



Riding the range

Mountainbikes nowadays range in price from £1,000 to £200. And, there is a growing difference between the high-rollers suited to the Sierra Nevadas and those designed for the city moonscape. BA looks at the developing styles and test rides eight from the spectrum.

A COUPLE of years on and the dust has begun to settle. The first mountainbikes to come storming into Britain had slack head angles, a long wheelbase, wide bull-moose bars and thick chunky 2.125 tyres. They were designed to be ridden down mountains. Fast. And their design characteristics produced the handling predictability and (off) road holding required by that sort of head-banging activity.

But mountainbiking captured the imagination of many cyclists, only a few of whom classed themselves as headbangers. Their appeal was obvious. Any bike that could stand up to being thrashed down a mountain could handle the urban city moonscape in its stride. And a high straight-bar riding position and powerful cantilever brakes wouldn't go amiss in the traffic either. For others, it was the notion of a bike they could take into beautiful car-free places they wouldn't consider taking their traditional tourers - but at a gentle pace.

People's conceptions of what they wanted in a mountainbike changed and, encouragingly, bike builders have kept pace with the new demands. A refinement here, a modification there and, in some cases, a rethink in basic design. From high-spec headbanging machines to robust urban commuters, the niches along the mountainbike spectrum have become more clearly defined. The good news is that you're more likely to end up with a bike designed for the sort of riding you have in mind; the process of choosing a mountainbike that's right for you is becoming easier.

If you're looking for an around-town machine, then a few refinements on the original mountainbike designs immediately spring to mind; mudguards or a rack for example. But for a lot of peo-

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people, it could also do with some speed. A robust urban machine needn't be sluggish after all. First then make the handling snappier and more responsive by shortening the wheelbase and tightening the geometry slightly. Originally, mountainbikes were built with wheelbases around 44 inches or so and with head angles around 68 or 69 degrees. Newer designs incorporate wheelbases which are a couple of inches shorter and with head angles a degree or two steeper.

And tyres; the thinner 1.75 rubber, pumped hard, produce a significant improvement in performance. Some manufacturers though have gone one step further and opted for 1.5 tyres at a slight sacrifice in kerb-hopping strength for even more zip.

Wide, wide handlebars are what you need for extra control when the only way is down and the purpose is maximising the thrills. But traffic jamming is an entirely different thrill. Straight bars are great for city riding, allowing you to see what's going on and giving excellent control. But the extra-wide variety close off too many of those between-traffic gaps. Lop off a couple of inches though and you get the benefits and the gaps.

But if the result is a mountainbike that's a nippy urban performer, it is also no slouch out where the air is cleaner and the cars non-existent. It's a machine that will serve pretty well in one of the real growth areas in mountainbiking - off-road competition.

The tighter geometry and narrower bars are going to give you a much more responsive machine for circuit-race speed. And narrower wheels and tyres - at least on dry, hard courses - are going to give you that extra zing. A bit 'witchy' for beginners perhaps, but a good start if you like to open the throttle occasionally.

The more refined versions of the off-road fast bike are where the the greatest amount of design experimentation is going on. As with road bikes, if you're aiming for maximum speed, the bike needs to be as light as you can get it, the wheels need to be strong and the components have to be top quality so that they work first time and every time. One of the necessary results of this though is that these bikes cost more.

The design trends are toward shorter wheelbases and tighter angles, but also, interestingly, higher bottom brackets. Not only does this help the pedals to clear rutted tracks and bits of forest lying across the trails, but say the designers, it helps put the rider in a better position for delivering power and keeping control at speed.

Between the urban commuter and the off road thrill-seekers lie the weekend machines. These are the off-road cousins of the touring bike, and the ride is an altogether more relaxed affair. Many people maintain that this is where the real spirit of mountainbiking lies. Gentle-paced

weekends surrounded by beautiful countryside; heading off into places you wouldn't normally think of taking your road bike.

Just as a standard touring bike makes a fine commuting bike, so does this sort of mountainbike. You may not be the first to the office, but the ride to work should be an untroubled affair. Most production models feature the wider tyres, emphasising shock absorption rather than speed. The wide tyres are usually combined with longer wheelbases and wide bars; the emphasis is on no-fuss riding.

The niches in the mountainbike spectrum though, serve as guidelines. Just because a bike is built with 'over the top' riders in mind, it doesn't mean that you can't ride it around town. Nor, for that matter, is there anything stopping you riding a towpath tourer in a race. But, with mountainbike design changing to accommodate the demands of different riders, checking out what's available will give you a better chance of getting the mountainbike bike that best suits your needs - and your pocket. The eight bikes we've selected represent some examples of what's around.

The bikes on test

Muddy Fox Monarch
Specialised Rockhopper
Dawes Ranger
Overburys Puma
Renegade
Maverick Super ATB
Eclipse Canyon
Ridgeback XT

Renegade

The Renegade is the newest entry into the mountainbike market and they've decided to start at the upper end of it, coming in with a bike costing £565.

The first thing you notice about the bike is its high - very high - bottom bracket. The bottom brackets on all mountainbikes are a couple of inches further off the ground than road bikes to allow the pedals to clear forest debris and rutted tracks. But 14½ inches is the highest we've seen on a production mountainbike. The resulting compactness of the frame bears more than a faint resemblance to BMX designs.

The bike is designed to be fast; suitable for powering through the scrub and off-road racing. But, say the designers, the bike's unusual design is also built for comfort over very rough roads. There are two reasons for the bottom bracket position. First, it gets the drive right out of the way when pedalling along rutted tracks at speed. Second, they reckon, you're in a better position to apply the power.

The frame design is also unusual. A shortish wheelbase (about 42 inches) is married to a 69 degree head angle. This, they say, provides snappy handling but keeps the front of the bike on the ground, thus improving 'track' holding, particularly when the going gets rough. Componentry is all top-line Shimano Deore (as you should expect for this money). The chainset is Shimano's elliptical



Renegade

Biopace. The Biopace is one of those 'believe them or not' things.

It's claimed to improve pedalling efficiency by concentrating power output on the downstroke. Some people say it's nonsense. Others say it's a godsend. Certainly, if you really believe it improves pedalling efficiency, it surely will.

The wheels are excellent; Suntour sealed hubs and top of the line Araya 7X rims and they're well built. The Renegade opts for 2.125 tyres as standard, figuring that with its unusual geometry,

they help in the comfort stakes. As some mountainbike frames become more compact, longer seat posts are needed; a problem the Renegade solves with a customised Tioga BMX post.

All our testers found that the Renegade took some getting used to - the unusual frame design is reflected in the ride. Once adapted though the bike was 'well quick' in the words of one. The Renegade costs, and takes some getting used to, but once in tune with it, is one for the thrill-seeker to check out.

**Specialised Rockhopper****Specialised Rockhopper**

Specialised have been building off-road bikes for five years and the Rockhopper is claimed to be the culmination of all that experience.

The bike fits neatly into the fast commuter/beginners race bike category. An excellent set of narrow wheels, well made up from Saturae X28 rims and Specialised sealed hubs, are shod with fast Specialised 1.5 inch Tri Cross tyres.

The Ritchey Uni Crown forks are reputed to be tougher than standard forks. The componentry is a mixture of mid-range Shimano and Suntour apart from the chainset which is a Specialised. The bars are about 24 inches wide, some 3 inches narrower than the bars which appeared on the first mountain-bikes here, and are great for city riding.

The Rockhopper is nifty mover, great for zipping around town and also pretty quick when you get it off the beaten track. Headbangers too, can be accommodated. One of our test riders was a top BMX rider and, after putting the bike through a series of hair-raising jumps and slides, gave it high marks.

Importantly, a slightly sloping top tube allows the bike to be built down to an 18 inch frame size which is good news for women and small men. There are though only limited stocks of the small frames but more, apparently, are on their way. The Rockhopper is a good bike for those who like to pepper their mountainbiking with a bit of speed. Priced at £395, it is good value for money.

Eclipse Canyon LTD

The indefatigable Greg Oxenham describes his company's bike as 'The Orient Express of Mountainbike'. In other words, a bike for grand touring over a variety of terrain.

Forewarned of this description, our testers were rather surprised to find that the bike was not at all slow and lumbering. In fact, all thought it moved along

quite nicely. Partly this is due to the way it is designed. Although a tourer in purpose, the 70 degree head angle and 42 inch wheelbase mean responsive handling and the 1.5 Specialised Crossroad tyres get it moving along at a good clip.

Alone of all British mountainbikes, the wheels feature Z rims made from 'Zytel', a glass re-inforced nylon. (Hubs are sealed Shimanos). The Z rims, it's claimed, give better braking; are very durable and, once properly trued, virtually indestructible. The twenty inch versions are used on many top quality BMX bikes, so they're used to taking punishment. Braking on Z rims is greatly improved by using synthetic blocks, and although Shimano non-synthetic blocks are fitted, Aztecs or similar will be fitted on request.

The Eclipse costs £525 and what you get is a top quality bike made from Reynolds 531 All Terrain tubing, including the bullmoose bars. The componentry is Shimano Deore XT, common to

many top quality off-road machines. An added touch is the Spenco saddle pad, included no doubt, to emphasise the 'Orient Express' image. The LTD is great for its intended purpose and also won't let you down if you feel like putting your foot down.

Muddy Fox Monarch

If the Canyon Ltd is the 'Orient Express', the Monarch is the Rolls Royce. Muddy Fox have the largest range of mountain-bikes in the UK and the Monarch is their flagship. The RR label comes not only as a result of its price tag (£675) but also because of its no-fuss smoothness.

Like the Rockhopper, it has the Uni Crown forks and the frame is built from beefed-up inch-plus diameter Araya chrome-moly tubing. Again the top-notch Shimano Deore XT components are used which is only as would be expected. It also comes with some handy extras - including frame pads and a handlebar bag. With a bike costing this much money, the big question that has to be answered is: 'is it worth the money?'

Well, that depends. Not only on how much you have to spend, but also how you're going to use the bike. If you wanted to have the ultimate in off-road performance, you would probably go for a stark competition machine - say with a higher bottom bracket, narrower wheels and slightly tighter geometry.

The beauty of the Monarch though is that it can win races and, for general riding and touring both off and on road, the bike is a delight. It is beautifully smooth and, most importantly, well balanced; everything feels effortless and right.

A delightful bike if your budget can stretch to it.

Dawes Ranger

The Ranger was one of the first British mountainbikes on the market, and many felt at the time that Dawes hadn't done their homework. Since then, the com-

**Eclipse Canyon**

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pany has put a lot of effort into improving the bike. The quality has dramatically improved and the bike has become a big seller.

The Dawes is not a race bike. First look at the wheelbase - a whopping 45 inches. The long wheelbase, says the company is deliberate. The idea is to build a bike that is very stable and suitable for those first getting into mountain-biking.

If the result is slow, it is also stately. This is a machine for cruising along the towpaths. It's also fine around the city, but not, perhaps, if you're running late for work. The test bike will be modified next year by adding Shimano brakes and modifying the SR quick release seat post.

Dawes were the first to introduce the double quick release seat post. They say that many riders have experienced slip with the lever under the saddle and next year this is being replaced with a nut and bolt. If they can get it to work, it's a good idea, allowing the saddle to be adjusted fore and aft as well as up and down.



Muddy Fox Monarch

For a weekend on the towpaths when the emphasis is on taking in the scenery and the fresh air, the Dawes is in its element. Gentle, very comfortable, and - yes - stable. On the Dawes the buzz word is: Relax!

Ridgeback XT

The Ridgeback was the first British mountainbike onto the market here and it has sold in large numbers. The XT is now one of four Ridgebacks and is second to basic within that range.

The machine is in its way a beginners bike as well; more at home in the cities and towpaths than letting it all hang out on the mountains. As the first in the UK, you would expect that it would have been modified and upgraded. Instead, new models have been introduced to the range to keep up with developments. The result is that the XT now looks a bit outdated.

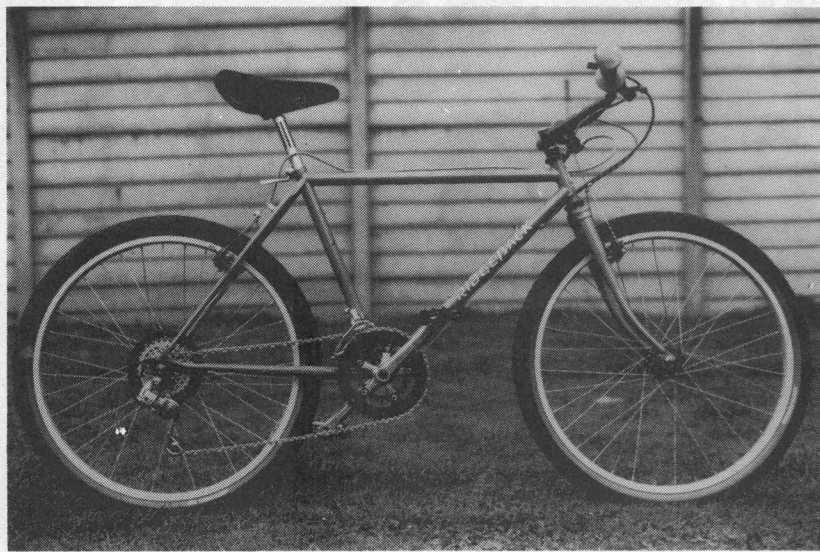
At £319, the bike now lies toward the bottom end of the market and the componentry is fairly basic Red S through-

BICYCLE DATABASE

Name & Manufacturer	Price	Type	Sizes/ Tubing	Derailleurs		Chainwheel	Freewheel	Stem	Bars
				Front	Rear				
Ridgeback XT Madison	319	Off road Mountainbike	TIG welded Cro-Mo 20, 22	Thumb MTD Shimano	Thumb MTD Shimano	Alloy 48/42/28 SR CXC	5SP 14 - 30 Shimano	Cro-Mo Bullmoose	Cro-Mo Bullmoose
Maverick Super Raleigh	348	All terrain Mountainbike	Brazed, lugged Cro-Mo 20, 22	Thumb ratchet Mountech XC Suntour	Thumb ratchet Mountech-GTL Suntour	Alloy 46/36/26 TPX Sugino	PC5-S silver 14-17-20-24-28 Suntour	Alloy MTS 180 SR	Cro-Mo Mountain bend Koizumi
Ranger Dawes	370	Off road Mountainbike Diamond	Brazed/lugged 531 MB 20, 22	Power thumb Mountech Suntour	Power thumb Mountech Suntour	Alloy 1 piece 26/36/46 175 SR	Helicomatic 14 - 28 Maillard	Alloy V - shape 4 bolt MTS 100 SR	Alloy Mountain bend SR
Rockhopper Specialized	395	Off/On Road Mountainbike	Lugless Cro-Mo 20" 22"	Thumb AG Tech Suntour	Thumb Mountech Suntour	Alloy 46/36/26 Specialized	Perfect 5 speed 14 - 30 Suntour	Cro-Mo Bullmoose Specialized	Cro-Mo Bullmoose Specialized
Puma Overbury's	399	All terrain Mountainbike Sloping top tube	Lugless 531 AT 17	Thumb Deore XT Shimano	Thumb Deore XT Shimano	Alloy 28/38/48 Takasi	6 speed Uniglide 14 - 32 Shimano	Cro-Mo Bullmoose Overbury's	Cro-Mo Bullmoose Overbury's
Canyon Ltd Eclipse Cycles	525	All terrain Mountainbike Hadon lugs	Vertical d. outs 531 all terrain 18 1/2 - 23	XT Thumbshifters XT Shimano	XT Thumbshifters Rear changer XT Shimano	Alloy 28/38/48 Shimano	5 speed 13 - 30 st. Suntour N. Winn.	531 Bullmoose Eclipse 531	531 Bullmoose Eclipse 531
Renegade Renegade Cycles	565	Off Road Mountainbike	531 AT 16", 17", 18", 19"	Thumb XT Shimano	Thumb XT Shimano	Alloy 48/38/28 Shimano Biopace	6 Speed 13 - 32 Shimano	Cro-Mo Bullmoose Nitto	Cro-Mo Bullmoose Nitto
Monarch Muddy Fox	675	All Terrain Mountainbike Diamond	TIG Araya Cro-Mo 18.5 - 22	Thumbshifter Deore XT Shimano	Thumbshifter Deore XT Shimano	Alloy/cotterless 46/36/26 x 175mm Sugino TAT	6 speed 13 - 28 gold Shimano MF 1600	Chrome Moly Bullmoose Nitto B902	Chrome Moly Bullmoose Nitto B902



Dawes Ranger



Ridgeback XT

out. The wheels too are fairly basic - SR hubs and Ascenti rims, although the ones on the test bike stood up to plenty of punishment.

Even at the bottom end of the market, you are going to get a bike which stands up to the hard knocks. You can bash through potholes or go charging over rough terrain, and the XT will handle those tasks without any problems. But it is quite heavy and the performance sluggish.

It is a workhorse rather than a com-

petition machine or relaxed tourer. But with a well balanced spec and a price tag of just over 300 quid, still represents reasonable value.

Overburys Puma

Since Overburys started building mountainbikes, they have established a reputation for innovation. The Puma is a bike that they have designed to slot into a gap in the market: small frames for small people.

With a higher bottom bracket, a cor-

rectly sized mountainbike will generally be a couple of inches smaller than a road bike. Which means that women and small men who are riding, say, 19 or 20 inch road bikes need 17 or 18 inch mountainbikes. Problem: They're pretty thin on the ground. Solution: the Puma. A sloping top tube is used in order to get the frame size down as low as sixteen inches while still using 26 inch wheels.

Encouragingly, quality hasn't been sacrificed merely because a bike has been built with a particular group of

Bars	Bottom Bracket	Pedals	Hubs	Rims	Tyres	Brakes	Saddle	Seatpost	Finish	Extras
Cro-Mo Bullmoose	Standard	Plastic Platform M4S	Alloy Solid axle L/F	26 x 1.75 Hardalloy Ascenti	High pressure 26 x 2.125 Nutrak	Cantilever Red S	Leather Anatomic Madison	Alloy Laprade type	Slate grey	Guard Q/F binder bolt
Cro-Mo Mountain bend Koizumi	International Sealed Kajita	Alloy XC-II Beartrap Suntour	LPF light alloy Suzue	26 x 1.75 7X(N)alloy Araya	Panaracer Skinwall National	980/280 Cantilevers Dia Compe	Black Anatomic Kashimax	Alloy MTE 110 SR	Metallic red	Seat clamp Alloy spoke disc Cage mounts
Alloy Mountain bend SR	3T cotterless	Alloy/Cro-Mo Platform SR	Sealed Diabolo Maillard	26 x 1 3/8 Anodised alloy Weinmann	Explorer 27 x 2 1/8 CR Vredestein	Cantilever Weinmann	Comfort Sprung Isca	Alloy Micro adjust QR SR	Burnt Cherry Lined lugs	Headset/drop outs Protectors Bottle bosses
Cro-Mo Bullmoose Specialized	Sealed Specialized	Alloy SX Shimano	Alloy Sealed Specialized	26 x 1.5 X28 Aero Saturae	Crossroads 26 x 1.5 Specialized	Cantilever Shimano	Padded plastic Touring Avocet	Alloy Laprade SR	Blue Red	Wheelsmith spokes Braze-ons
Cro-Mo Bullmoose Overburys	Cro-Mo Sealed Tange	Alloy SX platform Shimano	Sealed/Cro-Mo Deore XT Shimano	26 x 1.75 Alloy MB Rigida	All terrain Centre ridge Michelin	Deore XT Cantilever Shimano	Leather covered Anatomic Overburys	Alloy Micro adjust SR	Grey To choice	Bash plate Protector Q/R seatbolt
531 Bullmoose Eclipse 531	Sealed 130 Sealed cartridge Suntour	Alloy Beartraps Suntour	Alloy Sealed/s.spindle Suntour	26 Nylon Z rims ACS	Cross Roads Raised c. ridge Specialized	XT Cantilever Shimano	Leather Comfort/anatomic Selle Royal	Reinforced Nylon Micro adjust Atax	Brilliant white Black/red FB epoxy poulder	Bosses and cage Bosses/reflects. Seat cover
Cro-Mo Bullmoose Nitto	Sealed cups Tange	Alloy Beartrap Suntour	S/F Sealed Suntour	26 x 1.75 7X Araya	26 x 2.125 Panaracer	Cantilever XT Shimano	Leather B17 Brooks	Cro-Mo Custom layback Renegade	To choice	Full set of Braze ons
Chrome Moly Bullmoose Nitto B902	English Sealed Suntour DS-230	Alloy sealed XC-11 Beartrap Suntour	L. flange/sealed Alloy/Deore XT Shimano	26 x 1.75 S.light Alloy Araya RM-25	Skinside 26x2/125 Nat. Panaracer	Deore XT alloy Cantilever Shimano	Leather GT4 anatomic Kashimax	Micro adjust SP.O Sugino	White gold Metallic glint	Bosses/mudguard Eyelets/bag H'bar bag/pump

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buyers in mind. The frame is Reynolds 531 and the components - again - are Shimano Deore XT. Wheels too, are good quality with Shimano sealed hubs and Rigida rims. Overburys opt for the wide tyres, but narrower wheels can be fitted for the rider who wants livelier performance.

What you win on the roundabout, you lose on the swing and the price you pay for a bike that fits is a bike whose proportions are, necessarily, unusual. So, the riding position on the Puma takes a bit of getting used to. It may look and feel a little strange at first, but, importantly it works.

Women and small men have a very limited choice in mountainbikes. The Puma caters for them but better, it is also a top quality bike in its own right.

Maverick Super ATB 15

Raleigh entered the mountainbike market this year with a huge marketing campaign that put muddy mountainbikes on billboards all over the country.

And this gives a clue to the sort of bike it is. It is designed as a fun bike, appealing to mountainbike beginners and those who fancy one of the much advertised 'dirty weekends'. And, during the less exciting part of the week, a reliable commuting machine. They're jobs this Maverick - the top of the Raleigh range - will do very well.

The bike is built in Japan from chrome-moly tubing and imported into Britain. It's design is an amalgam. A laid back head angle and 43 inch wheelbase give stable and predictable handling; the narrow wheels and the bike's light



Maverick Super ATB

weight give brisk acceleration.

The componentry is mid range and about what you would expect for the money - Dia Compe brakes, Suntour Mountech changer and Sugino PX chainset. The latter has 46-36-26 rings and are combined with a 14-28T block. The gearing is not as low as that found on most serious off-road bikes, but is okay for the sort of work envisaged for the machine.

The Kashimax anatomic saddle sits on a SR seat pillar featuring, like the Dawes, fore and aft adjustment. This though is tightened with an allen bolt and is more secure than the quick release lever which, as Dawes have found out, can work loose.

This is a bike which, like the Ridgeback XT, is designed as a workhorse and weekend fun machine. It's lighter than that bike and more fun to ride. Those looking to rugged transportation and an introduction to off-road riding should be happy.



Overburys Puma

Production Mountainbikes

Maverick 5.....	£137
Montana Team.....	£188
Maverick 15.....	£199
Trailmaster 24".....	£229
Urban Express.....	£230
Ridgeback 5.....	£249
Muddy City.....	£254
Montana Sport.....	£262
Bigfoot.....	£271
Canyon Express.....	£275
Trailmaster 26".....	£299
Ridgeback XT.....	£319
Adventurer Deluxe.....	£322
Muddy City II.....	£334
Vixen.....	£336
Bigfoot II.....	£345
Eiger.....	£345
Super Maverick.....	£348
Fellrider.....	£350
Seeker.....	£353
Seeker Mixte.....	£353
Lynx.....	£370
Explorer Deluxe.....	£377
Haro Explorer 24".....	£378
Ridgeback 501.....	£379
Peakfinder.....	£380
Rockhopper.....	£395
Conquest.....	£395
Col Climber.....	£397
Montana Pro.....	£399
Puma.....	£400
Haro Explorer 26".....	£423
Cross Fell.....	£425
Desperado.....	£425
Stannet ATB.....	£426
Trekker.....	£429
Wildcat.....	£445
Alpine XT.....	£470
Gran Montana.....	£483
Rattus.....	£489
Rat.....	£489
Specialized Sport.....	£490
Pathfinder.....	£497
Condor Countryman.....	£525
Pioneer.....	£525
Rambler.....	£525
Range Rider.....	£549
Roberts Mountainbike.....	£560
Ridgeback 531.....	£563
Canyon.....	£565
Pioneer XC.....	£586
Hutch Trailstar.....	£593
Stumpjumper.....	£661
Monarch.....	£675
Limited Edition.....	£1,000