

# GROUPTEST

CYCLING JOURNALIST **MIKE DAVIS** REVIEWS BIKE CARRIERS

## Tow-bar bike racks

Tow-bar racks are easy to get bikes onto, they're sturdy, and they don't hammer fuel efficiency. Cycling journalist **Mike Davis** reviews four

**THERE'S NO** perfect-for-everyone solution to the problem of transporting bikes by car. Roof racks are dependable and allow you to retain boot access, but add drag and require you to lift bikes above your head. Boot racks are cheap, low drag, and easy to store, but can be awkward to fit and load safely and may block your rear lights and numberplate. Prong-style tow-bar racks are inexpensive, compact and load part of the car designed to take weight, but can be fiddly to load and are likely to need a lighting board adding. Wheel-support tow-bar racks are often expensive and bulky, but are secure, keep bikes safely apart, are relatively easy to load, and usually still let you get into your boot. If your budget will stand it and you have somewhere to store one, a wheel-support tow-bar rack is our favourite option.



### 2 Tow-ball mount

There are a number of methods used to hold racks to tow-balls. In our experience, they all work in the sense that they're secure and don't shift about. There are big differences in convenience, though, with tool-free lever designs at one end of the scale and bolt-on clamps that remain on the ball when you take the rack off at the other.

### 3 Security

While many racks include lockable clamps to secure the bikes and often have a lock on the tow-ball mount itself, it's best not to rely on them too heavily. A sturdy cable looped through all the bikes and the rack itself and locked to the car's towing eye gives another layer of security.

### 1 Bike holders

All the racks tested here are of the wheel-support style, with the bikes standing in adjustable channels to take their weight, and some form of vertical support to keep them upright. This is the most flexible design, able to cope with most bike shapes and sizes while keeping them safely apart.

### 4 Lights & numberplate

A laden tow-bar rack will obscure your car's numberplate and rear lights, which is why such racks include lights of their own. Tow-bar installations include the necessary electrics, but note that modern tow bars use a 13-pin socket rather than the traditional 7-pin, and racks may come with either. Adapters are available for £10-20. You'll also need a numberplate.

If you're planning to take your bikes onto the Continent (e.g. to Italy), beware that some countries' traffic police are stricter on unsafe loads and particularly frown upon boot racks. You won't be pulled over with a well-fitted & loaded tow-bar rack.

**WATCH  
THE  
WEIGHT**

There's a limit to how much weight you can apply vertically to a tow bar. The manual for your car will tell you what it is, although 85kg is a common maximum and larger cars or vans may handle 100kg. Some small cars may only have a tow bar capacity of 50kg, which won't be sufficient for a laden four-bike rack unless the bikes are very light – racks typically weigh up to 20kg on their own. There are also a few cars that can't have tow bars fitted at all – the Ford Ka and Vauxhall Tigra are two examples. Note that if you're travelling on a ferry, there may be a surcharge for a total vehicle *length* – including bike rack – of more than five metres. (A surcharge for 'over-height' vehicles is also common.)



**PENDLE WHEEL SUPPORT 4 BIKE £290.75**

The Pendle arrives in pieces and takes a while to put together, but you'll probably only do it once. A mounting block attaches to your tow-ball with four substantial bolts and prevents you using the ball for anything else. If you have a bolt-on flanged tow-ball you can use Pendle's 'behind the ball' mount instead. At 19kg the rack's hefty but lighter than you might expect, although when fully assembled it's big and quite awkward to handle. The rack doesn't tilt (Pendle do offer tilting versions of their two- and three-bike carriers) so once it's on, access to the boot is blocked. Bikes are secured using simple nylon straps to vertical posts. The wheel troughs are wide enough to deal with 2.4in MTB tyres. Pendle do a huge array of different versions of this rack, including a heavy-duty two-bike carrier that would be useful for electric bikes. [pendle-bike.co.uk](http://pendle-bike.co.uk)

*Bulky and blocks access to the boot, but simple, affordable, extremely sturdy and versatile.*



**THULE EUROCLASSIC G6 LED 929 £399.99**

Thule's flagship tow-bar rack is certainly robust; Thule's claimed weight for the three-bike version is 19.4kg and it came up a bit more than that on our scales. If you need to carry four bikes the optional adapter (£110) adds another couple of kilos. Despite the weight, mounting is easy, with a single lever clamping everything up securely. Once in place there's an easy-to-use tilt function with a foot-operated release lever. It swings wide enough to clear most tailgates although not that of our test van. While Thule quote a maximum weight of an impressive 25kg per bike – enough to carry e-bikes – the total capacity is 60kg, so you clearly can't take three 25kg bikes. Usefully, the bike frame holders are easily detachable so you can put them on as you load rather than having to thread them through each frame. A 13-pin plug powers a full set of bright, reliable LED rear lights. [thule.com](http://thule.com)

*Superb construction and easy to use, but heavy and expensive*



**BUZZ RACK QUATTRO £299.90**

The steel Buzz Rack arrives almost fully assembled – you just need to bolt on the uprights and attach the lighting board. The finished product is quite large, although the uprights fold down for storage. At 19.3kg it's not light, but it's quite easy to handle. Compared to the Thule and Atera racks, the Quattro has a useful bit of extra space between bikes although at the cost of sticking out further overall. With the length in mind, Buzz Rack have opted for a robust tow-ball clamp that requires a spanner to do up; it's not as convenient as a lever, but reasonably quick once you get the hang of it. It tilts for boot access, too. With two uprights holding two lockable frame clamps each the Quattro is easy to load. The bike wheels are supported in simple angled troughs with a row of holes for the straps to accommodate different wheelbases. [roofbox.co.uk](http://roofbox.co.uk)

*Easy to load, affordable, robust and secure but needs tools to mount*



**ATERA STRADA DL £427.50**

With its all-aluminium construction, the Atera is significantly lighter than comparable racks. Even with the optional bolt-on fourth bike adapter (£75) it's still just 18kg, with a weight limit of 15kg per bike. The Strada clamps to a tow-ball using a single lever – it's quick, easy and secure. Atera's unique slide/tilt mechanism gives enormous clearance behind the car, and was the only rack here to clear a vertical van tailgate. Bikes are secured with adjustable arms and lockable ratchet straps. The Strada has a full complement of rear lights, including fog and reversing lights, although these will only work if your car has a 13-pin socket. Atera also offers an e-bike version of this rack; it carries two, but with more space between them. There's also an optional loading ramp to save you having to lift bikes. [roofbox.co.uk](http://roofbox.co.uk)

*Expensive but lightweight and convenient. The best rack there is.*