

BIKE TEST



EXPEDITION BIKE

Salsa Fargo 2

Expedition touring bike, drop-handlebar 29er MTB, and more –
Chris Juden reviews a versatile, go-anywhere big wheeler from Salsa

▶ **FROM MY** first ride on a 29er, I've been tempted by the thought of a dual-purpose MTB/tourer on the same 29in/700C wheels. Salsa's Fargo is just that. You can ride it simply as a drop bar MTB on local trails, or load it up for multi-day expeditions. MTB-based 26in wheeled tourers are fairly common of course, but there's a far better choice of touring tyres in 700C and bigger wheels roll better – especially on soft and rough ground – so at the end of the day you'll either be less tired or further and maybe both!

There's also a Ti version but Fargos

700C isn't as common as some wheels sizes worldwide – yet. But as the Fargo uses disc brakes, you could get some 28×1½in rims built onto disc hubs if you wanted peace of mind touring, say, India

mostly have a steel frame and all have steel forks. Good old, dependable steel, but with an aluminium replaceable gear hanger which snapped when I tried to straighten it.

Fit and handling

Aside from that, I have no problems with the frame. I picked the middle size, though I'm borderline tall enough, and asked for the shorter stem off the small one – as I have long legs for my height. Good call: the long seatpost was only 1cm off its limit and I wouldn't have wanted the bars any further away.

A steeply sloping top-tube makes the bars relatively high. That's so you can use the drops most of the time, for these are not drops as we know them. They're MTB drops: with a short forward throw and drop that slopes and splays widely outwards, to provide the necessary leverage to negotiate trail obstacles and handle front panniers. I grew to like this Salsa Woodchipper quite a bit better than the usual racing cast-offs. At last: a handlebar designed for tourists!

The Fargo's handling is rather ponderous at low speed, especially



when front panniers add to the wheel flop that results from a large amount of trail. I'd like to try this bike with 1cm more fork offset. That would also take those fat tyres away from my toes. At speed, of course, all that trail firmly keeps the Fargo-ing in a straight line – just maybe a bit too firmly.

Frame to tyre clearances are generous, especially the fork, which looks long enough to be swapped for front suspension... but isn't quite: 80mm of travel will raise the head a couple of centimetres when riding.

Bristling with braze-ons

In the USA, they're re-inventing the improvised saddle-packs, handlebar bundles and triangular frame bags used by cycle tourists of 100 years ago. Frame bags are expensive and heavy for their small volume, and tend only to be available online here (e.g. alpkit.com), but both frame and fork fairly bristle with braze-ons.

For in addition to the usual frame positions, there's also provision for bottles on the fork. These bosses moreover – and one of the frame positions – come in threes! That's so the cage can be fitted lower or closer to hand, according to the length of bottle. It's a neat idea.

Fortunately the Fargo also has fittings for carriers. Salsa supply a

(Top right) Truly compact double, but mech is thwarted by a bottle boss

(Bottom right) Chainstay mounting keeps the brake away from panniers, but the cable may collect water

special carrier to clear that big rear tyre, which I fitted. Although made from alloy tubes it is rather heavy (940g) and unfortunately Salsa haven't upsized their lower fixings to more reliable 6mm bolts; but it's a sturdy carrier and didn't rattle loose. I also tested the bike with a low-load front carrier. (Fork bottles cannot be used at the same time as that.)

More spokes please

The Fargo comes with monster 2.2in tyres that make these wheels look huge and comfortably swallow most rough-stuff. They'll take up to 4.5bar, at which they also went okay on road. Ordinary touring tyres, down to 32mm, could be fitted for a diet of tarmac.

The spokes are nicely tensioned and 32 spokes are enough in front, but you can't afford to take chances with the back wheel of a tourer. Here at least 36 spokes are needed, to match the strength of a smaller 26in wheel. I would also like to see differential spoking, to balance the uneven stresses that arise from dishing. Wilderness touring calls for better than these stock 29in MTB wheels.

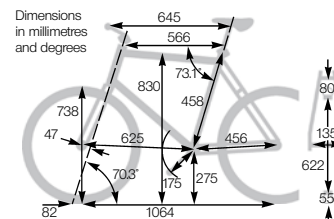
For now, 26in MTB tyres remain more widely available worldwide, so you'll need to be self sufficient if you go far on a Fargo. But I think that this size will become more universal. Fat

700Cs should eventually replace the 28x1 $\frac{1}{2}$ in tyres on roadster bikes in places like Holland and India.

Truly compact double

The most interesting feature of the Fargo 2 is its innovative combination of Sram's road shifters with 20-speed mountain gears, confirming beyond doubt that (unlike Shimano) Sram's 10-speed road and mountain stuff is completely mix and match. Unfortunately Sram don't do road triples, so you're limited to a double. With 10 sprockets at the back, however, even mountain bikes get by pretty well with just two rings and there's now quite a selection of genuinely compact doubles to choose from – each with their own different bolt pattern of course!

This FSA design accepts nothing smaller than 27 teeth, which with a 36 sprocket gears these 29in wheels down to 22in. It's low enough for most purposes short of the expedition touring this bike is supposed to be for, whilst 42/12 provides a top gear that's pure entertainment! If I were heading into the mountains, I'd go 20% lower at the bottom and lose 7% off the top with a Shimano 22-36 double chainset and an 11-36 cassette. But the front mech is already a bit too high on the frame for the existing



SALSA FARGO 2

Price: £1800

Weight: 12.88kg

Sizes (in): S/16, M/18 (tested), L/20, XL/22

Frame & fork: cro-moly steel

Wheels: Continental Race-King 55-622 tyres on DT Swiss 18mm X430 rims, 2.0/1.8 double-butted spokes 32×3 on Formula hubs.

Transmission: 20-speed, 22–102in. FSA Comet 42-27T chainset, Sram 12-36T 10-speed cassette, PC1031 chain. X7 front & X9 rear mechs, Apex shifters.

Braking: Avid BB7 road 160mm disc.

Steering & seating: Cane Creek headset, Salsa 8cm 25° stem, Woodchipper flared drop handlebar, WTB Silverado Thinline saddle on Cane Creek Thudbuster post.

Accessories: none included

Contact: Ison Distribution, ison-distribution.com, 01353 662 662

42 tooth outer (which the chain derailed over once or twice) and lower adjustment is blocked by an unfortunately positioned bottle cage boss. Salsa should've specified the low-clamp version of this mech.

I remember the days before triples when TA cranks with rings like 42-26 were standard equipment for touring. But before rushing to fit one of these truly compact doubles to your overgeared road bike, beware that chainline is much wider: 50mm against the road bike's 43mm. It'll run, but outer ring and inner sprocket will run a bit rough. You really want a 135mm MTB/trekking hub like on the Fargo – plus Sram shifters and mechs.

Shifting was convenient and prompt once I'd got it adjusted. I think this bike's rear mech must have been leant on in transit. I diagnosed a bent hanger and the rest you know. With a replacement fitted, all was well. But these Sram mechs do stick out rather.

Disc only

Avid BB7 road are generally reckoned the best discs you can get for drop bar levers, but at first I wasn't impressed. With no V-mounts, they've got to work. After a few steep descents to run them in, they started to grip much better. Very careful adjustment is needed to get firm action without rubbing when the brake is supposed to be off, but once adjusted and run in the brakes were easy to work from above or

below the Apex levers. By end of test I felt I could really rely on this setup.

One snag with cable discs is they stick out so far, causing problems for luggage. The Tubus Duo front carrier needed a longer spacer anyway to clear the fork, with which it also cleared the brake. Conflict at the rear is completely avoided by putting the calliper inside the rear triangle. Unfortunately that points the cable end upwards. In my experience that orientation helps water, rust and dirt accumulate in the casing, so the brake gets stiffer, and then freezes in winter.

Suspension & extras

The Fargo gets a modicum of rear suspension from a Thudbuster seatpost, which instead of telescoping lets the saddle swing back and down, cushioned by a chunk of polyurethane. I liked the way it made a hard and narrow saddle (read: thong) bearably comfortable on really rough tracks.

The Fargo doesn't come with any accessories but you can buy the luggage carrier I mentioned already, and most other standard stuff fits. Apart from mudguards. I lashed up some minimalist MTB guards with zip-ties. I asked SKS if they have any plans to make full mudguards for bikes like this. They don't, not until dealers ask for them. Cascadia 'fenders' are made in 29er size by Planet Bike in the USA (planetbike.com), but nobody imports them here yet.

The Fargo is quite capable off-road as a rigid mountain bike. The wide Woodchipper bars provide more steering security than narrow racing drops

Conclusion

Apparently, people who've bought a Salsa Fargo for their off-road adventures end up using it for all sorts of other riding too. I can see why they do. It's a bit heavy and unconventional, but with options that are wide open.

If you intend to load up this bike and head somewhere remote, you'll want to change a few things and carry a spare gear hanger or two. But the Fargo 2 is a good starting point for adventures big and small. It's made me even keener to build myself something like that – only better.

Also consider



1) Singular Gryphon £900+
Flared-drop bar allrounder, similar to the Fargo, but with fewer braze-ons, more fork offset, and an eccentric BB. Frame and fork £440. singularcycles.com



2) Genesis Fortitude Adventure £1499.99
Flat bar, rigid-fork-specific expedition bike with lots of braze-ons and a Shimano Alfine 11-speed hub. genesishikes.co.uk