

Away We Go





Are so-called ‘travel guitars’ a viable genre or just another way for makers to grab our cash? We present four of the best and find out...

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Joseph Branston



TRAVEL GUITAR ROUND-UP £259 to £645

Makers large and small usually like to attach the 'travel' label to shorter-scaled instruments typically downsized from the standard body sizes – dreadnought, jumbo and so on – that we play every day. They're presumably intended to pack in a plane's overhead compartment or, more likely, a car boot stuffed with camping equipment and kids/ mates – and unless you're very lucky, you're going to use that guitar for a couple of weeks a year. Hardly essential, then.

But today's 'travel' guitar is way more than that. Perfect as a kick-about house guitar, very handy for practice (not least for those younger, start-up players), songwriting and recording, a small-scaled guitar can have numerous uses. They're ideal platforms for Nashville high-strung tuning if you want to record a delicate, ethereal rhythm track, for example. Add in a pickup and it's stage- and open-mic ready. Above all, it offers the player a different voice.

Choice is wide: from Martin's Little Martin, Taylor's Baby or, as here, GS Mini, through to new additions such as Faith's recently released Nomad, and the Paul Brett-designed Vintage Viator that comes with a USB output for easy 'around the campfire' recording and songwriting.

So, valid instruments or merely something for the weekend? Let's find out.

Taylor GS Mini-e Mahogany

They're always beautifully clean – if Taylor has made a bad guitar, we've yet to see it. There's lovely striping to the mahogany top that's only marginally less detailed on the back and sides. It's unbound, but the edges don't feel unfinished, and there's a crisp purfling around the top edge with simple multi-band soundhole decoration. Internally, we have spruce X-bracing, but due to the laminated arched back there are no back braces. Small details such as the rounded fingerboard edges and perfectly fettled frets add quality to the feel. The neck is three-piece and perfectly jointed.

Martin LX1E Little Martin

Another hugely tidy build, the LX1E is again unbound and the top's chamfered edge creates a rather thick-looking impression that looks a little unfinished against the Taylor. Conversely, the multi-piece neck feels *more* finished and less open-pored and the fret work and rounded fingerboard edges give a great feel. The material may be man-made, but the fingerboard and bridge look like dense ebony, while the dark-hued HPL back and sides ape a dark, rich mahogany with the back's central core material giving a dark binding line, which evokes a classy feel. This one has a conventionally braced back and – with less decoration, no position markers on the fingerboard face and just a single five-band rosette – does look a little austere.

Faith Nomad Mini-Neptune Electro

Similar in size and style to the GS Mini, the trimmer-priced Faith is our only all-solid guitar here, although the mahogany is paler and less striped than our Taylor. The unbound edges are a little sharp, but it's no deal breaker; likewise, those fingerboard edges. The fingerboard is edge-bound, which looks very tidy, and the frets are a larger medium gauge. Decoration is minimal with just that 12th fret 'F' inlay and a bound abalone rosette. Internally, we have spruce X-bracing and conventional kerfed linings (unlike Taylor's more hi-tech and thinner linings), while the truss rod (like the Taylor) is adjustable at the head. The neck is three-piece, but the head-splice falls lower on the neck and, consequently, is more visible, while the tuners do look a little big with their large full-size buttons.

Vintage Viator USB Paul Brett Signature

If the Taylor, Faith and Martin all appear quite modern, our petite Vintage – the smallest guitar on review in terms of scale length and body size – seems to have dropped back a century in style. It looks like the sort of thing you might see on *Antiques Roadshow*, so we're not sure whether to play or put it on display. Hopefully, you'll choose the former, because it's very fit-for-purpose and really nicely made. The herringbone purfling and maple edge binding give it a classy 'finished' appearance, and even the dark brown 'antique' finish not only



Few guitar players will fail to engage with the GS Mini. There's a lovely intimacy that makes any style a pleasure

suits the style but is very nicely and evenly applied. Okay, the bridge does seem a little clunky and sharp-edged, but string spacing is full-width, while the wood-bound fingerboard is nicely edge-rounded and the frets mirror-polished. The neck appears to be three-piece (it's harder to see the joins under the finish), and that slotted head and those smooth open-g geared Grover tuners are highly functional and very classy.

Sounds

Few guitar players will fail to engage with the GS Mini. Like all our guitars, you have to get used to the condensed scale length, but with a really comfortable neck that's very

slightly V'd in lower positions, the Taylor's unplugged sound is expansive with more bass than many full-size parlours. It's very balanced, too, both in the way it sits on your lap and its sound. There's a lovely intimacy (though not huge projection, of course) that makes any style a pleasure, from Latin fingerstyle to rockier strummed rhythms. This is going to be a hard act to follow...

Or maybe not. The Little Martin does feel a little more industrial, but from the first strum its more conventional spruce-top voice has us captivated. If you're a classic Martin fan, this is just miniaturised with a lovely crisp-edged voice. It might lack a little of the GS Mini's low end, but we

1. The Taylor GS Mini's mahogany top has a lovely striping that serves to enhance the elegant, simplistic vibe



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really don't feel short-changed. Its more conventional sound perhaps leads us to traditional 'American' fingerstyle, and its pushy voice would certainly be heard above bigger guitars, both in an ensemble or a recording. Serious fun.

To be picky, the Faith's larger head and bigger tuners do make it feel a little unbalanced played seated – though in actual use, it's easily balanced by your right forearm. The sound is a little 'stringier' than either our Taylor or Martin, and despite the size similarity, not to mention materials, has less low-end warmth than the former. But thanks to those wide, bigger frets, its more electric-like playability will make many feel more at home, even though its 12-fret neck might feel a little cramped. Hit hard it doesn't respond too well; the thin brightness seems enhanced. But for more modern fingerstyle, that brightness works in its favour. This one might well benefit from a bigger string gauge and a drop tuning, plus some serious playing in.

The little Vintage sounds most like a 'honey, I shrunk my parlour'. It has quite a honky midrange push – combine that with the pronounced V-shaped neck and it creates a hugely characterful 'travel guitar', if perhaps not the most versatile model of the bunch here. Maybe it's that neck and its overall appearance, but it suggests an older-world style, one that's dirtier and a little buzzy if hit hard and, like the Faith, could easily handle a bigger string gauge and rootsy open A and E tunings. It's certainly the smallest in size, but far from the smallest in character. This would grace any bluesy, swampy recording as is, and would be a perfect take-anywhere bottleneck bruiser.

Head for the stage...

Plugged in, our GS Mini kicks us off with quite a dark, mellow-toned sound that needs a little bit of bass trimming and some high-end enhancement to create a

contemporary steel-string voice. Even so, it sounds a little magnetic-like, a little older than you might expect. It's quite a musical sound, though, and surprisingly nice for jazzier styles, too.

Our Martin has only pre-set EQ, and without that engaged things are a little middly and boxy: it definitely sounds more conventional with the contour switch, which cleans up the mids a little and adds some crispness. Like its acoustic voice, the Martin sounds very 'conventional' plugged in and that's no bad thing. It does sound a little more 'piezo-y' than the Taylor, especially on higher position lead lines, but it's really easy to dial in: we scooped a little lower midrange and that was about it. Open-mic ready, we'd say!

If the Faith lacks a little unplugged, it makes up for it as an electro. With just a slight mid dip on the slider EQ, there's a very

The Vintage looks like something you might see on 'Antiques Roadshow' – we're not sure whether to play or put it on display





2. The Faith has a proprietary CnR-3 electric system. Fully featured and with a built-in tuner, it provides an impressive plugged-in sound

3. The Vintage's dark brown Natural Antique finish and striking herringbone purfling around the edges and soundhole give it a very old-school vibe

credible modern voice here with a nicely balanced, not over-cooked bass end and plenty of high-end zing without it sounding overly 'piezo-y'. Only minimal outboard EQ is necessary to pass the open-mic test.

The Viator probably proves the 'small is big' concept best plugged in, producing a big ol' beefy sound. It's slightly unbalanced in output as the low E is a little light, but that

doesn't ruin the fun. With no EQ (the tone control is just a treble roll-off, or at least sounds like it), a little outboard tweaking to thin the mids certainly helps and it sort of sits between the Martin and Taylor, sound-wise – not as crisp as the former nor as dark as the latter. The bonus is the USB output, which is a quick way (without an interface) to knock out some on-the-road recording direct into your laptop. That low E is also very close to the fingerboard edge and, as we said, there's a little fretbuzz that suggests a slight truss rod relaxation and/or a slightly more 'manly' action. For the money, though, it's hard to fault.

Verdict

Whether or not you need a 'mini' guitar to accompany you on your travels or actually just fancy a smaller house-guitar to noodle away on, any of our contenders in this round-up are fit for either use. Not only that, as many players have already discovered (not least the million-selling Ed Sheeran), small can be big enough for those everyday gigs at Wembley Stadium or – more likely! – your local boozier, while



Size Matters

Our mini guitars all have different scale lengths and string spacing. Here's the lowdown...

	Taylor	Martin	Faith	Vintage
Scale	597 (23.5")	584 (23")	590 (23.2")	546 (21.49")
Nut width	43.17	42.7	42.8	42.8
String spacing (nut)	35.5	37	34.5	36.5
String spacing (bridge)	55	54	54	55
12th fret width	55.17	53.35	54.12	52.29

All dimensions in millimetres unless stated



4



5



6



7

The Martin LX1E does feel a bit more utilitarian but packs a very endearing and classic steel-string punch

each will add its own voice to any recording that you happen to be working on.

The GS Mini is our most expensive guitar on test; you could buy a credible full-size instrument for its price. But it does include the best gigbag of our bunch and employs Taylor's top-flight ES-2. Reflected in its lower price and material choice, the Martin LX1E feels a bit more utilitarian but packs a very endearing and classic steel-string punch, both acoustically and amplified.

Our similarly priced but all-solid Faith has a subtly more electric-like feel and playability, and while not our favourite on the quartet unplugged, plugged-in it's quite a corker, especially for the modern player. Which leaves our trimmest-priced Vintage with its 19th century looks, old-world acoustic sound and very usable plugged-in voice. Add in that USB feature and overall compactness and it's the no-brainer of the bunch, especially if you're into rootsier styles. Here comes the summer! **G**



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4. The Martin's Fishman Isys T preamp only offers a pre-set Contour switch for EQ, but with it engaged, the sound is crisper and cleaner

5. As with many more affordable Martins, the LX1E uses wood alternatives in some areas, such as the bridge and fingerboard – here, they're both made of Richlite

6. The Faith's full-size tuners do look a little large on the scaled-down headstock, but this is the only all-solid wood guitar here

7. There are no unsightly controls to break the illusion that the Vintage is a museum piece, thanks to the soundhole-mounted controls of the Fishman Sonitone

8. The low-profile buttons of the Taylor Expression System are a hallmark of the firm's electros; the Mini uses the ES-2



TAYLOR GS MINI-E MAHOGANY

PRICE: £645 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: 14-fret, 'modern day parlour' non-cutaway electro-acoustic
TOP: Solid mahogany
BACK/SIDES: Layered (laminated) sapele
MAX RIM DEPTH: 102mm tapering to 83mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 365mm
NECK: Sapele
TUNERS: Chrome enclosed
NUT: Graph Tech Tusq
FINGERBOARD: Ebony, 406mm (16") radius, with 5mm dot inlay
FRETS: 20, small
BRIDGE: Ebony with compensated Tusq saddle
ELECTRICS: Taylor ES-2 with shoulder-mounted volume, treble and bass controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.8/3.98
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Other current GS Mini models include the acoustic GS Mini (with spruce top, £553) and the GS Mini (with mahogany top, £600), both can be retrofitted with the ES-Go soundhole pickup, plus the electro GS Mini-e Rosewood (£645) and GS Mini-e Koa (£738)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, to order (no upcharge)
FINISH: Natural varnish

Taylor Guitars
 +31 (0) 206676030
 www.taylorguitars.com

8/10

PROS In build, finish and sound, this is a first-class ride, no question

CONS Quality comes at a price; is it a little dark sounding?



MARTIN LX1E LITTLE MARTIN

PRICE: £449 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: 14-fret, 'Modified 0-14 Fret' electro-acoustic
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany high-pressure laminate (HPL)
MAX RIM DEPTH: 94mm tapering to 75.5mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 316mm
NECK: Rust birch laminate with Standard Taper Modified Low Oval
TUNERS: Martin logo'd chrome enclosed
NUT: White Corian
FINGERBOARD: FSC Certified Richlite, 406mm (16") radius,
FRETS: 20, small
BRIDGE: FSC Certified Richlite with compensated White Tusq saddle
ELECTRICS: Fishman Isys T with under-saddle pickup and side-mounted preamp, with soundhole-placed preamp with rotary volume control, push switch contour and phase, plus onboard tuner
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.73/3.81
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Other current Little Martins include the acoustic LX1 (£379), LXX2, LX Black and the LXM (all £349), plus the electro LXME (£429)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes (no upcharge)
FINISH: Natural hand rubbed

Westside Distribution
 0141 248 4812
 www.martinguitar.com



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PROS Business class by design – simple, but everything you need

CONS Some may find it a bit austere, but it functions perfectly



FAITH NOMAD MINI-NEPTUNE ELECTRO

PRICE: £439 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: 12-fret mini jumbo non-cutaway electro-acoustic
TOP: Solid mahogany
BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 92mm tapering to 82mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 346mm
NECK: Mahogany
TUNERS: Chrome enclosed with large buttons
NUT: Graph Tech NuBone
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood, m-o-p 'F' at 12th fret, 406mm (16") radius
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE: Macassan figured ebony
ELECTRICS: Faith CnR-3 System with under-saddle pickup, rotary volume, treble, middle and bass slider EQs, phase switch and onboard tuner
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.81/3.99
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The other current Nomad is the downsized dreadnought Mini-Saturn electro (£429)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Natural satin

Barnes & Mullins
 01691 652449
 www.faithguitars.com

7/10

PROS Economy unplugged, but the electro sound is a free upgrade

CONS Acoustic sound isn't our favourite; it needs some playing in



VINTAGE 'VIATOR' USB PAUL BRETT SIGNATURE

PRICE: £259 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: 12-fret, small body non-cutaway travel electro-acoustic with USB output
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Laminated sapele
MAX RIM DEPTH: 90.5mm tapering to 74.5mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 284mm
NECK: Nato with customised 'V' shape and slotted headstock
TUNERS: Nickel-plated Grover open-gear
NUT: Graph Tech NuBone
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays
FRETS: 18, small
BRIDGE: Rosewood with compensated Tusq saddle
ELECTRICS: Fishman Sonitone USB with under-saddle pickup and soundhole placed volume and tone rotary controls and USB recording output
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.35/2.98
LEFT-HANDERS: No
OPTIONS: The acoustic Viator costs £209
RANGE OPTIONS: Other Paul Brett signatures include the Viator Tenor Guitar (£229). The Vintage VTG100 Acoustic Travel guitar costs £169 (inc gigbag) and is available left-handed. A 12-string version will be available shortly, retailing at £329
FINISH: Natural Antique

JHS
 01132 865381
 www.jhs.co.uk

8/10

PROS Hang onto your seat, this is an evocative ride and a real corker

CONS The low E is too close to the 'board edge; too tame plugged in