

Merlin MALT-CR £999.95

As with some of the greatest names in the cycle trade, Merlin Cycles started out exactly 20 years ago as a simple bike shop, specialising in mountain bikes. Since then it has grown organically into a respected online retailer, now stocking — and in some cases importing — a fine range of road bike brands. The model we are testing here is one that bears the Merlin name. Even among the exalted company in its stable, Merlin's own bikes tend to represent the zenith of value for money options.

Cheap isn't always cheerful, but there are more reasons to smile than you might at first think: while the 'official' price is £1,199 (I have to put it down otherwise people phone us up and complain), as we went to press Merlin was selling the MALT-CR for £999.95, which, if you look at the spec box, is really rather impressive.

From initial sightings, quite aside from the price, the MALT-CR is remarkable in its own right. Unlike B'Twin's unique FC700 frame, the MALT-CR is an open mould: that is to say, a factory in the Far East has this design available to anybody who wants to use it. But it wasn't a quick and easy option: Merlin looked long and hard for an open-mould frame they liked. For anyone worried about exclusivity take note: despite its open mould origins I don't think I've seen this frame in the UK before.

Next to the sharp, modern lines of the B'Twin, the Merlin is a very smooth, swooping affair, with round tubes used throughout. But that doesn't mean it's without its own sweet details. The gently bowed top tube and seatstays are nice elements, while the keyhole cutout in the seatstay wishbone is pretty funky. The finishing kit is all decent too, with Deda stem, bars and seatpost, and a San Marco SPID saddle. And the overall appearance, with its tasteful but not shy graphics, is classy.

Carbon is typically seen as a hard, brittle substance, but once manipulated in the right way it can deliver almost any ride experience. In this case, the effect of all those curves provides a feeling almost akin to that of a steel bike. There is a certain springiness about it, at least over smaller rumbles. It made me think of my old Morris Minor, which would bobble along happily until you came across an obstacle big enough to make the suspension reach its bump-stops.

The only downside is that slightly

“The gently bowed top tube and seatstays are nice elements”

Price £1,199.99 (reduced to £999.95)
Frameset
Gears Shimano 105
Chainset Shimano 105
Brakes Shimano 105
Wheels Carbotech K30
Tyres Michelin Lithion 2
Bars/Stem Deda RHM01/Deda Zero 1
Saddle San Marco SPID
Seatpost Deda R501
Size range 48, 50, 53, 56cm
Weight 8.2kg
Contact www.merlincycles.com

rubbery feel has a small effect on handling. The MALT-CR is not quite as direct as the B'Twin; there seems to be a little signal interference in the messages between the rider and the road. Power delivery takes a slight knock, too. It's still fine, and on a long day in the saddle you might appreciate a more relaxed ride experience, but compared to the B'Twin I found it just a tad less responsive when the hammer went down.

As expected, though, Shimano 105 is head and shoulders above its Tiagra sibling, providing smooth, reliable shifting every time. The fact Merlin has included a complete groupset with 105 brake calipers deserves huge praise — Shimano brakes at this level are unmatched. The Carbotech wheels are fine and I actually rather



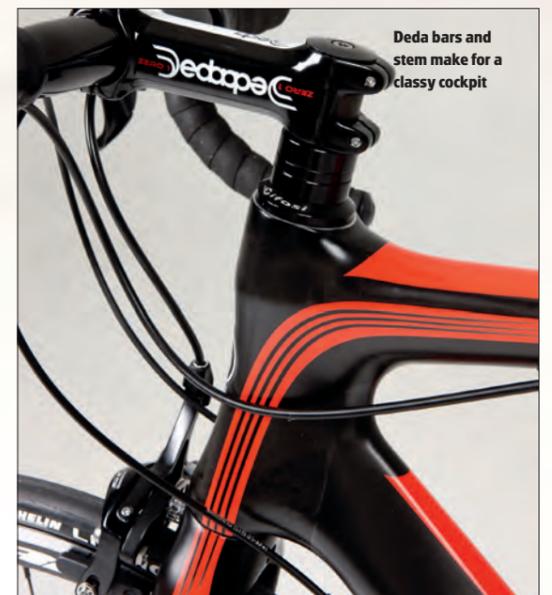
UPGRADE TIP

VERTICAL V HORIZONTAL What the sizes mean

What does the frame size quoted by a bike company refer to? Most people probably think it is the length of the seat tube, from centre of bottom bracket to the opening for the seatpost. That's the measurement Merlin means when it says our test model here is a 56cm. Yet many road bike manufacturers rather use the effective horizontal top tube length, from centre of seat tube to centre of head tube, such as with our 57cm B'Twin. Neither is incorrect, but it can lead to confusion, such as this test where the '56cm' Merlin is actually a slightly bigger bike than the '57cm' B'Twin. So here's an important lesson for anybody planning to buy a bike online: if you can, have a good look at the geometry to make sure you get one that fits. We'd recommend always using the effective horizontal top tube length as your reference.



Wishbone seatstays are a quirky touch



Deda bars and stem make for a classy cockpit

like Michelin's Lithion 2 tyres. Finally the all-up weight of 8.2kg for a 56cm bike is impressive too.

Despite the quibbles, the MALT-CR is a fine bike, but more than that, it's an excellent package. What it loses in ride quality it makes up for in overall competence. Once you are used to the nuances of the frame, you may find it's the bike you come to rely on for any road adventure.

