



Biketest

Women's road bikes

Do you want velocity or versatility? **Guy Kesteven** and daughter **Freya Kesteven** review a Boardman SLR 8.9 Carbon Women's and a Planet X London Road



GUY AND FREYA KESTEVEN

Journalist & daughter

Guy has been a bike tester for 25 years. He talks to himself while riding bikes at **YouTube/GuyKesTV**. Freya is a keen cyclist too. Peggy the dog just photo-bombs

There are masses of different options when it comes to investing in your first 'proper' road bike. We've picked two bikes at opposite ends of the 'workhorse to whippet' spectrum. The two bikes also cover totally different approaches to frame material, braking and gearing too, so there's a lot to talk about when we compare the women's versions of the Planet-X London Road and the Boardman SLR 8.9 Carbon.

Frame & fork

Like most sub £1,000 bikes, the frame of the London Road all-rounder from Yorkshire online direct seller Planet-X is aluminium. It's a well thought-out chassis too, with a down tube whose ovalisation switches from vertical at the head tube to horizontal at the bottom bracket. The main tubes are thinner in the centre and then different thicknesses either end to keep them lighter. A straight, stout seat tube sits ahead of equally stout, slightly kinked rear stays that give generous tyre room. You can get a 'gravel' version of this bike with 38mm tyres. Alternatively you can fill

that space with full mudguards, which the frame has full mounts for – as well as fixings for a four-point rack.

The London Road's disc brake mounts are the latest 'flat' variety, and the bolted 142x12mm rear through-axle sits in neat dropouts. While our test bike didn't use a front mech, there are cable stops for one if you want to run a double chainring setup. All bolts and welds are loud and proud on the bright green frameset, which contrasts with the broad-bladed Selcof carbon fork. That also has a 12mm diameter bolt-through axle and plenty of tyre/mudguard room, with the fixtures to fit them too.

In contrast, while the Boardman has only just been launched and has a lightweight carbon frame, the fixtures and clearances are surprisingly old school. That includes open dropouts with quick releases and rim brakes front and rear. While there are mudguard mounts, frame clearance is limited even with 25mm tyres; Boardman state a 28mm maximum. There is an SLR 8.9 Carbon Disc for £500 more but that's only available with gent's sizing and contact points.

The Boardman's carbon mainframe follows current aerodynamic/stiffness-blend trends with rounded front edges and flat-sided profiles. The bottom bracket area is a massive box section around the press-fit bearings. Equally supersized and boxy chainstays taper towards the rear dropouts. In contrast, the seatstays are super skinny right up to the flat, triangular

Photos: Guy Kesteven

First look
An aluminium-framed all-rounder built up as workhorse bike but capable of many other roles



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web behind the seat tube. The seat post is slim too, and held in place by an expanding wedge set into the top tube.

Components

There are three obvious differences in the component spec of the bikes. The Planet-X London Road aims for all-weather control with cable-operated disc brakes from new brand Riderever. The Boardman has lighter-weight rim brakes from well-established bargain brand Tektro.

The Planet-X has an MTB/cyclocross-style single chainring crank matched to an 11-speed 11-42 cassette. This gives wide-range sequential shifting without any need for ‘which gear next?’ arithmetic. The Boardman takes the traditional approach, using an FSA twin-ring chainset matched to Shimano’s excellent 11-speed 105 shifter and derailleur group. The cassette is only 11-28 rather than the 11-32 or larger that many brands are using even on their entry-level performance bikes. That means that, despite its double chainset, the SLR



Top: The London Road is a unisex bike but can be ordered with female-friendlier components like this saddle
Bottom: Loads of room for mudguards above 32mm tyres, plus fittings for rear rack

has a higher bottom gear than the London Road (32in versus 27in). It also has a much higher top gear (120in versus 103in). If you exclude duplicate gears and the two ruled out by extreme chainlines, the Boardman only has 18 different ratios. That’s still enough to keep gaps between gears noticeably smaller for a smoother pedalling rhythm.

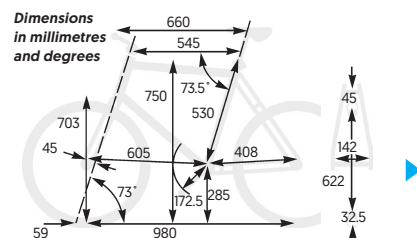
The third big difference between the bikes is the tyre choice. Tyres are a comparatively easy thing to change but they have a big impact on performance. In footwear terms, the wire-edged, 32mm Panaracer Tourguard Plus tyres on

the Planet-X are steel toe-capped boots, weighing in at over 2kg for the pair if you include the innertubes. In comparison, the 25mm Vittoria Zaffiro Pro tyres on the Boardman are sporty trainers. They’re a third of the weight of the Panaracers, with a folding bead and a graphene particle-infused compound.

The cranks are where Boardman start showing that they’re taking their proportional sizing seriously, with 165mm

Tech Spec
PLANET-X LONDON ROAD

- **Price:** £799.99
- **Sizes:** 47, 50, 53 (tested), 56, 59cm
- **Weight:** 10.04kg
- **Frame:** Triple butted 6061-T6 aluminium frame with tapered head tube, 68mm threaded bottom bracket, 142mm bolt-through dropouts, and fittings for flat-mount disc brakes, two bottles, rack, and mudguard. Carbon fibre fork with mudguard eyelets on the inside of the legs.
- **Wheels:** 32-622 Panaracer Tourguard puncture resistant tyres, Fulcrum Racing 600 disc rims and hubs, with 28 plain gauge spokes.
- **Transmission:** no pedals, 172.5mm SRAM chainset with 42t X-Sync chainring, SRAM GXP bottom bracket, KMC X10 chain, Shimano HG500 11-42 11-speed cassette. SRAM Apex shifter and derailleur. 11 ratios, 27-103in.
- **Braking:** SRAM Apex levers, Riderever MCX-2 cable disc brake callipers, with 160mm rotors.
- **Steering & seating:** Selcof bar tape, 420mm alloy bars and 100mm stem, Aheadset. Selcof Zeta seatpost with San Marco Shortfit ladies’ saddle. planetx.co.uk



**More reviews**

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cyclinguk.org/cycle-magazine/bike-test-small-gravel-bikes

**First look**

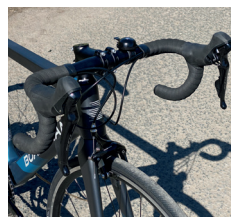
A carbon racer that will take mudguards for four-season riding. Sportier riders will want faster-rolling tyres

on this size small sample. Appropriately compact sizing extends to the 380mm wide bar and suitably short stem. This women's version gets a broad nosed, trough-centre, curved profile, female-specific saddle too. The Planet-X also comes with a women's saddle but only if you tick the appropriate option on their online bike builder. The same applies if you want a narrow bar or shorter stem.

When ordering the bikes, the London Road will be built to your specification in Rotherham and shipped to you in a box. The Boardman can also be delivered direct to you, or you can click-and-collect and pick it up from your local Halfords for no extra charge.

The ride

As well as female-friendly contact points, the Boardman has modified geometry in the smaller frame sizes. That comes from Boardman Bikes working with female racers like Nicole Cooke, who won the Beijing Olympic Road Race on a Boardman



Top: Being a women's-specific bike, this size small Boardman has a suitably narrow (38cm) handlebar

Bottom: A double chainset means more gears, primarily at the top end; bottom gear is higher than the London Road's

in 2008. The modifications include a slacker head tube to reduce the chance of toes hitting the front wheel when turning or track-standing. Together with the narrow bar, that does make the SLR feel a little stubborn to turn when you're over the front wheel on a standing climb, but keeps it very confident and secure at higher speeds on descents.

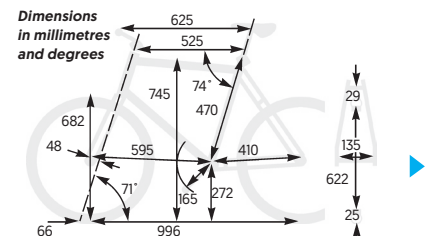
Steering is the only steady-feeling aspect of a bike that's otherwise full of pep and precision. The low weight means there are no issues with acceleration or climbing, while those boxy tubes mean no loss of power when you hit the bottom

of the high gear range on steep climbs, letting you just stand up and lever your way over the top. Apart from the range, the Shimano 105 gears were impeccable in feel and precision too. The brakes are fine in the dry but inevitably less powerful and predictable than discs in wet conditions.

The Boardman's saddle was well received by my female testers, helping take the edge off a ride that was definitely

Tech Spec
BOARDMAN SLR 8.9
CARBON WOMEN'S

- **Price:** £1,100
- **Sizes:** 45.5, 47 (tested), 48.5 and 50cm
- **Weight:** 8.66kg
- **Frame and fork:** C7 carbon fibre frame with press-fit BB and fittings for two bottles and mudguard (hidden). C7 carbon fork with tapered steerer and hidden mudguard mounts.
- **Wheels:** 25-622 Vittoria Zaffiro Pro G2.0 tyres, Boardman alloy tubeless-ready rims, Formula RB51/5711 QR hubs, double butted spokes.
- **Transmission:** flat pedals (not used), FSA Gossamer Compact 50-34T chainset, FSA CF86 PressFit MegaExo bottom bracket, KMC X11 chain, Shimano 105 R7000 11 speed 11-28T cassette. Shimano 105 R7000 STI shifters and derailleurs. 22 ratios, 32-120in.
- **Braking:** Shimano 105 STI levers, Tektro R315 sidepull callipers.
- **Steering & seating:** 380mm alloy bars, 85mm stem, FSA Aheadset. SLR women's saddle, Boardman 27.2mm alloy seatpost. boardmanbikes.com





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Above: An 11-42 cassette driven by a 42t chainring
Near right: Only 11-28 due to short-cage mech
Top right: Cable discs work better in the rain
Bottom right: Mid-drop brakes fit mudguards



firm rather than forgiving on rougher roads. A lot of that is down to the Vittoria tyres, which are durable and roll okay but have a 26tpi carcass that isn't as supple as top-quality race tyres (Vittoria's top models have a 320tpi construction). Given that the rims are tubeless-ready, I'd recommend upgrading ASAP. I did this and the ride was noticeably smoother and faster, flattering the performance potential of the carbon frame.

Tyres are a big part of the ride character of the London Road too. The weight of the Panaracers definitely slows down acceleration. Once you're rolling, they hold speed surprisingly well. With the heavyweight, puncture-shielded carcass allowing pressures as low as 45psi without worry, they're comfortable and smooth on most surfaces, with only sharp edges of potholes or rough bridleways suddenly jarring though the mid-depth, V-section Fulcrum rims and thick plain-gauge spokes. None of the testers had any concerns that what they were hitting would cause any damage, though. For loaded touring, badly lit and/or badly surfaced commuting, the wheels and tyres are entirely appropriate.

If you fit lighter wheels and top-quality high-volume road tyres (I switched them to Continental GP5000 TL 32mm on Hunt 4-Season wheels for part of the test period), you can save nearly two kilos in overall weight and discover a commendably lively feel from

Other options



TREK DOMANE AL3 DISC £995

Trek were the first big brand to start a female-fit range with their WSD (Women's Specific Design) bikes over 20 years ago. A smooth and stable ride, plus 32mm tyres as standard, makes their Domane AL3 Disc a liberating all-rounder.

trekbikes.com



GIANT LIV AVAIL 1 £949

Nobody is going further with establishing a separate women's product line than Giant with their Liv bikes, clothing and standalone shops. The Avail is light for aluminium, with a fantastic ride feel too.

liv-cycling.com

the London Road frame. Even in its sturdily, surefooted stock build it's still an enjoyable ride. Bombproof tyres, simple wide-range gearing, and adequate-if-not-amazing disc brakes boost confidence and open up more adventurous riding options.

Just remember to choose smaller bar and stem options as well as the female saddle in the 'custom choices' part of the buying process if you're a petite rider or you'll find the standard options a stretch. You can also change tyres, bar tape, and wheels and add bottle cages and pedals at this point. ●

Verdict

These are very different bikes targeted at different kinds of rider. The Boardman SLR 8.9 is essentially a pure racer, albeit with concessionary mudguard mounts that will work with skinny tyres for winter training. Low weight, firm ride, limited tyre space, high gearing and rim brakes are all about speed. With a tyre upgrade, this would be a very competitive bike for a sporty cyclist.

In contrast, the Planet-X London Road is a bike for almost everything else. In standard form it's a sturdy all-weather workhorse with braking and gearing suited for steep hills and/or slower speeds. Switch the rubber and it's a great example of just how responsive and enjoyable modern alloy bikes can feel. Just don't forget to select female-friendly contact points when you order.