



Grouptest

Alternative handlebars

A flat handlebar gives you one hand position, which isn't always comfortable. **Sam Jones** reviews four alternatives with a choice of handholds



SAM JONES

Sam is access lead in the Surrey Hills and a keen bikepacker

Alternative handlebars ('alt bars') are designed primarily for long-distance off-road riding, where comfort and capability on tricky terrain are key design factors. They're a subset of the flat bar found on mountain bikes and hybrids, and offer a multitude of different hand positions.

A standard flat bar gives you just one, which works fine for control off road but locks you into that handhold. If you ride for any great length or time, no matter the terrain, being able to change your hand position is always welcome. That's where alt bars excel.

These bars are often designed with bikepacking in mind. Compared to drop bars, they are more compatible with handlebar rolls and not as restrictive in terms of luggage and accessory space.

If swapping to these bars, it's worth bearing in mind that their width may mean that you need longer cables, housings and hoses – though that's less likely if coming from a modern mountain bike with a wider bar.

One bar missing from this test is the On-One Geoff, which is a cheaper copy of the Jones. We've reviewed that at cyclinguk.org/geoff-handlebar. (Tester Dan Joyce now has two.)

Details

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

1 Hand positions

Loops, 'horns', grip length: all provide more options for hand placement, which is vital to relieve hand fatigue. Bars with a lot of sweep give you more choice in how you sit, from leaning forward to an upright Dutch style (assuming long grips are fitted).

with different benefits usually offset by increased price. In like-for-like comparisons, non-aluminium bars reportedly soak up more trail buzz.

2 Luggage/accessories

Loops have an additional benefit for loaded riders: making your bar roll more secure without the need for a harness. Additionally, all that extra tubing means room for lights, GPS, bells, baguettes and so on.

4 Dimensions

All those tested are 700-800mm wide and have a 31.8mm stem clamp area. Greater width gives control on technical terrain and space for luggage. Too much width complicates tight woodland trails and train travel!

3 Material

Most alt bars are aluminium. Steel, titanium and carbon bars are available,

5 Rise

Like a standard riser bar, a bar that curves upwards puts the hand positions higher, sitting you a bit more upright and taking the strain off your back. This can be of particular benefit to taller riders looking for improved comfort on long rides.



Cycle's test promise

At Cycle, we are proudly independent. There's no pressure to please advertisers as we're funded by **your** membership. Our product reviews aren't press releases; they're written by experienced cyclists after thorough testing.