replacement is likely to work a bit better, by exactly matching the intended middle-outer difference of this mech, which has a deep enough cage to allow a much smaller inner ring to be used – even 22T appears possible.

WHEELS

Dawes fit a pair of Schwalbe's highly regarded Marathon tyres, in the popular 32mm section. They roll easily on tarmac and can also handle a bit of rough-stuff. If you're the sort of tourist who likes to mix it like that, you'll be happy that these rims are optimised for 37mm and even wider tyres. If, on the other hand, you stick to the tar and prefer to spin something slimmer, you'll not be as pleased with the

harsh and inefficient ride when 28mm touring rubber is stretched across such a wide rim. It's a pity Dawes did not source a 'happy medium' rim of 17mm section or thereabouts, which used to be the touring standard but has become the touring of a touring since the 700C market polarised into racing and trekking bikes.

The Achilles heel of a touring bike is its back wheel: that has to carry most of the luggage as well as the rider's weight, and all of the drive torque. Nowadays it often has no more spokes than the front wheel. (Sometimes – but not here – as few as 32.) However, spoke fatigue failure is a slow degenerative problem – not a problem for those who from time to time receive a brand new bike to review!

A cheaper way to avoid broken spokes is to have your wheels built by someone with the skill to bring each spoke to the same optimum tension. So the last straw for the back wheel of any derailleur geared bike is the revelation that dishing (to make space for all those sprockets) requires two hugely different spoke tensions! The solution is to use spokes of different thickness, with different optimum tensions, in either side of the back wheel: thicker and higher on the right, thinner and lower on the left.

Dawes make a small gesture in this direction by specifying mildly double-butted spokes (0.2mm thinner) on the left side of the Super Galaxy rear wheel. They'll help, but it would be better to match those with single-butted spokes on the right, which





have thicker heads to withstand the extra tension on this side of the wheel. That's something to ask for when the time comes to rebuild or upgrade this wheel.

BRAKES

Braking is another of those systems where the separate development of road and mountain bikes has created pitfalls for the design of touring bikes. The Tektro Oryx cantilevers fitted by Dawes are a compromise between the old-style sticking-out cantilevers that work best with drop bar levers and the neater-looking low-profile cantis. This mid-profile design still felt a bit mushy (not as firm as the Frogglegs reviewed in this issue) but worked okay, whilst providing the necessary tyre and mudguard clearance.

To avoid the levers bottoming out on the handlebars under extreme braking, the brake-blocks have to be kept adjusted very close to the rim, so close that one cannot unhook the straddle cable to release the brake (for wheel removal) except with difficulty. As neither the road lever nor the mountain brake is equipped with any quick adjuster or release, such things must be provided on the cable. Whereas some manufacturers completely overlook this requirement, Dawes have provided adjusters: on the front hanger and where the rear cable is stopped on the top-tube.

Ian also experienced judder from the front brake. It comes partly from having a nice springy fork, but is also likely to be less of a problem with a firmer brake, such as Frogglegs.

STEERING & SEATING

Touring top-tubes tend to be a bit longer than on racing bikes, which is at odds with a less elongated riding position. The proper solution is less handlebar extension, but it's hard

to find anything shorter than 9cm in the current road-racing monoculture. Dawes fit 11cm on this model, which is perhaps a bit long unless you want to ride it hard and fast.

Tourists want dropped handlebars mainly for the parallel handgrip provided by the tops, with fingers resting on the brake lever hoods. It's more relaxing for the wrists than the in-line orientation of flat bars. But the drops may occasionally be used if they're not too low.

A handlebar answering this description is supported by an 'Adjustable Threadless System' stem, from NVO Components. The ATS shim replaces the usual stack of spacers and provides just as much height adjustment (more if you also flip the stem) as an old-style quill. Meanwhile the headset bearings remain undisturbed. The ease with which this system allows adjustment or swapping of stems makes it an ideal fitment for ready-made bicycles. You can fine-tune your position with any of the alternative stems offered by NVO Components, in 10mm increments from 90 to 130mm extension. Of more interest to touring cyclists, especially women (since touring bikes are rarely made in shortened women-specific versions) is the news that NVO have recently extended (if that's the right word) their F2 range with four additional sizes down to 50mm. Your dealer can order alternative stems from NVO's importer: Greyville Enterprises.

Ian found the saddle too hard and narrow, but that's something Dawes have changed in 2008.

ACCESSORIES

In the context of a touring bike, accessories become necessities. The necessary mudguards are by SKS, foil laminated with PET rather than the better CAB plastic, but still pretty tough and with essential front safety release.

A Tubus Cargo rear carrier is the best bar none: lightweight, totally stiff, made of steel so you could mend it, except you'll never need to, and with a lamp/reflector bracket.

A couple of alloy bottle cages and the usual collection of reflectors, plus a bell, complete the specification.

CONCLUSION

It's good to confirm that the standard advice, to simply buy a (Super) Galaxy, still holds good. However, there are a few others who give Dawes a run for their money – give or take a few hundred quid. Significantly, all those that do are UK brands.

RIVALS

Ultra Galaxy: another £200 buys XT components and a Brooks saddle.

Hewitt Cheviot SE: £130 more than Super for Ultra components, plus even better gears and wheels. Not as widely available though.

Cannondale Touring Classic: £150 more expensive (compare with Ultra), looks the part but has toe overlap and lacks load-hauling gears due to a road triple and cassette.

Ridgeback Panorama: A very similar specification for £100 less! Well worth a look.

Trek 520: Also saves £100, but Ridgeback has it well beat. Trek's touring ambitions are compromised by a road triple and a weaker rear carrier. Expect toe overlap too.

Fahrrad Maufaktur T-Randonneur: A lot of bike for the money, including lights, but overgeared by an impractical 30-speed transmission.

TECH SPEC

DAWES SUPER GALAXY 2007

PRICE: £999.99

CONTACT: dawescycles.com

SIZES AVAILABLE: 46, 49, 52, 55cm

COLOUR: bronze

WEIGHT (55cm size): 13.5kg

FRAME & FORK: Welded steel Reynolds 853 main tubes, front, Cr-Mo stays, etc. & fork. Fittings for 3 bottles, front (custom low-load) & rear carriers & mudguards.

WHEELS: Schwalbe Marathon 32-622 on WTB Dual Duty 19mm rims, spoked 36x3 plain 2.0mm (2.0/1.8 db rear left) on Deore LX hubs.

TRANSMISSION: Wellgo multi-purpose pedals, Shimano 175mm Deore LX chainset with 26/36/48T rings on Octalink bottom-bracket, HG53 chain, 11/12/14/16/18/21/24/28/32T cassette, LX rear mech, Tiagra front and STI shifters. 27-speed, 22 to 119 inches.

BRAKING: Tektro Oryx cantilevers with adjusters on front hanger and frame stop (no quick-release).

STEERING & SEATING: WTB threadless headset, NVO F2 ATS 11cm x 7° stem, FSA 44cm dropped 31.8mm bars. Selle Italia XO gel saddle on Prime single bolt seatpost.

ACCESSORIES: SKS plastic mudguards with ASR front safety release, Tubus Cargo rear carrier, 2 alloy bottle cages, bell.

CHANGES FOR 2008: Altered frame design with higher and horizontal top tubes (thus effectively a shade shorter), pump pegs on seatstay, new LX chainset with external bearing bottom-bracket and Selle Italia FLX saddle.

