

## Road Test: Rivendell's Heron

*Not just a retro-grouch  
fashion statement*

By John Schubert

**O**kay, let's get the giggle factor out of the way first. You drop a major hunk of money — \$1,800 — on a new bike, and show it off to your friends. First, they exclaim, "Those shift levers were made when Richard Nixon was president." Then it's, "Hey,

is typical of many which Rivendell has sold.

The Heron is one exquisitely well-designed expedition touring frame. The components are the best Rivendell's Grant Petersen can find, whether they were made last week or made decades ago. In short, the design is timeless.

You get a gorgeous handbuilt frame from Waterford Precision Cycle Works (whose own expedition touring bike graced these pages in our July 1997 issue). The Heron is not a custom frame, however. If you want dimension changes, you'll have to pay more.

It's tempting to dismiss the Heron as a retro-grouch fashion statement. But that would be incorrect. Everything about this bike is oriented toward function. Because you order the bike with "a la carte" components, you can go "more modern" than our test bike in any one or all of the components. Petersen selected the test bike's components to illustrate his favorite stump speeches about form and function.

Let's talk about that frame first, and then we'll get back to giggling about the components.

First of all, you get the delightfully impractical beauty of a hand-made, silver-brazed, lugged frame. While Petersen is careful not to oversell the workmanship that goes into this particular frame, I'm sure impressed with it. In 1999, \$725 passes for cheap for a handbuilt frame. But Waterford doesn't make



PHOTOS BY KREG D. ULREY



**Most Heron customers equip their bikes with esoteric parts from Rivendell's unique inventory.**

how 'bout those pedals? My first Schwinn Varsity had pedals like that." (No it didn't, but that's another story.)

You don't get index shifting. You don't get whatever new brake design is hot this week. You don't get a saddle with a hole to protect the manufacturer from frivolous impotence lawsuits. Hell, you don't even get front and rear hubs manufactured on the same continent.

Well, this isn't inevitably true. You can get a Heron frameset and put whatever components on it you want. But most customers buy an entire bike from Rivendell, and equip it with their own favorite choices from Rivendell's ever-changing eclectic parts bins. In that sense, our test bike

anything but excellent frames, and whatever shortcuts they may have taken are invisible to me. The frame does not have a clearcoat over the paint, which leaves the decals more fragile and vulnerable, but that's this frame's only cosmetic deviation from perfection.

The frame has the usual bevy of brazed-on bosses. There's no front fork boss for a front rack, because Blackburn and Gordon racks have their bosses in different places, and Petersen didn't want to choose for you which rack to

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use. You can use either rack with a clamped-on fitting.

Meanwhile, living proof that this frame is no mere fashion statement comes from a closer examination of the tubing diameters and other frame dimensions. A long 18-inch chainstay improves the stability, ride and handling when loaded. The frame has a full eight centimeters of drop, which, combined with the 700x35C tires on our test bike, results in a bottom bracket height of 10 3/4 inches. (Smaller tires will give you a lower bottom bracket height.) By avoiding the mountain-bike-like higher bottom brackets, Petersen gives the Heron a lower center of gravity and better handling. What little you give up is the ability to pedal around sharp turns, but I never much liked doing that anyway. The frame has more than ample clearance for the 35C tires, and fenders.

The tubing is robust. At 4 pounds, 14.6 ounces, the Heron frame is about a half-pound heavier than most of the classic steel touring frames in the same size. Much of the extra weight appears to go to double-butted top- and down-tubes. As has become practice in today's frames, these tubes have outside diameters 1/8-inch greater than tubes of old at 1 1/8 inches and 1 1/4 inches respectively. In the Heron's case, this is coupled with no-nonsense wall thicknesses of 0.9/0.6/0.9 mm in the down tube and 0.8/0.5/0.8 mm in the top tube. The 1 1/8-inch seat tube is single-butted at 0.8/0.6 mm. The fork blades are 1.0 mm, and the rear stays are 0.8 mm.

What this means to you, the customer, is a frame rigid enough to be unlikely to shimmy, even under the duress of heavy loads and steep descents.

The dropouts were made for the Heron by Italy's Technocycle, the company that makes Campagnolo's dropouts. The fork crown and lugs are made by Taiwan's Long Shen and Everest, who have emerged as two of the world's premier lug makers.

Petersen has long been urging his customers to raise their handlebar stems for a comfortable riding position. What point is there in having dropped handlebars if you can't reach the drops? To that end, the Heron's top tube rises at a two-degree angle from seat lug to head lug. This gains two centimeters of handlebar height. The head lug sticks up a centimeter above the top tube, and the fork's steerer tube has an extra centimeter beyond that. (The extra space on the fork is taken up by spacer washers.)

The result is visually subtle — I didn't even believe the part about the two degrees

■ **Price as shown:** \$1800. Frame-set price, \$725. Prices may vary. All components custom-ordered.

■ **Sizes available:** 53 to 63 cm in odd-cm increments, measured center to top. 53 cm uses 26-inch wheels.

■ **Size tested:** 55 cm

■ **Frame dimensions:**

Seat tube: 55 cm, or 21 3/4 inches (measured center to top)

- Top tube: 22 x 1 1/8
- Head angle: 72
- Seat angle: 73
- Chainstays: 18
- BB height: 10 3/4
- Front center: 23 1/2
- Fork rake: 1 3/4
- Trail: 2 5/8
- Wheelbase: 41
- Standover height: 31 3/4

■ **Frame & fork:** Handbuilt by Waterford Precision Cycle Works, Waterford, Wisconsin. Oversize Reynolds 531 double-butted tubing throughout; lugged & brazed construction; 1 1/8-inch top tube & seat tube diameter; 1 1/4-inch down tube diameter. Threaded bosses for

three water bottles. Bosses for cantilever brakes front and rear. Dual sets of dropout eyelets front and rear for racks and fenders; threaded rear rack bosses; holes for fender mounts in seatstay bridge and fork crown. Slotted top tube bosses for rear brake and slotted chainstay boss for rear derailleur cable. Horizontal rear dropouts. Tange Falcon Professional FL 500 headset with roller bearings at the top and ball bearings at the bottom. Round 24 mm diameter fork blades; flat fork crown. Bare frame weight, 4 pounds, 14.6 ounces. Fork weight, one pound, 10.4 ounces.

■ **Rims:** Ritchey Design Rock 450CE 700C, 21.6 mm cross section.

■ **Spokes:** 36, 14 gauge cross-three front and rear.

■ **Hubs:** Phil Wood cartridge bearing sealed large barrel rear, Shimano Deore DX front.

■ **Tires:** Panaracer Pasela; 700 x 35C(37-622), 75 PSI. Raised center ridge with siping for water runoff; sidewall generator strip. Measured width, 31.1 mm.

■ **Crank:** Ritchey Logic 170 mm with 24/36/46 Sugino Super Shifter Team Pro notched chainrings and Ritchey Logic sealed cone-and-cup crank spindle.

■ **Front Derailleur:** SunTour Alpha 5000

■ **Rear Derailleur:** Sachs Centera, 40T wrap capacity

■ **Shift levers:** SunTour Bar-end ratchet friction style

■ **Freewheel:** Sachs/Maillard 13-15-17-21-26-32

■ **Chain:** Sachs PC 51 with master link

■ **Gearing in inches:**

\*\* 24 36 46  
13 50 75 96  
15 43 65 83  
17 38 57 73  
21 31 46 59  
26 25 37 48  
32 20 30 39

■ **Saddle:** Brooks B-17 Champion Special with titanium rails.

■ **Seatpost:** Nitto/Specialized; two-bolt micro-adjust saddle clamp; 330 mm long, 27.2 mm diameter

■ **Brakes:** Dia Compe 987 cantilever with Cannondale CODA brake pads; SunTour Cyclone non-aerodynamic hand levers. Selcof straddle wire guard.

■ **Pedals:** MKS Touring ("rat-trap" style) with ALE steel toe clips and ALE Allara leather/nylon straps.

■ **Handlebars:** Nitto 40 cm wide MAES bend with aluminum 100 mm stem.

■ **Sold by:** Rivendell Bicycle Works, 1561-B 3d Ave., Walnut Creek, CA 94596, phone 925/933-7304; fax 933-7305; e-mail [rivgp@earthlink.net](mailto:rivgp@earthlink.net); <http://www.rivendellbicycles.com>. (They can't answer all E-mails, due to the volume received. Phone or fax is preferred.)



until I measured it with a tape measure. But it raises the bars to a comfortable height. The test bike photographed is set up for me (55 cm frame size, 28 1/2-inch seat-to-crank-spindle distance) and the handlebars are much more accessible than they are on my own bikes with their level top tubes.

Time to revisit the giggle factor: Once again, you can equip your Heron any way you want, but I have to admit, this one was a conversation piece.

The component that made me roll my eyes was the Brooks B-17 saddle. Now I have nothing against leather saddles — you'll find four of them in my personal fleet — but this one came with titanium rails. To

my mind, that's an expensive way to buy a saddle. To a true Brooks fan, it's, well, ultimate class — the luxury of leather combined with 82 grams of weight savings. The upcharge for the titanium is \$62.

Whether you get steel or titanium rails, you get a special version of the B-17 made for Rivendell. The leather is thicker, the huge copper rivets at the back are cute, and the lower edge is skived. It's nicely done.

Our test bike came with a six-cog freewheel and good gearing, ranging from a stump-pulling 20-inch low gear to a 96-inch high gear. This is a very sensible range. 20 inches is very low, allowing you to slowly proceed up a steep hill when you're tired.

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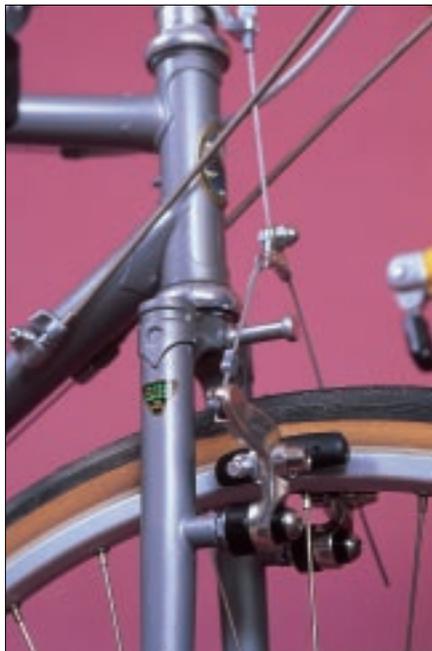


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Ninety-six inches, while lower than the top gears on most bikes, is sensible for touring. At a cadence of 90, it gets you 25 mph, which, I submit, is faster than almost anyone can cruise on a touring bike.

Most Rivendell Herons go out the door with six-cog half-step gearing. If you're not familiar with half-step, it's like this: Your rear cogs are spaced evenly — say, 20 percent apart from one another. A good example would be 13-15-18-21-25-32. Your two larger front chainwheels are close together — usually five teeth and 10 percent apart, like 47/52, with a teeny "granny" chainring of somewhere around 26 or 28 teeth. You stay on the top two chainwheels for most riding. A front shift is half the change of a rear shift, hence the name "half step." This allows you to pick the exact gear you want, at pain of sometimes having to shift both derailleurs to get it. Actually, our test bike didn't have half-step, but since I'm a half-step fan, I'm glad Rivendell is making it available.

Some components come and go in



Rivendell's inventory. The SunTour Bar-Con shift levers on our test bike are now out of stock, but Petersen has another bar-end lever he likes more now — he makes it himself by combining SunTour and Shimano parts. The Ritchey Logic cranks are gone too, but they've been replaced by — are you sitting down? — a new model of crankset from France's T.A. The new T.A. Zephyr crank continues T.A.'s tradition of versatility (it mates with other manufacturers' standard bolt circles) and tour-friendly design (you can choose granny chainwheels down to 20 teeth).

I vastly prefer old-fashioned non-aerodynamic brake levers. It's easier to disconnect the cables for servicing or transport, and the levers themselves seem to work better. Levers like this are hard to find, but Petersen keeps a supply on-hand for guys like me, and two are on our test bike.

You might have noticed that the test Heron has a Shimano front hub and a Phil Wood rear hub. The reason: Rear hubs take a much harder beating. The Phil hub is more expensive and more durable. The front hub is strong enough for the job, and more economical. Logical? Yes. Something Cannondale would spec on one of their bikes? Not bloody likely.

And there's more: the cotton-cloth handlebar tape, the Dia Compe cantilever brakes, the any-shoe-friendly MKS "rattrap" style pedals with Italian leather toe straps, the old-fashioned MAES-bend handlebars (no "anatomic" shape to confuse my elderly

hands!) ... truly, the Heron has everything I liked about bike equipment over the decades. The lack of razzle-dazzle is refreshing, as is the hard-nosed dedication to function.

Many of the components Rivendell has in stock are available in quantities too small to put in the catalog, or on the web site. So if you want to make an eclectic fashion



statement, do ask. You just might get to order your Heron with a Huret Duopar or a long-cage Simplex, for example.

All this talk about fashion, function, and the benefits of the retro-grouch lifestyle belie the critical question: how does this bike ride? The answer surprised me: Despite its pack-mule capability, the Heron feels very lithe underneath. It's an able companion for sharp corners and aggressive sprinting (if that's your bag), but it has the rigidity and dimensions to handle luggage well.

In an era when touring bike designs are so often compromised to go along with current fashion (borrowed from the irrelevant worlds of road racing and mountain bike racing) and component availability, the Heron is uncompromising. That is a statement of timeless elegance. ●

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*The elegant and timeless John Schubert has been Adventure Cyclist's technical editor nearly long enough to make him "retro."*