



Photos by Seb Rogers

● SURLY STRAGGLER

BIKE TEST

ADVENTURE ROAD BIKES

There's a new breed of bikes designed for the (dirt) road less travelled. *Seb Rogers* tests a Surly Straggler and Genesis Croix de Fer 20

WHATEVER YOU prefer to call them – adventure road bikes, anyroad bikes, gravel road bikes – this style of bike should appeal to a broad cross-section of riders. Combining the supposed go-anywhere potential of a cyclocross bike with the load-lugging ability of a tourer and the stopping power of disc brakes, the range of uses runs from continent-crossing to commuting.

For this test, I sourced two bikes that evolved from cyclocross roots. US-based Surly's Straggler takes the go-anywhere, do-anything ethos of the company's well-established Cross-Check and adds disc brakes, some geometry tweaks and horizontal dropouts. The emphasis is firmly on adaptability. UK manufacturer Genesis's Croix de Fer has a similar history, but comes in at £300 below the Surly's price.

FRAME AND FORK

Although they share TIG-welded main frame construction, the bikes have different tubing and features. Genesis have specified Reynolds' well-regarded 725 chromoly tube set. Surly use own-branded 4130 chromoly

tubing called Natch, short for 'naturally' (as in, 'why use anything else?', according to the Surly website).

Reynolds 725 is heat-treated so is a bit stronger than 4130, enabling less of it to be used. Aside from that, I'd be surprised if there were significant differences. Surly offer a three-year frame warranty, Genesis a limited lifetime frame warranty. Forks are also chromoly, although the frame-only version of the Genesis has a carbon fork instead.

Surly have opted for down-tube-shifter-compatible cable stops, whereas the Croix de Fer's headtube-mounted stops are more discreet (and prevent cable rub) but commit you to running bar-mounted shifters. Two sets of bottle mounts and a full complement of rack and guard mounts on both frames, front and rear, mean that owners can fit just about any combination of luggage carrier and mudguard. The Surly trumps the Genesis with a few extra rack mounting points, but the Genesis also has grommeted entry and exit points for Shimano's Di2 electronic shift cable routing. I doubt it's something that many Croix de Fer owners



● (Above) 41mm tyres provide effective cushioning off-road but they add weight you can feel on road climbs
 (Below) The Straggler's forward-facing dropouts allow singlespeed or hub gear use





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will be taking advantage of, however.

There's a small caveat to the Surly's rear rack mounting arrangement. In an admirable effort to make the Straggler as versatile as possible, Surly have equipped the bike with forward-facing horizontal dropouts, which will work equally well with derailleurs, hub gears

or a singlespeed set-up. Rear-facing stop screws – and a threaded hole for another, forward-facing screw on the drive side – prevent wheel slippage.

The forward-facing dropouts make wheel removal easy, even with a full-length mudguard fitted. They also mean that the only place to put the disc caliper mount is behind the seat stay. The Genesis's vertical dropouts are less versatile, but allow for a neat inboard caliper position that tucks the brake mechanism out of the way of a rear rack. The Surly has to put the lower rear rack mounts partway up the seat stays to stop the rack fouling the brake caliper.

This has two impacts. First, you'll need an adjustable height rear rack (rather like Surly's own) for it to fit properly. And second, the full weight of the rear rack and its load is supported by two small bits of braze on the stays, whereas the Croix de Fer's conventional rack eyelets are part of the dropout. In fairness, Surly admit that the Straggler is a 'light-duty' touring bike and that the dropout/rack mount/caliper position conundrum is a compromise. Whether the versatility of the dropouts is worth the lower payload is, ultimately, a personal one.

COMPONENTS

A lot of the attention on these bikes, component-wise, will be on the disc brakes. There's no option on either frame to run rim brakes, so the disc option needs to work, and work well.

Also available



1) GIANT REVOLT 1 £999

Giant's range-topping, go-anywhere Revolt eschews rack eyelets but comes with a carbon fork, an 11-34 cassette, a built-in down tube mudguard, and room for 50mm tyres.

giant-bicycles.com



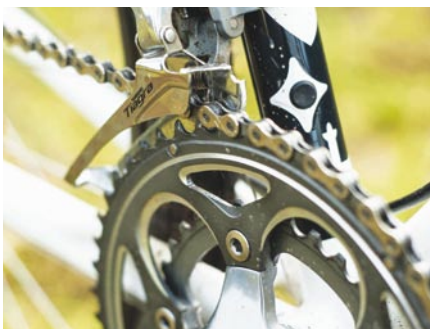
2) TREK 920 £1375

More a 29er touring bike like the Salsa Fargo, Trek's 920 uses 10-speed Sram X5/X7 MTB gears with an 11-36 cassette, 42-28 chainset, bar-end shifters and fully hydraulic discs.

trekbikes.com



● (Above) The Croix de Fer has ample room for mudguards or for bigger tyres than these 35mm ones
(Below) Like many adventure road bikes, the Croix de Fer's 50-34 chainset means it's overgeared for carrying loads





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● (Above) The fork has four sets of eyelets 'to provide more options for mounting stuff, from racks to whatever' (Below) Tiagra levers work well but not with the 10-speed MTB rear derailleurs you might want for lower gearing

» The Surly's Avid BB7 mechanical discs are a tried-and-tested cable-operated option. Running on generous 160mm rotors front and rear, they offer more power than most rim brakes whatever the weather or ground conditions, plus they're easy to set up and maintain.

In terms of power and 'feel', though, they're no match for the more sophisticated hybrid TRP system fitted to the Genesis. Compression-free housings run standard cables down to the calipers, where a

Shimano's 10-speed Tiagra – with its easy-to-use STI levers – is a fantastically slick mid-range performer, but low-gear range is limited by the rear mech's maximum 32-tooth capacity and the double chainring set-up selected by both Genesis and Surly. Genesis's choice of a 34-50 tooth chainring combo gives the broadest spread of ratios at the expense of a fair bit of sprocket-shunting on each chainring shift, while Surly have opted for an easier-to-use 36-46 tooth chainset at the expense of overall range.

“Both bikes are extremely competent all-rounder... but suffer from being over-gearred for load-carrying, particularly in steep or off-road terrain”

cunning mechanism makes use of the piggy-backed hydraulic reservoir to convert cable pull into hydraulic action on the pistons. Opinion on the aesthetics of the admittedly bulky calipers will be split, but there's no denying the brakes' effectiveness. Power and controllability are both a step up on the Surly's mechanical set-up, with more than enough power to lock up both wheels on dry tarmac. That might sound like too much power, but it's easily regulated and is great news for anyone hauling a big load.

Talking of big loads, both bikes suffer from being over-gearred for genuine load-carrying, particularly in steep or off-road terrain.

There's no easy way to get low gears. The hassle of switching to a triple – new bottom bracket, front mech and front shifter – doesn't gain you much other than a slightly lower bottom gear and (for the Surly) a slightly bigger top gear. Shimano's 10-speed mountain bike rear derailleurs, which work with sprockets up to 36 teeth, won't play nicely with Shimano 10-speed road shifters. The cheapest solution would be to run a 9-speed mountain bike mech on a 10-speed 11-36 tooth cassette, which works but isn't ideal. Like touring bikes, adventure road bikes show that Shimano need a proper, wide-range 10-speed road groupset.





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» Wheels on both bikes follow the standard three-cross, 32 double-butted spoke pattern, but Surly's approach to tyre choice is worth a mention. The 41mm profile Knard tyres fitted to the Straggler are noticeably chunkier than the norm, with a shallow tread pattern borrowed straight from mountain biking. You'd struggle to fit a mudguard in there at the same time, but there's more than a hint of off-road potential in such a determinedly voluminous tyre selection.

RIDE

I was expecting the Surly's chunky tyres to give it an obvious advantage away from tarmac, but I was wrong. Despite a noticeably bigger air volume and grippier tread pattern than the Continentals fitted to the Genesis, I noticed no difference in terms of grip or comfort on gravel and dirt surfaces. Both bikes are enormously competent all-rounder, with handling and brakes that make adventurous route choices feasible and surprisingly comfortable.

Where the Straggler's big tyres do make a difference is in overall feel. The Surly is a pound or so heavier than the Genesis, and pretty much all of that difference is in the tyres. At nearly 12kg, the Surly is nudging into the same territory, weight-wise, as an equivalent mountain bike. Because the extra weight is rotating mass, the Surly feels more sluggish than the Genesis on the road, particularly on hard out-of-the-saddle efforts and on climbs (which aren't helped by the slightly taller gearing).

Neither bike is quick on tarmac by road bike standards, but that's not really their intended purpose. The Surly's acceleration disadvantage could easily be cancelled out by swapping the tyres, which would also make room for mudguards. Set up with identical tyres, there's nothing to choose



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between the two bikes in terms of ride quality. Both are comfortable, stable and undemanding day-long companions.

SUMMARY

Although the Surly looks a little expensive next to the Genesis, it's easy to make a case for the quirky American. By combining the best of its cyclocross ancestry with touring practicality and a dropout set-up that emphasises transmission versatility, the Straggler can be set up pretty much any way you like – just so long as you don't want to carry expedition loads on the back. If you fancy running a hub gear or singlespeed, it's the obvious choice.

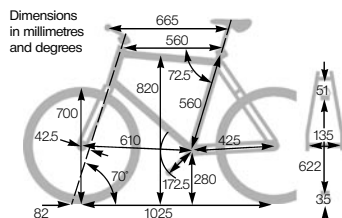
I don't think it's the best bike overall, though. The Genesis can't quite match the Surly for set-up options, but if you have any intention of carrying big loads, it's the one to choose. Better brakes and the limited lifetime frame warranty inspire confidence. The difference in price could also help pay for a wider ranging gear set-up. It's just a shame Shimano doesn't have a proper 10-speed touring transmission off the shelf. ●

Seb Rogers is best known as a mountain bike photographer and journalist. He also spent six years working in a bike shop.

● (Left) A hydraulic caliper actuated by a cable, we reviewed TRP's HyRd in Oct/Nov 2013

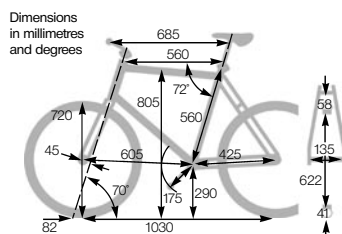
(Below left) All ready in the unlikely event that you want to upgrade to Di2 electronic shifting

Tech Specs



GENESIS CROIX DE FER 20

- PRICE:** £1199.99
- SIZES:** 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 60cm
- WEIGHT:** 11.35kg (no pedals)
- FRAME & FORK:** Reynolds 725 chromoly frame. Double-butted chromoly uncrown disc fork
- WHEELS:** Continental Cyclocross Speed 35-622 tyres, Alex XD-Elite rims, 32x3 Sapim 2.0/1.8/2.0mm spokes, Deore M525 hubs
- TRANSMISSION:** FC-R565 chainset 34-50, Shimano BB4600 68mm, Shimano HG62 11-32 cassette. Tiagra shifters & mechs. 20-speed, 29-125in
- BRAKING:** TRP HyRd hybrid discs, 160/140mm rotors
- STEERING & SEATING:** 42cm Genesis compact drop bar, 11.5cm +-7° stem, FSA Orbit Equipe headset. CX saddle, 27.2x350mm seatpost
- WEBSITE:** genesisbikes.co.uk



SURLY STRAGGLER

- PRICE:** £1499
- SIZES:** 42, 46, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 60, 62, 64cm
- WEIGHT:** 11.75kg (no pedals)
- FRAME & FORK:** Surly double-butted 4130 chromoly frame. Butted chromoly lugged disc fork
- WHEELS:** Surly Knard 41-622 tyres, Alex XD-Lite rims, 32x3 DT Swiss Comp 2.0/1.8/2.0mm spokes, Surly Ultra New front, Shimano 529 rear hubs
- TRANSMISSION:** Shimano CX-50 chainset 36-46, Surly Enduro 68mm, Shimano HG62 11-32 cassette. Tiagra shifters. CX70 front, Tiagra rear mechs. 20-speed, 31-115in
- BRAKING:** Avid BB7 discs, 160/160mm
- STEERING & SEATING:** 42.5cm Salsa Cowbell drop bar, 10.5cm +-7° stem, Cane Creek 40 h/set. Velo VL1353 on 27.2x300mm post
- WEBSITE:** surlybikes.com