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Bike test

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?

Shop carefully and it's possible to get a capable bike for most purposes for just £250. Editor **Dan Joyce** goes bargain hunting

CHEAP DOESN'T have to mean nasty. The difficulty comes when you define 'cheap', which means something different to occasional cyclists than it does to enthusiasts like Cycling UK members. You can get new bikes for less than £100, but I've ridden – and crashed – a £79.99 full-suspension mountain bike and wasn't keen to repeat *that* experiment. It was simply inadequate, the proverbial Bicycle-Shaped Object (BSO).

The dividing line between a BSO and an inexpensive 'proper' bike is blurry and hard to pin down by price. It depends partly on your expectations and demands of the bike, and partly on how simple it is. Less is generally more, because non-essentials like an ineffective suspension fork further dilute the limited budget. I wanted to find bikes for road cycling, touring, urban riding, and mountain biking that you or I might enjoy riding at a price non-enthusiasts or cyclists on a tight budget *might* stretch to. I settled on a limit of £250.

We know from surveys that, on average, Cycling UK members spend much more than this on their best bike. Yet not everyone can or will. Moreover, Cycling UK members are often the bike experts that friends or family consult for advice. The difference between someone you know getting a good bike at £250 and a bad one at £100 (or even at £250+) might be the difference between them becoming a lifelong cyclist or a non-cyclist with an abandoned bike in a shed. (All's not lost in the latter case: the Big Bike Revival can bring them back into the fold!)

If you want a new bike at £250 that isn't mediocre, your options are relatively narrow. Most big-name cycle manufacturers are not

in this market at all as the margins are too tight. So you'll need to consider superstores and online shops that sell direct. They provided all four of the test bikes.

Direct-sellers are not your only option for getting a good bike on a tight budget. Many bike shops are part of the Cycle to Work Scheme, a salary sacrifice programme that enables you to save 25% or more on the price of a new bike and spread the cost. See bit.ly/bikehub-cycletowork for more. Alternatively, there are bargains available when last year's unsold bikes are discounted – and all year round if you're happy to wait for the right bike to come up

secondhand. Cycling UK's forum is a good place for secondhand purchases; visit bit.ly/cyclingukforum-bikesforsale.

Over the next four pages, meanwhile, are four of the least compromised, best value £250(ish) bikes I that could find. **C**



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The one on the right doesn't look too bad, but that full-susser...



Below: Trickle down technology: now even Tourney offers STI brifters!



Road bike

WIGGLE ROAD BIKE

UNTIL I DISCOVERED Wiggles' prosaically-named Road Bike, I had forgotten that Shimano's STI brifters had trickled down to the entry-level Tourney groupset. But here they are, feeling like Sora shifters from a few years ago: you swipe the brake lever to go up in sprocket/chaining size and press the little 'mouse ear' on the brake hood to go down in size. Shifts weren't exactly slick but didn't miss a beat during the test.

If you buy them separately, these levers have an RRP of £99.99, 40% of this bike's budget. Yet the rest of the bike shows few signs of corner cutting. The economies are the sort you might expect: the rear wheel has a threaded hub with a 7-speed freewheel; the chainset is 175mm rather than 170mm; the handlebar isn't as ergonomic as a more expensive compact drop. (I'd fit a shorter stem to offset the long stretch to the hoods.)

I was going to criticise the budget Kenda tyres, as their rubber isn't very grippy on wet tarmac; I slid the rear wheel alarmingly

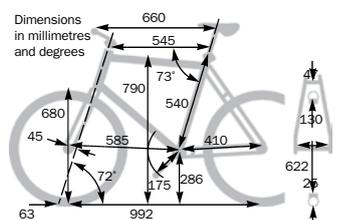
sideways on a tight S-bend over a bridge. But that's partly my fault: I was riding it like I'd ride a bike with expensive dual-compound tyres. I forgot I was on a £250 bike because it doesn't feel cheap.

FRAME & FORK

The aluminium frame and steel fork have fairly standard road bike geometry and aren't unduly heavy. There are even fittings for a rear rack and mudguards, although like many road bikes at any price, mudguard clearance is compromised by short-drop brakes. There's toe overlap too, for which those long cranks are partly to blame.

If the frame and fork were designed around mid-drop brakes, such as the inexpensive Miche Performance 57mm, this Wiggle would make a great all-purpose road bike for beginners or a practical winter bike for enthusiasts. As it is, it's nevertheless a bargain starter road bike for better weather. It's available in a wide range of sizes too. **G**

Tech Spec



WIGGLE ROAD BIKE

PRICE: £250

SIZES: XS-XL (M tested)

WEIGHT: 11.17kg (inc pedals)

FRAME & FORK: 6061 aluminium frame with fittings for 2 bottles, mudguard/rear rack. Steel fork with mudguard eyelets

WHEELS: 25-622 Kenda K1018-025 tyres, double-wall aluminium rims, 32x3 2.0mm spokes, unbranded QR hubs (threaded rear)

TRANSMISSION: flat pedals (swapped for my Shimano M520 SPDs), 175mm Prowheel 50-34 chainset, CH52 square taper bottom bracket, KMC Z51 chain, Shimano Tourney 14-28 7-speed freewheel. Shimano Tourney shifters and derailleurs. 14 ratios, 33-96in

BRAKING: Tektro R312 short-reach callipers

STEERING & SEATING: cork bar tape, 420mm aluminium drop bar, 100mmx7' aluminium stem, 1 1/8in threadless headset. Velo saddle, 27.2x300mm aluminium two-bolt seatpost

EQUIPMENT: none

WEBSITE: wiggles.co.uk

OTHER OPTIONS



1 Carrera Zelos £250

Fewer available sizes than the Wiggle but has a similar frame and fork, and the same 2x7 Shimano Tourney gears, Tektro R312 brakes and Kenda tyres. halfords.com



2 B'twin Triban 500 £250

Reduced from £280, Decathlon's entry-level road bike has a wider gear range thanks to 3x8-speed Microshift controls. It comes in eight sizes, from XXXS-XXL. btwin.com



Below: Hub dynamo lighting – on a £230 bike! – adds commuting and touring convenience



Touring/trekking bike

B'TWIN HOPRIDER 300 CITY

YOU CAN'T GET a drop-bar touring bike for £250. You can get a trekking bike. It's challenging compared to other bike types because the additional equipment – a pannier rack and mudguards, at least – eats into the budget.

Not that you'd know it, looking at this own-brand hybrid from Decathlon. As well as guards and a rack, it has a kickstand and *hub dynamo lighting*. The hub is of unknown provenance but works fine with little resistance, powering a switchable halogen headlight and, until the rear wiring came loose, a Basta lamp on the rack.

The bike's aluminium frame is long in the top tube for a medium. I set the adjustable stem upright more to reduce the reach than to raise the handlebar. If I owned the bike, I'd fit a shorter quill stem. The chain stays are long too, giving more heel clearance for panniers and taking the edge off any jolts from the rear wheel.

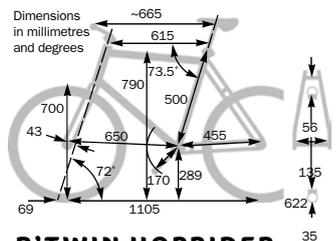
The Innova tyres have a touring pattern with a centre rolling strip, and are wide enough for comfort on badly surfaced roads. The sidewalls read '700x38C (40-622)', but my Vernier calliper says they're 35mm.

FULLY EQUIPPED

They're fitted to wheels with 36 spokes each, which adds strength for commuting or touring. But due to the budget, the rear wheel has a threaded hub. This makes the axle weaker than a freehub's as there's a bigger distance between the dropout and the drive-side bearings. For any touring you'd likely do on the Hoprider, it should be fine.

Gearing is 3x7 with twistgrip shifters. It works okay, wanting only a lower bottom gear for loads and/or hills. The Altus rear derailleur will handle a sprocket up to 34T, so it's a shame a Megarange cassette wasn't fitted. That's my only real criticism of what is an outstandingly well-equipped trekking bike. **C**

Tech Spec



B'TWIN HOPRIDER 300 CITY

- PRICE:** £230
- SIZES:** M-XL (M tested)
- WEIGHT:** 15.6 kg
- FRAME & FORK:** 6061-T6 aluminium frame with fittings for 2 bottles, mudguard, rack, frame lock. Steel fork with fittings for mudguard and dynamo cable
- WHEELS:** 40-622 Innova tyres, double-wall aluminium rims, 36x3 2.0mm spokes, unbranded front dynohub, threaded rear hub
- TRANSMISSION:** flat pedals, 170mm Shimano FC-M131 chainset, 48-38-28 chainrings, square taper bottom bracket, KMC chain, Sunrace 14-28 7-speed freewheel. Sunrace twistgrip shifters, Shimano Altus rear and Tourney front derailleurs. 21 ratios, 28-94in
- BRAKING:** Alhonga V-brakes
- STEERING & SEATING:** 600x25.4mm riser handlebar, 90mm adjustable-angle quill stem, threaded headset. Lookin gel saddle, 27.2x350mm micro-adjust seatpost
- EQUIPMENT:** Chromoplastic mudguards, rear rack, kickstand, Trekk Lite 10-lux halogen front light, unknown Basta rear light
- WEBSITE:** btwin.com

OTHER OPTIONS



1 Carrera Axle £169
Discounted from £289, this urban mountain bike requires only mudguards and a rear rack to turn it into a tourer. It's a viable MTB too. halfords.com



2 Dawes Sahara £299
Not great value alongside the B'twin, but this UK trekking bike is touring-ready thanks to a fair gear range (3x8 Tourney), a rear rack, and mudguards. dawescycles.com



Urban bike

ELEPHANT BIKE

FIVE THOUSAND MailStars didn't end up as scrap when the Post Office abandoned bikes: they were acquired by Krizevac Project, a UK-registered charity. They refurbish the bikes and sell them as Elephant Bikes, donating another Elephant bike to Africa for every one sold.

The name Elephant Bike was chosen not because it's stupendously heavy, although it is, but because of the colour. MailStar-riding park wardens in Malawi's Liwonde National Park discovered that the elephants didn't like Post Office red and gave chase, so the bikes were resprayed green. Problem solved. The ex-MailStars are now shot-blasted and powder coated in the UK, after being stripped down by offenders at HM Prisons who work towards cycle maintenance certificates.

This explains why an Elephant Bike sells for £250 when it would be worth at least twice as much brand new. Everything on the one I tested was in good condition: the drivetrain looked new and the tough

Schwalbe Marathon Plus tyres might have been. The drum brakes weren't but they last for ages and are perfect for a town bike.

CARGO OPTIONS

The Elephant Bike is essentially a small cargo bike. The steel-tubed rear rack, rated to carry 20kg, is standard. The front parcel tray, also rated to 20kg, is an optional extra that costs £30 with the wicker basket. It's worth getting for convenience. Due to its low trail, the bike also handles better with a bit of weight above the 24in front wheel.

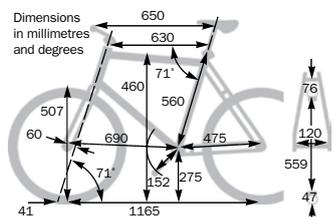
It's very sturdy and should require little maintenance, which is ideal for an urban bike. If you do need to refit the rear wheel, vertical dropouts and a chain tensioner make that easy. I mentioned the weight earlier; I'd fit a 24-tooth sprocket to the 3-speed hub for help on hills. A lower top gear won't matter as the bike's sit-up-and-beg riding position favours stately cycling.

There's a £30 charge for delivery, unless you pick your bike up from Uttoxeter.

Below: Drum brakes offer reliable, all-weather breaking. The 3-speed hub suits flatter areas best



Tech Spec



ELEPHANT BIKE

- PRICE:** £250+ (£280 as shown)
- SIZES:** 18 or 22in (tested)
- WEIGHT:** 23.5kg (as shown)
- FRAME & FORK:** Step-through steel frame with 13mm-tube rear rack and optional parcel tray. Steel fork with lamp bracket
- WHEELS:** 47-507 (front) & 47-559 (rear) Schwalbe Marathon Plus tyres, aluminium rims (24in front, 26in rear), 36x3 2.3mm spokes, Sturmey Archer X-FD (front) and X-RD3 (rear) hubs
- TRANSMISSION:** platform pedals, 170mm 42t forged steel chainset, 1/8in singlespeed chain, 20t sprocket, chain tensioner. 3 ratios, 41-73in
- BRAKING:** 70mm drum brakes
- STEERING & SEATING:** 620x25.4mm steel riser bar, 45mm stump-neck quill stem, threaded headset. 31.8x350mm plain seatpost, Selle San Remo roadster saddle
- EQUIPMENT:** aluminium mudguards, twin-leg kickstand, ding-dong bell, optional (+£30) parcel tray & wicker basket
- WEBSITE:** elephantbike.co.uk

OTHER OPTIONS



1 Retrospec Mantra Fixed/Singlespeed

£149.99
This simple steel fixie/singlespeed lacks mudguards but at this price it's affordable to add them. (SKS Raceblade Long?) It comes with two brakes. merincycles.com



2 Revolution Courier 1 16

£249.99
Spartan aluminium hybrid with 1x7 Shimano Tourney Megarange (14-34) gearing, 700x32C tyres, and Allen-headed wheel skewers. edinburghbicycle.com



Below: Chain tension is via short track ends. Longer ones would simplify wheel refitting by providing more slack



Mountain bike

VITUS DEE 29

THIS 2016 VERSION of the Dee 29 was discounted down to £209.99 in December when I got it. The 2017 version will be £279.99 – still a good deal. It's pitched as a city bike and has mounts for mudguards and racks; low-rider fork bosses make it easy to fit a front mudguard without fouling the disc calliper. The 38/18 gear (62in) is fine on road but too high where I mostly rode it: off-road.

A rigid, singlespeed 29er will not be everyone's mountain bike of choice. Yet if you can tolerate a non-variable gear, the Dee 29 rides well and is kilos lighter than anything close to it on price – and some bikes that are much dearer. Its rigid fork is far better than a cheap coil suspension fork with no damping, providing taut, predictable handling. A rigid bike is hard work on stutter bumps but elsewhere those 29er wheels hold their momentum well – once you've thrashed the single gear up to speed.

The one change I made, other than fitting budget SPD pedals, was to the gearing. I'd have liked a 32t chainring, but that's not

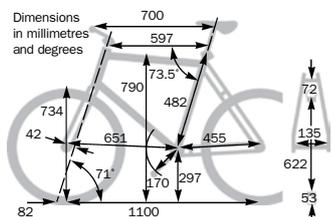
feasible with a five-arm 110 BCD chainset so I fitted a spare 34t from a road bike and shortened the chain. That reduced the gear to 55in. A better option, requiring spare 1/8in chain links, would be a 22t Sturmey Archer freewheel (£12). That'd give an easier 50in gear with the original chainset and let you jettison the 18t freewheel, whose knobby bearings promise a short life.

INEXPENSIVE UPGRADES

If I owned the Dee 29, I'd replace the front tyre with a grippier one with more volume; Chain Reaction were doing a 29x2.4in wire-bead Continental Mountain King for £15.99 at time of writing. I'd also add cheap bar-ends (~£10) as a rigid fork gets jarring with one hand position. Adding gears is possible – given a new rear wheel and a DMR Chain Tug Mech Hanger – but isn't cost effective.

Vitus might intend the Dee 29 as an *urban* mountain bike, but it doesn't take much to return this 29er to its roots (sic). It's a proper mountain bike, albeit a basic one, and it's properly fun to ride. **C**

Tech Spec



VITUS DEE 29 2016

PRICE: £209.99

SIZES: 16in, 19in (tested)

WEIGHT: 12.2kg (inc my pedals)

FRAME & FORK: 6061-T6 aluminium frame with fittings for 1 bottle, rear rack, mudguard. Chrome-moly steel fork with fittings for mudguard & front rack.

WHEELS: 53-622 Maxxis Sphinx tyres, Jalco JV200 aluminium rims, 32x3 2.0mm spokes, Vitus aluminium solid-axle disc hubs

TRANSMISSION: flat pedals (swapped for M424 SPDs), 170mm 5-arm chainset with 38T chainring and guard, square taper bottom bracket, KMC singlespeed chain, 18T freewheel. One ratio, 62in (reduced to 55in for test)

BRAKING: Tektro M280 mechanical discs with 160mm rotors

STEERING & SEATING: 660x31.8mm Vitus aluminium flat bar, 90x10° Vitus aluminium stem, 1 1/8in threadless headset. Vitus saddle, 27.2x400mm Vitus aluminium micro-adjust seatpost

WEBSITE: chainreactioncycles.com

OTHER OPTIONS



1 Wigg Mountain Bike £250

Another rigid 29er, but its 3x7 Shimano Tourney gears make it the more sensible off-road option for many. Has V-brakes instead of mechanical discs.

wigg.co.uk



2 Raleigh Helion 1.0 £260

One eye on the future (650B wheels), one on the past (quill stem), this bike avoids the cheap suspension fork trap, and its 3x6 Tourney gears include a 42-32-22 chainset. raleigh.co.uk