

#### THE SPEC

Model Prova Speciale Groupset  
Sram eTap AXS HRD Wheels  
Zipp 303 NSW Disc Finishing kit  
Zipp SL-70 Ergo bars, Zipp SL  
Speed stem, Prova titanium seat  
topper, custom Selle Italia Flite  
saddle, Vittoria Corsa 2.0 28mm  
tyres Weight 7.99kg (55cm)  
Price £11,200 as tested (approx  
£4,500 frameset, £840 paint)  
Contact [provacycles.com](http://provacycles.com)



## Prova Speciale

### The cutting edge of custom is a dreamy ride

Words JAMES SPENDER



**J**ust when every high-end bike seems to be converging on the same style – semi-aero tube profiles, dropped seatstays, disc brakes, fully integrated cabling – along come three in quick

succession to alleviate this often brilliant but mundane predictability. Last month I was fortunate enough to test the beautiful Cicli Barco XCR; a few months prior I reviewed the perfectly balanced Argonaut Road Disc; this month I'm already getting separation anxiety thinking about having to return the Prova Speciale to its maker, Mark Hester.

#### Down Under engineering

Melbourne-based Mark Hester cultivated a long CV in automotive engineering before launching Prova three years ago. As well as founder and owner, Hester is also Prova's lead designer and fabricator, although he does have a little help from some robotic friends, a 3D printing company in New Zealand and another in the form of Bastion Cycles, based in the workshop next door.

To that end, the Speciale's seat topper is 3D printed 6-4 titanium, designed by Hester and made by Bastion, while the seat tube cluster, rear dropouts, disc mount, internal routing ports and seatpost sleeve are designed by Hester and printed in New Zealand from 15-5PH stainless steel. Those parts are seamlessly silver-brazed into the frame ◻



#### SEAT TUBE

You'll struggle to find a neater marriage of materials than this. A carbon seat tube sits impeccably between the stainless steel top tube and seatstays, finished with a 3D printed titanium seat topper.

## This is the plushest bike I have ever ridden, yet without compromising on stiffness or weight

◀ – so seamlessly, in fact, that I'll just take Hester's word for it that the seat cluster and top tube aren't one piece. The join really is invisible.

The bulk of the frame is made from neatly TIG-welded Columbus XCr stainless steel plus a Reynolds 953 stainless top tube, chosen for its oval profile (which Columbus doesn't offer) and custom-machined steel head tube. Then there's that contrasting carbon fibre seat tube.

'The seat tube is butted using an external mould and internal bladder that has the same compaction of an autoclave but allows variable wall thickness,' says Hester. 'This is crucial to the design having such a minimal seat lug: the carbon wall thickness gradually decreases away from the seat lug and BB, which lowers the peak stress at the transition from carbon to steel.'

So besides being lighter than the steel alternative and adding compliance, the carbon seat tube affords lighter printed parts and a stronger frame. But why bother with 3D-printed parts at all?

Well, they look very fine for one thing, but they are also more 'tuneable' than traditional cast or



### HEAD TUBE

Prova uses a custom-machined steel head tube, which rather unusually eschews the practically ubiquitous trend for internal bearings in favour of an external, pressed-in headset.



bi-laminate lugs because the pieces' walls are a hollow lattice structure, allowing Hester to dial in specific stiffness and flex characteristics. But crucially, printed parts allow Hester to play around with such things as tyre clearance and chainstay length, and to build with truly custom geometry. Each printed part can be minutely changed in its angles for any given frame.

### Hard to measure

Testing custom geometry bikes is tough because what works for me will not necessarily suit you. But that's to miss a trick. The objective review comes in the form of 'does it live up to the brief?', and if the answer is 'yes' then there's every reason Mark Hester could deliver you a bike that is as perfect for you as this is for me. Which this bike absolutely is.

The basic geometry of this Speciale is based on a bike fit from Aidan Hammond at Bike Fitting Ireland, who fitted me up for a custom FiftyOne back in issue 75. But there are some tweaks.

Having discussed my lack of crit racing, Hester lowered the BB height to 75mm (based on the idea that my riding style wouldn't run the risk of pedal strike from leaning deep and pedalling through corners), increased fork trail to 59mm – up from the FiftyOne's 53mm – and reduced the wheelbase from 992mm to 984mm. The Speciale was built with very similar stack and reach, however. ▶

◊ That created a platform which, much as I remember with the FiftyOne, *just felt right*. After angling the bars there was nothing more to set up. Even the seat height came pre-set just right.

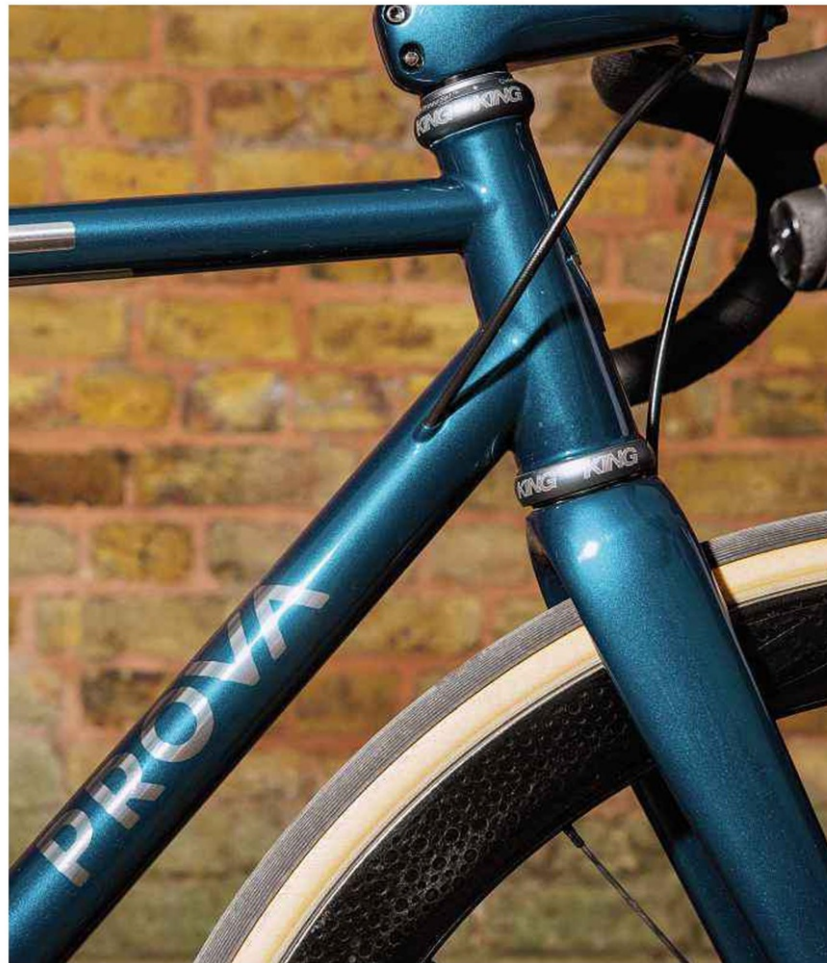
With a lower bottom bracket, and hence lower centre of gravity, and long-ish fork trail the Speciale descended like a fairground ride, but given the short wheelbase it felt deft and responsive, and swung through corners with aplomb.

As far as I'm concerned, these are all big ticks for the custom bike. I'm happy enough on most 55cm/56cm frames given the right stem length and spacers, but the Prova does make the case for how custom bikes are just that little bit nicer to ride.

Yet, what elevates the Speciale above and beyond any bike I've ridden, stock or custom, is just how comfortable it is. This thing doesn't just cruise, it books the presidential suite on the QE2 and lays on a free bar.

Admittedly the QE2 now resides as a floating hotel in Dubai, and you will need Dubai-levels of money to buy the Prova Speciale. But the fact remains this is absolutely the plushest bike I have ever ridden, yet without compromising on stiffness – of which it has plenty – or too much on weight.

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**WHEELS**  
Zipp's 303 NSW Disc wheels and Vittoria's latest Corsa Graphene 2.0 28mm tyres are a formidable combination, offering speed, sublime handling and comfort to complement the Speciale's racy traits.

The frame is 1.65kg but that includes the seat topper, and while the overall build is 7.99kg, it could be much lighter. The Zipp wheels are fast but at 1,530g not terribly light; the saddle spares no lavish expense, refinished in custom leather by fellow Australian outfit Busyman. Plus this thing has disc brakes and 28mm tyres (it can fit up to 32mm).

That said, this bike could be even more comfortable. The precisely balanced stiffness/flex of the frame is such that it highlights the ever-so-slightly chattering edge of the paired Enve disc fork, whose stiffness gives great precision in corners but becomes occasionally noticeable through the hands on buzzy road surfaces. I mentioned this to Hester and he said he is potentially going to create his own fork. And that really is the only criticism I can level here.

Given that ride feel is impossible to quantify, you'll just have to take my word for it. Then again, for over £11k you'd hope to enjoy riding it.

The cost of bikes is a never-ending source of discussion among cyclists, but this is top-spec in every regard, and doesn't cost much more than many top-end stock bikes. Only here you get everything built up just for you, and so you really will be getting something quite unique. ✨