



Cycle's test promise

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the steeper off-road climbs. Paired with the narrower, semi-slick tyres, the build feels more suited for a winter road bike or rugged commuter rather than something designed for out-and-out gravel riding. The SRAM Apex braking was sufficient over different terrain, though didn't feel quite as powerful as Shimano GRX brakes.

Lastly, I enjoyed the Diverge's riding position, with its ergonomic 40cm handlebar offering a lovely, stable stance in the moderately flared drops. The sloping top tube also means that there's plenty of exposed seatpost for attaching saddlebags, which is a boon for shorter riders like me.

The Whyte Friston puts you in a very different position, in large part because the handlebar is 10cm wider. While a wider bar means more steering leverage for improved control on technical trails, this extreme width didn't suit me. Other things being equal, splaying your arms wider means you have to lean forward more. I got upper back pain from what felt like a totally unnatural stance.

The difference in tyre performance is also like night and day, with the Friston's 45mm Maxxis Rambler tyres offering plentiful grip, especially when run at the lower pressures a wider tyre allows. They ate up the rougher trails and singletrack, giving me the confidence to let off the brakes and go for it.

To test the bike's singletrack credentials, I joined some pals for a mountain bike ride aboard the Friston. It coped pretty well on natural singletrack featuring rocks, roots and some small drops. I only needed the dropper once on the steepest trail, as I found I moved

Other options



CANYON GRIZL 8 1BY £1,949

This adventure-ready alloy build has clearance for 50mm tyres, quality GRX shifting and grippy Schwalbe G-One Bite tyres.

canyon.com



RIBBLE GRAVEL AL PRO GRX RX800 £2,199

Fantastic value, customisable alloy gravel bike with high-quality Shimano GRX810 11-speed gearing and Mavic Allroad 650B wheels.

ribblecycles.co.uk

forwards to weight the front wheel when descending, which distanced me from the saddle anyway.

A cynic might argue that by the time you're getting into dropper post territory, you might as well be on a cross-country mountain bike. I'm not convinced that the benefit of having one outweighs the added weight and maintenance requirement, but if you're dead set on riding steeper singletrack on your gravel bike, it might suit you.

Even though the difference was only two teeth, the slightly smaller chainring on the Friston did help when it came to the steeper off-road inclines. On linking road sections, the Friston wasn't the fastest, though the Ramblers didn't feel sluggish either. ●

Verdict

Even though they're both SRAM Apex-equipped aluminium gravel bikes at a similar price, they're very different and will suit different types of rider. If you're looking for something that can take you from your daily commute to the towpath and beyond, the Specialized Diverge is probably a good option. If you're a keen off-road rider looking to enjoy more technical trails on a drop-bar bike, then the Whyte Friston will be more up your (unsurfaced) street. Other riders may want a more versatile bike closer to the middle of the gravel spectrum, such as the Sonder Camino or Pinnacle Arkose.

In terms of value for money, I think you get more with the Friston than the Diverge. Tubeless-ready wheels and tyres save on upgrade costs, and it comes with a dropper post. However, I would be quick to switch out the wide handlebar for something more conventional.