



NINER RLT STEEL

BY NICK LEGAN

→ “DOES this climb ever end?” I asked myself, ignoring the fact that the effort was warming me in the freezing temperatures. The shaded, dirt shelf road curved its way up the pass that served as the opening volley in the 2015 Rebecca’s Private Idaho gravel event. While there was a number on the front of my Niner RLT Steel test bike, I was there for new roads and old friends, not heated sparring with fellow cyclists, and to put Niner’s latest offering through its paces.

Whether labeled gravel, adventure road, all-road, or something similar, bikes like Niner’s RLT (Road Less Traveled) Steel continue to offer new, versatile options for drop-bar riders who like to mix it up. Sharing geometry and key features with Niner’s original RLT Alloy, the steel version easily clears 40mm tires, offers the reliable stopping power of disc brakes, a Pressfit 30 bottom bracket (with the option of using Niner’s eccentric bottom bracket for tensioning a singlespeed or internal-gear hub chain), and full compatibility with both mechanical and electronic groupsets. Its balanced, low (but not too low) bottom bracket and long (but not too long) chainstays make for a sure-footed bike that changes direction when asked.

Niner says the RLT Steel is a bike designed with gravel, dirt, and paved roads in mind, whether its rider goes fast and light or slowly and methodically. While many users will keep the RLT in a stripped-down form, its frame does

SPECIFICATIONS

NINER RLT STEEL W/ 2-STAR 105 BUILD

Price: \$2,500 (as reviewed)

Sizes available: 47cm, 50cm, 53cm, 56cm, 59cm, 62cm

Size tested: 56cm

Weight: 22.74 lbs. (without pedals)

TEST BIKE MEASUREMENTS

1. **Seat tube:** 56cm (center to top)

2. **Top tube:** 56.5cm (effective)

3. **Head tube angle:** 71.5°

4. **Seat tube angle:** 73.0°

5. **Chainstays:** 430mm (horizontal)

6. **Bottom bracket drop:** 65mm

7. **Crank spindle height above ground:** 285mm

8. **Fork offset:** 45mm

9. **Wheelbase:** 1038mm

10. **Standover height:** 819mm

11. **Frame:** Niner RLT Steel w/ Reynolds 853

12. **Fork:** Niner Full Carbon Fork, QR 9mm (new model uses thru-axle)

13. **Rims:** Niner alloy

14. **Hubs:** Niner Alloy, QR 9mm front, 142x12mm thru axle rear (new model uses thru-axle front)

15. **Tires:** Schwalbe G-One Performance 700x35mm, folding bead



- 16. **Bottom bracket:** FSA
- 17. **Crankset:** FSA Energy, 172.5mm, 46/36T
- 18. **Cassette:** 11-speed Shimano 105 11-32T
- 19. **Brake levers:** Shimano 105 ST-5800 black
- 20. **Shift levers:** Shimano 105 ST-5800 black
- 21. **Brake calipers:** Avid BB5 mechanical disc brake
- 22. **Pedals:** N/A
- 23. **Seatpost:** Niner alloy, 400mm
- 24. **Stem:** Niner alloy, 100mm
- 25. **Handlebar:** Niner Drop Top Alloy, 44cm
- 26. **Headset:** Cane Creek
- 26. **Saddle:** Niner w/ Cr-Mo rails

GEARING IN INCHES

	36	46
11	88.9	113.6
12	81.5	104.2
13	75.2	96.1
14	69.9	89.3
16	61.1	78.1
18	54.3	69.4
20	48.9	62.5
22	44.5	56.8
25	39.1	50.0
28	34.9	44.6
32	30.6	39.1

Contact: Niner Bicycles, 1611 South College, Unit 202, Fort Collins, Colorado, ninerbikes.com.



feature rack and fender mounts both front and rear. In fact with the updated fork that Niner unveiled in October 2015, the company offers the industry's few carbon fiber forks with mid-blade rack mounts (the Specialized Diverge is another).

Rebecca's Private Idaho was a worthy test with 93 miles of prime Ketchum-area dirt roads. With well-stocked, regular rest stops, I didn't need to take advantage of the RLT's third water-bottle-cage mount. On the other hand, I did make use of the Niner's ample tire clearance by installing a pair of Clement's excellent 40mm X'Plor MSO tires.

While the 56cm bike was a bit harsh for my 155-lb. frame (although bigger riders enthusiastically endorsed the bike's ride quality) with its stock 35mm Schwalbe tires, the Clements went a long way to smooth out the rough ride of dirt roads. They also gave the bike a more sure-footed feel that led me to explore several singletrack connectors while riding at home.

When I asked Niner's Associate Brand Manager Brad Cole about that perceived rigidity, he mentioned that with Niner's background in mountain bikes, the RLT frame and fork are built to surpass Europe's strict EN off-road specifications required of mountain bikes sold on the continent. "As a result, the frame and fork ends up a bit stiffer, but stronger and more durable," he said. For this tester, that peace of mind really did go a long way when I considered taking the road less traveled. It also means that the frame will carry a load well when in touring mode.

When exploring the limits of the Niner RLT on mountain bike trails, the lack of a granny gear became apparent. While the FSA Energy crankset is a fine, value-oriented piece, the stock 46-36T chainrings and 11-32 cassette limited where my mortal legs and lungs could propel the bike. In fairness, this isn't a mountain bike, and the fact that I was able to use singletrack connectors on dirt-road rides put a smile on my face.

To help a bit on long inclines, prior

to Rebecca's Private Idaho, I installed a 34T chainring that I had in my parts box, which helped limit my suffering. A triple or a mountain bike rear cassette would have opened even more possibilities for the bike as an explorer and for loaded touring. Thankfully, if you'd like to entertain that option, Niner sells the RLT Steel as a frameset (\$1,500).

The basic layout of Rebecca's Private Idaho is a lollipop. And because the route begins with a long climb out of Ketchum that turns to dirt, the ride ends with a well-earned descent back into town. While

Shimano 105 shifters, derailleurs, chain, and cassette all performed just as you'd expect from Shimano's third-tier group, featuring reliable accuracy that is a bit heavier than its more expensive siblings. Like most original equipment, replacing the cables for slicker, more expensive options would have improved both the shifting and braking, but that's a wear item and nothing of concern.

Those wide 44cm bars mentioned earlier are a Niner house brand model, as are the zero-setback seatpost, saddle, stem (with nifty beer-cap headset cap that you

down dirt descents. So, like many things, weight is a double-edged sword.

Beyond gravel and dirt road exploring, Niner also pitches the bike as a bikepacking or light touring bike. As such it features rear rack mounts, and the new fork offers a front thru-axle as well as low-rider rack mounts. A road-touring cyclist could fit robust, road-width tires and fenders for cruising comfort, but the tall gearing limits the heft of the load a Niner RLT-mounted explorer might consider if using a stock build. If you are fit and seasoned in packing light, though, the RLT will make a fine touring steed.

That versatility also makes the RLT Steel a worthy weekend warrior while serving double duty as a weekday commuter. Install lights and a rear rack to carry your work essentials and spice up the ride home by hitting a dirt section.

The Niner RLT lives up to its name. With a robust frame, disc brakes, and healthy tires, the Niner encouraged me to take overgrown doubletracks, singletrack connectors, and the longer option on several occasions. At \$2,500, the Shimano 105-equipped model I tested is a great value for a very versatile bike. My only minor qualm is the gearing, but stronger legs won't mind, especially if the bike is only used with light luggage. Unless you have an ample parts collection at home, the complete bike is a value compared to the frameset option. As the basis of a personalized world explorer, Niner's RLT Steel frame and fork would serve as a wonderful foundation. **AC**

Nick Legan is the technical editor of Adventure Cyclist.

INSTALL LIGHTS AND A REAR RACK TO CARRY YOUR WORK ESSENTIALS AND SPICE UP THE RIDE HOME BY HITTING A DIRT SECTION.

the Niner was wonderfully sure-footed throughout the day's ride, it was on this descent, after 80 hard miles, that the handling and intelligent spec on the RLT Steel really shined. An ear-to-ear grin installed itself on my dusty face as I did my best John Tomac impression on the rough dirt descent. The wide 44cm bars, low bottom bracket, and long (think gravel-bike long, not loaded-touring-bike long) wheelbase gave me the confidence to let it all hang out on bumpy corners where overshooting the edge of the road had dire consequences.

Avid's budget BB5 mechanical disc brakes did a fine job offering modulation and power and the Niner wheels were true after all my off-road escapades.

can decorate with your favorite brew's lid) and wheels. While serviceable, these items help to keep the cost down but are not the lightest in category.

And that heft does add up a bit, with the tested 56cm bike weighing in at 22.74 lbs. without pedals. For a bicycle with a tough steel frame and a budget-oriented specification, this is totally respectable. I always encourage friends to focus on the fit of a bike and refine it with nice touchpoints and tires. Many bikes in this weight category ride lighter than a scale would indicate. With the Clement MSO tires and my preferred saddle installed, I never found myself cursing the bike's extra weight, but I did appreciate the stability that accompanied its heft when flying

Carver All-Road touring frame
\$1399.00

- 3/2.5 aerospace titanium for durability and comfort
- 11 sizes to fit any rider (or custom for \$200.00 extra)
- Maintenance free brushed finish
- Burly 38 mm downtube, ovalized at the BB and head tube

Carver Bikes
Woolwich, Maine
1-800-BIKEMAN (245-3626)
www.carverbikes.com
davis@bikeman.com