

Dreadnought Saga Holiday

A D-SIZED GUITAR WITH SOLID INDIAN ROSEWOOD BACK AND SIDES FOR UNDER £500 – TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE? **PAUL ALCANTARA** INVESTIGATES

GBINFO

BLUERIDGE BR-40D CONTEMPORARY

PRICE: £249
BUILT IN: China
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1 11/16 inches)
TOP: Solid sitka spruce
BACK & SIDES: Laminated mahogany
NECK: Mahogany
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20 medium
BRIDGE: Rosewood
MACHINEHEADS: 'Kluson' style individual tuners with 14:1 ratio gears
CASE: No
FINISHES: Natural (shown)
LEFT HANDERS: No

CONTACT: Gremlin Musical Instrument Co.
PHONE: 01273 491333
EMAIL: post@gremlinmusic.co.uk

GBINFO

BLUERIDGE BR-160D HISTORIC

PRICE: £489
BUILT IN: China
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1 11/16 inches)
TOP: Solid sitka spruce
BACK & SIDES: Solid Indian rosewood
NECK: Mahogany
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20 medium
BRIDGE: Rosewood
MACHINEHEADS: 'Kluson' style individual tuners with 14:1 ratio gears
CASE: No
FINISHES: Natural finish with 'aging' toner
LEFT HANDERS: No

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Since its introduction by Martin in 1931, the dreadnought has dominated the field of steel-strung flattops like no other guitar. Almost every single acoustic guitar brand from bargain basement to ultra high-end includes at least one example of this square-shouldered behemoth in its catalogue.

Despite a recent resurgence of interest in smaller bodied 'parlour' guitars, for some, big will always be beautiful and today the dreadnought remains as popular as ever, accounting

for around 40 percent of total flattop production.

Saga's new kids on the block offer solid spruce tops – and in the case of the BR-160D Historic, solid Indian rosewood back and sides – and all at an affordable price, too.

BODY AND NECK BLUERIDGE BR-40D CONTEMPORARY

With its gently rounded top curve, the BR-40D's headstock is an attractive variation on the standard 'squared-off' Martin look – different enough to strike a note of individuality but traditional enough to avoid upsetting the guitar's overall balance. Attached to the neck with a scarf joint, it features a rosewood overlay that sports a fancy scroll inlay emblazoned with the 'Blueridge' logo. Described as mother of pearl and abalone, the whole thing looks rather too good to be true and I'd hazard a guess that Abalam (good enough for PRS) or some similar substitute has

BELLY 'HANCER

AIN'T BROKE, DON'T FIX IT

■ By the late 1920s most Martin models had switched from gut to steel strings, and around 1929 the company replaced the small rectangular bridge that it had used since the 1840s with what has become known as the 'belly bridge'.

The 'footprint' of this design offers a larger glue surface, therefore making it more resistant to the increased pull of steel strings, and as a consequence, the belly bridge has since gone on to become an industry standard.

been used. Whatever, it's cleanly executed with no evidence of filler.

Referred to in the company's literature as 'Kluson style', the tuners are in fact closer in appearance (at least from the front) to the Grovers found on pre-war Martins – and very nice they look, too. Unfortunately, the pair serving the outside strings are positioned rather too close to the centre line of the headstock, with the result that strings one and six



■ Nice to see a bit of herringbone, though we're not sure about the 'stained' top

laminated rosewood, are in fact laminated mahogany. The top is a solid piece of book-matched sitka spruce

that is as clean as the proverbial whistle – in fact, the overall quality of construction leaves very little to criticise.

Standard-issue rosewood belly-bridge and black plastic pickguard, together with black/white body binding and soundhole rosette lend the BR-40D a sober appearance that's slightly at odds with its ornate headstock inlay.

"WITH A MEDIUM/LOW ACTION, THE BR-40D MODEL PLAYS GREAT STRAIGHT OUT OF THE CASE"

veer inward at an alarming angle, while strings two and five are forced up against the former's string posts. This situation will do little for tuning stability and is a design fault that Saga would do well to address before the series is introduced in September.

The BR-40D's slim mahogany neck has a pleasant, modern feel to it. It's topped by an unbound rosewood fingerboard that's fitted with 20 medium-sized frets which, like the bone nut, are expertly shaped and finished. Set up with a medium/low action, the guitar plays great straight out of the case.

The body meets the neck at the 14th fret with a pointed, black plastic-capped, Martin-style heel. Back and sides, though described by Saga as

■ Simple, effective and beautiful too. Can't beat a bit of faux dead sea mollusc



with a nice tight grain, its appearance somewhat marred by the longitudinal brown stripes that run down either side of the bridge (this of course has no bearing on the guitar's sound or structural stability).

According to Gremlin (Saga's UK distributors), the finish is nitro lacquer, though its rather plasticky, high-gloss appearance would suggest urethane as a more likely candidate. Nevertheless, it's flawlessly applied, with a minimal build up around the base of the heel and fingerboard extension. A peek through the soundhole reveals an interior

**BODY AND NECK
BLUERIDGE
BR-160D HISTORIC**

The BR-160D is an altogether swankier package. Every inch of its headstock face is crammed with coloured abalone curlicues that recall Washburn's presentation models of the early 1900s. Regrettably it shares the BR-40D's problem regarding the location of the tuners. This time the neck is constructed from a single piece of mahogany with a separate glued-on heel (no ugly scarf joint). The unbound rosewood fingerboard is several shades darker than that of the BR-40D, suggesting that it has

■ This torty pattern is a welcome visual departure from the workaday pickguard



GBOPINION

BLUERIDGE BR-40D CONTEMPORARY

GOLD STARS

★ Nice build quality and set up

BLACK MARKS

● Incorrect tuner placement

IDEAL FOR...

Those wishing to make the step up from a bargain basement, laminate-top dreadnought



■ A simpler pickguard for the BR-40D, though the soundhole trim stays

been stained in an attempt to imitate the appearance of ebony. Attractive abalone snowflakes complement the headstock inlays, and it's good to see that the fretwork, nut and setup are once again top notch. The BR-160D

NEVER HAD IT SO GOOD

BANG FOR BUCK IS AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH

■ The difference between a US-built acoustic and what the Yanks refer to as an 'off shore' product was once a yawning chasm.

Built to a price, instruments originating in Asia were generally aimed at the budget end of the market and as such featured laminated construction, orange peely finish and an interior deemed too scary for Life Of Grime.

Those days are happily behind us and the quality of construction and materials (particularly on instruments coming from China) is now astonishingly good. The

advent of CNC routers has levelled the playing field and this, together with the top-quality timbers that now appear routinely on guitars priced under £500 (Vintage's V1500N comes complete with solid spruce top plus solid Indian rosewood back and sides - price just £399!), makes it increasingly difficult to justify the huge mark up that the big boys charge.

Although it would be misleading to suggest that the type of instrument outlined above is fully equivalent to a Taylor, Martin or Santa Cruz, the gap is definitely narrowing.

appearance of an Essex girl who has overdone the fake tan. Yuk.

A real surprise is the fact that both back and sides are built from solid Indian rosewood - a luxury generally reserved for instruments carrying a far heftier price tag. The quality of the

However (as we all know), size is no guarantee of performance and many dreadnought-sized guitars fall well short of the mark with a sound that offers little in the way of bottom end or volume. Fortunately the BR-40D and BR-160D both deliver the sonorous goods, the latter promising to develop into ➤

"THE BR-40D AND BR-160D BOTH DELIVER THE SONOROUS GOODS, THE LATTER PROMISING TO DEVELOP INTO A REAL BOOMER"

shares its plainer sibling's slender neck profile - a feature that would make either guitar an ideal choice for players raised on electrics.

Heel cap and body binding are white plastic, the perimeter of the top set off nicely by Martin-style herringbone trim. The soundhole rosette is black/white plastic while the pickguard has a mottled appearance duly described by Saga as 'Dalmatian Style'!

Solid book-matched spruce is used for the guitar's top, which is this time finished in 'Bombay Aloo'... oops, I mean to say 'aging toner'. Intended to conjure a vintage vibe, this yellow stain merely serves to lend the guitar the jaundiced

timber used is excellent, the back in particular displaying an attractive grain pattern set off by a striking centre strip of contrasting wood marquetry.

SOUNDS

Intended for vocal accompaniment, the dreadnought was designed to be loud and bass heavy and the best of the breed are indeed a force to be reckoned with.

■ Inside there you'll find tidy scalloped X-bracing in the Martin style



■ Some may say this is over the top, but we think it's dead class. Good job Saga!



... DETAILS

A GREAT DEAL OF DREADNOUGHT FOR MODEST SUMS – THE BR-160D EVEN HAS INDIAN ROSEWOOD BACK AND SIDES



■ Waverley-like buttons add a touch of class



■ Traditional belly bridge is right for the job



■ You'll always get noticed with this!



GBCONCLUSION

GENERALLY A GOOD SHOW, BUT THE PEGHEAD NEEDS SORTING

■ Both of these Chinese-built dreadnoughts offer a lot of guitar for what is a relatively modest outlay. Indeed, the quality of materials used – particularly the BR-160D's Indian rosewood back and sides – is remarkable at this price and the same goes for the overall attention to detail.

The problem with tuner location is an issue that Saga should really sort out as soon as possible, and while they're at it why not ditch the kitsch 'aged' top and stained fingerboard? Get wise guys, the organic food industry has successfully tapped into the demand for an unadulterated product, so why not market additive-free spruce and rosewood as an advantage? **GB**

SCALLOPED BRACING

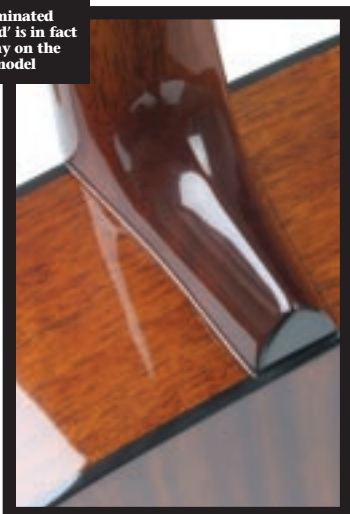
BRACED FOR DYNAMICS

■ The volume and tone quality of Martin's pre-war guitars is often attributed to the delicate scalloped bracing that the company employed until 1944.

After that date, a sturdier bracing system, deemed more

suitable for the heavy steel strings in use at the time, was substituted. Both of the Saga guitars reviewed here feature scalloped bracing, which certainly helps with their open sound and impressive dynamics.

■ The laminated 'rosewood' is in fact mahogany on the BR-40D model



a real boomer while the former offers the balanced bass, pronounced mid range and bright clear trebles that make mahogany-bodied guitars a favourite with recording engineers.

Both of these guitars have good sustain characteristics and plenty of dynamic headroom enabling them to handle everything from gentle James Taylor-style fingerpicking to vigorous Bluegrass thrash with ease. It would be interesting to take a look at these two after several months of playing – I suspect that the BR-160D in particular will develop a powerful dreadnought voice that would be capable of holding its own in the company of instruments costing several times its price.

GBOPINION

BLUERIDGE BR-160D HISTORIC

GOLD STARS

- ★ Great build quality
- ★ Top timbers
- ★ Excellent value for money

BLACK MARKS

- Incorrect tuner placement

IDEAL FOR...

Anyone looking for maximum bang for buck from their sonorous strummer

GBRATINGS

BLUERIDGE BR-160D HISTORIC

BODY & NECK	★★★★☆
HARDWARE & PARTS	★★★★☆
PLAYABILITY	★★★★☆
SOUNDS	★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
GBVERDICT	★★★★☆

GBRATINGS

BLUERIDGE BR-40D CONTEMPORARY

BODY & NECK	★★★★☆
HARDWARE & PARTS	★★★★☆
PLAYABILITY	★★★★☆
SOUNDS	★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
GBVERDICT	★★★★☆