

THE VOLAE EXPEDITION ES

It's so comfy, you might just nap on it — just don't do so while on the road

by John Schubert

Back in 2003, an unfortunate thing happened — Vision recumbents went out of business. Vision had a lot of good designs and I was sorry to see them go. One of their retailers wasn't so pleased either. That retailer was Hostel Shoppe in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Hostel Shoppe owner Rolf Garthus took pains to get detailed information about some of Vision's more intriguing designs so those designs could live on in

a new Hostel Shoppe incarnation.

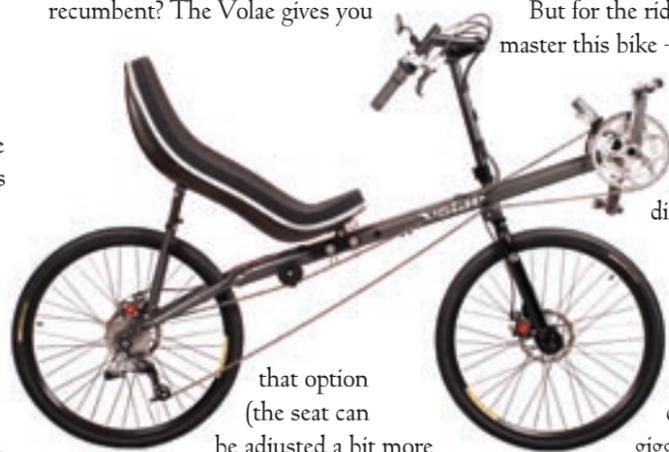
Next, Garthus needed a manufacturer, so he went to one of the brightest kids in the class: Waterford Precision Cycle Works, also in Wisconsin. Waterford, which has made custom bikes for many people who read this magazine, was easily equal to the task of manufacturing the new bikes. Garthus named the new bikes Volae (it's a coined word, like Lexus or Acura) and a brand was born.

Volae now has 11 models, one of which is a tandem. Eight of the other 10 have a somewhat unusual design feature (for a recumbent): a pair of full-size wheels. The model we tested, the Expedition ES, has wide tires (26 x 1 1/4 inches) for touring.

So, in a world that already has some excellent recumbent designs, what does Volae bring to the customer that's so special? Good handling, good workmanship, and an approach to seat design and rider position that some may find irresistible.

Let's talk about that rider position first. First there's the "wedgie" bike, the term recumbent riders have given to traditional bicycles. Then there's the conventional recumbent, in which you're sitting in about the same posture that you would

in an automobile seat. Well, how would you like the option of an even more comfortable position than the conventional recumbent? The Volae gives you



that option (the seat can be adjusted a bit more upright, if you insist), and another \$200 option replaces the conventional sling-style recumbent saddle with a carbon-fiber seat lined with foam. It's sinfully comfortable and it distributes your weight over a broader expanse of your body — almost as evenly as a water bed.

Any recumbent introduces a few paradigm shifts in its rider's expectations, and the Volae has more than a few. For instance, a quick search reveals no water bottle bosses. Wrong for a touring bike? Not at all. The Volae can accept a three-

liter hydration system, neatly attached to the back of the seat. Similarly, the Hostel Shoppe has a huge selection of recumbent-specific racks and bags that wedgie riders won't recognize.

Most recumbent bikes inspire lots of prose about their comfort, ride, and handling, and the Volae Expedition is no exception. This is an excellent handling bike, though its handling comes with a bit of a learning curve. Because of the steeply-reclined rider backrest and high pedal position (the crank spindle is almost six inches higher than the low point of the saddle), you'll probably be overcorrecting a fair amount.

But for the rider who has learned to master this bike — an accomplishment well within the reach of us mere mortals — the Volae handles well and feels dialed in.

How do you get there from here? Practice for a few minutes in a flat place where none of your detractors can point and giggle. Take the time to get acquainted. Your proprioception on this bike is altered, not by the bike's control responses, but by the fact that your body and head are arranged differently on the bike compared with other bikes (including some other recumbents). Once you learn to be at ease with this new position, you'll enjoy the handling and exceptional comfort.

Even a novice can prove to himself that the Volae's handling is entirely benign, and that any trepidation is all in your head. How? Sit upright in the seat,

dangle your feet so they aren't scraping the ground, and coast down a gentle hill (or scooter-kick on the flats). When you do this, the bike's steering and balancing response becomes quite ordinary. Given the bike's 73-degree head-tube angle (just like on your wedgie) and 46 1/4-inch wheelbase (about five inches longer than a wedgie's, but still in the ballpark) this benign handling makes sense.

Now slouch back onto that comfy padded carbon-fiber seat and bravely elevate your feet onto the pedals. The bike hasn't changed any. But you have, and you'll find yourself overcorrecting. Relax. This will pass, and you'll want to put in the time to help it pass. Your reward is a stunningly comfortable ride and very crisp, dialed-in handling. The leaned-back rider position distributes your body weight over more of your back's surface area — a huge comfort advantage, even in the already-comfy world of recumbents. The elevated pedals minimize your frontal area and thereby decrease your wind resistance. Your center of mass is sensibly placed between the two 26-inch wheels.

Adventure Cycling member Daryl Burbank-Schmitt, who has extensive long-distance touring experience with many brands of recumbent, wrote to me last year to tell me he felt the Volae had the best handling at all speeds.

The stuff that bike riders normally obsess over seems less important when

Specifications: Volae Expedition ES

Price: \$1,975. Tested with take-apart frame option (\$650) and carbon-fiber seat (\$200). Price as tested, \$2,825.

Sizes available: small, medium, large, X-large.

TEST BIKE MEASUREMENTS

Weight: 32 pounds

Wheelbase: 46 1/4 inches

Head tube angle: 73 degrees

Seat height above ground: 27 3/4 inches

Crank spindle height above ground: 33 3/8 inches

Frame and fork: Chromoly steel, welded by Waterford Precision Cycle Works. Frame comes apart for transport or storage (the ES option). Threadless headset.

Rims: Velocity Aeroheat, made in Australia, 18-559. Measured rim width, 24.4 mm.

Spokes: 36, 14-gauge, cross-three

Hubs: Velocity with disc brake mount & quick release, front & rear.

Tires: Kenda Kewst, 32-559 (26 x 1.25); measured width, 32.7 mm; 100 psi.

Crank: Truvativ Elite GXP with hollow splined spindle, 170 mm arms, and 30/39/52 chainrings.

Front Derailleur: Sram Microshift.

Rear Derailleur: Sram X-9.

Shift levers: Sram X-9 twist grip.

Cog cassette: SRAM

11-12-14-16-18-21-24-28-32 9-speed.

Chain: SRAM FG

Gearing in inches:

	30	39	52
11	71	92	123
12	65	85	113
14	56	72	97
16	49	63	85
18	43	56	75
21	37	48	64
24	33	42	56
28	28	36	48
32	24	32	42

Seat: Volae carbon fiber with foam padding.

Brakes: Avid BB7 Mtn, cable actuated.

Pedals: Wellgo rattrap.

Bars & Stem: Volae, 54 cm wide.

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the entire bike is so different. But here's a quick rundown. The Avid disc brakes, SRAM drivetrain, Truvativ crankset, and other components all work flawlessly. Other Volae models offer other attributes. There are bikes built for skinny tires only, with rim brakes, with small front wheels, bikes from \$1,650 to \$3,540, and that

cute tandem.

Riders interested in a touring recumbent should call or visit the Hostel Shoppe and give the Volae some thought. It's a very viable choice. **AC**

Technical Editor John Schubert welcomes your rebuttals at schubley@aol.com.

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