

Kit reviews

GEAR

COMPONENTS, KIT AND MEDIA SELECTED AND REVIEWED BY SPECIALIST JOURNALISTS AND CYCLING UK STAFF

Continental CONTACT PLUS TYRE **£39.95** conti-tyres.co.uk

IF THERE'S ONE time when reliability takes precedence over speed and comfort, it is surely at the start of a rural commute in midwinter, an hour after dusk over mud-washed roads littered with hedge trimmings. At such a moment, the reassuring grip and outstanding puncture resistance offered by Continental's Contact Plus more than outweigh the performance deficit from the tyre's stolid ride and substantial weight.

Available with wire (non-folding) bead and black tread/sidewall only, the Contact Plus is said by the manufacturer to offer up to 30% greater puncture protection than its direct competitors. In any case, it would seem that few sharp objects commonly encountered on the road have much hope of penetrating the 'Safety Plus' layer, which combines with Continental's SafetySystem Breaker to form an 'extremely puncture and cut-resistant' casing suitable for use in e-bikes. A few days' riding was enough to reveal imperviousness to



- PROS & CONS**
- + Bombproof
 - + All-conditions grip
 - Heavy
 - Sluggish, wooden ride

newly-cut blackthorn, hawthorn, and other thorny sticks, along with exceptional traction and directional control on muddy tarmac.

Looking at the tread pattern, it's not hard to see why. An updated version of one of the German firm's most popular touring tread patterns, it has wide but shallow sharp-edged blocks extending to the tyre's full width, with a closer-spaced strip, which creates some vibration at certain speeds, along the centre. It's a tread for a wide range of conditions including muddy canal towpaths, if not one for fast rolling on tarmac. It even worked well on early morning frosted roads, although black ice might be a different matter.

Against this imperturbable reliability must

be set the tyre's weight. The 27.5x1.5in (42-584) example tested is a hefty 880g per tyre, with the heaviest model, a 26x1.75in (47-559) brute weighing 950g. Add an innertube and that's over 1kg per wheel. The inevitable result is hard work both on climbs and on the flat, since there's a lot of material to deform as the tyre rolls. Potential users will see this as par for the course when it comes to tyres that prioritise puncture resistance over rolling resistance. Those who favour faster rubber might, like me, be pleasantly surprised by the sensation of cycling free of anxiety in forbidding riding conditions – once accustomed to the new performance envelope.

Richard Hallett

OTHER OPTIONS



1 SCHWALBE MARATHON PLUS £41.49
Generously-treaded touring tyre with SmartGuard puncture protection belt. Wide size range. schwalbe.com



2 VITTORIA ADVENTURE TECH G+ RIGID £26.99
City and touring tyre that prioritises longevity and puncture protection. E-bike compatible. vittoria.com



PROS & CONS

- + Effective with ordinary footwear
- + Durable
- Chunky looks



Restrap

DIAGONAL & HORIZONTAL STRAPS

EACH £24.99

restrap.co.uk

MADE USING RECYCLED car seatbelt webbing, Restrap pedal straps are a sort of halfway house between plain flat pedals and the secure shoe location when cycling offered by toe clips and straps – or even cleatless pedals. There are two versions: horizontal and diagonal, both featuring a wide, thick wad of fabric and Velcro that sits on top of the shoe, while the straps themselves complete a loop around the shoe. The idea in both cases is to keep the shoe more securely located on its pedal and, ideally, enhance pedalling effectiveness without the need for cycling-specific footwear.

The horizontal version's twin straps per side are designed to pass through channels or slots in the pedal body. Each strap has a buckle, but fine tensioning once the strap is secure is best done using the double-layer Velcro in the top rather than trying to fiddle around with the buckle on the move. When adjusted snugly, the strap does a surprisingly (to a first-time user) good job of keeping the shoe in place on the pedal downstroke, although it's less effective if you try to pull up on the upstroke.

On the downside, getting the shoe into the strap isn't the simplest of tasks. The weight of the strap inevitably makes the pedal hang upside down and, as with toe

clips and straps, there's a knack to flipping the pedal the right way up. Whereas toe clips hold their straps away from the pedal to facilitate shoe entry, Restraps simply slump on the pedal, offering a challenge to the deftest of toe-punts. Once in place, the straps offer much the same rider comfort as plain pedals, with no constraints on foot angle or fore and aft positioning.

Angled across the top of the pedal and secured using screws and plates supplied with them, Diagonal straps offer a slightly different and possibly superior experience. They share the

Horizontal straps' slumped resistance to ready entry, but require in addition that the foot be angled toe-inwards as the shoe is initially slid into position on the pedal. Once in place, the foot is pulled back into

line. This effectively twists the strap further, which tightens it, gripping the shoe securely. It's important to get the loop the right size for comfort using the Velcro on the top, but once set up, Diagonal straps are the more effective set up.

Both designs offer rapid, safe foot exit with none of the problems some users find with cleatless systems, and both should last well, albeit while acquiring an ingrained coating of road muck in most riding conditions.

Richard Hallett



OTHER OPTIONS



1 POWER GRIPS STRAP SET £29.99

Similar to Restrap's Diagonal Straps, although preceding them by some years. Available in standard length, extra long, and specifically for fixies. powergrips.com



2 MKS HALF CLIP WITH LEATHER £22.99

Leather-covered steel toe clips without straps, designed for cyclists who don't want to scuff their smart shoes. Would suit commuters. zyrofischer.co.uk



PROS & CONS
 + Narrow, stable, tough
 - Awkward with short steerers



PROS & CONS
 + Secure & accessible bottle storage
 - Won't fit a large water canteen

Apidura BACKCOUNTRY TOP TUBE PACK 1L & FOOD POUCH PLUS 1.2L **£35 & £45** apidura.com

TOP TUBE BAGS aren't only for bikepacking. A small bag up front is a good alternative – or addition – to a seatpack for tools, snacks, etc. Most that I've tried before have been too wide, compromising their own stability and hitting my knees during out-of-the-saddle pedalling.

At only 4cm across the base, and plumping out to 5-5.5cm when packed, Apidura's Top Tube Pack is scarcely wider than those little 'fuel tanks' that triathletes use for stashing gels. Since it's 21cm long and 10cm at its highest, the volume is bigger – perhaps not quite a litre as it's not rectangular, yet big enough to swallow a 29er innertube, a tubeless repair kit, a CO₂ inflator, a multitool, a chain tool, tyre levers, and a few other small items.

I've mostly used it off-road, where it's been stable and secure despite attaching with just two wide Velcro straps. Seatpacks I've taken off-road have wobbled around, broken at their bracket, eventually spewed their contents over the trail behind me, or all three. Apidura's Top Tube Pack has done none of these, and it's kept its contents dry thanks to (stitched) waterproof fabric and a location that's not in the line of fire from the wheels. It weighs 74g. It's not the cheapest top tube bag, but it works well, carries plenty, and you can pretty

much forget it's there. There's a shorter but otherwise similar 0.5L version for £30.

Dan Joyce

ONCE I'D WORKED out the webbing strap was detachable and was able to rig up a secure system to my Jones Loop bars, I immediately began to appreciate the benefits the Food Pouch Plus had for my bikepacking plans, despite at 80g it being heavier than most bottle cages.

Using a full frame bag, I can't fit bottle cages, and I've struggled to find an easily accessible place to keep a drink handy. This problem's been solved by Apidura and, but for the eye-watering price, I'd definitely consider buying another.

It sits secure when bouncing around off-road and, with its handy and easy-to-use drawstring, keeps your bottle safe. I used a 750ml one and had no trouble, but was a little disappointed I couldn't fit my 1 litre Nalgene bottle. There are handy stretch pockets for other snacks if your pockets are filled too.

If you're touring on road, I'd suggest you consider paying a bit more and getting a bar bag instead. For day riding, if you're considering this, then you probably need to ask yourself whether you're carrying too much!

Sam Jones

OTHER OPTIONS



1 ORTLIEB COCKPIT-PACK £49.99

A shallower, wider bag (8cm) that's waterproof and tough but has slightly less volume at 0.8L. ortlieb.com



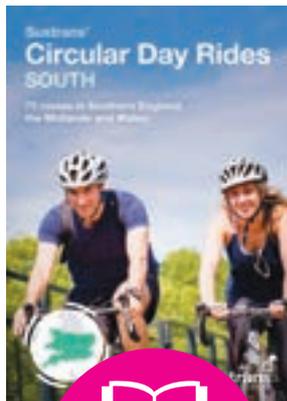
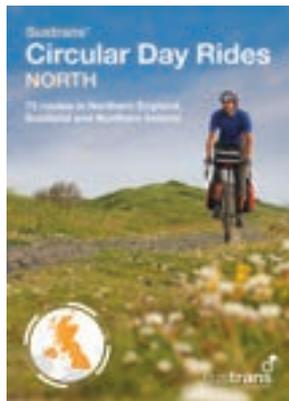
2 LPKIT STEM CELL XL £30

Cheaper, comes in variety of colours and should be able to fit 1L Nalgene water bottle. alpkit.com

Book reviews

BOOKS

A ROUND-UP OF THE LATEST CYCLING-RELATED READS



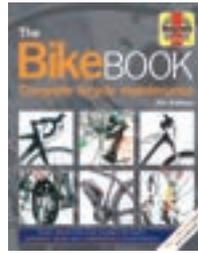
Sustrans
SUSTRANS' CIRCULAR DAY RIDES £14.99
shop.sustrans.org.uk

SUSTRANS' TWO CIRCULAR day ride guides are excellent in many ways. Each features 75 rides that start and finish at the same place, usually a train station, with one ('North') covering routes in Northern England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the other ('South'), routes in Southern England, the Midlands and Wales.

They are designed to be practical, so if you want a guide that refers to history, landscape and people, these aren't for you. For each route, there's an information page and an accompanying map, colour-coded to display the type of road or traffic-free path to be followed. The directions on the information page are clear, there's a distance and gradient graph, and details of bike shops and places to eat and drink along the way. With no unnecessary clutter, they're some of the easiest to follow maps I have seen in a route guide. There's a good range of routes in each as well.

There are, however, a couple of puzzling omissions. Most of the routes are between 20 and 30 miles and are intended for 'intermediate to experienced' cyclists, but there's nothing to indicate the difficulty of individual routes. The Kirby Stephen to Tan Hill ride is around 27 miles, the same distance as another ride based around the Downs Link and Horsham. The former is a far more challenging undertaking than the latter, but I only know that because I've ridden both; it's not immediately obvious from the guides. Some grading of route difficulty, and the type of surface when the routes are off-road, would have been helpful.

Duncan Dollimore



Mark Storey & James Witts
HAYNES THE BIKE BOOK 7TH EDITION £18.99
haynes.com

I'M A BIT nostalgic about this manual as I own a well-used first edition from 1994. It's been revised for the seventh time, so isn't *that* similar. To keep it roughly the same length, authors Mark Storey (author of the sixth edition) and James Witts (the editor of 220 Triathlon) have carefully balanced the step-by-step instructions that Haynes manuals are famous for, and added in newer developments such as tubeless tyres and internal cable-routing. There are now much clearer photos and well-written instructions, with a good section on troubleshooting. It's suitable for a beginner or intermediate home mechanic.

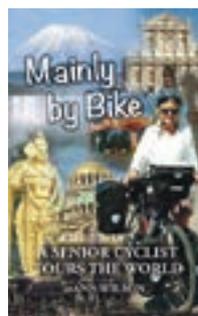
Victoria Hazael



Janet Moss & Pete Martin
THE BAY VIEW CYCLE WAY £13
theoffcomers.co.uk

THE COMBINATION of coastal estuary and mountain scenery around Morecambe Bay is stunning. This guide encourages you to take your time and savour its sights, sounds, scenery, and points of interest along the way – just my kind of touring. The guide is well-sized, fitting a bar-bag map holder. Navigation is straightforward, using OS maps and turn-by-turn instructions. There are also detours and day-trip ideas, and a wealth of background information on the area's history, geography and wildlife.

Roland Seber



Ann Wilson
MAINLY BY BIKE
 £9.99/£4.99
amazon.co.uk

SELF-PUBLISHED BOOKS on Amazon (the cheaper price is the Kindle edition) are a mixed bag. This one is a great armchair read. At the age of 59, Ann Wilson set off with a couple of maps of France, a pre-planned route to Turkey, and ambitions to travel as far as she could in a year. This is an engaging account of her adventure – through Bulgaria, (where her bike was stolen) to India and Asia, even taking in North America and Canada before ending in Manchester.

Natalie Parsons



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