

SPORTIVE BIKES

There's more to road bikes than racing. Alex Wise, John Storms & Rosie Downes test three for long day rides. Chris Juden provides the analysis



Here we're talking about road bikes, but not for racing as such. Most of us, let's face it, are not going to win any races – or not anymore. But we can still keep fit and enjoy going fast on a really light and efficient bike.

One very good reason for not pedalling as hard as you possibly can is because you're pedalling a heck of a long way! And in this issue of *Cycle* we're also talking about challenge rides, sportif rides, audax, gran fondo, call them what you will. The concept is a mass ride that may be something like a race for a few at the front but a question of 'can I actually finish?' for almost everyone else.

If you're not pedalling too hard, you'll not want too much bodyweight over the pedals because it'll fall

on your hands and arms instead. So 'sportive' road bikes allow the handlebars to be somewhat higher and closer to the saddle, which may in turn be positioned a touch further aft, relative to the pedals. You'll also want lower gears than they use in the Tour de France (come on, admit it, you really are *not* as strong as Lance) so road bikes for general issue come with either a triple or more commonly a compact double chainset.

We've picked three road bikes in the £800-ish price bracket to take a closer look at, to see how closely they conform with the design brief I've outlined above. We also lent one each to three members of CTC staff (who do actually race as it happens) with instructions to put themselves in the shoes of the general rider. Their comments follow my analysis.

The Boardman and Giant are two

Rosie and John tested the bikes in chilly Britain, while Alex managed to go to Lanzarote

(Opposite, detail shots) A flattened top-tube contributes to the Boardman's comfort rating, whilst maintaining torsional rigidity. The Boardman sports Sram Rival for a change

entry/enthusiast level road bikes that come with compact doubles but don't otherwise make many concessions to recreational riders. You can buy a similar bike for similar money from any number of manufacturers. The Trek is subtly different and *not* because it's smaller and women specific.

Frame and fork

All are alloy with a carbon fork and mounts for two bottle cages. In a gesture towards practicality the Giant Defy also provides fixings for a carrier and mudguards, but not enough frame or fork clearance safely to fit the latter. The Trek Pilot has fittings *and* clearance. Top marks to Trek!

The Boardman is purely racing in concept, with appreciably shorter chainstays, shorter head tube and steeper angles than the Giant,

which as you should expect from the 'endurance' marketing spin, is more clearly designed for a longer or easier ride. The Boardman's shorter head tube will not allow less aggressive riders to raise their handlebars as far as they might like.

The Trek Pilot is smaller and 'WSC' (women-specific-geometry), so cannot be compared directly with the other two. So I checked out the catalogue geometry of the non-specific version in L (58cm) size. It's somewhere between the other two, but much closer to the Giant Defy. This you would expect from the similar sales pitch: Trek recommend the Pilot to beginners and to experienced riders seeking comfort and convenience on longer rides.

Woman specific?

Checking those specs it became clear that there's nothing at all women-specific about Trek's frame geometry. The WSD model has exactly the same table of dimensions, leaving specificity to components, in the shape of a shorter stem, shallower drops and a women's saddle.

Perhaps Trek have realised that this stuff about women having shorter torsos than men of the same height is a myth. It is, you know. I have the data from Peoplesize and it's perfectly clear that women and men have the same proportions leg to body – on average. It's just women racing cyclists who tend to be leggy – for obvious reasons. Women are a minority in cycle sport, where crank lengths etc. have become standardised for the average male – who is generally bigger. So women with relatively long legs for their height are much more likely to enjoy cycling enough to become racers.

The actual reason women, most women that is, tend to want their handlebars higher and closer to the saddle than most men, is that the differently shaped female pelvis has to sit more upright on a bicycle saddle. Bending that far over hurts either the spine or some other place. Female racing cyclists often resort to a downward sloping saddle, which can cause other problems with knees and/or hands – but needs must when the speed devil drives!

Getting back to the Pilot 2.0 WSD:

Trek's component level adaptations proved quite adequate not only for Rosie but also my wife Helen, who is 3in shorter but nevertheless fitted this bike pretty well.

I've a couple more general points about small bikes for either sex. Shortening the top tube without shrinking the front wheel requires a shallower head angle, but with a standard fork that produces excess trail and floppy steering. So top marks to Trek for specifying a fork with increased offset, thus maintaining the same trail and similar handling characteristics, compared to bikes with steeper head angles. But the second point isn't addressed: a bike this small really ought to have 165mm cranks and a lower bottom-bracket.

Wheels

The Boardman specifies the lightest wheels of the three: Ritchey Pro rims connected by only 20 spokes in front and 24 in back to Formula



“The Boardman is a racing bike, pure and simple, and great value”

Test notes

Boardman Team, by John Storms



I threw all sorts of conditions, distances and hills at this bike. Many rides were in low single digit temperatures, on both flat roads and rolling hills. The aluminium frame is lighter than some in this price range, was comfortable and didn't feel at all 'clanky'.

Not every bike is set up as well as this one in the factory. The shifting is crisp, the brakes aligned perfectly and all the cables are the right length.

The Ritchey wheelset was one I've found before to be reliable for training and winter use. And the tyres are better than expected, with plenty of grip. Even though conditions were at times freezing and damp I was confident I would stay upright and had only one puncture in over 400 mile (after hitting that pot-hole at speed, which would flat any tyre).

For me the compact chainset was reasonable on even the steepest climbs, such as the 20% grade on Leith Hill in Surrey. After a short tutorial on how Sram Rival works (one lever, big push for more teeth, small push for fewer) I only missed a shift when tired!

This groupset loses some points for faux carbon (i.e. plastic) levers and the hoods didn't feel as anatomical to start with, but that's just a Shimano user for 25 years talking. After two weeks I didn't notice this at all. I'd give plus points for an external bottom bracket, Shimano cassette, a quality carbon fork plus Ritchey branded seatpost, stem and handlebars.

This bike is excellent value, but you'll have to spend a bit more to make it just right. It comes without pedals (budget £40 plus for clipless ones) and you'll want a couple of water bottles for longer rides (£10). In the depths of winter and bad weather, only race type mud guards (£25) can be fitted and I didn't get on with the saddle supplied.

It's an excellent first road bike. And assuming you buy an upgrade in a few years time, you'll still want to keep it for training and winter use.



The Giant has in-line adjusters but none on the frame



Giant: no space for a mudguard under this brake

hubs. They're also equipped with light, strong and grippy Continental Ultra-Sport tyres. The rear went slightly out of true during our test. We should probably blame that pothole, but I think Trek's 32-spoke Bontrager wheelset (on IRC tyres) will prove more serviceable in the long run. 'Bontrager' is Trek's own brand for components, by the way. In my opinion: Giant's 24/28 Mavic hoops shod with Kenda tyres fit somewhere in between.

Gears

The so-called compact double has almost replaced triples on this sort of bike. If it were genuinely compact (like those of 30/48 or less that were common on touring bikes in the '70s) a double could well provide just as low gears, but these aren't and they don't. They're fine for short rides, or strong riders on long rides. But the rest of us will struggle when the way is both long and steep. So credit to Trek for fitting a triple. Even so: Helen missed the even lower gears her touring bike provides and seldom found a use for the outer ring.

Road bikes at this price point get their transmissions mainly from the Shimano Tiagra groupset, which is 9-speed, so it's interesting that Boardman instead specify Sram Rival for their 'Team' – with the bonus of an 10th sprocket! It's a significant upgrade and together with those light wheels will make this model – the cheapest of the three on test – look even better value in the eyes of a racer.

A detail to note is that the Giant

puts cable adjusters on the levers instead of the frame. They're handy there but limit this bike's upgradeability to any system which routes gear cables under the tape.

Brakes

The Boardman gives more bang for your buck in this department too, by specifying expensive-looking dual pivot sidepulls with weight-saving slotted arms and replaceable pads. Meanwhile Giant play safe with Shimano Sora. Both are as short as they come, so the Giant's mudguard bosses will be neither use nor ornament.

Further kudos to Trek for fitting medium reach brakes – although they don't mention this in the catalogue! I guess they have to keep quiet about that or else the foolish people who equate more clearance with 'less serious' would turn up their noses. But this is CTC so you know better!

Contact points

All the bikes come with 'integrated' headsets, like it or not – and I don't. The Giant's headset is my prime suspect for the stiff steering under front braking reported by Alex: integrated designs seem especially prone to such faults.

All the bikes' fork steerers were long enough to stack about 3cm of spacers, which by also flipping their slightly angled (7° or 8°) stems, gives about 5cm of total height adjustment, which is more than you generally get from a quill.

The women-specific Trek has the

Test notes Giant Defy 2, by Alex Wise

This Giant Defy 2 is a smart, even an expensive-looking bike. When I showed it to my friends and family comments ranged from 'stylish' to 'pretty'. Amongst cycling enthusiasts the Tiagra/Sora groupset gives it away. I find that Shimano equipment is well built at every level however. The gears shifted smoothly and confidently whenever I hit the selector, so I wouldn't let yourself get sucked into Dura-Ace snobbery.

This bike is billed as an entry-level mile chumer with comfort a priority. This comfort was noticeable – and surprising. Aluminium frames I've previously used gave quite a 'noisy' ride with a lot of road vibration fatiguing my hands and bum. The Defy has none of this, giving me a quiet and relaxing ride – which I really appreciated on Lanzarote's rough and rugged roads.

I noticed the lack of weight on hands and arms from a more upright position. But the weight has to go somewhere and that's the saddle. This could create problems for some riders, but once I was used to this position I found it very comfortable.

Although this bike handled perfectly most of the time, whenever extra load was put on the headset, either by standing on the pedals or using the front brake, the steering became stiff. Under heavy braking it would also 'chatter' while I fought for control of the steering. I learnt to cope, but clearly something is at fault here.

Tyre grip was impressive at lean and this was refreshing as so often on cheaper bikes the tyres are not given much thought. But I did find the brakes lacking in the rain, which together with the front brake/steering problem meant I had to plan my braking even further ahead than usual!

This strange problem is the only failing of an otherwise comfortable and classy looking bike. The Defy rides like a more expensive machine and could be a great entry point to road cycling – especially for someone who wants to go long distance. In two weeks I rode about 2,000km on it and there was not a moment of discomfort that wasn't self inflicted. That's very impressive.



BIKE TEST

shallowest drops I've ever seen and an 8cm stem, compared to 110cm on the larger two bikes. It's enough reduction for Rosie, but not for many other women, who will have to fit an ugly and overweight downhill stem to get a shorter reach.

There's not much to say about seatposts – except that Boardman seem to have found a slightly lighter one of those too – and saddles are personal. These suited the persons involved well enough, if not perfectly.

Trek and Giant give you a cheap pair of pedals with toeclips that most customers replace with their choice of clipless system. Boardman don't bother (so I weighed the bike with John's Look Keos on it).

Accessories

These are road bikes: you don't get any! But the Trek has some neat touches for when you add some. I've already mentioned mudguards and fitted a spare pair to the Pilot WSD for Helen to try it out.

They fitted fine, although the rear brake had already suffered so much from being sprayed with salty water that I had to dismantle and re-grease the pivots before it would release from the rim. The seatpost also refused to go down until I'd withdrawn and greased its badly scored shaft – after wiping



off accumulated grit and corrosion. Anyone still not see why I'm keen on mudguards?

The Trek's other neat touches are a second set of guard (or carrier) eyes inside of the seatstays and the positioning of the lower seat tube bottle cage boss below the front mech. In a small frame this improves the chance of actually fitting a second bottle, that you can actually pull from the cage.

The Giant also has this thoughtful touch, although it's hardly necessary in this larger frame.

Conclusion

The Boardman Team isn't really a beginner's or casual rider's bike, nor suitable for long distances – not unless you have the fitness and inclination to work hard for the entire distance. It's a racing bike pure and

“The Trek Pilot is subtly different... not because it's women specific”

simple, and for that it's excellent value for money.

The Giant Defy delivers on its endurance promise, but the Trek Pilot delivers more. I'd recommend this bike not only to those who are just getting into road cycling, but also experienced riders seeking more comfort in the long run. It has enough of the look and performance of a racer that anyone should be able to go virtually as fast as they might on any bike, yet it can also comfortably accept the accessories they'll want for practical purposes.

Trek provides all the fittings you could want – and there's room to fit mudguards under the brakes too

Trek puts the 'quick' back into quick-release with CLIX skewers

Test notes Trek Pilot 2.0 WSD, by Rosie Downes



The Pilot 2.0 says it's designed with comfort in mind, with an extended head tube to allow higher handlebars without increasing standover height. I felt it was a great bike both for fast commuting (a higher eye-level is good in traffic) and audax or sportive rides, where comfort over long distances is essential.

High bars are not so aerodynamic, but comfort is also a factor in performance. And while I didn't take part in any races during the test period (in that event I could have lowered the bars as much as 3cm), I had no complaints about speed. I usually tackle my 40-mile commute on a carbon Trek Madone and despite the Pilot's aluminium frame and lower groupset, I noticed no difference in journey time. In spite of the carbon fork it's not the smoothest ride, although the bike was tested in winter with the roads at their very worst!

Shifting was a little less responsive than I'm used to, a tad clunky, but this would not be noticeable to those unspoilt by top-end groupsets! The triple is a nice addition, and while I never had cause to use the smallest chainring during the test, it would definitely be valuable for hillier rides or those who prefer lower gears.

The Bontrager tyres rolled well, but didn't inspire confidence while cornering. The saddle is clearly women-specific, wider and shorter than standard, and felt a bit spongy. I was comfortable enough on my 40-mile commutes, but would have changed it if I'd been planning any longer rides. The understated look of the bike will appeal to a broader spectrum of riders than if Trek had gone with a brighter colour and it's nice to see a women-specific bike that doesn't feature pastel pink or baby blue!

At £850 I think the 2.0 represents very good value. And while women specific bikes don't suit all women, they benefit those who feel too stretched out on standard bikes. Anyone looking for a fairly light and comfortable road bike that isn't as aggressive as a high end racing model, could do far worse than buy a Pilot 2.0, regular or WSD as appropriate.

BIKE TEST



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TECH SPEC

Bike	Boardman Team	Giant Defy 2.0	Trek Pilot 2 WSD
Guide Price	£800	£825	£850
Weight (kg)	8.40	9.44	9.52
Size	L	L	XS (50cm)
Sizes available	S, M, L, XL	S, M, M/L, L, XL	XS (47cm), XS (50), S, M, L, XL
Groupset	20-speed Sram Rival	18-speed Shimano Tiagra	20-speed Sram Rival
Gear range	36-111in	36-111in	31-122in
Website	www.boardmanbikes.com	www.giant-bicycle.com	www.trekbikes.com/uk/en/
Key to geometry diagram (mm & degrees)			

Other options



Cannondale CAAD8 Tiagra £800

27-speed Tiagra gives you the gears you want for sportive riding, but you'll be using 'Race Blades' as mudguards. www.cannondale.com



Ridgeback Century £800

Steel frame, carbon fork and a compact Sora double. Comes with full length guards and takes a rear carrier. www.ridgeback.co.uk



Dawes Sportif Comp £850

Steel frame and fork with 18-speed Sora – albeit a 12-23 cassette. Takes mudguards (included) and a rear carrier. www.dawescycles.com

Geometry explained

