

Top and main pic: Hewitt Cheviot SE

Middle: Longstaff Audax

Bottom: Thorn XTC



Distance bikes

There was a lot of competition for the distance bike class awards this year

This was probably the hardest single category to call, with five bikes all having a good case to be the winner, so perming a final three proved extremely difficult. Interestingly, though we are long-term admirers of 26in-wheeled tourers, and though the market continues to move in this direction, two out of the three top places go to bikes sporting the more traditional 700C-sized wheels.

Third place goes to the **Thorn XTC**, (£999, C+148) a British-built frame from a company with a deservedly high reputation for the quality of its tourers. The XTC has 26in wheels mated to a Reynolds 725 frame and a 531 fork; drivetrain is mainly Shimano's off-road LX. Fit shouldn't be a problem: there are four sizes, each offering a choice of top tube length. Handling is sure and nimble, whether loaded or not. All in all, the XTC is a true thoroughbred. SJSC ☎ 01278 441502, www.sjscycles.com.

Our runner-up is a masterpiece of the frame builder's art, and the man whose name it bears is sadly missed, the **Longstaff Audax** (£1795, C+150). The Audax is one of the few bikes to score a perfect

10 for its frame. As you'd expect it is a joy to ride – basically you get a race frame that's been relaxed a little in the name of comfort.

That it's a compact may be unexpected (the Audax is also available with a standard top tube for those who prefer) but the thinking behind a compact Audax bike is sound, the extra length of exposed seatpost on a compact adds a touch more compliance to the ride – something that could make all the difference if you're covering distance. Our bike came kitted out with Tubus rack and SKS guards and there is a choice of wheels and groupset. Had we tested the full Centaur equipped model at £1,425 (prices go as low as £1,250) the Longstaff might well have scored an overall 10 and probably bagged top spot here too. Longstaff Cycles ☎ 01782 561966, www.longstaffcycles.co.uk

And the winner is...

Instead for the second year in a row, our Distance Bike award goes to Paul Hewitt for the **Cheviot SE** (£999, C+151). We like this bike a lot, but what we particularly like is that it builds on the success of last year's winner, the Cheviot.

The SE boasts a Reynolds 725 frame, rather than the Cheviot's 631, slightly wider rear dropouts – which are chromed (well, it looks nice and there is less paint to chip), extra bottle braze-ons, up-rated tyres, Hewitt hand-built wheels with up-rated hubs, XT and LX derailleurs, Dura Ace levers, SKS mudguards, and a Blackburn Expedition rack. The British-applied finish to the Taiwanese frame is superb, and on top of all this, Paul Hewitt will measure you up on a jig before fitting. This is as close as it gets to a bespoke frame, at an off-the-peg price.

Bex Hopkins' best bikes



For everyday use I was quite taken by the Specialized Sirrus range – the Sirrus Sport is amazing value for money at £499, and makes getting round town a speedy and stimulating experience. Kitted out

with a rack and panniers it outperforms a packhorse and can still be used as a winter training bike and for pretty much anything in between too without feeling compromised. Comfort is key here with the flat handlebar for good traffic visibility and effective braking ideal for city use.

Staying within the city limits the Dahon Speed D6 (see Testbench) took me by surprise. Not being a fan of smaller wheels per se the performance and steadiness of this 20in folding bike shone through my previous cynicism. Life as a commuter was made simple with the efficient and easy to use folding design, it's pretty compact too.

A tight turning circle and balanced cornering made whipping through traffic fun and controlled, variable position handlebars allowed an upright riding position ideal for a good view of the road.

For 2004 the range of high performance tarmac/city bikes seems to have exploded, various wheel size and handlebar set-up combos with specific geometry frames all emphasise the fast yet controlled riding that has encouraged so many new riders to the road and commuter scene this year.

Roll on the spring so we can test these new bikes on warm dry roads!

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Dawes Sardar (£699.99, C+143). Simon really liked this super 26in-wheeled mid-range tourer when he tested it back in the spring. Your cash buys a bike that will last a lifetime and take anything you can chuck at it, from commuting to expedition riding.

Thorn Explorer (£999, C+145), a tandem for under a grand will suit beginners and keen leisure riders – loads of options and a lot of bike for the money. Great for day rides and short tours, but you can't fit a drag brake, so maybe not one for the long haul expeditions.