

Other options



RIDGEBACK EXPEDITION £1,349

Well-priced, flat-bar offering with a steel frameset, cable disc brakes and a 3x9-speed Shimano setup with a low bottom gear.
ridgeback.co.uk



TEMPLE ADVENTURE DISC 3 £1,695

Drop-bar steel tourer with TRP Spyre brakes, Shimano Sora and 40mm WTB Vulpine tyres. The price doesn't include a rack or mudguards.
templecycles.com



Photos: Simon and Shirley Withers



Left: 35-622 Schwalbe Marathons are good all-rounders

gear is superfluous. We also have nearby hills with pretty long – by UK standards – steepish sections. If you're carrying bulging panniers on a ride of a few hours or more and you reach the foot of one, trust me, you'll welcome it. The older I've got the more convinced I've become that you can never have a bottom gear that's too low. ●

in a lower riding position, but the long wheelbase keeps the ride stable and – like me these days – it's built more for comfort than speed. The Spa also has the only Brooks saddle I like: the non-leather Cambium C17. The Oxford has a larger, more padded Bioflex OnGel option. I don't usually like so much padding but it proved friendly to my backside.

Both bikes climb well thanks to their low bottom gears. My ride home from town has some short stretches at 11%, and I'm usually in the largest sprocket for these. On the Spa, I found myself in second or third. That doesn't mean that the 16in bottom

Verdict

Both these British brands have delivered high-quality tourers with the sort of care and attention that smaller-scale companies do so well. Well-finished, Far-East-manufactured framesets are decked with carefully chosen components – the Spa's contemporary, the Oxford's more retro. Crucially, both bikes have gearing, wheels and tyres that are spot on for touring.

As for the handlebars: the Oxford's flat bar helps with a super-stable, upright and regal ride, while the Spa's drop bar gives you more handholds and a lower, more aerodynamic position for a slightly swifter ride. Neither bar nor bike will let you down.