

STUFF

REALITY TESTED PRODUCT REVIEWS



We're proud of our reviews, and we think our process sets us apart from the competition. Each item is evaluated by a single individual over a minimum 6-week testing period, and each write-up is peer-reviewed by a staff of knowledgeable bike experts, giving you the confidence you need to make smart and informed purchases.

PHOTO: JUSTIN STEINER

SALSA CYCLES FARGO

"Jack of all trades, master of none" is a phrase that is often thrown about in terms of bikes designed to be highly versatile, as there are certain compromises that come with versatility. With the Fargo, Salsa is attempting to walk the tightrope between rigid mountain bike and touring bike—something they are aptly calling an adventure touring mountain bike.

Talk to ten different people about how an adventure touring bike should be set up, and you'll likely get ten different answers when it comes to geometry and parts selection. The light-and-fast crowd will want a quicker handling machine, while the take-the-kitchen-sink-and-we'll-get-there-when-we-get-there crowd will want a long, comfy bike that they can

ride while practically sleeping. On top of all this, everyone will want his or her preferred handlebar setup.

Obviously, designing a bike like the Fargo to cater to all these desires is no short order, not to mention combining traits of a mountain bike and a touring bike, which are in many ways inherently at odds. Many of us like mountain bikes that handle quickly and responsively, while touring bikes designed for heavy loads benefit from slow, stable handling.

For starters, the folks at Salsa wanted drop bars for multiple hand positions, which necessitated shorter top tubes, making toe-overlap more of an issue with 29" tires and fenders. This issue was solved by choosing a non-suspension-corrected fork with lots of offset (55mm), and a slack

head tube angle of 70° (both numbers identical to the Jones SpaceFrame tested in issue #141, incidentally), to provide a reasonable, if a bit short, trail measurement while sticking the wheel far enough out of the way of your toes. This quickish front end was also used to keep steering responsive when loaded. A long head tube was a must in order to get the drop bars high enough for comfortable off-road use. A low bottom bracket (75mm drop, or 11.25") was used for stability, along with lengthy 18.3" chainstays. The steeply sloping top tube offers a great deal of standover clearance. All of these constraints produce a bike that is awkwardly attractive.

Parts spec was wisely chosen for this bike. The XT-level kit with traditional

SALSA CYCLES FARGO

TESTER:
Justin Stiener
AGE:
26
HEIGHT:
5'7"
WEIGHT:
160 lbs.
INSEAM:
31"

VITAL STATS

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:
Taiwan
PRICE:
\$656 (frame, and fork), \$1,950 as tested with XT kit
WEIGHT:
27.5 lbs. (w/ pedals, as tested)
SIZES AVAILABLE:
S, M (tested), L, XL, XXL
CONTACT:
www.salsacycles.com



PHOTO: JUSTIN STEINER

mountain gearing (22-32-44t chainrings and 12-32t cassette), Avid BB7 brakes, and Tektro long-pull brake levers come together to provide a highly functional and reliable system. Salsa's Semi 29'er rims, along with XT hubs, have proven to be bomb-proof—no truing or tensioning needed through my lengthy test period. Salsa also provides all cockpit parts.

On road, the Fargo felt great as a commuting machine—the stock WTB Vulpine 29" x 2.1" tires roll surprisingly well on pavement aired up to only 28psi, and were super comfy for the ballast-covered railroad access road portion of my commute. These tires also worked surprisingly well for my singletrack ventures, even in some mud and snow—a perfect match for the Fargo's versatility. Off-road, the Fargo feels better than you might think based on the geometry chart alone. The front

riding in the drops for extended periods. Trouble with that height is you now have the tops and hoods of the bars so high that they're basically useless (especially with the deep drops of the Salsa Bell Lap bar). A bar with less drop and more flair would help to ease this problem—which, according to the rumor mill, is apparently in the works at Salsa. As I get older (ripe old age of 26) I find myself enjoying the more upright position afforded by many alt bars on the market, whether it be the On-One Mary, Jones H-Bar, or otherwise. For this project I wanted an H-Bar for the variety of hand positions, and Jeff was kind enough to loan me his new Loop H-Bar for this test. With a 130mm stem to compensate for the loss of reach of the drop bar, things really started to come together. The H-Bar gave me multiple hand positions without the height disparity of a drop bar.

Having six bottle mounts was simply awesome—I'd like to have bottle mounts on the forks of all my bikes.

end steers quickly and is quite agile, while long chainstays do slow things down substantially out back. Lofting the front end of this bike definitely requires more effort than most of us are used to, but I had no issues bunny-hopping after getting the timing and effort required dialed in. The low bottom bracket was noticeable, but simply took some adjustment on my part. In fact, I like the "carvy" cornering feeling that the lower BB affords in conjunction with the front-end geometry and long rear end.

With drop bars, the main issue I always run into is just how high to set them up. Off-road, you need to get the bars high enough to be comfortable

With my fit further refined, and spring springing, it was time to load up the Fargo and set out for a few days on the singletrack and fire/dirt/tarmac roads of one of our local state forests. With the bike moderately loaded—lowriders up front, handlebar bag, and saddlebags—it looked like a machine ready for adventure. Setting the Fargo up as a touring bike was a piece of cake, as the folks at Salsa provided just about every mounting option for every touring-related need one might have. Having six bottle mounts was simply awesome—I'd like to have bottle mounts on the forks of all my bikes. One drawback: on my 18" test bike, the second down tube bottle mount couldn't be used

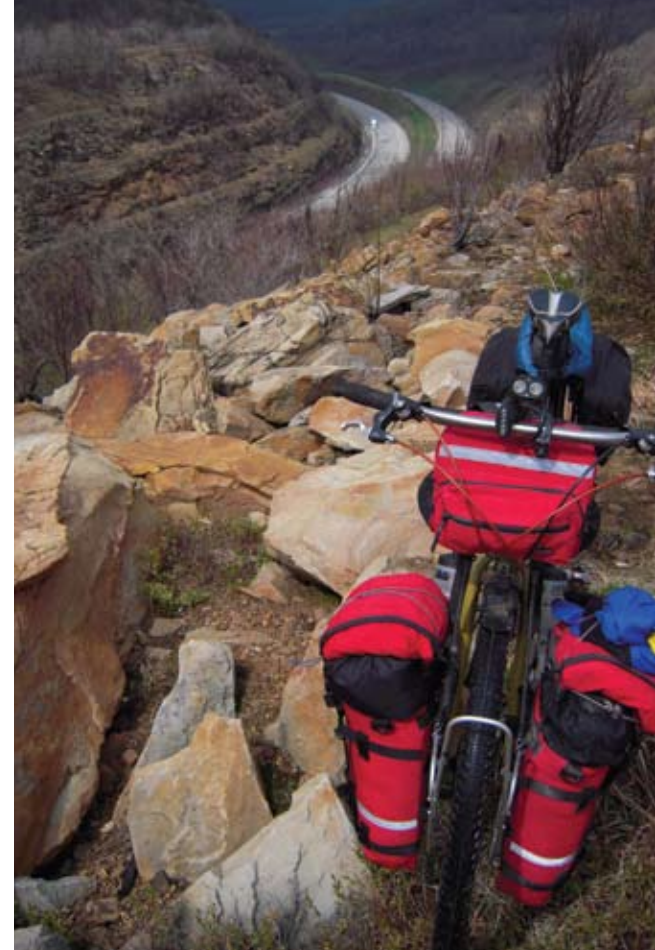


PHOTO: JUSTIN STEINER



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PHOTO: MATT KASPRZYK

if I wanted to run a frame pump under the top tube.

Overall, the Fargo handled my moderate load respectably. There was just a touch of frame flex from the Salsa Classico chromoly steel in some high-strain situations, but it was an acceptable amount—most users will likely never take issue. The long, low rear end certainly handled the weight as you would predict: nice and stable. The front end was a bit of a different story due to the bike's short trail. A bike that feels agile with no weight on the front end can be a handful when loaded, most noticeably in two situations. One, on heavily crowned surfaces (dirt or tarmac) the front wheel wants to turn and ride up the camber. With this wandering of the front wheel due to surface input, I found it impossible to take both hands off the bars with weight on the bike on all but the most level surfaces. While not a huge deal, the cumulative effects of countersteering added up over the course of a day's ride. The second situation in which the lack of front-end stability was most noticeable was while climbing in granny gear, when there was very little gyroscopic or linear momentum keeping things going in a straight line. In this case, the lack of self-centering combined with extra weight could overpower my steering efforts

unless I had a nice, wide grip on the H-Bars. Moving to a position that would simulate the tops of a drop bar left me unable to control the direction of the front wheel.

However, anytime speed was a factor, the combined gyroscopic inertia of the wheels and linear inertia of bike, body, and gear was enough to overpower the surface input and the bike felt good. Going more than 30mph on a loose gravel road descent down a mountain, fully loaded? No problem, just ease yer butt back over that super-long rear end and let 'er rip!

The only other handling strangeness came in the form of headshake with the front end unloaded and a moderate load on the rear rack. With both hands off the bars in excess of 15 mph on any surface that wasn't glass-smooth, the front fender will start an oscillation of the front wheel which could turn ugly if one hand was not placed immediately back on the bars. While the simple solution is just to keep one hand on the bars at all times, this does illustrate the quickness, and lack of self-centering, of this bike's front end.

Riding singletrack loaded (er, I should say, with the bike loaded) was a pleasant experience. At any speed with some momentum, the handling was pleasantly responsive and the bike felt good. In slow situations the

mentioned steering feedback became noticeable.

My issues aside, the Fargo is an inspiring bicycle. Whether I'm riding it, or just looking at it, this bike inspires me to dream up my next adventure. Want to ride someplace and camp, then take off your bags and do some mountain biking? Go for it, the Fargo is ready and willing. Want to spend a long weekend (or a few months) exploring the forest roads and dirt roads of this vast country? This may be the bike for you. Want a nice fat-tire commuting bike with room for fenders, racks, and all the bells and whistles you might want? Yep, you got it: Fargo. This bike is a build kit away from being whatever you want it to be.

As it stands now, I can't help but feel there is a slight disconnect between the handling of the front and rear ends of the Fargo. Simply slowing down the front end to compliment the rear end's stability would make a great bike even better. You can't expect everyone to get everything right on the first try, but my hat goes off to Salsa for getting this close in the first round. While it may not be a master of any one thing, it certainly is a skilled jack of all trades.

Dirt Rag Go To

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Go to our website, find the green box to the left, and enter "22" for Justin's Fargo adventure blogs.