ANY TOURING BIKE will tackle dirt roads and bridleways. On a durable roughstuff touring bike with wider tyres, it’s more fun. You don’t have to ride so cautiously, you won’t get shaken about so much, and the bike is less likely to break down. Rocky restricted byways in the UK or gravelly South American *ripio* might make a touring cyclist on 32mm tyres dismount; on a roughstuff tourer, you can keep riding.

How wide you want your tyres will depend on how and where you ride, and on where you want to compromise between road and off-road performance. One size doesn’t fit all. At York Rally this year, Colin Thomson (531colin from the CTC Forum) surprised me by saying his own Spa Cycles Ti Roughstuff has 35mm tyres; I’d pick 50mm or more, given a suitable frame.

Both of the test bikes will take big tyres. The Spa Cycles Ti Adventure, as distinct from Spa’s Ti Roughstuff, is a ‘go anywhere’ bike in a similar mould to the Salsa Fargo. It’s available with a flat or drop bar. The Surly Disc Trucker is a conventional tourer that happens to accommodate bigger tyres; the chainstays declare ‘fatties fit fine’. The Disc Trucker comes with either 700C or 26in wheels, and in 9- or 10-speed.

**FRAME AND FORK**
As its name says, and despite its modest price, the Ti Adventure has a titanium frame. It’s straight gauge tubing, so while it’s strong and dent-resistant (and of course corrosion-resistant), it’s not especially light; the smaller-wheeled steel Surly is lighter overall.

Along with the frame features you’d expect of any tourer – rack and mudguard mounts, bottle mounts, threaded bottom bracket, external headset – the Ti Adventure has some extras. There are mounts for a cantilever or V-brake pivots as well as a disc calliper; there’s a third bottle cage; and the lower rack eyelets take stronger 6mm bolts. Rear triangle clearances are large. A 42mm tyre gives a big gap to the mudguard and 47mm would fit fine. With the guard removed – something I didn’t want to do – a two-inch 29er tyre went in with mud room.

The fork bristles with fittings too: it’ll take a disc or rim brake (canti/V); a low-rider or...
uses only 5mm lower rack eyelets, and also
has a neat spoke mount on one seatstay.
The Disc Trucker is available in a vast
range of sizes and with either 26in or 700C
wheels, but 700C is only an option for
frames 56cm or larger. That neatly sidesteps
the problems of fitting 700C wheels and
wide tyres into smaller frames, and it enables
Surly to use the same 45mm fork offset
throughout the range. I can ride the 56cm
700C (I've tested a Long Haul Trucker in that
size) but fit a 54cm better, so felt aggrieved,
at 5ft 10in, to be grouped with the short
riders and to have no real choice but 26in.
The frame looks bigger than it is
because the top tube is almost horizontal,
and because the wheels are small. One
benefit of this for roughstuff is bigger frame
clearances: the 26in version can run two-
inch tyres plus mudguards, while the 700C
version is limited to 42mm plus guards.
The tapered, raked fork of the Disc
Trucker is nicer than the sturdier, heavier
fork of the Ti Adventure. It helped make the
bike tolerable off-road despite narrow tyres
and smaller diameter wheels.

Components

There's a good argument for 26in wheels if
you're a world traveller carrying heavy loads
over unsurfaced roads. Spares are easy
to find and 26in wheels are stronger than
700C, other things being equal. Here they're
not. While there's nothing wrong with the
Disc Trucker's wheels, which have XT hubs,
36 spokes, and eyeleted rims, the wheels of the Ti Adventure are better tensioned. Built in house by Spa, they use stronger spokes on the rear drive side. I’d expect these wheels to last at least as long as the Surly’s. Both bikes could usefully be fitted with the wider tyres. The reduction in road speed on climbs would be paid back in spades on rough surfaces. The Disc Trucker’s 26in Continental Tour Ride tyres are particularly narrow, just 33mm wide according to my Vernier calliper. The bigger-framed 26in is a 96in gear with these wheels. At the rear, a cassette bigger than 32 would be an improvement; 12-36 is an option in 9-speed. The gear range is better on the Surly, and I didn’t find the bar-end shifters any less convenient for casual riding. The front is friction-only so will operate any front mech. The rear is indexed for Shimano 10-speed mountain bike derailleurs but can be set to run friction mid-tour. It’s worth noting that Spa’s bikes can be specified to suit you, so bar-end shifters etc are possible on the Ti Adventure too. The price might go up or down a bit, depending on what you wanted. Both bikes have disc brakes, which I prefer on any bike with fat enough tyres. There’s nothing to choose in outright stopping performance between these Shimano and Avid mechanical brakes. The Avid BB7s of the Disc Trucker have advantages. They’re the MTN version, paired with linear-pull Tektro levers, and the longer cable pull translates into better modulation. They’re easier to set up and maintain too, since both pistons can be adjusted.

The Ti Adventure comes with SKS mudguards and a couple of bottle cages, but the Shimano Sora rear shifter works perfectly with any 9-speed Shimano MTB derailleur but the front restricts you to a road derailleur and thus bigger chainrings.

“Both bikes could usefully be fitted with wider tyres. The reduction in road speed on climbs would be paid back in spades on rough surfaces”

Disc Truckers get 1.75in tyres, giving heavier riders more support. For mixed-surface riding, I’d fit 50mm or wider touring tyres.

Being sensible tourists, both bikes have triple chainsets on square taper bottom brackets. Spa many Sora STi to Sora/Deore derailleurs, while Surly take the traditional route with bar-end shifters from Microshift. Both setups worked fine but I found the Ti Adventure over-geared. While the optional Spa Zicral chainrings are very nice (and add £30 to the bike’s cost over a stock model!), they’re large for rough stuff. I wanted a bottom gear lower than 24in and had little use for the 48T chainring, given that 38/11 Ti Adventure too. The price might go up or down a bit, depending on what you wanted.

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which would add about 700g and £35 to the spartan Surly. Spa also sent a Tubus Logo rear rack, which I used on both bikes but haven’t factored into prices or weights.

**RIDE**

I rode the bikes on a mix of tarmac roads, rough bridleways and gravel forest roads, with and without luggage – luggage being variously two small rear panniers and an Apidura bikepacking seat bag. Tyre pressure is a compromise on mixed surfaces like these. Weighing a little over 10 stone, I settled on 40-45psi front and 50-55psi rear. With fatter tyres, I’d go lower.

Both bikes ride like the tourers they are. On road, there’s little to choose between them. On rough surfaces, the Ti Adventure’s wider 700C tyres and longer trail figure provide unperturbed progress over ruts, small rocks and tussocks that require concentration on the sharper-steering, smaller-wheeled Surly. On the other hand, the Surly is if anything more comfortable, probably because of the fork differences.

I’d use a wider drop bar on either bike to improve steering leverage. A flared drop like a Salsa Woodchipper would work well, at the cost of making bar-end shifters stick out. Saddles are personal: I found the Disc Trucker’s okay but have never liked leather ones so would swap the Spa Nidd.

**SUMMARY**

The Spa Cycles Ti Adventure is a versatile, heavy-duty tourer that’s great value, given that it’s titanium and has à la carte options for components. Its monster fork demands a fatter front tyre for comfort, but bikepackers on 29er tyres may also want a tapered head tube for an easier suspension fork upgrade, plus a tad more room in the rear triangle. Traditional roughstuff riders, meanwhile, may want a more forgiving fork to take the sting out of bad surfaces on medium-width rubber. This is not quite a Salsa Fargo and it’s not a Spa Cycles Ti Roughstuff either, but rather something in between the two.

The Surly Disc Trucker is a sturdy all-round load-lugger with good clearances and sensible component choices. If you don’t fancy 10-speed or discs, a 9-speed Long Haul Trucker is £250 less. For anything but tarmac-only touring (or commuting), the 26in Disc Trucker would benefit from much wider tyres. Better yet, I’d prefer easier-rolling 700C wheels to be an option for at least the 54cm frame. That would require geometry changes, which doesn’t seem likely. But if you’re happy on 26in or fit the 700C sizes better than I do, you’re unlikely to be disappointed by this workhorse tourer.

**Tech Specs**

### SPA CYCLES TI ADVENTURE

**PRICE:** £1,530 (as spec’d), f&f £1,000

**SIZES:** S (43cm), M (48cm), L (53cm)

**WEIGHT:** 13.28kg (no pedals)

**FRAME & FORK:** 3Al/2.5V titanium frame with fittings for disc & V-brakes, rear rack, mudguard, 3 bottles. Chromoly Surly Ogre fork

**WHEELS:** 42-622 Schwalbe Marathon Mondial tyres, Exal DB19 rims, 36×1 Sapin Race/Strong spokes, Shimano Deore M525 hubs

**TRANSMISSION:** no pedals, PD2 170mm chainset, 48-38-28

**STEERING & SEATING:** Cork tape, 420×31.8mm FSA Wing Compact bar, 90mm×6° FSA OS168 stem, Tange 1 1/8in headset. Spa Nidd saddle, FSA SL280 27.2mm seatpost

**EQUIPMENT:** SKS guards, 3 bottle cages

[spacycles.co.uk](http://spacycles.co.uk)

### SURLY DISC TRUCKER 10-SPEED

**PRICE:** £1,299.99, f&f £299.99

**SIZES:** 26in: 42, 46, 50-62cm (4 tested). 700C: 56-64cm

**WEIGHT:** 12.18kg (no pedals)

**FRAME & FORK:** Chromoly steel frame and fork with fittings for: disc brakes; rear, low-rider and porteur racks; mudguards; and 3 bottles

**WHEELS:** 37-559 Continental Tour

Ride tyres, Alex DA19, 38×2 DT Swiss Champion 14g spokes, Shimano XT M785 hubs

**STEERING & SEATING:** Cork tape, 420×26mm PMT bar, 100mm×17° stem, Tange Crown 1 1/8in headset. Unbranded saddle, 27.2×200mm Kelloy SP-248D seatpost

[ison-distribution.com](http://ison-distribution.com)