

Club class?

Thorn bikes have won C+ awards in the past, but is their entry-level model up to the same standard? **Simon Withers** tests the Club Tour to find out…

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Thorn Club Tour

£699 as tested

www.sjscycles.co.uk

Saint John Street's Thorn Cycles build a range of touring bikes from various steels for both 26in and 700c wheels, some with derailleurs, many with the increasingly popular Sachs Rohloff hub gear. Surprisingly, though, we've never tested their entry-level 700c wheeled tourer: the Thorn Club Tour. While 26in-wheeled bikes have their fans and their advantages (you'll easily be able to find replacement rims and tyres anywhere in the world) there's still a market for those who prefer the larger wheel size. There's enough interest for the likes of Thorn, Hewitt, Pearson, Longstaff, Roberts and suchlike to make a wide range of touring and audax bikes. And it's worth remembering that a larger diameter wheel is better at coping with poor road surfaces.

The model we tested was the £699 version, and we made no changes to the basic spec, though we did ask for 32mm tyres, because most of our riding is done on less-than-smooth towpaths. You're able to change components to your particular preference: don't like bar-end shifters? Then you can go for STI. Want narrower tyres, or pannier racks fitted? You can, though the latter will naturally cost you more. The same goes for kit upgrades. The Club Tour also comes with Thorn's usual 14-day money-back guarantee, which is a definite bonus.

Frame 9

Very neatly TIG-welded from Reynolds steel

Reynolds steel for both the frame and forks comes as no surprise. Steel, while virtually unheard of in the peloton, is still the material of choice for most touring bikes. Aluminium has made some inroads, titanium has its fans but the price is off-putting, while the days of the carbon fibre tourer aren't quite here yet. And it has, of course, got the advantage that, compared with most other frame materials, it's much easier to get it repaired if needs be.

One of the first things you notice here is the sticker on the seat-tube proclaiming that this is hand-built in Taiwan to a Thorn design. So is this anything to be concerned about compared with a British-built machine? Absolutely not. Taiwan has some of the most skilled and highly experienced bike builders in the world. It's why the likes of Giant and Trek, among many others, have at least some of their machines made there. Having bikes constructed in the Far East allows you to have hand-built quality for a realistic and affordable price, with no drop in quality.

And that appears to be the case here. The compact frame is made from Reynolds 725, a heat-treated lightweight cromo with a significantly higher tensile strength than 531, with forks in the now venerable 531 (a material originally dating back to 1935). It has all the usual braze-ons: three bottle mounts (one under the down-tube); ones for front and rear racks; and ones for a seatstay-mounted pump. The TIG-welding is exemplary throughout, and the rear dropouts are the same ones Thorn use on their more expensive bikes. The scales show that this is no lightweight, but that's of little relevance when you could be carrying 20kg of kit. Strength and durability are the real issues, and this material and build quality should ensure both.

One area that may not appeal to everyone (at least if the C+ forum is anything to go by), is the combination of a comparatively short head-tube and numerous spacers (which Hewitt bikes also use). While this may well be aesthetically lacking, the great advantage is that it allows you to tweak the handlebar height and

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In detail



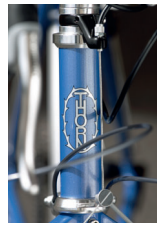
Neat welds and a fine finish throughout



Drivetrain and hubs are all from the quality and well-priced Deore groupset



Full complement of braze-ons adorn the Club Tour's frame



Head-tube and spacers give great adjustability



Thorn Club tour

Replacement value £699 (as tested)
SJS Cycles ☎ 01278 441521,
www.sjscycles.co.uk

Frame and forks
Size tested : M, long top tube
Sizes available : S, M, L w/ short or long top tube
Weight as tested : 12.040kg/ 26.5lb no pedals
Frame : Reynolds 725:
Frame Weight:2240g/4.9lb
Fork: Reynolds 531:
Fork Weight: 1068g/2.4lb

Bike dimensions
Top tube : 58.0cm/22.8in
Seat tube (c-c) : 49.0cm/19.3in
Chainstays : 44.5cm/17.5in
Wheelbase : 106.0cm/41.7in
Head tube angle : 71.0°
Seat tube angle : 72.5°
Fork offset : 5.0cm/2.0in
Trail : 6.8cm
B/b height :27.8cm/10.9in
Standover height : 78.5cm/30.9in
Braze-ons :3x watre bottle, f&r mudguard and racks, pump peg, dynamo

Frame alignment
Head tube : Perfect
Rear triangle : Perfect
Fork : Perfect

Transmission
Chainset :Shimano Deore, 26-36-48T, 170.0mm
Bottom bracket : Shimano BB UN53
Freewheel : Shimano HG50
Chain brand : Shimano HG53
Derailleurs : Shimano Deore
Gear levers : Shimano Bar End Shifters
Pedals : Clips and straps

Gear ratio (in)

Chainring \ Sprocket	11	12	14	16	18	21	24	28	32
26	64	59	50	44	39	33	29	25	22
36	88	81	69	61	54	46	41	35	30
48	118	108	93	81	72	62	54	46	41

Wheels
Front & Rear : 36HSun CR18 rims on Shimano Deore hubs w/ stainless plain gauge spokes
Tyres : Panaracer Pasela, 700x32c
Wheel weight : f: 1600g; r: 2170g

Other components
Handlebar stem : Ahead, 100mm
Handlebars : ITM Super Europa, 43.5mm
Headset : Cartridge
Saddle : Rolls
Seatpost : Unbranded
Brakeset : Avid shorty 6
Accessories : f&r mudguards

Handling 9
Impeccably sure-footed, problem-free riding

Take the bike out for a spin and you immediately realise where its strength lies – its handling. This is totally twitch-free and just about as sure-footed and confidence-inspiring as any touring bike I've ridden. It handles impeccably, loaded or unloaded, and even riding no-handed (don't try this at home, kids) the Club Tour's just as worry-free. No road bumps or dodgy track surfaces did anything whatsoever to deflect this bike from its course. And although this isn't something that concerns everyone, the frame's geometry ensured there was a pleasing absence of toeclip-overlap.

Whether you'd buy this bike for its touring capabilities, audax or commuting on less-than-perfect road surfaces (or, indeed, rough stuff such as towpaths), it's hard to imagine the Club Tour's handling ever being knocked off its stride.

Equipment 8
Sensibly specced good-quality kit

Even our £699 version came with decent finishing kit, with no obvious cost-cutting evident. The saddle is a San Marco Rolls – my own personal favourite, and a classic used by racers and tourists alike. Seatpost and the brushed aluminium stem are both unobtrusive and Thorn-branded, with ITM supplying the bars.

Almost inevitably the great majority of business-end kit is from the big S. Their mid-range Deore groupset supplies the chainset, cranks, rear mech and hubs, though unusually there's an upgrade to LX for the front mech. All should give the sort of service we've come to expect from Shimano and performed faultlessly throughout testing. Gear changes come courtesy of bar-end shifters. Though a pretty old design, these are still used by both time triallists and cycle tourists. While not quite as convenient as newer designs such as Shimano's STI and Campag's Ergopower, they offer reassuringly solid gear changes, with the added advantage that you can convert them from indexed to friction shifting if required.

The brakes are Avid Shorty cantilevers. These are fairly common on dropped bar touring bikes and it's easy to see why. Stopping is powerful and controlled, and they're both elegant and easier to set up than the V-brakes with Travel Agent on my own tourer. There was some minor squealing (which is never a problem because it makes pedestrians notice you) but a little tweaking removed this. While you could have pricier kit if you want, there is absolutely nothing here in need of any upgrading.

Wheels 8
Schwalbe, Panaracer and Shimano combine to good effect

When it comes to tyre choice you get nearly as many opinions on which tyre's best as there are riders. Some swear by Conti's Top Touring, others love their Schwalbe Marathons or the Panaracer Paselas, as fitted by Thorn. These looked like they'd go on for thousands of miles, and certainly coped with the uneven and bumpy Kennet and Avon Canal towpath without complaint. But with tyres, more than with any other component (apart from possibly the saddle) personal experience is the telling factor.

When it comes to rims, there was a time when you'd see little other than Mavic, but for touring there are other options. Hewitt goes for Italian DRCs, while Thorn are big fans of Sun wheels, using them on a wide range of their bikes. The Club Tour's CR18 rims boast a 'triple hollow construction' and nickel-plated brass eyelets. A useful feature is the rim's wear indicator. This is a small indentation in the sidewall – when it's no longer visible it's time for you to go out and buy a new one. Overall width is 22.5mm.

The wheels were perfectly true from day one (which isn't always the case) and stayed so during testing. The spokes used were plain guage and build quality was very good, with consistent spoke tension throughout.

Rivals

Hewitt Cheviot — **from £849**

www.hewittcycles.co.uk, ☎ 01772 424773
Taiwan-built from Reynolds 631 (525 forks) with a short head-tube, similar to the Thorn Club. The higher-specced and more expensive Cheviot SE boasts 725 frame and forks and mainly XT kit. Excellent Hewitt-built wheels, with DRC rims and Pasela tyres, complete the package.

Claud Butler Dalesman — **£749**

www.falconcycles.co.uk, ☎ 01652 656000
The Claud Butler Dalesman sees the welcome return of a venerable touring name, even if it's now part of Falcon Cycles. This offering boasts a Reynolds 631 frame, cromo fork, 27-speed STI and Vittoria tyres. It's available to buy in four compact frame sizes.

CYCLING PLUS Verdict

Considering the Club Tour occupies the bottom rung of Thorn's extensive touring bike range, this is an absolutely fantastic machine. Several weeks and hundreds of miles of riding found no faults whatsoever. Whether you're looking for a dedicated tourer or a one-bike-for-all-needs touring/audax/commuting bike, this is certainly a machine worthy of serious consideration.

Whether unladen or with full-to-bursting panniers, nothing deflects this bike's superb handling qualities. The combination of good quality Shimano Deore equipment, equally well-chosen finishing kit and a very good quality Taiwanese-built frame is one that's hard to beat, especially considering the comparatively modest price tag.

It should appeal to those who prefer derailleurs to Rohloff's 14-speed hub gear, though the sloping top-tube may put off those who like more traditional frames with horizontal ones.

Verdict 8
Top quality full-on tourer at a very reasonable price

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