

Cyclocross bike with mudguard and rack mounts

BikeRadar score  3.5/5Surly Cross-Check (www.robertsmithphotography.co.uk)

BikeRadar verdict

Perfect off-road handling but it's no lightweight

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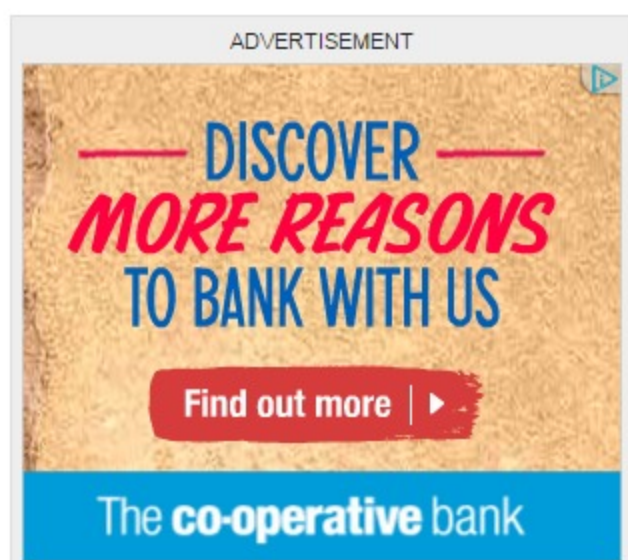


At first glance, the Surly Cross-Check looks like a classic steel cyclocross bike, but take a closer look at the beautifully appointed chromoly frame and you'll find provision for mudguards, a rear rack and even a high-mount front pannier rack. That makes it capable of so much more than just mud-plugging, although when you hit the road it's definitely more touring bike than sprint machine.

But it's on the rough stuff that the Surly really shines. With a short top tube, slack head angle and swept forward fork, it's an absolute joy in the off-road handling stakes. Okay, it can't compete with a modern mountain bike on dirt – to push one of those and yourself to the limit you'll likely need to visit a trail centre or venture to Europe's mountains.

Instead, the Cross-Check, essentially a road bike with fat tyres, makes your local woods, byways or bridleways a genuinely exhilarating challenge. If you make your next commuter bike a Cross-Check and then get yourself off the beaten track, you'll not only improve your all-round bike handling skills but you'll have fun doing so.

Our test build is good value with some great kit: a drivetrain that combines a Shimano Deore mech shifting an 11-32 cassette and 'cross-specific 48/36 chainring. Not only is this an ideal off-road range, it's more than adequate should you decide to hang some panniers on the frame for a spot of weekend touring. Old-school bar-end shifters will run forever without fuss, though you do need to anticipate your required gear before you hit a technical section off-road.



Controlled braking, lots of clearance

A solid wheelset and excellent off-road tyres in the form of Kenda's Slant Six – mountain bike legend John Tomac's signature series – help ensure that the Surly is surefooted, smooth and comfortable. Steering is handled by Salsa's super-flared Bell Lap bar, the one drop bar we're truly comfortable with riding off-road in the drops.

The downside of the Cross-Check is that it comes in the wrong side of 11kg, but that weight translates into toughness; on one 60-mile off-road test ride we took the Cross-Check cross-country from singletrack to cart track, and even a couple of runs down a former national downhill course, complete with drop-offs and jumps. It survived with not even a scratch on its vibrant – 'Hospital Foam' – green paintwork.