

SPECIFICATIONS

FRAME	3AL/2.5V Seamless Hydroformance Titanium Tubing
FORK	Easton EC90SL
SHIFTERS	Shimano 105 5800
FRONT DERAILLEUR	Shimano 105 5800
REAR DERAILLEUR	Shimano 105 5800
CRANK	Shimano 105 5800
CASSETTE	Shimano Ultegra 6800 11-28
BOTTOM BRACKET	Shimano Press Fit
WHEELS	Mavic Ksyrium SLR
TYRES	Mavic Yksion Pro
BRAKES	Shimano 105 5800
HANDLEBAR	VNT Elements alloy, compact
STEM	Van Nicholas Ti
HEADSET	FSA
SADDLE	Selle Italia
SEATPOST	Van Nicholas Ti
CHAIN	Shimano 105 5800
WEIGHT	8.2kg
PRICE	\$6,800
DISTRIBUTOR	Blue Globe Alliance

Test Lab | Van Nicholas Zephyr
BY PAT HOWARD

Van Nicholas Zephyr

FRAME MATERIALS COME IN AND OUT OF VOGUE AS TECHNOLOGIES INEVITABLY ADVANCE, YET TITANIUM HAS BEEN ABLE TO RETAIN IT'S PLACE AS THE BESPOKE, REVERED ALTERNATIVE TO THE MATERIAL OF THE MOMENT. LIGHT, STRONG, SMOOTH AND TIMELESS IS THE SPIEL. VAN NICHOLAS BIKES AIMS TO ADD AFFORDABLE TO THAT LIST.

8.2kg, 56cm,
\$6,800

Short low-set chainstays reflect the current trend in carbon frame design.

A ti frame with a good carbon fork and quality wheels adds up to one very smooth riding bike.

Ti bikes are about functionality and style; the 105 groupset delivers on both fronts.

AND LET'S SAY THAT affordable is one of the most subjective terms you're likely to bandy about, but historically titanium has been a super premium material when measured in dollars. Ever popular among small to medium sized hand-builder brands, names like Moaots and Lynskey exist based upon ranges comprised entirely of titanium frames, with cult-like followings. Add in makers like Baum, Seven, Indy Fab and Firefly and you have a who's who of drool worthy, dream bikes. The fact that the mainstream brands almost entirely avoid ti further bolsters its appeal. A complete Van Nicholas Zephyr with a 105 group can be had from a bit over \$4,000, not cheap per se but seemingly good value in the realm of titanium. Our review bike had some ti options and ups spec wheels.

Van Nicholas is a Dutch company, but all their frames are manufactured in China. The romantic image of the lone craftsman in a small workshop is not part of the Van Nicholas marketing. The tubes of the Zephyr are shaped and tapered but not butted, and the welds are solid and



1. The ti stem, spacers and top cap are optional, but a nice touch.
2. Any bike or frameset purchased this year will come with a Van Nich jersey and bibs, valued at \$275.
3. Selle Italia's SLR Max saddle has ample padding and a cavernous cut out.
4. Mavic's Ksyrium SLR wheelset is a quality inclusion; it looks good and weighs just over 1,500g.
5. The rear wheel is laced with carbon spokes on one side, steel the other.
6. The cool satiny sheen of brushed titanium...

SUMMING UP

QUALITY

The Zephyr has plenty of nice design touches and some effort has been put into shaping the tubes for their purpose. Everything was in place but the super fine detail and welding won't keep the legends of bespoke ti lying awake at night.

PERFORMANCE

This is a super smooth ride. It's a stable bike too, which lends itself to big miles and rich, warm, full bodied comfort. The front to rear rigidity is better suited to measured efforts than frenzied attacks which is unlikely to be an issue for the typical Zephyr rider.

VALUE

For ti, the Zephyr is a pretty good starting point as a complete bike. Prices start in the low \$4000's and can head well north of \$10,000 depending on how you feel. The option to up and down spec to your taste lets you choose the value proposition rather than having it dictated.

OVERALL

There are few bikes that I'd rather have with me on a long or multi-day ride, especially on dead country roads. The ability to custom spec is pretty ace, many who like long rides will have strong preferences for parts and ergonomics. This is the kind of bike you can grab when you leave in the morning darkness, not sure if it will still be light when you return home.

purposeful rather than the minimalist and precise joints we'd expect of the legendary artisans. Van Nicholas promote the longevity of a ti frame and the ride quality, two aspects that most proponents of ti will voice loudly. Titanium doesn't rust in the way a steel frame does, nor corrode like a bare aluminum frame would. The look is distinctive and should polish up almost as good as new after a decade of riding. Many would argue that a ti frame is also more resistant to damage (say compared with carbon frames which can crack or aluminum tubes that can dent), but personal experience

leaves me with the conclusion that no material is a magic solution to blunt or high speed impacts, or fatigue. The ride feel of titanium is theoretically similar to that of steel. The material has an inherent ability to absorb vibrations and to take the edge off impacts (as a sweeping generalisation).

The Zephyr comes with a polished finish, replete with etched graphics and a recessed headtube logo. The understated nature won't turn heads but should stand the test of time. Nothing is oversized but the down tube and top tube have more volume that you're accustomed to with a ti frame.

Both tubes are hydroformed to increase their rigidity at the head tube, with the top tube tapering notably before it reaches the seat tube. The Zephyr breaks tradition by imitating the low juncture of the seat stays onto the seat tube, as is seen in many current carbon frames. This is said to enhance comfort by directing bump forces into the seat tube where they can be more readily absorbed than if the stays met at the top tube. The head tube is not tapered and uses an integrated headset for a nice clean look. The bottom bracket is also integrated, this time in a press fit 86 shell, something the traditionalists may rue as being oversized.

The Zephyr is Van Nicholas' high-performance bike for the everyman. The frame dimensions sit the rider a little more upright than a race day machine, and the wheelbase is lengthened by an extra few

millimetres in the chainstays, just to bump up the stability when things get fast or the rider gets fatigued. The 75mm bottom bracket drop is as generous as you're likely to find on a 'road' bike too, placing the riders centre of gravity closer to the axles for an even more stable position. The Zephyr is aimed at weekend rides with mates, big training or base k's and epic days out that challenge the body and soul, be that 100km or 300km depending on the rider.

Our Zephyr came with a variety of components, including some lovely light Mavic Ksyrium SLR wheels and an Easton EC90SL fork. Still, the initial 'pick up the bike' test let us know she wasn't the lightest bike we'd ride this year. The Mavics roll up to speed easily and the weight was only really noticeable when trying to accelerate or match tempo up

hill. The Zephyr frame carries less blame for this than the alloy cockpit and 105 groupset and we'd always opt to save weight on the wheels before anywhere else.

Clocking along having a chat, the weight loses relevance and the tactile experience moves to the fore. The 105 group shares the same lever shape as it's more expensive brethren, and also retains the superb shifting. The mid-compact crank and 12-28 cassette make for a versatile ensemble. Most importantly the Zephyr frame lived up to the ti mystique, the ride really is very supple. The road is still coarse, but it's not rough. It's akin to hitting a nail with the rubber impact mallet instead of the steel headed hammer. There's still a good thud, but the jarring sting is absent. Sitting in your slightly upright position with the low bottom bracket and generous wheelbase, you can

comfortably ride the Zephyr all day long over any variance of road surfaces.

The 23mm Mavic tyres gave no problems, but in this day and age a 25mm tire has got to be pretty close to the new normal. The Zephyr's comfort in the absence of the bigger tire speaks well of what would be experienced with a smoother riding tread fitted. Van Nicholas note a maximum tyre width of 25mm, but some 28's may even squeeze in the rear but not the fork. I'd love to see some more tyre clearance factored into future Zephyr revisions as this frame should last an age and the limited tire clearance flies against the strong emergence of wider tyres at all levels of the sport, especially so amongst the Zephyrs target demographic. I also found that the stem bolts of the ti Van Nicholas stem were sharper and more exposed than my knees would have liked.

Coming from a smaller brand, the biggest upside to the Zephyr or any Van Nicholas, is the ability to customise (stem, tires, fork, wheels, you name it!). The Van Nicholas website offers a massive array of options and bikes can be delivered in as little as two weeks from order confirmation via the Australian distributor (Blue Globe Alliance). Blue Globe also offer their advice on spec choices and recommendations to ensure that any custom bike will really suit the needs and desires of the owner. There's more spec choice and global leverage at play than a one man brand, but real flexibility that few of the big brands can provide. The Van Nicholas range fills an interesting spot between the poles of the market. Make what you want of the Zephyr, truly. It's a real smooth ride that can deliver in almost any guise you'd like. 🌟

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