



# DIRT CHEAP

Gravel bikes needn't cost the earth so we compare four go-anywhere machines that won't break the bank

PHOTOGRAPHY RUSSELL BURTON





## THE BIKES ON TEST...

### MARIN NICASIO 2

£1350

Marin is a legendary mountain bike brand named after the Californian county of the same name. It's been in the gravel bike game since it started to become popular and for 2020 it's assembled a range of classic-looking, but thoroughly modern all-road machines with its Beyond Road geometry, practical fixtures and a road-derived drivetrain. The Nicasio 2 promises maximum versatility for minimal outlay.



### FUJI JARI 1.3 ADVENTURE

£1399.99

Fuji's Jari range is aimed at the more adventurous gravel rider. The Jari 1.3 Adventure is a decently priced all-road machine that aims to combine a versatile lightweight aluminium frame and carbon fork with a gravel-focused drivetrain based around SRAM's wide range Apex 1x groupset. It's built to give you a bike fit to take you through the roughest toughest terrain on the weekend and get you to work every day.



### MERIDA SILEX 400

£1400

Merida's design take on gravel brings a different approach to most of its rivals: instead of taking a road or cross bike as the basis for the design it's instead looked at mountain bikes. Merida says the result is a combination of mountain bike handling with endurance geometry to create a machine that can blast down tracks and speed over tarmac. Can Merida's different approach manage trails other gravel bikes find hard to reach?



### ON-ONE FREE RANGER

£1799.99

On-One's history is all about simple, affordable singlespeed mountain bikes, road bikes and fixed gear specials. The brand's reputation was built on exceptional value for money. Does this new full-carbon, gravel-racing special continue in this vein? With a spec sheet comparable to bikes that cost twice the price, on paper at least, the Free Ranger looks unbeatable. Let's see if the Ferrari spec and Kia price tag add up to a true bargain.



**R**ecently gravel bikes have dominated drop-bar bike sales. The idea of a bike that can get you off the beaten track yet not feel sluggish on tarmac has wide appeal, so we've tested four of the best for under £2000.

California-based brand Marin launched in 1986 as one of the early mountain-bike specialists. It's expanded into road, cyclocross and now has a wide range of gravel and adventure bikes. The Nicasio 2 combines a classic, slim-tubed steel frame with Marin's Beyond Road geometry and a road-derived drivetrain. This is a bike with versatility at its core.

Fuji's Jari 1.3 Adventure is built around a light alloy frame and carbon fork and aims to offer versatility from the same mould as Marin. Fuji, however, has opted to

provide the rider with a gravel-friendly, wide-range 1x drivetrain and more off-road specific rubber.

With the Silex, Merida looked to its mountain bikes for design inspiration. The result is a machine with a more upright riding position but with the nimble on-road manners of an endurance bike. A sub-compact 46/30 chainset adds versatile, go-anywhere gearing into the mix too.

Finally, it's On-One's Free Ranger. The UK brand (part of the Planet-X empire) started out making singlespeed mountain and road bikes, building up a

**The idea of a bike that can get you off the beaten track yet not feel sluggish on tarmac has wide appeal...**

Why stick to tarmac? Explore the British countryside on a gravel bike

committed and dedicated fanbase. It's now expanded into gravel with a full (Toray) carbon chassis and SRAM Force 1x drivetrain and a smattering of brand-name parts for a bike that looks like a best-value-for-money package.

YOUR TESTER



**WARREN ROSSITER**  
SENIOR TECH WRITER

Warren has always had a soft spot for gravel bikes, awarding one of the earliest 'gravel' machines, the original GT Grade, best debut in our 2015 Bike of the Year. He has owned lots of gravel machines and believes hopping between tarmac and trail opens up new ride adventures.

### THE RATINGS EXPLAINED

★★★★★  
**EXCEPTIONAL**  
A GENUINE CLASS LEADER

★★★★  
**VERY GOOD**  
ONE OF THE BEST YOU CAN BUY

★★★  
**GOOD**  
IT'LL DO THE JOB VERY WELL

★★  
**BELOW AVERAGE**  
FLAWED IN SOME WAY

★  
**POOR**  
SIMPLY PUT, DON'T BOTHER



# MARIN NICASIO 2

£1350 » Keeping it real with steel

**W**e recently tested Marin's sub-£1000 Nicasio + and were hugely impressed with its capabilities. The Nicasio 2 shares the same Beyond Road geometry traits as the + but the frame is a higher-grade butted Series 2 steel, complete with mudguard mounts, rack mounts, a reinforced head tube and even provision for internal Di2 wiring, plus a minimal flat-mount for the disc brake. Up front it boasts an all-carbon fork with mudguard mounts and a tapered steerer.

Marin's Beyond Road geometry blends numbers you'd expect to find on a sporty endurance bike with (on our 58cm test bike) a 610.4mm stack height (the vertical distance from the centre of the bottom bracket to the top of the head tube) and 398.4mm reach (the horizontal distance between the centre of the bottom bracket to the head-tube centre). Though the slacker head angle of 71.5-degrees gives a more stable feel up front than a road-specific machine, the 73-degree seat angle is pure

**WE SAY...**  
A gravel bike that performs well on tarmac with the feel of a smooth endurance bike



**TOP** Cables route externally, but there's provision for internal Di2 cables  
**ABOVE** I was impressed with the RS405 hydraulic brake performance

road stuff. It adds up to a bike that feels stable and smooth on the road and capable off road.

Spec-wise the Nicasio 2 is more road than gravel when it comes to its drivetrain, mixing Shimano's entry-level RS405 (Tiagra) hydraulics, road-based Shimano Tiagra mechs and an FSA Omega 50/34 chainset. The 50/34, 11-34 pairing is classic road endurance and a great option for those looking to mix tarmac with excursions onto dirt. Schwalbe's all-round variant of its gravel G-One tyre is a slender (for gravel) 35c (1). The dimple-patterned tread rolls fast on tarmac and grips well on hard-packed dirt. The tyres shape up well on the Marin own-brand rims with their bigger-volume, tyre-ready 19mm internal dimension.

### SPECIFICATIONS

- Weight** 11.7kg (58cm)
- Frame** Series 2 chromoly
- Fork** Carbon
- Gears** Shimano ST-RS405
- Shifters** Shimano Tiagra
- Mechs** Shimano BR-RS405
- Wheels** Marin alloy double-wall rims; forged alloy Marin hubs
- Finishing kit** Beyond Road saddle, Schwalbe G-One all-round TLE 700 x 35c tyres

Its off-road performance is more suited to gravel roads, fire roads and towpaths, rather than single-track trails



**ABOVE** Slender steel tubes give the Nicasio 2 a classy look

**LEFT** The bulbous hoods of the RS405 shifters: suited to larger hands

**BELOW** The Nicasio's fork has very generous clearances



### HIGHS

Luscious ride quality from a smart steel frame

**LOWS**  
Sluggish front shifts

**BUY IF...**  
You want a bike that's great on the road and can handle the knocks when the going gets rough

The Shimano Tiagra ST-RS405 shifters are last-generation Tiagra whose mechs, particularly the BR RS405 hydraulic brakes (2), all work so well it poses a challenge to Shimano's own, more expensive 11-speed options. The shifters at this level feature oversized 'bulbous' hooded levers (3), which this larger-handed tester didn't have an issue with but those with smaller hands have reported some issues.

The oversized hoods offer a large grip area – great for when you're rattling through rocky trails. My only issue was with the combination of the FSA Omega rings and the KMC X10 chain: shifting down from the big ring to the small works well, offering just the right amount of speed and efficiency. But when shifting from small to big the chain labours a little.

The Nicasio's skinny-tubed steel frame rides beautifully well boasting the most shock-absorbing ride of the bikes here, despite having the skinniest tyres. The frame embodies steel qualities, yet at 11.7kg it isn't overly heavy.

The Nicasio's off-road performance is more suited to gravel roads, fire roads and towpaths than singletrack trails. I managed to pinch-flat the skinny Schwalbes when the tracks got a bit rowdier. On the road the Nicasio 2 feels like a smooth endurance bike and the liveliness of the steel frame keeps it fast. Even on the climbs the Marin's great gear range means it's no plodder.

Marin has got the components pretty sorted too: the 12-degree flare on the compact drop bars gives you a good variety of hand holds and a commanding position in the drops. The flare does angle the shifters a little, which can be a bit of a stretch for those with smaller hands. The Marin Beyond Road saddle is a fine design with plenty of padding and a central pressure-relief channel with a cutaway in the hull. It's not an open channel, thankfully, so no water or mud spray.

The Nicasio is the most road-ready of the bikes on test here and it's no slouch when it comes to gravel. The frame can take up to a 40mm tyre in 700c or up to 47mm in 650b, so you could look to go further off road than the 35c tyres allow with a switch of rubber and wheels. As it stands, it's the ideal commuter/road cum gravel bike.

### THE VERDICT

Stylish steel frame that rides as good as it looks

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER...



**FOR A LOT MORE...**  
MARIN NICASIO RIDGE  
£2295

Sharing the same plush Series 2 CroMo steel frame as the Nicasio 2, the Ridge upgrades the drivetrain to SRAM Rival 1x and switches in WTB 650b wheels and big-volume WTB Byway 47c tyres.



**FOR A LITTLE LESS...**  
MARIN NICASIO +  
£845

We found the Nicasio+ to be one of the best budget gravel bikes around for its sheer fun factor, the wide range 1x gears, expansive tyres – not to mention a great steel frame – making it one of the bargains of the year.



**WE SAY...**  
An everyday workhorse that can take you on weekend adventures

# FUJI JARI 1.3 ADVENTURE

£1399.99 ► Well kitted-out gravel machine

**Y**ou could mistake the alloy tubes for steel they're so slender. The satin matt-blue finish also keeps things understated and even the fluoro graphics don't detract from a great-looking bike.

It's very well set for fixtures and fittings with internal cable routing for 1x and 2x drivetrains, full rack and 'guard mounts, top tube bento-box style mounts and three sets of bottle bosses. The full carbon fork has rack mounts and a drilled bridge for full-length mudguards, plus triple bosses for anything-style cages on the legs (1), internal routing for the brakes and for a dynamo on the right hand fork leg.

I was blown away with the equipment levels. The wheel package is WTB's excellent and hardy STi23 tubeless-compatible gravel rims running on cartridge bearing hubs (2), which stayed tight and true giving plenty of life with their responsive spring in the rough and on the road. They are shod with Panaracer's excellent 38c GravelKing SK tyres, their tight block tread



**TOP** Fixtures and fittings for any configuration you could want  
**ABOVE** The Jari fork routes the brake hose internally

excels in dry, dusty conditions and the close block pattern rolls well on tarmac too.

Fuji's component partners Oval provide the rest of the build with competent alloy seatpost and stem and a well-shaped saddle. The Oval 325 bar combines a 4-degree sweep and wide 25-degree flare. This works perfectly in the shallow drops on technical sections, providing masses of wrist clearance while the back sweep shortens the reach giving you a more upright position on the hoods, enabling you to look down the trail without craning your neck. The bar tape is a generous 4mm thick and compensates for any stiffness in the oversized alloy bar with foam-backed cushioning.

The drivetrain is SRAM's entry-level Apex 1x 11-42

### SPECIFICATIONS

**Weight** 10.2kg (58cm) **Frame** A6-SL super-butted aluminium **Fork** FC 440 carbon **Gears** SRAM Apex 1x **Brakes** Tektro MD-C550 cable disc **Wheels** WTB STi23 rims **Finishing kit**, Oval 325 gravel bar, Oval 438 saddle, Oval 300 seatpost, Panaracer GravelKing SK 700 x 38c tyres, FSA Omega adventure chainset 40t



**ABOVE** The Jari's slender alloy frame adds up to low weight for the money

**RIGHT** The wide flare of the bar means Apex levers are set at a sharp angle

**BELOW** The cable-actuated Tektro discs perform surprisingly well



The frame has every fixture you could wish for, plus it handles with superb stability off-road without becoming bland on tarmac

cassette combined with a 40-tooth chainring on FSA's Omega adventure cranks (3). Unusually, the Apex setup is for cable disc brakes not hydraulics and these are combined with Tektro's MD-C550s. The actuation is dual-piston and in use they work really well. The lever response is a bit springier in feel than the progressive pressure you get from hydraulics but I never felt under-braked. A cable system is a good option when it comes to long tours as it's easier to carry a spare brake cable than a bleed kit and hydraulic fluid. I did get the occasional front rotor rubbing after a few prolonged dusty descents but usually a couple of sharp tugs on the brake would clear whatever was blocking the pads from fully releasing.

The 40 x 11-42 drivetrain gives the ideal spread for proper off-road excursions and 40-11 is a more than ample top gear for spinning along tarmac roads. I only found it limiting on long, rapid road descents where I'd spin out the gear before I'd got to full downhill-thrash mode.

Fuji describes the Jari as having "adventure" geometry with a longer wheelbase and slacker head and seat angles. My 58cm/XL test bike has a 72-degree head and 72.5-degree seat, around a degree or two slacker than a road bike.

The 1037mm wheelbase adds stability but the 609mm stack is lower and sportier than I'd

### HIGHS

Great ride position; smart handling; full set of fittings for the frameset

### LOWS

Cable-disc brakes limit upgrade potential

### BUY IF...

You want a bike that's more adventure tourer than gravel racer

expect yet the reach is quite short at 383mm. All these numbers add up to a bike that has quite the dual personality: up on the hoods it's a pleasant cruiser that's happy to track along byways, towpaths and trails at a sprightly enough pace. Get into the drops and its stiff alloy frame and great wheel package make it responsive but with a very stable feel, thanks to that slack head angle and generous 64mm trail on the fork. A racy road bike will have a trail around 57mm, an endurance bike around 60mm.

The Jari may look under-specced with cable discs but I am impressed. It's light for the money and easy to live with. The frame has every fixture you could wish for, plus it handles with superb stability off-road without becoming bland on tarmac.

## THE VERDICT

A bike that impresses both on road and off

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER...



**FOR A LITTLE MORE...**  
FUJI JARI CARBON 1.3  
£2499.99

Fuji's Jari Carbon shares the same adventure geometry and has plenty of fixtures and fittings for racks, guards, bottles and more. SRAM Rival 1x and WTB's KOM light i23 wheels fill out a great spec for the money.



**FOR A LITTLE LESS...**  
FUJI JARI 1.5  
£1249

The same bike as the 1.3 but instead of a 1x SRAM drivetrain you get Shimano's Tiagra in a more road-friendly 2x setup. Making a versatile gravel bike even more so if you spend the lion's share of your time on tarmac.



**WE SAY...**  
Fun to ride on the trails and will serve you well as a commuter or tourer

# MERIDA SILEX 400

£1400 » Mountain-bike influenced design

The Silex takes more influence from mountain biking than road. The difference lies in the increased stack to a tall 663mm, and a long reach of 430mm (see p40 for descriptions of both stack and reach). Longer reach usually means a lower position as you are more stretched out, whereas a taller stack means a more upright position. Here, Merida combines this mix of dimensions with a short 80mm stem. This means a position similar to a standard endurance bike, but with handling optimised for off-road as a slack 71-degree head angle increases the trail; this stabilises the front wheel while a short stem speeds up the handling responses from a long fork (397mm) (1).

Stem length has a big influence on how a bike feels to steer: a long stem gives you a longer steering arm – so it's less responsive but more stable, think of a steering wheel on a truck, whereas a shorter stem makes it more responsive to steering inputs but feels less stable. Cleverly, on the Silex, Merida has sped up the steering



**TOP** A tall front end with a short steering cockpit works well  
**ABOVE** The Merida's full carbon fork is drilled to fit full-length mudguards

response while slackening the head angle and lengthening the fork, so you have a bike that feels absolutely at home in the rough. It tracks superbly well and cuts through bumps with assured control without feeling sluggish.

We were hugely impressed with the carbon Silex, which we reviewed in issue 339, praising the comfort of the chassis over rough, rutted tracks. This more affordable aluminium interpretation deserves high praise too, with the same full carbon CF2 fork, which is brilliant at cushioning the worst of rough surfaces with its swept-forward legs that taper down towards an almost vertical 12mm thru-axle (2). At the back the alloy 30.9mm post can't quite keep the same plush

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Weight** 11.7kg (58cm) **Frame** Prolite 66 triple butted aluminium  
**Fork** Carbon CF2 **Gears** Shimano GRX400 **Brakes** Shimano GRX400  
**Wheels** Merida Comp SL **Finishing kit** Merida Expert GR alloy bar, Merida Expert CW stem, Merida Expert saddle, Maxxis Rambler 700 x 38c tyres

It blends superb ride position and brilliant off-road handling making this a bike that combines value with performance



**ABOVE** Tall front end, long top tube, slack head angle and a short stem

**LEFT** Shimano's GRX features a switchable 'clutch' on the rear mech

**BELOW** Hydroformed and shaped alloy give the Silex a touch of class



## HIGHS

Very clever chassis design; handling; value

## LOWS

Sticky freehub and slender rims

## BUY IF...

You want a bike that majors on off-road handling and offers quality at an excellent price

feeling as the front, though it's topped with a comfortable perch in Merida's Expert saddle.

The frame features guard mounts, rack mounts, two cages (with two positions on the down tube) and double bosses on the fork legs for either a further two bottles or low rider/anything mounts. That means it could easily be put into service touring, bikepacking or adventure cycling (it'll also take 650b wheels). Or just simply commuting during the week and exploring at the weekends.

Equipment levels are a good-value mix of Shimano's gravel-specific GRX from both 400 and 600 levels. The sub-compact 46/30 chainset and an 11-34 cassette give an excellent spread of gearing for off-road and on. The same is true of the Maxxis Rambler tyres, the 38c volume is covered with a tightly packed small-block tread that rolls well on tarmac and hard-packed dirt. The large shoulder blocks on the tyres provide bite in corners off-road but are so tall (and soft) they squirm somewhat when cornering.

Merida provides the lion's share of finishing kit with own-brand parts. The cockpit is a fine combination of a smoothly shaped, minimal, alloy Expert CW stem and Expert GR bar. The bar shape is excellent offering a small amount of flare. Along with its oversized tops, padded textured tape makes for great hold on the tops, drops or hoods.

The Merida Comp SL wheelset is running cartridge bearing hubs although I did find that the freehub was somewhat draggy initially. On inspection the freehub had been packed with too much grease. A quick wipe and it was friction free.

The shallow aluminium rims roll well but the dimensions are narrow (for gravel) internally at between 17 and 18mm. The 38c tyres are about as large as I'd go (3). Going to the maximum allowed by the frame and fork of

42c (in either 650b or 700c) would need a wider rim to get the best performance.

The Silex offers something quite different in what is a rather packed playing field of gravel bikes. It blends superb ride position and brilliant off-road handling with fantastic ride quality making it a bike that combines value with performance.

## THE VERDICT

Huge fun factor from this very accomplished machine

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER...



**FOR A LITTLE MORE...**  
**MERIDA SILEX 700**  
£1900

The 700 shares the same aluminium frame but here it's premium Shimano GRX810 throughout with adventure 2x gearing of 48/31 chainset and an 11-34 cassette for a sportier gear range than the 400.



**FOR A LITTLE LESS...**  
**MERIDA SILEX 300**  
£1200

Sharing the same sculpted and shaped aluminium frame as the 400, the 300 replaces Shimano GRX with a mix of SRAM Apex gearing and Tektro's cable-operated Spyre disc brakes.



**WE SAY...**  
Amazing value, top-quality gravel bike that's kitted out with excellent features

# ON-ONE FREE RANGER SRAM FORCE 1

£1799.99 ▶ Carbon frame and fork, and SRAM Force at an amazing price

**O**n-One was started by ex-mountain bike journalist Brant Richards as a response to increasingly complex mountain bikes. He designed simple, affordable singlespeed bikes, and pairing with direct-to-market legends Planet-X brought them to the forefront of the road singlespeed/ fixed gear trend in the late noughties. With the advent of gravel bikes On-One has started to push out some classy, cost-effective bikes, initially with the On-One Space Chicken and now this poultry themed bike.

The frameset is built from high-grade Japanese Toray T700 carbon (Toray is a brand of carbon used by some of the most respected brands in cycling) (1). The Free Ranger frame is bang up to date with its flat-mount disc compatibility, 12mm thru-axles and dual wheel size compatibility. It's versatile too with full-length 'guard mounts and rack mounts.

Aside from the carbon frameset you get SRAM's premium mechanical Force 1x group



**TOP** The flared On-One bar is named 'Brian'; On-One doesn't say why... **ABOVE** SRAM Force hydraulic brakes are a cut above in this test

with carbon crankset and powerful hydraulic brakes. The drivetrain mix of a 42-tooth chainring and 11-42 cassette is super off-road with that 42/42 combo giving a 1:1 ratio that'll see you up the steepest technical gravel climbs with your pedals still turning, rather than you hiking. At the other end, the 42/11 combination gives a 106-inch gear with the big volume tyres that saw me through fast gravel descents. When descending long, fast tarmac hills you may, as I did, find yourself wishing for another sprocket.

The finishing kit is quality stuff with Selcof's alloy seatpost and stem (2). TEC's Rector saddle is well padded and its elongated and sculpted channel shape is certainly comfortable. The curiously named On-One 'Brian'

## SPECIFICATIONS

- Weight** 9.87kg (XL)
- Frame** Toray T700 carbon
- Fork** Carbon
- Gears** SRAM Force 1x
- Brakes** SRAM Force hydraulic
- Wheels** Fulcrum Racing 900 DB
- Finishing kit** On-One Brian bar, TEC Rector saddle, Selcof Zeta V2 alloy post, Selcof Zeta 6061 alloy stem, Bruce Gordon by Panaracer Rock & Road 700x43c tyres



**ABOVE** Carbon frame and fork and full SRAM Force 1 at this price?

**RIGHT** SRAM's Force 1x chainset is a classy piece of carbon design

**BELOW** Tec's Rector saddle is new to me: I'm impressed with its comfort



If your idea of gravel riding is sprinting through singletrack in the woods you won't find a better value option right now

bar has 32mm of flare at the drops. It's a more subtle flare so it keeps the SRAM levers in a more vertical position while still allowing plenty of clearance when you're in the drops.

The Fulcrum's Racing 900 DB (3) rolling stock is a good solid choice, the alloy rims' 19mm internal width holds the big-volume 43c tyres well. They are built tough with 28 spokes at either end held in place by proper brass nipples. A wider rim is better as big tyres on narrow rims shape badly and have an adverse effect on handling. The claimed 1900g all-up weight isn't going to impress weight weenies and the lack of tubeless compatibility won't impress the tech-geeks either but the 900s are a solid wheel and I was really impressed with the Bruce Gordon by Panaracer tyres they are shod with.

Bruce Gordon (who sadly died last year) revived one of the earliest 29-inch mountain-bike tyre designs (from legendary mountain-bike designer Joe Murray). This skin-walled tyre combines a compliant, lightweight casing with a tread that blends stepped bars with block pieces. On dry, dusty trails it's simply one of the best gravel tyres I've tried off-road. Its tenacious bite in the corners and fast roll in a straight line impressed. The super-soft sidewalls and soft durometer rubber of the tread do sap some performance when on tarmac though. Compared to the skinnier Panaracer

**HIGHS**  
Incredible value for money; light, aggressive riding

**LOWS**  
Big treaded tyres are slower on the road

**BUY IF...**  
You want to spend all day, everyday riding gravel

GravelKings on the Fuji I couldn't hold quite the same pace on tarmac.

It's certainly at the racy end of gravel with its 72-degree head angle and 73-degree seat. The long 1052mm wheelbase (on my 58cm test bike) majors on stability while the fork offset combined with the large volume tyres adds up to a trail figure around 64mm giving the Free Ranger a stable feel to its handling. The stack of 608mm would be sporty on an

endurance bike and the 393mm reach is similarly racy. What all of this adds up to is a rapid, yet confident bike off road and when you combine that feel with its low weight and great gearing it's simply excellent. If you want to go long-haul trucking it's a little racy but if your idea of gravel riding is sprinting through singletrack in the woods you won't find a better value option.

## THE VERDICT

Astonishing value for money, off-road rig

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER...



**FOR A LITTLE MORE...**  
ON-ONE FREE RANGER SHIMANO GRX £1999.99

Prefer Shimano's 1x gravel solution to SRAM's? For an extra £200 you can get the same build as the Force bike but with Shimano's top-of-the-range GRX RX810 hydraulic brakes and RX810 drivetrain.



**FOR A LITTLE LESS...**  
ON-ONE FREE RANGER SRAM RIVAL 1 £1599.99

The same carbon frame, fork and build as the Force 1, switching in SRAM's second-tier 1x group Rival to save you a few hundred pounds. You still get the same Selcof finishing kit and top-notch Fulcrum disc wheels.

Inspiration came from mountain bikes and progressive geometry – looks odd but feels so right!



Senior Tech Editor, Warren, out on the singletracks and trails

## AND THE WINNER IS... MERIDA SILEX 400

A unique design takes the crown

**T**his test has been fun but a tough one to judge as every bike here has its merits. The Marin's lively steel frame and great ride position make for an incredibly fun experience, especially on long days out.

The Fuji majors on versatility and while it make a good commuter, it tilts its spec to the more adventurous rider looking towards multi-day epic tours and challenges. British brand On-One has yet again overturned the apple cart when it comes to out-and-out value. We were impressed by the spec on the Free Ranger. Try and find a similarly equipped bike from the big bike brands and you'd be looking at around a £1000 more on your bill. It's not just about value though: the Free Ranger combines stable handling, low weight and some inspired component choices with a bike that's genuinely

exciting to ride off road. If it's pure gravel you want, then look no further.

The winner, however, is Merida's Silex 400. We've always been impressed with Merida's approach to gravel bike design. It hasn't looked to road or cyclocross bikes for inspiration, believing that even the greatest examples of road-derived gravel or race-inspired cross bikes are somewhat compromised. Rather, Merida has taken inspiration from mountain bikes and the progressive geometry that may look odd but feels so right when you're riding. The long frame yet short cockpit allied with a long trail makes for one of the best handling gravel bikes around. That it feels good on the road and particularly when riding in an urban environment means that the 400 is a weekend warrior that'll also get you to work every day with confidence and, above all, is lots of fun.

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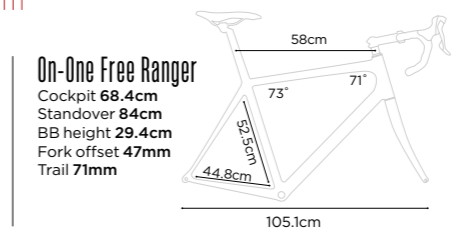
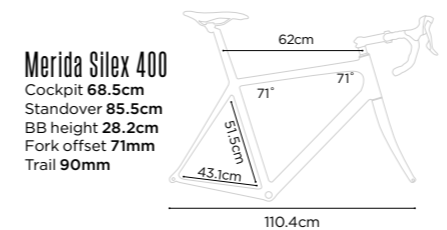
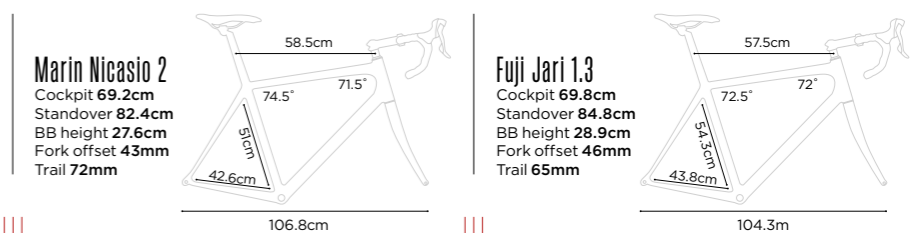
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	MARIN NICASIO 2 £1350 ★★★★★	FUJI JARI 1.3 ADVENTURE £1399.99 ★★★★★	MERIDA SILEX 400 £1400 ★★★★★	ON-ONE FREE RANGER £1799.99 ★★★★★
<b>SIZE TESTED</b>	58cm	58cm	XL	XL
<b>SIZES AVAILABLE</b>	50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 60	46, 49, 52, 54, 56, 58, 61	XS, S, M, L, XL	XS, S, M, L, XL
<b>WEIGHT</b>	11.7kg	10.2kg	11.7kg	9.87kg
<b>FRAME</b>	Series 2 Cromoly steel	A6-SL aluminium	Prolite 66 triple butted aluminium	Toray T-700 + hi-mod carbon
<b>FORK</b>	Full carbon, tapered steerer	FC-440 Full carbon, tapered steerer	CF-2 carbon	Toray T-700 carbon
<b>FRAME ALIGNMENT</b>	Perfect	Perfect	Perfect	Perfect
<b>TRANSMISSION</b>				
<b>CHAINSET</b>	FSA Omega MegaExo 50/34	FSA Omega Adventure BB386 Evo 40t	Shimano GRX600 (46/30)	SRAM Force 1x Carbon 42t chainring
<b>BOTTOM BRACKET</b>	FSA MegaExo	FSA BB386 EVO, BSA Thread	Shimano Press-fit BB71	SRAM GXP XR
<b>CASSETTE</b>	Shimano 10-speed, 11-34	SRAM PG1130 - 11-42	Shimano CS-HG50 (11-34)	SRAM PG-1130 (11-42)
<b>CHAIN</b>	KMC X10	KMC X11 EL-1	KMC X10	SRAM PCT110
<b>DERAILLEURS</b>	Shimano Tiagra ST-RS405	SRAM Apex 1	Shimano GRX400	SRAM Force 1
<b>GEAR LEVERS</b>	Shimano Tiagra	SRAM Apex 1	Shimano GRX400	SRAM Force 1
<b>WHEELS</b>				
<b>FRONT AND REAR</b>	Marin alloy double wall rims on forged alloy hubs	WTB ST i23 rims on cartridge bearing alloy hubs	Merida Comp AL rims on VP CLK hubs	Fulcrum Racing 900 DB
<b>TYRES</b>	G-One all-round TLE 700 x 35c	Panaracer Gravel King SK 700c x 38c	Maxxis Rambler 700 x 38c tyres	Bruce Gordon by Panaracer 700 x 43c
<b>WHEEL WEIGHT</b>	1.32 (F); 1.83 (R)	1.69 (F); 2.37 (R)	1.61 (F); 2.14 (R)	1.78 (F); 2.52 (R)
<b>COMPONENTS</b>				
<b>STEM</b>	Marin 3D forged alloy	Oval concepts 313 alloy	Merida Expert CW	Selcof Zeta 6061 alloy
<b>HANDLEBAR</b>	Marin butted alloy compact 12-degree flare	Oval concepts 323 6061 alloy	Merida Expert GR	On-One Brian alloy
<b>HEADSET</b>	FSA Orbit IS	FSA No. 42	Merida M2331	Selcof Sport
<b>SADDLE</b>	Marin Beyond Road concept	Oval Concepts 438	Merida Comp CC	TEC Rector
<b>SEATPOST</b>	Marin alloy 27.2	Oval concepts 300 6061 alloy	Merida Comp CC	Selcof Zeta V2
<b>BRAKES</b>	Shimano BR-RS405 hydraulic	Tektro MD-C550 mechanical discs	Shimano GRX400 with Shimano RT10 rotors	SRAM Force hydraulic disc

### SPECIFICATIONS & MEASUREMENTS

Geometry is probably the most important factor when buying a bike but, as you can see from these tables, even bikes nominally the same size can vary considerably. All reputable bike retailers – high street and online – should ensure the bike fits you.



### NEXT ISSUE EBIKE COMMUTERS

As more of us prepare to head back into the office in September and would like avoid public transport, we look at four of the best ebike commuters from Ribble, Boardman, Raleigh and Carrera.