



RITCHEY OUTBACK

Price: \$4,200
Sizes available: XS, S, M, L, XL
Size tested: L
Weight: 21.0 lbs. (without pedals)

TEST BIKE MEASUREMENTS

- **Stack:** 587.4mm
- **Reach:** 390mm
- **Head tube length:** 170mm
- **Head tube angle:** 71°
- **Seat tube length:** 515mm
- **Seat tube angle:** 73°
- **Top tube:** 569.8mm (effective)
- **Chainstays:** 453mm
- **Bottom bracket drop:** 68mm
- **Fork offset:** 50mm
- **Wheelbase:** 1069.6mm
- **Standover height:** 817.8mm

SPECIFICATIONS (AS TESTED)

- **Frame:** Heat-treated, triple-buttressed Ritchey Logic steel; straight 1 1/8in. head tube; three bottle mounts; rack and fender mounts; replaceable stainless steel derailleur hanger
- **Fork:** Ritchey Carbon Adventure Fork, triple mounts, rack and fender mounts
- **Handlebar:** Ritchey WCS Carbon VentureMax, 420mm, 24° flare
- **Stem:** Ritchey WCS C220, 100mm
- **Rear derailleur:** Shimano GRX 810 1x
- **Shifters:** Shimano GRX 810 1x
- **Brakes:** Shimano GRX 400 hydraulic disc, flat-mount

RITCHEY OUTBACK

BY DAN MEYER

→ Redesigned for 2020, Ritchey's new Outback is a bit of a departure from the norm. In the world of gravel bikes, where so many new models are either borrowing from road racing with sleek aero frames, or from mountain biking with slack angles and enormous tire clearance, Ritchey has found a third way by prioritizing rider comfort above all else.

Looking at the Outback's profile reveals a few hints as to its intentions. Starting at the back, you might notice that the proportions seem a little off. Look at the amount of white space between the rear tire and the seat tube: pretty generous, right? That's because the chainstays are 453mm long, which is the longest of any gravel bike I'm aware of. I brought this up in an email with Fergus Liam, Ritchey's U.S. marketing manager, and I think I hit a sore spot.

"Oh boy," said Liam. "This has been the talk of the town since releasing this frame. Frankly, I blame the trend of super tucked rear wheels with the tires grazing the back of seat tubes like an '80s track frame. The need to sit someone right over the rear wheel on a frame designed to be ridden off-road is confusing. It's like asking to sit on a jackhammer. Lengthening the stays elongates the wheelbase for a more stable ride while allowing the rider to be more comfortable on rougher terrain."



- **Rotors:** Shimano Ice-Tech Freeza, 160mm front and rear, Center Lock
- **Bottom bracket:** Wheels Manufacturing, threaded
- **Crankset:** Shimano GRX 810, 172.5mm, 40T
- **Cassette:** SunRace 11-42T, 11spd
- **Headset:** Ritchey WCS
- **Seatpost:** Ritchey WCS 1-bolt, 27.2mm
- **Saddle:** Ritchey WCS Carbon Skyline, carbon rails
- **Hubs:** Ritchey WCS, 100 x 12mm front, 142 x 12mm rear, thru-axles
- **Rims:** Ritchey WCS Zeta OCR, 24h
- **Tires:** Ritchey WCS Speedmax 700c x 40mm, tubeless ready

GEARING RANGE

	40	
11		100.6
13		85.1
15		73.8
17		65
19		58.3
21		52.5
24		46.2
28		39.5
32		34.6
36		30.7
42		26.3

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Moving on to the front triangle, you might notice that the frame's tubes look a little ... skinny. At least you would if brands like Surly pop to mind when you think about steel frames. Compared to the oversized tubes of most modern steel bikes, the Ritcheys look downright dainty, but to me they just look right.

Finally, the fork and head tube are also unique to Ritchey. The fork is full carbon and, according to Liam, was designed to maximize tire clearance without being too long. A shorter fork allows for a longer head tube, which means a longer steerer, which in turn means more material to absorb harsh terrain before the vibrations reach your hands. And, this being a Ritchey, that steerer is straight 1 1/8in.

"Tapered forks mean tapered head tubes, which means heavier, bigger down tubes, which makes for a very stiff front end that doesn't feel good after a while off-road," said Liam.

Indeed, Ritchey designed the Outback from back to front to maximize the rider's comfort without taking anything away from the riding experience. The long rear center might suggest ponderous handling, and the skinny tubes and long, narrow steerer might imply noodly steering, but let me assure you that this is a precision instrument.

Pulling the wasabi-green bike out of the box, I noticed a full complement of Ritchey's go-fast WCS kit, including hyperlight 700c Zeta wheels, 40mm Speedmax tires, a carbon VentureMax handlebar, and a Skyline saddle with carbon rails. The drivetrain was Shimano GRX, but with a single 40T chainring and an 11-42T cassette, I could tell that hauling heavy loads up steep hills would not be in my immediate future. But haulin' oats on doubletrack and singletrack? Yup.

The Salt Lake City foothills do not have an abundance of classic "gravel bike terrain." Our gravel roads either splinter off to rough double- and singletrack trails or deteriorate into a

boulder-strewn mess that only a fat bike can make sense of. After building up the Outback, I immediately took it out for a quick shakedown ride on some of the tamer bits of singletrack. Hilarity ensued.

Riding a gravel bike on singletrack — an example of “underbiking” — is one of life’s great pleasures. What were once fairly boring trails under the wheels of my mountain bike suddenly became the most exciting trails in town on the Outback. It was pretty darn fun.

It was also pretty darn smooth. All of those little Ritchey touches make for a nicely riding bike that doesn’t punish your body when the trail turns rough. Even with higher tire pressure than I would normally run (the tires were tubed), the Outback floated over rocky sections. I could look down and see the carbon fork flexing quite a bit. And at the end of a long ride, my hands still felt fresh.

Comfort may be the Outback’s selling point, but there are other benefits to its design. One is traction. A stiff frame isn’t just going to be uncomfortable; it’s also going to bounce

around and make it hard to keep the tires on the dirt. But the Ritchey flexes in all the right ways. On one trail that I rode the Ritchey on a lot, there are a couple of steep, rocky pitches that aren’t a given even on a mountain bike. You need to know where to place your wheels, where to pedal, and where to lift your rear wheel. I made both climbs on the Ritchey on the first try.

Another benefit is speed. It’s a fast bike, both on-road and off, and its WCS kit certainly isn’t hurting in that regard. The wheels especially are incredibly light, and the SpeedMax tires are, well, speedy. They’re some of the fastest gravel tires I’ve ever used, and in the rocky, loose-over-hard dirt we have here in SLC, they provided more traction than I expected. After riding a fair bit of pavement while connecting dirt routes, I’m convinced that the Outback is faster than my road bike.

The rest of the build kit performed well, though I did make some changes. They were mainly for fit, like swapping out the Ritchey seatpost for a zero-offset Thompson I had lying around.

The whole bike felt bigger than expected, and the included components such as a 100mm stem exacerbated that stretched-out feeling. The size large, which is typically my locked-in size, was big enough that I could have gone for a medium instead and benefited from a lower standover height.

The carbon VentureMax handlebar was appropriate for the kind of riding the Outback is designed for, but I found the 24° flare to be a bit much for my taste. I did like the extra width in the drops, though, especially while descending, and I *really* liked the flat tops. They were a very comfortable place to put my hands during long climbs.

Shimano’s GRX drivetrain performed flawlessly, but I would have preferred either a wider-range cassette or a 2x system. The 26 gear inches at the low end wasn’t quite low enough for a loaded overnight up some very steep, very loose fire roads. I walked a lot. What didn’t need changing were the brakes. Holy cow, those GRX brakes were powerful. It was very easy to break a tire loose.



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With rear rack mounts and triple mounts on the fork, the Outback is ready for loaded adventures. Unfortunately for me, the test model I reviewed had a pre-production fork, according to Ritchey's Liam, so the three bolts on either side of the fork didn't quite line up. Liam assured me that the issue has been fixed for all production bikes. I was still able to get all my gear on it and head out for an overnight in the foothills, a task the Outback performed with aplomb. It never felt out of sorts or overwhelmed, but I wouldn't want to subject those lightweight 24-spoke wheels to too much weight too often.

In fact, if I bought an Outback for myself, I would want two wheelsets for it: the Zeta 700c wheels with the SpeedMax tires for fast and light rides, and a set of 32-spoke 650b wheels with wider rims and knobby tires for loaded off-road missions. Yes, the Outback was designed for either wheel size, with a maximum tire capacity of 700c x 48mm or 650b x 2.0in. With big 650b knobbies, I bet the Outback would be a monster.

Because Ritchey doesn't sell complete models, you can buy an Outback frameset for \$1,549 and build it up as you see fit. You can buy directly from Ritchey through their website, or from a local shop via distributors BTI and QBP. That frameset price is a little higher than that of comparable models from other brands, but it's a fair premium for those special Ritchey touches.

The Ritchey Outback is a special bike, and with its smooth ride, the ability to swap wheels, and the abundance of braze-ons, it just might be your do-it-all gravel rig. **AG**

Dan Meyer is the Deputy Editor of Adventure Cyclist.

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