

Bike Test

SUB-£1K SPECIALIST BIKES

£750-£1,000

AGE OF A BASE

With good details and dialled geometry the Marley's chassis is a match for many boutique frames but will only set you back £249 on its own

POWER STEERING

A short stem and super-slack head angle give the Marley serious gravity confidence, with a through-axle wheel and sticky tyre for maximum front end control

BEST OF THE BUNCH

The Manitou Minute fork is better than most at this price once you've worked out the bayonet axle technique

RAGLEY MARLEY



£899.99

Rad-angled value ride makes the Marley a Rasta trail blaster

SO GOOD

BB geometry and sticky tyre give front end confidence

Well-balanced frame with short back end keeps things lively

Accurate Manitou through-axle fork

NO GOOD

Basic brakes and flexy fork

Radically slack steering and low BB can interfere with climbing

JARGON BUSTER

ISCG

International Standard Chain Guide mount – three threaded tabs on the BB shell that you can bolt an aftermarket chain guide to.

Clutch mech

Rear derailleur with a reinforced-spring mech that helps the chain to stay taut.

Ragley have always had a great reputation for hardcore bikes at high-value prices and the new Marley has been worth the long development wait if you're after an affordable aggro machine.

The frame

It may be the cheapest Ragley bike but there's still a decent level of detailing on the Marley. The tapered head tube gets a metal head badge and the multi-shaped 6061 alloy tubes are externally braced and internally butted for reasonable weight and a relatively forgiving ride quality. The controls all run under the top tube and there's an ISCG mount on the conventional screw-in BB shell. The swerved-and-curved chainstays with a split 'finger bridge' plate behind the crankset give room for 2.4in tyres and the seat clamp's QR cam gets a brass insert for long-term smoothness. While the top tube isn't super-long the rest of the geometry is state-of-the-art slack-and-low for flat-out riding, and you can buy the frame on its own for £249.

The kit

Ragley have made sure the componentry backs up the ballsy

handling as much as possible. The 130mm (5.1in) travel Manitou Minute fork gets a 15mm through-axle and the WTB rims are fitted with sticky front/fast rear tyres to match the rad front, rapid rear handling character. The Deore gearing includes a clutch rear mech and is driven through a FSA double crankset with a polycarbonate bashguard for rock and log protection. The Deore brakes are definitely basic in feel but Ragley's own-brand seating and steering kit is all decent stuff.

The ride

In typical Ragley style, the 65.5-degree head angle is radically slack unloaded, but takes into account the fact that only the front end of a hardtail sags when you sit on it, steeping the steering angle. Together with a 50mm stem it gives the Marley a serious amount of swagger for pushing your luck on technical trails. While the 740mm bar is a handy enough width for decent control without having to stop to squeeze between trees in your local woods, we'd be tempted to go even wider to maximise the power steering potential of the geometry.

Once you've worked out how to get the half-turn Hex Lock axle on the

Manitou fork consistently connected and tight, it adds an obvious edge to front-end accuracy compared to the QR forks on the other bikes here. It also means you won't have to change the front wheel if you decide to upgrade to a fatter legged, stiffer and more consistently damped fork (such as Manitou's own Mattoc) later. The sticky-compound 'High Grip' version of WTB's Vigilante tyre up front means you can make the most of that accuracy and short-stem steering agility even in the sketchiest, wintery conditions. Even with the stock mid-width bar, having the front wheel way out front and the BB slammed low means the Marley rips and rails corners like a maniac, so long as there's nothing big hidden in them to buck the back wheel off line.

The short back end and low-slung top tube mean easy hop-and-pop agility for keeping the unsprung rear wheel out of trouble as much as possible too. We didn't have any trouble with the QR rear hub, but it's worth checking the skewer for tightness regularly because the Marley's 'have a go hero' character means you're likely to be taking every part of the bike to its limits and yours