



## Biketest

# Small gravel bikes

Cycling UK's **Georgina Cox** and **Nicola Marshall** test ride two 650B all-rounders: a Kona Rove NRB and a Surly Straggler. Review compiled by **Dan Joyce**



**GEORGINA COX**

Head of Membership and Individual Giving

Georgina thought gravel bikes were a bit of a marketing fad, but is now a convert.



**NICOLA MARSHALL**

Director of Income Generation

Nicola normally commutes over a beautiful common. She loves weekend riding on lost lanes.

**S**horter cyclists have little choice in gravel bikes, as with touring bikes. A drop-bar frame small enough for someone under about 5ft 3in (160cm) won't automatically accommodate 700C wheels with wider tyres. One solution is to change the bike's geometry, slackening the head angle and increasing the fork offset. The other is to use smaller wheels, such as 650B. Many brands, however, simply don't make gravel bikes for five-footers.

Our testers are an inch either side of that. "Being only 4ft 11in, with short legs for my height, my cycle choice is limited," Georgina said.

She isn't kidding. I knew petite women weren't well catered for but was nevertheless surprised by how few off-the-peg options there are that would properly fit. The two I got hold of have 650B wheels, which are an inch-and-a-half smaller in diameter than 700C. I didn't come across any

gravel bikes with 26in (ISO 559) wheels, which are an inch smaller again, but some touring bikes still use this size and could be adapted for 'gravel' use.

Surly's Straggler comes in two wheel sizes. Bigger Stragglers use 700C wheels, smaller ones 650B. The smallest Straggler has a dinky 38cm frame. It's so compact I asked the supplier to leave the fork's steerer tube long; I wanted Nicola and Georgina to be able to set the handlebar as high as the saddle.

All sizes of Kona's Rove NRB come with the 650B wheels that gravel bikes have helped popularise. Unlike most manufacturers, Kona take advantage of these smaller wheels by offering smaller frames too: the smallest is meant for riders as short as 4ft 10in. The seat tube and head tube of this model are longer than the little Surly but the reach is almost identical.

The two bikes aren't women-specific. They're just smaller, which is what's most important. For a given height, gender differences can be addressed with a different saddle (likely wider for women), a different handlebar (likely narrower), a different stem (shorter for a more upright position), and lever reach adjustment (for smaller hands).

The plan was that Nicola and

**First look**

A well-proportioned gravel bike that's fairly light thanks to its full-carbon fork and aluminium frame



“Kona take advantage of the 650B wheels by offering smaller frames, fitting riders down to 4ft 10in”

### Tech Spec KONA ROVE NRB

- **Price:** £1,699
- **Sizes:** 46 (tested), 48, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58cm
- **Weight:** 10kg/22lb
- **Frame & fork:** Butted 6061 aluminium frame with fittings for rear rack, mudguard, and three bottles. Kona Rove Verso full-carbon fork with fittings for mudguard and two bottles/accessory cages.
- **Wheels:** 40-584 WTB Horizon Plus TCS tyres, WTB Asym i23 TCS rims, 32x3 14g stainless spokes, 100x12mm Formula front hub, 142x12mm Formula rear hub.
- **Transmission:** no pedals, 165mm SRAM Apex 1 chainset, 40t X-Sync chainring, SRAM GXP 68mm bottom bracket, SRAM PC1110 chain, SRAM PG1130 11-42t 11-speed cassette. Sram Apex shifter & rear derailleur. 11 ratios, 25-96in.
- **Braking:** SRAM Apex levers, TRP Spyre C mechanical disc brake callipers, 160mm TRP rotors.
- **Steering & seating:** 400x31.8mm Kona Road handlebar, 60mm Kona Road stem, FSA No. 57B headset. WTB Volt Comp saddle, 31.6mm Kona Thumb offset seatpost, Kona seatpost clamp.
- **Equipment:** none [konaworld.com](http://konaworld.com)

Georgina would swap the bikes between them. That was stymied by the Covid-19 lockdown. So was our planned photoshoot... and also my visit to Guildford, when I would've weighed, measured, and spec-checked the bikes. We've done what we could with people and bikes in different locations.

**Frame and fork**

Georgina on the Kona: "First impressions were good. I loved the sparkly maroon paintwork. It felt lighter than my hybrid and not much weightier than either of my road bikes. This is the smallest frame but it was still a tad big for me: with the saddle at its lowest, the seatpost hit the bottle bosses. I'd fit a shorter post or saw an inch off this one. There are plenty of frame mounts, and my normal and rack and pannier for commuting would fit fine. There was no toe overlap, even with my relatively large feet."

Nicola on the Surly: "With a small frame and 650B wheels, it looked a

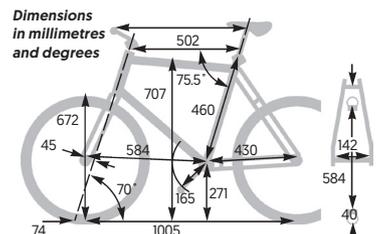


**Above:** Georgina liked the Kona's sparkly maroon colour  
**Opposite page:** (left) Georgina on the Kona Rove NRB; (right) Daria Taddei also took the Surly Straggler for a test ride, though at 5ft 4in she'd fit better on a larger size

bit like a kid's bike – an impression reinforced by the pink, sparkly paint! At 10.6kg, it's heavier than my road bike but not too heavy to lift up and down railway station stairs. I was pleased to see lots of fittings for pannier racks and water bottles. With the cranks supplied, there was a couple of millimetres of toe overlap."

We'll come back to crank length later. It's worth noting here that, by not being specifically designed for shorter cranks, both bikes have a bottom bracket that's higher than it need be, so it's a stretch for the short rider to get a toe down when stopped. Neither Georgina or Nicola commented on this so I guess it's something they've become used to from other bikes.

Both bikes have steep seat angles. This makes the reach to the handlebar manageable while providing room to squeeze in 'normal' sized wheels. But it also tips the rider's weight forward, which can result in numb or tingling



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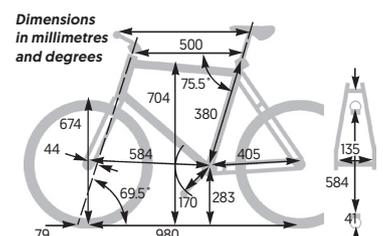
**First look**

A versatile steel all-rounder that should fit riders even shorter than our testers, given a short enough stem

## Tech Spec

### SURLY STRAGGLER 1x 650B

- **Price:** £1,750 (frameset £650).
  - **Sizes:** 38 (tested), 42, 46, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58cm in 650B. Sizes 54, 56, 58, 60, and 62cm in 700C.
  - **Weight:** 10.6kg/23.3lb
  - **Frame & fork:** 4130 chrome-moly steel frame and fork with fittings for two bottles, mudguards, rear rack, front low-rider & porteur racks
  - **Wheels:** 41-584 Surly Knard tyres, Halo Vapour 27.5in wheels [584x21 tubeless compatible rims, 32x3 double butted stainless pokes, Halo six-bolt disc QR hubs].
  - **Transmission:** no pedals, 170mm SRAM Rival 1 chainset, 42t X-Sync chainring, SRAM GXP 68mm bottom bracket, SRAM X1 11-speed chain, SRAM PG1130 11-speed 11-42t cassette. SRAM Rival 1x shifter and long-cage derailleur. 11 ratios, 27-101in
  - **Braking:** SRAM Rival levers, TRP Spyre mechanical disc brake callipers, 160mm rotors.
  - **Steering & seating:** 400x31.8mm Genetic Flare Road handlebar, 75mm Genetic SLR stem, Dia Compe CB-2 headset. Genetic STV saddle, 27.2x350mm Genetic Syngenic seatpost.
  - **Equipment:** none
- [ison-distribution.com](http://www.ison-distribution.com)



▶ hands. That's one reason to avoid setting the handlebar too low. Some riders might also want a seatpost with more layback, along with a correspondingly shorter stem, to move their weight back a bit.

The Kona Rove is 600g lighter than the Surly, largely because it has an aluminium frame and a carbon fibre fork. The weight saving is worthwhile when you consider that the person riding or lifting the bike might weigh only 50kg themselves. The Kona's thru-axle dropouts are more secure than the Surly's quick-releases, and the added stiffness should mean less rotor rub from the brake pads. There's more heel clearance for bigger panniers as the chainstays are longer.

The Surly Straggler has interesting rear dropouts: forward facing with stop screws. So it could run a singlespeed or hub gear drivetrain without a tensioner. Alternatively, it would be very easy to



**Top:** Forward-facing dropouts make the frame easy to set up with a singlespeed or hub gear drivetrain

**Bottom:** For a review of the Surly Knard and other gravel bike tyres with tread lugs, turn to page 68

switch to a 2x derailleur setup: it comes fitted with a barrel-adjuster-equipped cable stop for a front derailleur. The fork doesn't have triple cage mounts but does have them for low-rider and porteur racks.

**Components**

Bikes this small want, at most, 160mm-long cranks. Big brand chainsets don't go shorter than 165mm, however. That's a step in the right direction, and one the Kona takes. The Surly has 170mm cranks, which are too long. As well as toe overlap in this case, longer cranks mean more awkward pedalling, which

Nicola identified as "not feeling right", plus more pedal strikes off-road.

Both bikes use 1x SRAM drivetrains: Apex for the Kona, Rival (one tier higher) for the Surly. "I really enjoyed the 1x transmission," Nicola said. "It removed a whole set of decision making and seemed to flow a lot more smoothly." Georgina liked it too, once she became accustomed to SRAM's



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**Above:** The Kona's cranks are 165mm  
**Near right:** Carbon fork with triple cage mounts  
**Top right:** 170mm cranks are too long  
**Bottom right:** Front derailleur? No problem



double-tap operation.

I think both bikes are slightly overgeared. The Kona has a 40-tooth chainring, the Surly a 42. That gives the same gearing a six-foot-tall bloke would expect on a gravel bike, despite him being maybe 50% heavier and stronger. SRAM's 1x road groupsets don't provide much scope for lower gears: 40 is as small as Apex chainrings come, while Rival goes down to 38. You can't just fit a SRAM 1x mountain bike chainset to get a smaller chainring as the road and MTB groupset chainlines don't match.

Like most gravel bikes, the Kona and Surly have flared drops. "I found them too wide and a bit of a stretch," said Georgina. "Down on the drops, I couldn't reach the brakes at all." She'd have preferred a 38cm bar with a more compact drop. Apex levers are reach adjustable, so these could be set up closer to her fingers.

### The ride

Georgina on the Kona: "In a word, comfy! On tarmac, it didn't feel too different from riding a road bike – just more cushioned, which was ideal for hidden holes after all the winter rain. The wider tyres and sturdier frame didn't appear to slow me down too much, although obviously it felt a little more sluggish up the hills. I'm a real wuss on uneven ground but the 40mm tyres

### Other options



#### CANYON GRAIL WMN AL 6.0 £1,299

Lightweight (9.42kg) and good value, with a carbon fork, 2x10 Shimano GRX drivetrain, and hydraulic brakes. The 2XS and XS sizes have 650B wheels.

[canyon.com](http://canyon.com)



#### BOMBTRACK BEYOND £1,900

More of a 'monstercross' bike, the Beyond has 650B wheels in S and XS. The XS has a 493mm top tube and a 400mm seat tube, so should suit five-footers.

[bombtrack.com](http://bombtrack.com)

glided across gravel, roots, and thick mud."

Nicola on the Surly: "In Thetford Forest, the bike handled everything from deep sand to pretty large rocks and puddles. A bit of a nervous rider, I gained more and more confidence on it. It was super comfortable. On a road ride around the Suffolk coast, I was worried the Straggler would feel much slower than my road bike, yet it felt quite quick – though I'd switch out the MTB-style tyres." ●

### Verdict

Georgina: "I really enjoyed riding the Kona Rove NRB. With a few adjustments, it could be my ideal sized and weight multi-purpose bike for both faster commuting and off-road family rides."

Nicola: "The Surly Straggler was a cracking ride, really good fun. It gave me much more confidence off-road and wasn't at all heavy or slow on the roads. I can't wait to ride it again post lockdown!"

I'd say the framesets are what's best about both bikes, mainly because they're built to fit riders of this stature – a rare thing. But they also have the clearances and fittings you want from a do-it-all drop-bar bike. The components are only fair to middling, and some aren't scaled down enough.

The Kona Rove NRB strikes me as the better complete bike. It has a lighter frameset, a more suitable chainset, and faster rolling tyres. However, the Surly Straggler can more easily be built up in different ways – and it's available frame-only for anyone wanting to do that.