



# NINER MCR 9 RDO

BY BERNE BROUDY

→ As a touring cyclist, you hope for is a bike that disappears beneath you, allowing you to focus solely on the experience. Niner's new MCR 9 RDO is the first tunable full-suspension gravel bike, giving riders 40mm of suspension in the front and 50mm in the rear for confidence, comfort, and control on off-road excursions and roads of questionable quality. It's the Magic Carpet Ride (hence the acronym) for gravel cyclists and bikepackers.

I first rode the MCR on gravel roads and green and blue mountain bike trails in Vermont and Colorado. Then I loaded it up, swapped out the 700c wheels for 650b, and rode the length of the country of Jordan, a 13-day, 450-mile tour with over 60,000 feet of climbing and grades up to 24 percent both up and down. The surface included everything from miniature baby-head rocks in sand to broken pavement, chunky gravel, and blacktop so new it was still steaming. I was carrying personal and repair gear, up to four liters of water, and some food.

I can't think of a bike I would have rather been riding on this tour.

I've heard many gravel riders ask, "Do I need suspension?" If you're sticking to paved roads or dirt so smooth that it seems paved, you don't. But if you're an adventure rider game to embark on a tour with minimal info, or a rider who can't pass up an

## NINER MCR 9 RDO

**Price:** \$5,900

**Sizes available:** 53cm, 56cm, 59cm

**Size tested:** 53cm

**Weight:** 25.3 lbs. (without pedals)

## TEST BIKE MEASUREMENTS

- **Stack:** 575mm
- **Reach:** 382mm
- **Head tube length:** 133mm
- **Head tube angle:** 71.0°
- **Seat tube length:** 490mm
- **Seat tube angle:** 73.8°
- **Top tube:** 545mm
- **Chainstays:** 440mm (actual)
- **Bottom bracket drop:** 62mm
- **Fork Offset:** 44mm
- **Trail:** 76mm
- **Wheelbase:** 1041mm
- **Standover height:** 764mm

## SPECIFICATIONS

- **Frame:** Niner RDO carbon fiber, CVA suspension, internal cable routing, integrated fender, bottle, and bag mounts
- **Fork:** Fox 32 Step-Cast Float AX Performance Elite, 40mm travel
- **Shock:** X-Fusion MicroLite RL, 50mm travel
- **Handlebar:** Easton EA50 AX
- **Stem:** Niner RDO
- **Brake/shift levers:** Shimano GRX800
- **Rear Derailer:** Shimano GRX800
- **Front Derailer:** Shimano Ultegra
- **Brakes:** Shimano GRX rear, Shimano SLX front, hydraulic disc



- **Rotors:** Shimano, 160mm
- **Crankset:** Easton EA90, 47/32T
- **Cassette:** Shimano Ultegra 11spd, 11-34T
- **Chain:** Shimano HG601
- **Bottom bracket:** Easton PF30
- **Seatpost:** Niner Carbon
- **Saddle:** Niner, titanium rails
- **Headset:** Niner integrated
- **Hubs:** Stans NoTubes Neo, 100 x 15mm front, 142 x 12mm rear, thru-axles
- **Rims:** Stans NoTubes Grail S1, 32h, tubeless ready
- **Tires:** Schwalbe G-One Evo SS 700c x 40mm, tubeless ready

#### GEARING RANGE

	47	32
11	118.0	80.4
13	100.1	68.0
15	86.5	58.9
17	76.3	52.0
19	68.5	46.4
21	61.9	42.0
23	56.4	38.4
25	52.0	35.4
27	48.1	32.9
30	43.4	29.6
34	38.1	26.0

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opportunity to turn off on a side road or trail, you should consider it. By adding full suspension to a dedicated gravel platform, Niner gives riders the control of a cross-country race mountain bike with the efficiency, fit, and responsive handling of a road bike to make gravel riding more fun.

In front, Niner uses a Fox Step-Cast 32 AX fork with 40mm of travel. The rear X-Fusion shock is tucked behind the heavily shaped seat tube and surrounded above and below by linkages in Niner's Constantly Varying Arc (CVA) suspension layout, a version of which the brand uses on its full-suspension mountain bikes.

Designing such short suspension travel is an evolving science, and Niner did a good job with their first foray tuning suspension that absorbs vibration and small bumps. With only 50mm on tap, Niner opted for a more linear suspension curve with the notion that a seated rider should be able to take advantage of all the travel.

Without bags, I put more pressure in the shock and fork than Niner recommended and still had the smooth and stable ride I wanted. However, when loaded up with 13 days' worth of gear, I wasn't able to get that smooth, never-bouncy suspension feel dialed in as precisely.

Niner's Zach Vestal confirmed that the company's pressure guidelines were biased toward riders using all the travel, and that in a "loaded touring application or smoother than typical road surfaces, our suggested setup might feel too soft."

My rider weight, which in this case included my weight plus frame, seat, and handlebar bags of gear, fluctuated by up to nine pounds a day, depending on how much water I was carrying. I set the shock and fork to my weight plus a guesstimate of how much my gear weighed, and then I added a whole lot more pressure at different intervals throughout the trip. I got it to where

it felt good on technical terrain, but I kept the rear locked out for climbs and sections where I was hammering on flats. Suspension made stretches of trail that would have been heinous or unrideable on a rigid bike manageable, if sometimes spicy.

The X-Fusion shock isn't as precisely tunable as those from other brands, and homing in on the perfect setup with such minimal travel is as much an art as a science. The bike's suspension enhanced my riding experience, but instead of leaving it open all the time, I used the handlebar-mounted lockout and the twist knob on the top of the right fork leg to give me more or less shock absorption depending on the surface. Open, the Fox AX gave me what I expected from a suspension fork — no-bounce vibration absorption and small-bump compliance, and once I got the rebound dialed in via a knob at the bottom of the left fork leg, I left it open except when I was on pavement. The rear shock was harder to dial in, and I opened and closed the lockout lever many times throughout the day.

I tested the MCR spec'd with Niner's 4-star Shimano GRX 800 2x build, and I was impressed with the components. The biggest difference was in the textured hood covers, which feature exaggerated knobs and made moving my hands around on the bars stable and secure. Angled lever blades felt natural with the bike's flared bars, and the whole setup made swapping between hoods and drops seamless even on steep, technical descents.

For the Jordan trip, I swapped the 700c Stans NoTubes Grail S1 wheels for 650b NEXT carbon wheels with Project 321 hubs and 47mm WTB tires. I also swapped the Ultegra 11-34T cassette for a GRX 11-40T rear cassette to give me a better chance of pedaling up Jordan's viciously steep grades. It rode perfectly unless I cross-chained, in which case the drivetrain locked. So I tried not to cross-chain. Shimano's claimed range maxes out at 34T, but adding a few links to the chain would've likely solved the issue.

Other touches on the carbon frame include an integrated rear fender to protect the rear shock, full-sleeve

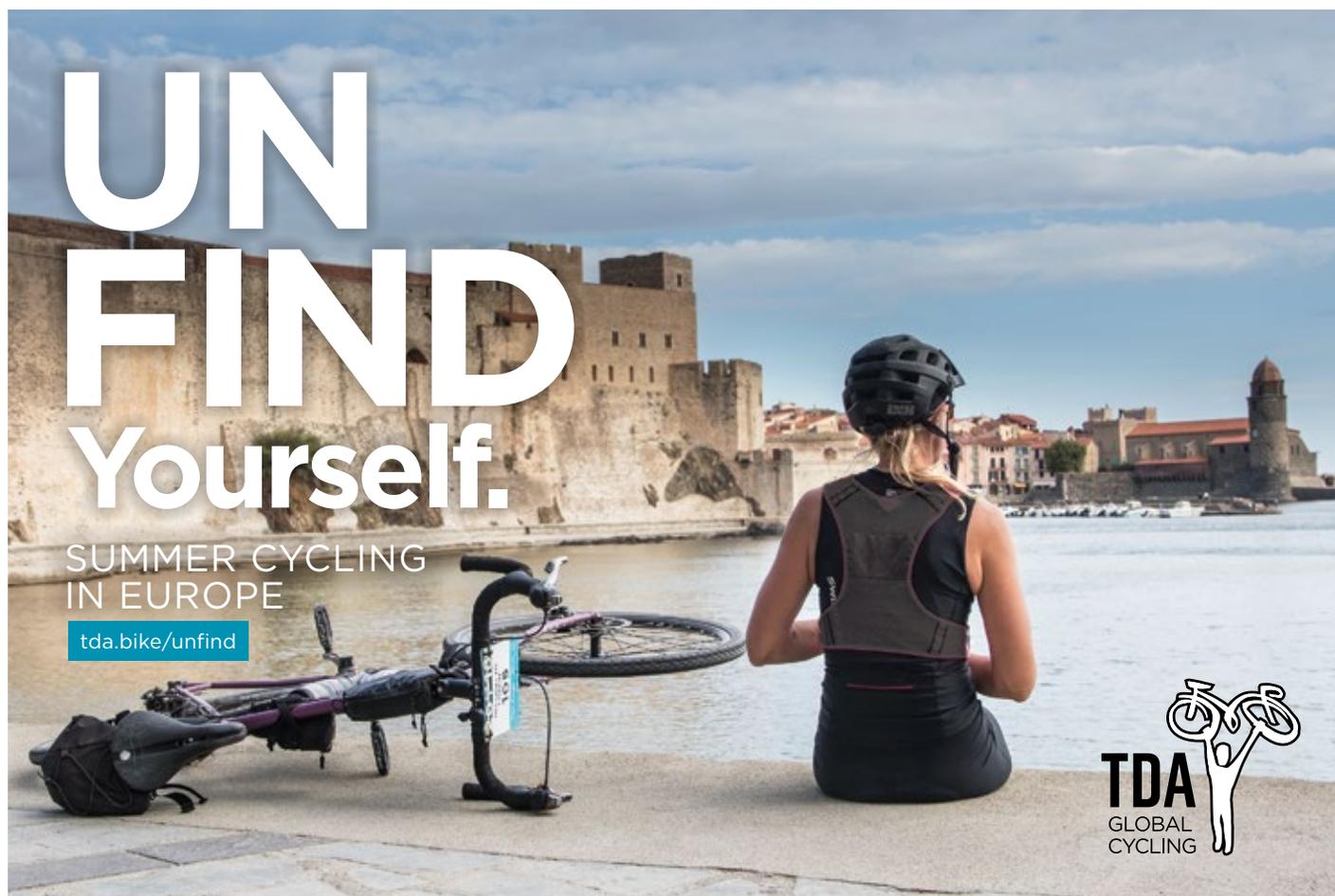
internal cable guides, a port for a dropper post if you decide to add one, and 11 fixed mounting points to hold framebags, bottles, and more. There is clearance for whatever rim and tire combo you want to ride, up to 700c x 50mm or 650b x 2.0in.

As Niner gets more riders on this bike, they'll refine their suspension pressure charts, making it even better than it is. Hopefully, they will also design alternate mounts for the rear shock lockout. With the ultralight handlebar bag I prefer, which wraps and clips around the bar, I couldn't reach the rear lockout lever. A bag with a frame would have solved the problem, but I had to angle the lever awkwardly to make it work.

Despite its imperfections (I rode the first MCR available in the U.S.), I had an exceptional experience on this bike. It let me ride more of the Jordan Trail at a more efficient pace possible than I would have on any other bike, and helped me keep a smile on my face on the most grueling days.

"Fun is the glorious side effect of

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# UN FIND Yourself.

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**TDA**  
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customers can watch the Tour de France on a flat-screen television while they wait for their bikes to be serviced or built. There's coffee for those who are so inclined. Mechanics use that same television screen to go over a customer's bill, or to connect customers to websites where they can learn about various products that are available for sale.

"We do what's right for the customers and offer premium service all the time," Guillemet said.

Velofix's friendly, social approach requires mechanics who are also people persons, which is not always easy to find.

"It's always a challenge to get great people," Guillemet said. "Our franchise partners have the same challenge. Great mechanics are not in short supply, but the trick is getting the right ones. Not only do you have to be a great mechanic, but you also have to interact well with people."

In the "current model," by which he means the traditional bike shop, Guillemet said those people skills are not always evident.

"Many mechanics don't have to interact with customers, and frankly don't want to," he said.

All this mobile friendliness and repair camaraderie doesn't come cheap. Velofix's Franchise Disclosure Document, dated March 27, 2019, estimated the initial investment to launch your mobile bicycle shop at \$170,200 to \$202,950, which includes a \$25,000 franchise fee, and \$49,000 to \$55,000 for the van.

"What we like to say is put approximately \$65,000 down and you're operational," Guillemet said. "You have the keys and you're rolling around."

As the Ashburn Bicycle Repair blog ([ashburnbicyclerepair.com](http://ashburnbicyclerepair.com)) noted recently, \$200,000 is a lot of money.

"For comparative purposes, for as little as \$31,000, you can open an H&R Block franchise," the Ashburn blog says.

Ashburn Bicycle Repair is an independent mobile bike service provider in Ashburn, Virginia, and many small surrounding communities. Ashburn also offers consulting services for those interested in opening a mobile bike shop. The blog also says that velofix is just about the only game

in town for those looking to get into a franchise for a mobile bike shop.

"For better or for worse, they're the big boys on the block," the blog notes. "Their growth has been constant and sustained. It seems rarely a month goes by without another positive velofix press release and another corporate partnership."

Chris Guillemet wouldn't disagree. His vision is to take the red velofix vans international, although that idea has been shelved for now, according to BRAIN. Guillemet told BRAIN that international growth remains a long-term goal.

Velofix also attracted investment capital from a Montreal-based firm that focuses on the clean energy, transportation, and smart city sectors, according to a May 24, 2019 news release from MacKinnon, Bennett & Company's MKB Partners Fund LP.

The amount of the investment was not disclosed, but MKB Partners said the goal was to help the velofix founders expand the company's footprint within North America, enhance its technology, and scale up its marketing efforts. The fact that velofix was able to attract venture capital at all is a good indication of how the company is viewed in the wider business world.

"When we launched this business, we saw in our hearts there was a need for it, but you don't know how it's going to go," Guillemet said. "At the end of the day, you start a business based on a pain point or frustration. You hope and expect others are feeling the same frustration and pain, but we didn't know in the beginning.

"We were pleasantly surprised." **AC**

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*Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.*

this bike," said George Parry, the Niner designer who led the project. "When mountain biking first started, it was just guys out in regular shorts, ripping fire roads. Now cross-country riding is super serious, with everyone kitted out in Lycra. People find a way to split off when it gets too serious. For me, that's what this bike is about — exploring, and doing it with comfort and efficiency."

arc of our history, the growth of our membership, the exciting "speciation" within the bike world (think gravel, touring, mountain, bikepacking, eBikes, urban, epic, overnight, etc.), and the immense looming pressure of our collective response to climate change ... NOW is our time at Adventure Cycling to revisit the strategic plan that we adopted in 2018 and determine the best bets for incremental improvement and where we might be positioned for more rapid change. As Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

As bike travelers, we have rare and collective insight into how to get along with others, appreciate diverse cultures, reflect and learn from experience, connect to our surroundings, and travel with a low carbon footprint. Valuable skills in today's world. Plus, we're an interesting lot that knows how to have a good time with whatever cards, climbs, or company we're dealt.

Which brings me back to thinking about that 50th birthday party, because along with the strategic planning, advocacy, and white papers we put into the world, I want to have fun while I'm doing it. I want to celebrate our community, and I want to get on my bike and ride. And I look forward to seeing you out there too.

### Scott Pankratz

*Executive Director*

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If you're looking for a gravel race bike, this probably isn't it. But if you want a bike that gives you something a hardtail mountain bike or full-suspension XC bike can't — more hand positions, touring bike geometry, braze-ons galore, higher speeds on pavement — the answer is a hard yes. **AC**

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