

Raising the bar

The Oxford Bike Works Model 1 and Spa Cycles D'Tour are both steel tourers designed and assembled in Britain, but they're far from peas in a pod. Review by Simon Withers

These mid-priced tourers have much in common: steel framesets, very wide-range gearing, mudguards and a rear rack. But there are notable differences. One is defiantly old school, with V-brakes and quick-release axles. The other has cable disc brakes and thru-axles.

The most striking difference is the choice of handlebar: the Spa Cycles D'Tour has a drop bar, the Oxford Bike Works Model 1 a flat bar. Curiously, while this is the default for each bike, they're both available with either handlebar option.

Frame, fork & handlebar

Both frames are made from Reynolds steel and are very neatly finished. The Spa has 725 tubing, the Oxford 525. They're essentially the same chrome-molybdenum alloy but 725 is heat treated, which boosts its strength by about 50%. It's not something you're aware of when riding, and either frameset should last you a lifetime if looked after.

The Oxford Bike Works Model 1 is about as retro as it gets: a frameset that would have been familiar decades ago, decked out with kit not dissimilar to that which I toured on in the 1990s. That's not a bad thing. It's tried-and-trusted

technology, put together with care and attention – and it all works well. If you were buying one, you'd probably have fewer spacers on the steerer; Richard at Oxford Bike Works put this together at short notice in a size smaller than I'd normally ride.

Every one of the bikes I've owned since my flat-bar kids' bike has had a drop bar, and I've ridden all my extended tours on drops. I've nevertheless put in thousands of miles on flat bars. There are obvious benefits to both setups.

While the flat bar helps with stability, as your hands are further apart, the extra width makes it harder to squeeze through gaps in stationary traffic. It generally puts you in a more upright position, which means less strain on your lower back. Yet it's harder to ride into a headwind as it's less aerodynamic.

Apart from better aerodynamics, the big advantage of a drop bar is the number of handholds it offers. Your hands, wrists and shoulders aren't stuck in the same position, so you can reduce the likelihood of



Middle: V-brakes are a blast from the past but still work well for touring and commuting
Bottom: A 44–33–22 triple gives cadence-friendly front shifts