Distance/touring

Quality not quantity headed up by the best of British

We haven't had many long distance and touring bikes in the last year, but those that did have really impressed us. All three topping the podium are built by specialist British manufacturers with a penchant for steel. And it's been so tough choosing that we've given two silvers rather than a siver and bronze.

Roberts have always set a high standard. Tying for silver, this year we fell for the Kawasaki green charms of the **Roughstuff Lite** (£1500, ☎ 0208 684 3370, www.robertscycles.com, C+155) – though rough it certainly wasn't. Light, svelte and nimble, its individual looks were a real winner, a feeling reinforced from the first turn of the pedal. Effectively both a comfortable audax bike and a light tourer with a surprising turn of speed, it proved once again that 26in rubber is hard to beat for all-round appeal. Built up around a bespoke tubeset (ours came fillet brazed with Reynolds 725), attention to detail is to Robert's usual exacting standards. What's more, buying from a specialist framebuilder means finishing kit can be pic'n'mixed. The 'Shimagnolo' combination worked a treat, with smooth, crisp shifting from Campag's Centaur levers and, thanks to an XT cassette, plenty of gears in reserve for those weekends away. Prices for 2005 see a small increase, starting at £1550 (£795 f&f), which includes a quality set of SKS mudguards and Tubus's ultralight Fly rack.

While 26in tourers continue to grow in popularity, the more traditional 700c offerings still have a strong and loyal following. **Bob Jackson's Custom Special Tourist** (£1397, ☎ 0113 255 9844, www.bobjacksoncycles.co.uk, C+158) is a prime example of the art of cyclecraft, with its effortless blend of classic lines and modern components, at a fair price. Balancing superb loaded and unloaded handling, it comes from a builder with a pedigree that dates back to 1935 – which makes the £475 price tag for the fully custom frame and fork even more impressive. Kit includes a mix of Shimano XT and Ultegra components and a tough Tortec steel rack. Almost as fast as a road bike but able to handle far rougher terrain, 700c tourers are perhaps the ideal machines for that lightweight, wind in the wheels tour.

But the Gold Award this year goes to **Thorn's Raven Tour** (£1099, ☎ 01259 441 502, www.sjscycles.com, C+155 – a winning combination of Germanic engineering, Taiwanese frame building and British know-how. While a move away from derailleurs is a bold one, several thousand kilometres down the road, under all manner of conditions, has convinced us of the advantages of the Rohloff system – and there's a 100-day money back guarantee if you don't agree. Price-wise, Thorn's hit the nail right on the head, given the hub costs £625 alone and should outlive several standard drivetrains. Rohloff specific, the frame comes complete with stainless steel cast dropouts and eccentric bottom bracket for easy wheel removal. Even if the finishing kit is on the utilitarian side, there's a wide choice of stems, cranks, tyres and rims, while 2005 sees 11 sizes and a range of appealingly understated but tough finishes. Add to that its versatility – the frame takes a suspension fork and is also suited to commuting – and you have an impressively well-rounded bike.



'MY PICK OF THE YEAR'

Simon Withers

Of the bikes I've ridden this year two have stood out. On a general note it's good that new tourers are still coming to the market [with the like of **Koga Miyata** arriving late this year], and both the **Dawes Ultra Galaxy** (C+161) with its 853 frame and the **Fuji** (C+159) did well, albeit with small question marks over them [no mudguards on the Fuji, the Dawes coming in a bit pricey]. But the two bikes I'd go for from '05 are the **Pearson Audax Pro** (C+163) and the **Airnimal Joey**.

The Audax Pro because it just felt so well designed for the job. A very well finished frame, decently made and super comfortable. And though the price puts it up against custom models, it bears comparison. Good too, that component choice is so wide. So if you're a voracious mile eater, it's certainly worth a test ride.

My other personal favourite is the Joey. So good I bought the company? Not quite, but I am planning on buying one [a Joey, not a company] next year as I combine cycling with commuting by train. While the speed and ease of fold still isn't up there with the likes of the Brompton the ride quality is excellent, virtually without compromise, and the price makes it much more affordable than previous Airnimals.

Honourable mentions

Lest we're accused of riling your bank manager, two other tourers are definitely worth an honourable mention. **Giant's Expedition** (£749, ☎ 0115 977 5900, www.giant-bicycle.com, C+153) may not be up to truly global travel with its 700c rims, but for value for money, there are few bases it doesn't cover with all its extras. Cheaper still, we were impressed by the US vibes of the **Fuji Touring** (£625, ☎ 01248 680860, www.fujibikes.com, C+159) with its solid handling under load, but it could do with some mudguards.

Winners enclosure

Joint Silver Award winner

Roughstuff Lite: light svelte and nimble

Joint Silver Award winner

Bob Jackson Custom Special Tourist: classic lines and modern components at a fair price







Bike of the year

It takes something special to win… and something special has

Over the years a number of very different bikes have won our Bike of the Year award for a number of very different reasons. What they all had in common though was that there was something about them – be it innovative design, build quality, value for money or even a combination of the three – that we felt was worth celebrating. Back in 2000, **Airborne** burst onto the UK scene, with the **Zeppelin**, a bike that was not only technically excellent, but excellently priced too – and which offered the prospect of owning a titanium bike to riders who could only have dreamed about it the year before. In 2001, the **Ridgeback Genesis Day 01** took top spot defining a new type of bike, the flat barred road bike, for an emerging group of riders – urban and leisure riders who wanted the speed of a road bike, but with a more upright position for riding in traffic.

In 2002 we plumped for technical excellence with the **Giant TCR carbon**. Sometimes, something is simply so right and of the moment that it will brook no argument. Giant brought truly cutting edge carbon bikes into the realms of affordability by the simple expedient of building the TCR as Mike Burrows had originally intended.

Last year, **Airborne** won again our top prize going to the **Torch**, a bike that combined everything we like – excellence, value and innovation. That last one, value, is important because it means that as many people as possible will get the chance to enjoy a great bike. This year, all three bikes on the podium offer some combination all of our favourite virtues – they are all great bikes, but they are all great bargains too.

Our Bronze award goes to the **Thorn Raven** – a bike built around a 14 spd Rohloff Speed hub for little more than a grand can truly be said to combine value, innovation, and excellence. What's particularly impressive is that corners don't appear to have been cut to make the price. You get versatility and a Rohloff hub that offers ultra-durable, near maintenance-free performance – in other words, if you need a bike that can perform many different functions: audax, touring, commuting, expedition riding, even off-roading that still handles like a dream, then this is it. As we said back in C+155, 'the cheapest Rohloff equipped bike and probably the best'.

Silver goes to the **Specialized Dolce** because it is such a very well sorted road bike and because its bargain price gives a lot more women the chance to get into road biking on machines designed by women for them. Up until now most firms who've built bikes for women have done so to satisfy existing demand in the higher price points rather than try to grow the market. The Dolce is certainly a bike worth celebrating.

Which brings us to our winner the **Decathlon Penta Pro**. Like some previous winners of the overall award, this is a bike that didn't win its category, in this case just being nudged out for the Race award by the Storck. But it wins the overall because it is a proper pro's road bike, with a real racing heritage, that has been properly thought out, well specced and well built; and because it spells out the simple fact that you don't have to spend loads of money on a glamour brand to get all the performance you need – this bike was ridden to more stage wins on last year's Tour than machines costing a hell of a lot more. Sure there is something to be said for the cachet attached to some big name brands, but if it's performance, comfort, handling, and character that count – look no further. And it's a bargain too, if it was our money we know where we'd be spending it.

CYCLING PLUS OF THE YEAR





Paul Vincent

We still test bikes in the same way that we did 12 years ago, though with so many more bikes to choose from separating the handling of two very closely matched bikes usually kicks up some surprises. I don't have time to ride any of my classic bikes these days but I race on the road when I can and keep a hand in with the cyclocross and the Newport track lead when Tony lets me get away from my desk half an hour early.

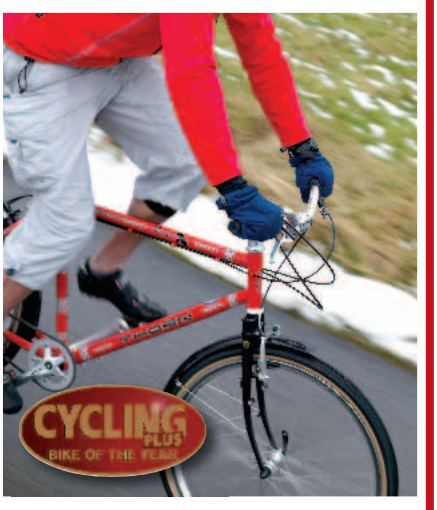
This year I have been impressed with so many of the carbon bikes including the **Isaac Force** (C+162), **Stork Scenario C1.1**(C+165), and reaquainted myself with the previous benchmark setting Ultegra equipped **Scott CR1** (C+163), though in particular the **Cannondale R900** and **Fuji Team SL** (C+165) recently set a new benchmark in the same issue for value for money.

Winners enclosure



Silver Award winner

Specialized Dolce bargain priced proper womens bike



Bronze Award winner

Thorn Raven: The ultimate utility bike and so much more