

Feature

Raise the bar

'Gravel' riding in the UK is rarely best on a drop-bar bike with 38mm tyres. Dan Joyce, Isla Rowntree and Guy Kesteven explain what they use and why



GRAVEL BIKING IS basically 1990s mountain biking. Plenty of cycling articles, keyboard-warrior

comments and YouTube videos start with this premise. While it's an oversimplification – gravel bikes are not mountain bikes, not even old ones – there's more than a grain of truth in it for UK cyclists.

Gravel bikes are marketed more as go-anywhere, do-anything all-terrain bikes than as all-roads bikes. The imagery suggests that they're the perfect Swiss-army-knife bike, excelling not just on gravel roads but also the same bridleways and less technical trails that made up much of 1990s mountain biking. They're not. They don't.

The United States has more than a million miles of unsurfaced roads, on which gravel bikes are great. The UK doesn't. Forest fire-roads and green lanes are as close as we come. A mixed-surface ride here – on one of Cycling UK's long-distance routes, for example (cyclinguk.org/long-distance) – generally includes rights of way that are literally off road and not just off tarmac.

So why are so many cyclists using drop-bar bikes with medium-width tyres for rides where a flat-bar bike with bigger tyres would offer more comfort and control? It's partly (OK, mostly) down to media and marketing. Possibly there's an element of



denialism from riders who have just dropped two or three grand on a new bike. (Yes, you can ride a gravel bike there – but you could say the same about an off-road unicycle.) It's also a reflection of how we got here.

Gravel bikes budded from the cyclocross branch of cycling's family tree. 'Cross bikes have drop bars and narrow (30–something millimetre) tyres. This is not because those are better for cyclocross, as Thomas Frischknecht and Nick Craig proved by winning on flat-bar CX bikes before they were banned. It's because drops and narrow tyres are enforced by the UCI. Why? Tradition. A few years ago I spoke

to Jeff Jones about his own bikes. Cyclocross, he said, is like having a foot race where all the competitors have to run in high heels.

Gravel bikes have diverged from cyclocross bikes as designers have grappled with the problem of making an essentially unsuitable bike better able

to deal with off-road trails. The geometry has changed. Tyres are bigger. Bars have widened and flared. All this has helped but, I would argue, misses the point.

If you really want to raise the bar for what

we consider gravel riding in the UK, you have to start by ditching that drop bar altogether. →

“Gravel bikes are marketed more as all-terrain bikes than as all-roads bikes”

Off-the-peg options

We (Isla, Guy and Dan) have settled on our bike choices through trial and error, having ridden countless bikes and bike setups. But we're not claiming to have unique insights. Some manufacturers already offer flat-bar gravel bikes. Here are a few.

MERIDA SPEEDER 100 £800

Merida's Speeder hybrid range, which had 32mm tyres and was aimed at commuters and fitness riders, has 'gone gravel' (sic). The new bikes have: 45mm tyres, with room for 50mm; a slacker head angle; and more frame mounts. A mid-step frame is an option.

merida-bikes.com



SCOTT SCALE GRAVEL 10 £2,349

Your eyes don't deceive you: the Scale Gravel 10 is fully rigid carbon-fibre mountain bike with 29x2.4in XC tyres and inboard Spirigrips for more hand positions. It's equipped with 1x12 SRAM S1000 Eagle AXS wireless gearing.

scott-sports.com

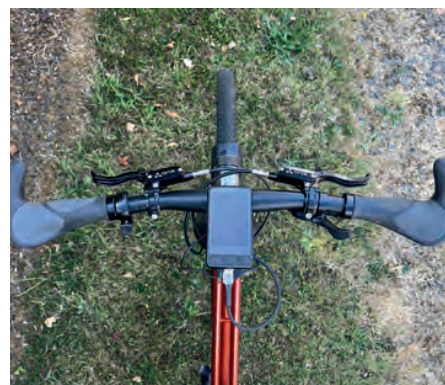


SONDER CAMINO AL APEXI FLAT BAR £1,199

The Camino is 'built for those moments when the road turns into trail and the bridleway drops off into singletrack'. Most have drops. This, the cheapest by £300, has a flat bar, plus a carbon fork, 1x12 SRAM Apex gears and 45mm tyres.

alpkit.com





Isla's Rosetta

Rosetta is Islabikes' new flat-bar, mid-step gravel bike for adults. It came about after I'd built what turned out to be the first prototype for my wife. We love Cycling UK's long-distance routes and she wanted a dedicated bike for that kind of riding – interesting UK-style off road, interspersed with quiet roads and cycleways. Her brief was a flat handlebar, a low step-over, very low gears and all the travel practicalities included.

On our subsequent trips I continued to ride my old drop-bar off-road tourer, and I found myself becoming jealous of her bike. She was taking in the views, descending with confidence and getting on and off her loaded bike more easily than I was. It occurred to me that other people might enjoy something similar, so I set about developing a version for production, starting with one for me!

The accepted format of a gravel bike is a dropped handlebar, a high top tube and, often, surprisingly high gears. We imagine ourselves thrashing along flat, smooth gravel roads like we see in the cycling media. The reality, however, is that we ride muddy singletrack, grassy descents, old railway lines, pretty lanes, woodland trails and, yes, occasionally a gravel road. The traditional gravel bike is best suited to racing, and yet most gravel

riders don't race at all. So I'd like to challenge these norms, starting with the handlebar.

I'm no stranger to riding a drop-bar bike off road – I've won several national championships in cyclocross – but recently I've made the switch to a flat bar for off-road touring. And what a revelation it has been! The most notable change is to braking. My smallish hands can't reach the levers properly from the drops (and, let's face it, who goes down there anyway?), and braking from the hoods is an awkward, unnatural sideways movement, where the hand has little strength. Modern hydraulic brakes make the best of this but it's still no fun on a long, rough descent.

“The traditional gravel bike is best suited to racing, yet most aren't raced”

So why don't cyclocross racers complain about this? Well, here's the thing: you rarely brake hard or long in a cyclocross. Any braking just requires a light, brief touch to scrub off a bit of speed, which is completely different from descending an off-road pass with luggage on, where prolonged, heavy braking is essential and hand fatigue quickly becomes a factor. A flat bar puts the brake levers in a position that makes best use of the hands' strength, and the levers are usually much easier to reach than drop-bar levers, especially if you have smaller hands.

This, coupled with a slightly more



upright 'sightseeing stance' for the rider, and a mid-step frame for ease of dismounting for gates and tea breaks, has increased our enjoyment of our multi-day trips, in particular – with no downsides for short, luggage-free blasts after work, either. →

MY 'GRAVEL' BIKE Islabikes Rosetta £3,299.99, plus accessories

Key features

- Flat bar for natural control and confident braking.
- Ergonomic grips with integrated mini bar-ends for multiple hand positions and all-day support.
- Mid-step frame for easy mounting and dismounting, even with luggage.
- A choice of three tyre

styles to suit your riding – 35mm road, 40mm gravel or 57mm XC.

- Shorter-than-conventional cranks for comfort and rider longevity, with no loss of efficiency.
- Full range of tried-and-tested travel-ready accessories to tailor it to your kind of adventure

More info: www.islabikes.co.uk



Feature



Guy's Merida Big Nine

Every time I post a test video on a gravel bike, someone inevitably comments: "I wouldn't ride that down there." What's interesting is that those comments often come from totally opposite perspectives. Gravel riders who haven't tried a mountain bike mean I'm being very brave/reckless riding rougher terrain on a rigid bike with a drop bar and skinny tyres. Whereas those with a mountain bike background quite rightly think I'm just being stupid when I could be using suspension, a flat bar and fat tyres. And the thing is, both of them are 'right', because for a lot of the riding we call 'gravel' in the UK, a lightweight MTB makes far more sense.

While bigger tyres add a few hundred grams and suspension forks up to a kilo, a flat bar and separate brakes and shifters rather than drop-bar-combo controls can win a lot of that back. Mountain bike frames are often comparable in weight to gravel frames and sometimes significantly lighter – despite being stronger and having more tyre clearance and more stable, safer steering. What XC tyres add in weight they can give back in easier rolling on rougher terrain. The further you ride, the less you'll feel fatigue from transferred vibration and lumpy surfaces, and from wrestling with steep 'off-roadie' steering. The kick

you'll get cruising up to a conventional gravel or road biker on a climb is definitely worth some extra Watts.

This isn't just anecdotal or statistical surmise. I spent most of last year experimenting with various builds on a Mason Macro hardtail, moving from rigid to suspension forks and then from drop bar to flat bar, all the while working through countless different hyper-fast XC and fat gravel tyre options. I even experimented with prototype wheels with deep-section gravel rims on MTB hubs, along with mini bar extensions, which I've been a fan of for years.

Going back to what's 'right', though: it depends entirely on what you want as a rider. For example, I loved the Macro with big tyres, a rigid fork and a wide drop-bar. A flat bar and rigid fork didn't chime with me, despite being super light, as I couldn't make the most of the flat bar without suspension. But then a drop bar and a suspension fork didn't feel great for the opposite reason.

And while the conventional hardtail XC format is undoubtedly faster as things get rougher, I know a full-suspension XC bike would be faster and smoother still.

But who said faster was automatically more fun or more fulfilling?

Because unless you're a serious racer, surely the whole reason to ride a bike off road is fundamentally silly. That's a whole other conversation entirely – and everyone will have a different and equally right answer to that, too. →

"For a lot of UK 'gravel', a lightweight MTB makes far more sense"



MY 'GRAVEL' BIKE

Merida Big Nine carbon race hardtail

Key features

- Lightweight carbon frame. This is the cheaper, heavier Big Nine frame, but at 1,300g it's still comparable to most gravel bikes' but with much more tyre space.
- SQlab Innerbarends. These mini forward extensions, set at a 500mm spacing, mean better aerodynamics for fast sections and more stable steering on climbs. The flat-bar-and-bar-end combo with MTB controls is still much lighter than a drop-bar setup, too.
- Silly-fast tyres. Currently Vittoria Peyote Race front and Terreno Race rear for a faster off-road roll than any skinny gravel tyre. They're not much slower on the road either.
- Trimmed handlebar. Chopped from 780 to 750mm to reduce weight and improve tree-clipping clearance when I don't need the extra leverage for extreme trails.

More info: for a video of Guy testing different setups side by side, visit: bit.ly/guykestv-gravel-v-MTB

Feature



Dan's Carver Gnarvester

The only gravel bikes I've enjoyed as all-terrain bikes have been drop-bar 29ers like the Genesis Vagabond, Mason ISO and Salsa Cutthroat. They've ridden better off road, thanks to higher trail figures (slacker head angles), taller stack heights (longer head tubes and forks), and wider tyres. Only the drop bars held them back.

Yet if you began with the frameset of one of these bikes and fitted a Jones Loop H-bar (or On-One's copy, the Geoff), you could build a great UK gravel bike. More easily than if you started with an MTB frame, in fact, as mountain bikes tend to be lower and longer, and a Jones-style bar works better when it's higher and closer than a standard flat bar.

But I used a mountain bike frame as it's what I had: my 11-year-old Carver Gnarvester, a titanium MTB designed for the 29x3in tyres that the industry has largely abandoned. I wrote about this bike in the Feb/Mar 2016 issue. It was my off-road bike for everything until the down tube developed a terminal-looking crack. Patrick Banks of Limit Fabrications (limitfabrications.co.uk) fixed it neatly and economically, but by then I had another mountain bike. The Gnarvester needed a new role.

It looks incongruous as a gravel bike, with huge tyres on 45mm-wide

rims, but works very well. The titanium frame and Travers Prong carbon fork have mountain bike geometry, big clearances and fittings for a rear pannier rack and for cargo/bottle cages on the fork. Those wide, low-pressure tyres do away with the need for suspension on rougher terrain. On loose surfaces like gravel, the bigger tyre footprint vastly improves traction and flotation. Only on smooth, hard-surface climbs is extra drag evident.

The Jones-style Geoff handlebar, which I've raised by fitting a steeply angled stem, provides as many hand positions as a drop bar. To get aero, I added Spigrips to the front loop. Their flared ends kept my hands in place off road but they were too short so

I replaced them with some 120mm-long 'West Biking' bar-ends found on eBay (£8.32).

The resulting time-trial-style position is more aerodynamic than the wide drops or hoods of a gravel

bike – and maybe of a road bike. When testing Schwalbe's G-One Speed Pro TLR tyres, I kept up fine on this bike on an 18mph-average road ride. Off road, where I've mostly been using tougher, grippier 29+ XC tyres, the Gnarvester has proved itself more comfortable and capable than clubmates' gravel bikes – and at least as quick. After bruising my forearms riding on rough fire roads, I added armrests scavenged from an old aero-bar. ●

“The bigger tyre footprint vastly improves traction and flotation”



MY 'GRAVEL' BIKE Repurposed Carver Gnarvester

Key features

- Lightweight frame and fork. These help offset the higher weight of the wheels, tyres and handlebar.
- On-One Geoff handlebar with 120mm bar-ends (fitted as shown after trying all orientations), TT armrests, Jones H-bar Pack and a Beeline Velo 2 on a stem-cap mount.
- Wide, fast-rolling tubeless tyres. Any wide MTB or gravel tyre would work but I'm mostly

using 29x3in XC tyres, which can be run at lower pressures.

- 155mm cranks. Better ground clearance, more fluid pedalling and a roomier aero position.
- Dropper seatpost (125mm). Not essential but nice for the tricky descents my gravel-bike companions tend to walk. Also handy for putting feet on the floor while sitting and chatting.

More info: cyclinguk.org/cycle-febmar-2016