



THORN RAVEN

Equipped with Rohloff's superb Speedhub for a touch over a grand – is this the ultimate do anything bike?

Thorn's all-new Raven Adventure Tour is one of a range of Rohloff-hubbed Ravens. It's a bicycle that is as at home in the wilds as it is on tough city streets.

The Raven's frame is Taiwanese – built there to Thorn's recipe. Build quality is impressive, with neat TIG welds and beautiful cast, Rohloff specific, stainless steel vertical dropouts. All cables run under the top tube, while a light alloy eccentric bottom bracket in a steel shell allows chain adjustment. For a faster ride, the £1,300 Reynolds 853 Raven Sport is also available, with lighter tubing and shorter chainstays but less provision for heavy loads – check it out on the Thorn stand.

Both models share a wide choice in forks. Our Tour came with twin plate 531 ST blades, borrowed from the heavyweight EXP and ideal for serious hauling duties; a shorter, lighter 531 fork is also an option (without braze ons for a rack), as well as a carbon version for an extra £50 – and even a suspension fork, the Fox Vanilla RL.

Sizing is a little unusual, with six frame sizes available with alternating short and long top tubes – with a little creative use of stem lengths and angles, everyone should be covered. There's also the pick of five finishes, with powder coats typically more durable and wet finishes more lustrous.

A quality FSA Orbit XL headset and every braze on you can imagine is included, racks, guards and three bottle mounts, dynamo and pump.

Although the Adventure Tour is very much a load-carrying bike, it's lively enough to enjoy unladen as well. With its shorter chain stays and lighter tubes it handles better than its stablemate, the Nomad – there's plenty of heel clearance for panniers too. In fact, the Raven can just as easily be a commuter as a full expedition bike. But it is the drivetrain that really makes the Raven special: all but gears 7 and 8 can be changed both while pedalling hard and at a standstill. With the Speedhub, the days of struggling up a hill in the wrong gear until you can change down are over. No hill will ever catch you out, while pulling away from traffic lights is a breeze – useful when you're carrying. In fact, a whole new riding style opens up,

one which is considerably freer than riding with derailleurs.

The pros and cons of the system are summarised honestly on the Thorn website. For sure, the Speedhub is heavy – while the unit actually weighs little more than a complete system, it's the fact that all the weight is in one place at the rear end that's the issue. As a result, the bike can feel heavier than it is, though the difference is harder to sense when you're loaded up.

Other factors to be aware of are the need to ease off on gears 7 and 8. Mechanically, the Rohloff is effectively a 7-speed hub with reduction gears doubling it to 14. Gears 7 and 8 engage the low and high ratios and need to be treated with care. A little fiddly, but far easier than a derailleur, once you're used to it.

Gears are an important factor to be worked into the Rohloff equation. Unlike a derailleur, the Speedhub's range is fixed at 526% in 13.6% increments, and can't be extended. Fitted with the lowest set up – a 38t chainring with a 16t sprocket – an equivalent low gear of 22/34 and a high of 42/12, is less than a MTB setup. This means most of the riding is done in the quieter, efficient high ratio (8 to 14), saving the low ratios (1 to 7) for hills.

While we found the set up to be ideal for loaded touring, it will mean you'll have to get used to a whole lot more spinning at the top end when you're riding unladen. Other chainring and sprocket sizes are available.

Overall, the only drawback is the fact that the hub can be noisy. The whirring is louder than expected and can have the comical effect of sounding like a windup toy in lower gears, breaking the silence as you toil. But while hills may feel that bit harder in your mind, there's little difference in efficiency between Rohloffs and conventional mechs: unlike a derailleur system that declines in efficiency, a Speedhub improves as it beds in. This process generally takes at least 1,000km – the hub had certainly begun piping down through the whole range of gears over the test. In time, the high ratios should almost be silent, though there'll always be noise in low ones. And Thorn have put their money where their mouth is with a 100-day



The cheapest and one of the best Rohloff equipped bikes on the market



In a similar vein...



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money back guarantee.

At over £600, the bulk of the Raven's budget has been concentrated on the Speedhub. Admire it from near; admire it from afar. While the Rohlhoff can't quite match the simple elegance of a single speed, it comes close. The whole line of the bike is far less cluttered, making it easy on the eye as well as easier on the elbow grease. A superbly engineered fit-and-forget hub, it's so well sealed that there's little maintenance required to keep it running. Aside from a yearly oil change, looking after your bike has never been so easy. Wipe down the chain and that's about it.

Expeditionists will query its reliability but they needn't. Originally conceived for downhill Mtbing, a Speedhub is far less fragile than derailleurs. Although Rohlhoff claims not to have had any internal failures in 30,000 units, it's still worth carrying spares as the externals can get knocked around.

The introduction of all-weather oil should sort out the leakage problems with earlier models – the only issue that comes up regularly in forums. And should the untoward happen, Rohlhoff has an excellent reputation for sending out replacement parts, with the added promise that any improvements made in the future can always be retrofitted to existing hubs.

Thorn has tightened the purse strings elsewhere. Radius V brakes and levers

are powerful enough but can be a little fiddly to set up – an upgrade for £20 to Deore is worth it if you're heading into the wilds. Cranks are Thorn-branded and available in eight lengths. Stem and handlebars are also Thorn's own and do the job just fine, though I'd go for conventional riser bars over the 18-degree layback ones fitted.

The Adventure Tour came with high-end Mavic XE 721 rims, handbuilt with quality stainless triple butted spokes. Speedhubs are only built with 32 holes. Since there's no need to dish the wheel for a cassette and the flange is so much bigger than a normal hub, Rohlhoff claim they're as strong as a conventional 48-spoke wheel – more than enough for even a fully loaded bike. What's more, the drive side spokes are easy to change without any cassette removal tools – so you've less tools to carry on tour.

There are other rims to choose from, including beefy Sun Rhynos for expedition duties and the more svelte Sun CR18s for fast touring – at no additional cost. Tyres are dependable Panaracer Hi Roads, with a Schwalbe Marathon XR option.

CYCLE 2004 VERDICT

The cheapest Rohlhoff bike on the market, and perhaps the best

PRICE: £1,099

CONTACT: SJS CYCLES stand M19