



LITESPEED GRAVEL

BY NICK LEGAN

→ MANY YEARS AGO, I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, just down the road from Chattanooga, Tennessee, the home of Litespeed Bicycles. I worked at a shop that sold the pretty titanium bikes, and I had the pleasure of riding a custom 'cross bike that I had made with a lower bottom bracket and increased tire clearance. Cantilever brakes were the standard of the day, and I ran a set of lovely Paul Component Touring/Neo Retro stoppers. I used the bike in several cyclocross races, but it was made primarily for road and dirt road exploration. I can't recall the largest tire that fit, but I rode it all over the Southeast and then in Colorado when I moved back. Eventually I sold the frame, one of the few regrets I have.

When Litespeed's new Gravel bike arrived this summer, I had some serious flashbacks. It appeared that my previous dream bike had been updated with disc brakes, additional mounts, even more tire clearance, and a sporty, modern geometry that leans more on road bike DNA than mountain or cyclocross design. I was intrigued, if not mildly excited.

WHAT IS IT?

Let's get this out of the way: the Litespeed Gravel is not a traditional touring bike. Don't let the rear rack mounts fool you. They lend some

LITESPEED GRAVEL

Price: \$5,975 (as reviewed, \$2,920 frameset)

Sizes available: S, M, ML, L, XL

Size tested: ML

Weight: 20.7 lbs. (without pedals)

TEST BIKE MEASUREMENTS

- **Stack:** 585mm
- **Reach:** 386mm
- **Head tube length:** 144mm
- **Head tube angle:** 72.0°
- **Seat tube length:** 515mm (center to top)
- **Seat tube angle:** 74.0°
- **Top tube:** 555mm (effective)
- **Chainstays:** 430mm
- **Bottom bracket drop:** 71mm
- **Fork offset:** 50mm
- **Trail:** 63mm (calculated with 700c x 40mm tire)
- **Wheelbase:** 1030mm
- **Standover height:** 793mm

SPECIFICATIONS

- **Frame:** Litespeed Gravel titanium, made in USA, FlatMount disc, rear rack mounts, front/rear fender mounts, three bottle mounts, one top tube mount
- **Fork:** Litespeed Gravel Fork, carbon fiber, fender eyelets
- **Headset:** Cane Creek 40 ZS 44/40, sealed bearing
- **Rims:** Stan's ZTR Grail, 32h rear, 28h front, tubeless ready
- **Hubs:** Stan's thru-axle, 142 x 12mm rear, 100 x 12mm front
- **Tires:** Panaracer Gravel SK 700c x 38mm, tubeless ready
- **Crankset:** FSA Adventure Energy, 172.5mm, 32/48T



- **Bottom bracket:** FSA PF30 press fit, sealed bearing
- **Cassette:** Shimano Ultegra 11–32T, 11 spd
- **Brake-shift levers:** Shimano R785 Di2/hydraulic
- **Front derailleur:** Shimano Ultegra Di2
- **Rear derailleur:** Shimano Ultegra Di2 medium cage
- **Brakes:** Shimano RS805 hydraulic, FlatMount, 160mm rotors
- **Stem:** 3T ARX II Pro, 110mm
- **Handlebar:** 3T Ernova Pro aluminum bar, 420mm
- **Seatpost:** 3T Stylus Team Stealth, 31.6mm
- **Saddle:** Prologo Scratch Pro

GEARING IN INCHES

	32	48
11	79.9	119.8
12	73.3	109.9
13	67.6	101.4
14	62.9	94.2
15	58.5	87.9
18	48.9	73.3
20	43.9	65.9
22	39.8	59.9
25	35.1	52.7
28	31.3	46.9
32	27.4	41.2

Contact: Litespeed Bicycles, P.O. Box 22666, Chattanooga, Tennessee 37422, sales@litespeed.com, litespeed.com



versatility for sure, but this bike is made with a different kind of riding in mind. It would get the job done for occasional tours, but there are better tools for that type of work.

Instead it is a very interesting take on what an adventure or gravel bike can be. Litespeed approached the idea from a road racing perspective. It's a bicycle made for spirited riding, but also for exploration. To that end, the Gravel is made to clear up to 700c x 45mm or 650b x 2.1in. tires. This makes virtually every gravel tire model on the market an option for the Litespeed, even WTB's Road Plus models (650b x 47mm).

I rode the Gravel with four different wheel/tire combinations. I started with its stock 38mm Panaracer Gravel SK on Stan's wheels, tried a set of Mavic Cosmic aero wheels and 26mm road tires, and moved onto a pair of Boyd Jocassee 650b wheels with WTB Byways. On a couple of occasions, I put a set of mountain bike tires on the 650b wheels to increase comfort and traction.

In each configuration the Litespeed excelled, its strengths shifting as traction and tire flotation were altered. In particular, the confidence I had descending on the Litespeed was amazing. I say this remembering a perfectly smooth pavement descent out of Rocky Mountain National Park as well as a washboard gravel descent in Idaho chasing racers with far better local knowledge. In the first case, the Litespeed was stripped down and shod with road wheels and tires, and in the second it had 2.2in. tires, three water bottles, a seatbag, and a hefty repair kit. I explored the limits of the Litespeed Gravel, and it was ready for action even at the fringes of its intended purpose.

DIVING DEEPER

After hundreds of miles on the Litespeed and with my opinions well established, I spoke with the designer of the Gravel, Litespeed's Head of Product Development Brad DeVaney, to learn more. His influence started with the frame and fork, tube dimensions, etc., and extended all the way to the parts hung on the complete bike.

I was most interested in how he landed on the bike's geometry. DeVaney explained that every bike is designed for a certain speed range. The difficulty with gravel bikes is that they are used at a lot of different speeds. Gravel bikes are typically ridden a lot faster than cyclocross bikes but not on the same technical terrain as mountain bikes. So as the Litespeed team sees it, it makes sense to look to road bikes because of the high speeds and consistent surfaces that are normal there.

The Gravel's head tube angle is 72 degrees with a fork offset of 50mm. With a 700c x 40mm tire, that puts its trail figure at 63mm. For reference, Litespeed's road models have 59mm of trail with a 25mm tire. When I ran the 650b wheels, I was even closer to the road figures because of the smaller wheel diameter. It's a snappy front end.

DeVaney explained that the rear end dimensions are a function of component choice and tire clearance. At 430mm, the chainstays certainly aren't long by most standards. But Litespeed still allows for a 48T chainring and massive tires. That's some clever work.

Like all Litespeed's titanium models, the Gravel is made in

Chattanooga. Even the head tube badge, machined dropouts, and disc brake mounts are made in house. For long-range riders, the frame arrives with mounts for three bottle cages as well as a pair of bosses on the top tube for mounting compatible feed bags.

Normally I'm not the biggest fan of PF30 bottom brackets, but I never heard a peep from this one. On the upside, PF30 allows for more flexibility in the design of the tubeset and also helps with internal routing and crank compatibility.

Up front I wished for mid-fork rack mounts, but DeVaney assured me that adding them would have adversely affected its ride quality.

The parts hung on the Gravel show that DeVaney and his crew are paying attention to the needs of gravel riders. Litespeed sells the bike in several trims at varying price points. What we reviewed is the priciest of them, with Shimano's Ultegra Di2 electronic shifting and hydraulic disc brakes, an FSA Adventure crank, Stan's wheels, and 3T post, stem, and bar.

The FSA Adventure crank, with 32/48T chainrings, gives a 1:1 low gear with the Shimano 11-32T cassette without limiting the top end for most riders. Although shifting was good, I prefer Praxis's Zayante crank with the same ring options. The rings seem far stiffer on the Praxis, but on the FSA crank I was able to induce chain rub on the front derailleur with out-of-the-saddle efforts. DeVaney mentioned that future models will get the new Ultegra 11-34T cassette for even lower gears.

The 3T handlebar has a large oval shape on the tops, great for comfy

climbing, and a nice ergonomic bend to the drops. The 3T Stylus seatpost wasn't to my liking though—it slipped on a couple of occasions despite using a torque wrench to tighten it. Thankfully, Litespeed can do custom builds to substitute out any parts you don't like.

CONCLUSION

After countless hours riding the Gravel, I think that DeVaney and his colleagues have nailed their design goals. But I must admit that this bike isn't for everyone. It leans highly in the direction of a race bike. For many of us, this is a good thing. My longest day on the Gravel neared 10 hours, and I would have happily kept going if not for the rain. With a simple change of wheels, Litespeed's Gravel kept me inspired on tarmac, gravel, and even technical ATV trails. If that isn't the definition of an adventure bike, then I don't know what is.

If you do prefer a highly stable, slower-handling bike, you may want to look at a different model from Litespeed, the Cherohala SE. It's a new model with a taller head tube, slightly different geometry, lighter tubing, internal rear brake routing, and larger chainring clearance, but it still fits 700c x 44mm or 650b x 47mm tires. **AG**

Nick Legan is the Technical Editor of Adventure Cyclist and the author of Gravel Cycling. You can reach him at nlegan@adventurecycling.org.

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