GRAND INTENTIONS

So you've got a grand to spend. What kind of bike will your £1000 get you if you're a roadie, tourer or Mtber? **Paul Vincent, Simon Withers** and **Warren Rossiter** get riding…

One thousand pounds. A grand. One K. Call it what you will, when it comes to buying a means of transport it'll get you an aging and none too stylish second-hand car*. But it will also get you a more than decent bike. Whatever type of cycling you do, parting with a grand of your hard earned readies will get you a rewarding machine that will last for many years. But what sort of value will a thousand quid get you? Would you get better value if you spent a little less, or would you get a better bike by stumping up a little more? We find out. By testing a thousand pound race bike, tourer and mountain bike. The first two come in at £999 with Giant's cross country off-roader just a little less.

Another reason for looking at bikes priced at a grand is that this is about the average amount a *Cycling Plus* reader parts with for their main bike. And looking at back issues of our magazine – and our sister magazine *MBUK* – it is clear you get more for your cash than you did a few years ago. In the last decade or so the cycle industry has changed hugely. Companies like Giant, the world's largest cycle manufacturer, have brought high quality, good value machines to both road riders and mountain bikers, producing every type of bike from budget hybrids to full on Tour de France race machines and full suspension mountain bikes costing a few grand. More recently Airborne have pioneered selling their titanium bikes online, bringing the price of titanium machines down to more affordable levels. Now they manufacture in aluminium as well, and you can also buy their bikes in a large number of 'real' bikeshops. We test their first alu road bike, the Thunderbolt.

And that's another change that the last decade has seen: aluminium. While other materials have staked their claim – and carbon fibre and titanium continue to do so – at a thousand quid aluminium is king, though carbon fibre is likely to be there somewhere in a road bike. The one area where this isn't really true is the tourer. Even high end tourers, in the UK at least, are still predominantly made from steel. Whether it's off the peg models from Thorn – we test their xTc all-round tourer here – Orbit, Dawes, Hewitt and others, or custom bikes from the likes of Chas Roberts or George Longstaff, steel rules the roost. And talking of tourers… your thousand pounds is as much as you really need to spend. Yes, you could easily pay more, but unless you need – or want – a custom bike, a grand will get you a high quality, last-a-lifetime machine with few if any frame or kit compromises.

By contrast while a grand will doubtless get you a good race machine or off-road bike, it's not going to quite get you the very best. But on road or off, there is a world of choice out there…

* As we go to press you could, for example, get a Hyundai 1.3 N Reg for a grand, or a 1993 1.8 Ford Orion – we reckon that any of the three test bikes would be much better buys…



PAUL SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY

THORN XTC

A touring classic handmade in Britain from Reynolds 725

Thorn are one of a few British companies who have built their reputation on the quality of their tourers. Their opposition in the off the peg tourer market includes Dawes, Orbit and Mercian with Paul Hewitt staking a claim with his excellent Cheviot. While above them – in terms of price – are the bespoke manufacturers such as Longstaff and Chas Roberts.

Thorn, along with Mercian and Orbit – on their dearer models – actually make their frames in the UK. Dawes have transferred their frame building to Eastern Europe and the Far East. And at around the grand mark there are also a few US entries in the British market, with both Trek and Cannondale entering the fray. But what all these companies have in common, with the exception of Cannondale, is that whether making custom or off the peg bikes, they all rely on steel. Touring bikes are the one high end sector where steel dominates. Whether it's basic cromo steel in the shape of Reynolds 520, or its slighly flasher, higher-spec cousins 531, 631, 725 or 853 (and their equivalents), aluminium rarely gets a look in. And that's certainly the case with the Thorn.

As with most Thorn tourers, whether with 700C or 26in wheels, there is a wide choice of kit, straight or drop bars – and a 14 day guarantee too.

FRAME 9

Handbuilt and beautifully finished in Britain

Reynolds and Thorn really deliver the goods here. The frame is made from Reynolds heat-treated Conical 725 cromo, the forks from the dependable and now venerable 531C. 725, according to Reynolds, is '25CrMo4, a superior European specification similar to CM4130… ideal for TIG welding and brazing, with joining by lug or lugless construction.' The XTC is fillet brazed – and very neat it is too. It has all the necessary braze-ons: for three bottle mounts, front and rear racks, even a pump peg. And it's the frame that accounts for the biggest chunk of the price, coming in at £499 – and also, presumably, most of the price difference over the Hewitt. Presently handmade in the UK, the frame has a beautiful blue paint finish (other colours cost £55 more), simple Thorn graphics, and a deep, lustrous lacquer reminiscent of the Hewitt's.

And though the XTC isn't custom built, with four frame sizes each with two top tube lengths to choose from you should be able to find one that fits you absolutely perfectly.

HANDLING 9

Smooth, steady and surprisingly nimble

Straight out of the box the bike rode superbly. All I needed to do was to put pedals on and turn and tighten the handlebars. No tweaking was needed from workshop masters Paul or Jez – not always the case. What immediately impressed us was the smoothness of the drivetrain. Like the Hewitt Cheviot, there's no noise anywhere when you pedal – you could use it for stealth attacks it's so noiseless.

In spite of steel's reputation for flexing, the XTC's frame feels stiffer than expected, quite similar, if anything, to my Cannondale's frame. It's certainly stiff enough with loaded panniers to suffer no detectable



Touring classics: cantilever brakes offer a good mix of power and modulation; Bar end shifters are still de rigueur on drop bar tourers – and can easily be switched to friction shifting; Reynolds steel has been the material of choice for generations







BIKE SPEC

Thorn XTC

Replacement value £999 (without rack)
SJSC ☎ 01278 441502, www.sjscycles.com

FRAME AND FORKS

Size tested: L
Sizes available: 4 sizes (+ 2 top tube lengths)
Weight: 11.54kg/25.4lb without pedals
Frame: Reynolds 725 conical
Frame weight: 2102g/4.6lb
Fork: Reynolds 531C
Fork weight: 927g/2.0lb

BIKE DIMENSIONS

Top tube: 58.5cm/23.0in
Seat tube (c-c): 50.0cm/19.7in
Chainstays: 45.0cm/17.7in
Wheelbase: 107.0cm/42.1in
Head tube angle: 72.0°
Seat tube angle: 71.0°
Fork offset: 5.0 cm/2.0in
Trail: 5.3 cm; Wheel Radius 32.5cm
Bottom bracket height: 28.5cm/11.2in
Standover height: 80.5cm/31.7in
Braze-ons: 3x water bottle, f&r mudguard and rack, dynamo mount, pump mount

FRAME ALIGNMENTS

Head tube: perfect
Rear triangle: perfect
Fork: perfect

TRANSMISSION

Chainset: Deore, 22-32-42T, 175mm
Bottom bracket: Shimano cartridge
Freewheel: Shimano HG70
Chain brand: Shimano HG73
Derailleurs: Shimano LX
Gear levers: Shimano bar end shifters
Pedals: none

GEAR RATIO (IN)

Chainring \ Sprocket	11	12	14	16	18	21	24	28	32
22	52	48	41	36	32	27	24	20	18
32	76	69	59	52	46	40	35	30	26
44	104	95	82	72	64	54	48	41	36

WHEELS

Front & Rear: 36H Mavic X517 on LX w/stainless plain gauge spokes
Tyres: Panaracer Hi-Road, 26x1.5in
Wheel weight: f: 1455g; r: 2036g

OTHER COMPONENTS

Handlebar stem: unbranded, 110mm
Handlebars: ITM Europa
Headset: FSA Orbit XL II
Saddle: Selle San Marco Rolls
Seatpost: unbranded
Brakeset: Avid Shorty 6
Accessories: front and rear mudguard



flex or wobbles. But as a I discovered during some blisteringly hot summer cycling, it also succeeds at being comfortable enough for loaded day-long rides.

WHEELS 9

Handbuilt at SJSC – Mavic XC rims, Deore hubs

The two most crucial areas of any bike are the frame and the wheels. Get these right first time, and you can improve the rest later. And with these handmade wheels Thorn seem to have succeeded.

Like a lot of modern bikes, Thorn have gone for 26in wheels. And there are numerous reasons for this. The mountain bike size wheel has become the *de facto* world standard, so no matter where you are travelling, if there are bike shops replacement rims, tyres and tubes should be available. Compared to the slightly larger 700C wheel, as used on 'classic' tourers like the Galaxy range and the Hewitt Cheviot, a 26in wheel (all other things being equal) will be stronger.

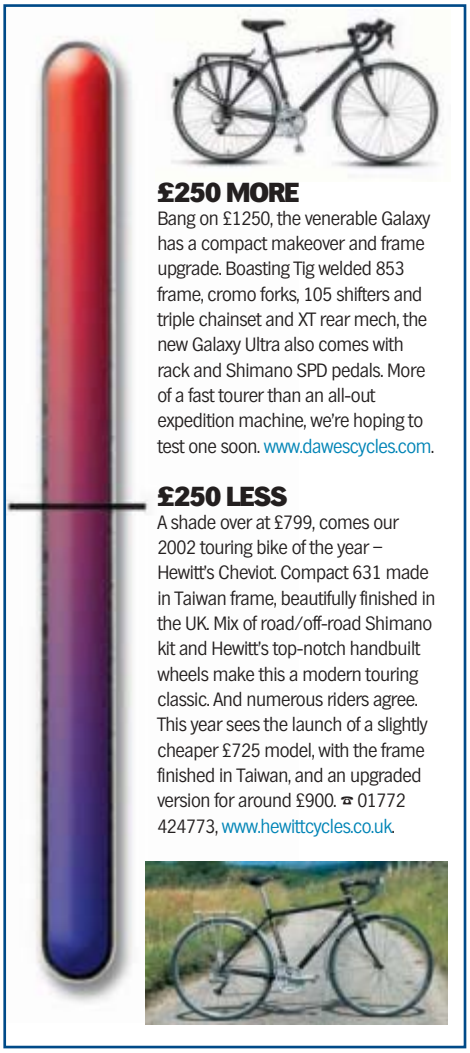
Our Thorn comes with Mavic's X517 cross-country rims which should be up to the rigours of heavy touring, though there are also a wide range of other rims available from SJSC, including ultra-tough heavyweights from Sun. Tyres are Panaracer's 26x1.5in (38-559) Hi-roads. The combination of components and build quality is faultless, with the wheels evenly tensioned and as nigh on perfect as possible from day one, and there's every expectation they would stay that way for a long time to come. Certainly riding 500km in two weeks showed no teething problems.

EQUIPMENT 8

Well thought out mainly off-road kit

It's all decent, durable and well thought out. Shimano's bar end shifters combine with mainly Deore LX off-road components for ultra-smooth, STI quality shifting. With the added advantage that you can alter the levers to friction shifting in case of mechanical problems. Chainset, hubs, front and rear mech are all Shimano; and are well-built and sensibly priced. But it's the components around the groupset that show that thought has really gone into speccing this bike.

The saddle is far from flashy, far from expensive, but as far as I'm concerned the Rolls is perfect. The rear rack is Blackburn (though this is not included in the £999 price), the bars from ITM, with Thorn branded seatpost and headset. As should be the case with a thousand pound bike, there are no obvious upgrades necessary. Though my backside did find it odd getting used to a non-suspension seatpost after so long…



£250 MORE

Bang on £1250, the venerable Galaxy has a compact makeover and frame upgrade. Boasting Tig welded 853 frame, cromo forks, 105 shifters and triple chainset and XT rear mech, the new Galaxy Ultra also comes with rack and Shimano SPD pedals. More of a fast tourer than an all-out expedition machine, we're hoping to test one soon. www.dawescycles.com.

£250 LESS

A shade over at £799, comes our 2002 touring bike of the year – Hewitt's Cheviot. Compact 631 made in Taiwan frame, beautifully finished in the UK. Mix of road/off-road Shimano kit and Hewitt's top-notch handbuilt wheels make this a modern touring classic. And numerous riders agree. This year sees the launch of a slightly cheaper £725 model, with the frame finished in Taiwan, and an upgraded version for around £900. ☎ 01772 424773, www.hewittcycles.co.uk.

CYCLING PLUS Verdict

Along with the Hewitt, Thorn's XTC is the best tourer I've tried at C+. A well made, beautifully finished steel frame, handmade wheels and off-road kit make a well balanced tourer that will cope with road, mountains and rough-stuff, while being light enough for commuting, audax and day rides. If you want to load up for expeditioning, the XTC's toughened up big brother eXp is just the job, but for all-round touring the XTC is a great choice. The test also shows that there is no need to spend more than a grand for a high end tourer. You could spend extra for custom, but with Thorn's wide range of sizes the chance of not getting an xTc that fits you perfectly is very slim.

OVERALL RATING 9/10

Why pay more? Top quality frame, wheels and kit; fit for tours, day rides, commutes or audax. Or all four