



Baltic gravel

From mass production Colnagos to Lithuanian-made custom, Wittson Cycles explains why titanium is very much alive

Words JAMES SPENDER Photography MIKE MASSARO

In the modern era relatively few bikes bear the name of their actual maker, but for a long time Ernesto Colnago's were at least some where the signature matched the handiwork. But then came exotic materials and the shift of production to Asia, spelling an end to the Italian tinkerer's hands-on approach.

However in 1994, before the exodus to Chinese factories, Ernesto made a brief sojourn to Russia. He went to see a gentleman named Vidmantas Zukauskas, or Vitas to his friends. An ex-professional, ex-Lithuanian national coach and now paid-up framebuilder, Vitas was in his own words 'a bridge between the West and the East' for the most exotic material of all: titanium.

It made sense. Russia had the mills for making raw tubing and the expertise for working with it. Huge Soviet investment in the military sector had led to Russian fabricators being adept at dealing with the super-hard, super-light metal. Vitas capitalised on this fact and set up business in Nizhny Novgorod, where

a world-renowned titanium welding school had sprung up in the midst of the Cold War project to build Alfa-class submarines with titanium hulls.

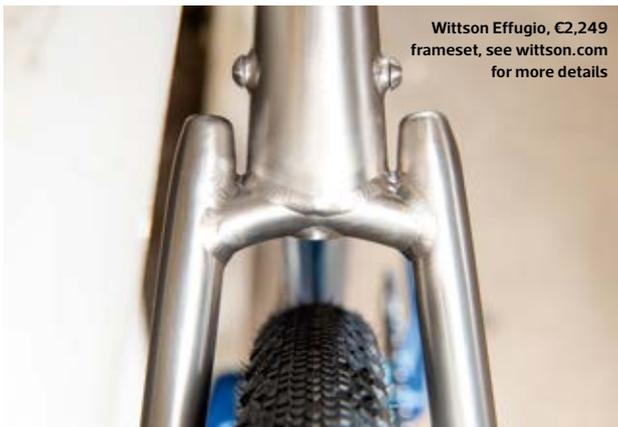
In a few years, Vitas and his new contract framebuilding company was turning out 5,000 Colnago-branded titanium bikes per year. Yet such heady days couldn't last forever. Carbon fibre was waiting in the wings and Colnago took its cue and moved the bulk of its operation to Asia. Vitas had to reinvent himself, and so moved his business back home to Lithuania, drafted in his sons, and Wittson was born.

Like father, like sons

Vitas still works at his company, but it's sons Mindaugas and Gintaras that *Cyclist* meets. The brothers are part-way through a tour of bike shows that have seen them in Australia over the past few weeks and now in Bristol for Bespoked: The UK Handmade Bicycle Show. Their father, apparently, has to stay home to run the workshop and oversee a team of six fabricators – a large number for an independent

Brothers Mindaugas and Gintaras Zukauskas followed in their father's footsteps to become innovative bike builders. 'You can do anodising in a lot of ways, even using Coke,' says Mindaugas





Wittson Effugio, C2,249 frameset, see wittson.com for more details

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◊ builder, albeit one that builds 70 frames a year and growing (a one-man band would see 15 as good going).

One of the bikes the brothers are exhibiting is this, the Effugio. Bedecked in blue anodised cranks from Italian company Ingrid, hubs from Chris King and custom-anodised logos that Mindaugas has perfected himself ('You can do anodising in a lot of ways, even using Coke'), the Effugio is a real head-turner. But there's a lot more to this bike than twinkles in the eye. Its secret is its versatility.

'We designed this bike around 40mm tyres,' says Mindaugas. 'But from there we wanted the Effugio to be compatible with whatever people wanted to build it with. So the Rocker dropouts, from Paragon Machine Works, have interchangeable inserts to run the bike as single speed, or with Rohloff or Shimano Alfine [internal geared hubs], and as a belt drive – there is a splitter on the right chainstay to insert a belt. It can be 2x12 or 1x, and you can fit any fork you like as the head tube is straight, accommodating up to 1.5in bearings.'

Key to this design is the CNC'd yolk behind the bottom bracket, which allows the chainstays to flare drastically over a short distance to accommodate a normal road chainset without the chainrings fouling the stay, compromising tyre clearance or creating an overly long rear end. Yet as functional as the Effugio is, Wittson hasn't shied away from some

aesthetic flourishes, even if one or two ideas had to be reined in.

'The top of the seatstays takes a lot of welding work,' says Mindaugas. 'The shape helps to gain maximum tyre clearance as the stays sit further away from the tyre than they would if they triangulated at the top of the seat tube in the traditional way – but I also liked the look.' To which brother Gintaras chimes in, 'He wanted them to be like bullets, real sharp ones! But then we thought, well, maybe if you crash...'

And it's the crashing – or at least the thrashing element of gravel riding – that the brothers think might return titanium to a more mainstream pedestal.

'Titanium is just such a good material for gravel,' says Gintaras. 'The one thing every framebuilder looks for, and this is in any material, is for it to be comfortable when riding in the saddle and stiff when you're riding out of it. Titanium has those two qualities in one, without experimenting with things like layup [of carbon fibre sheets]. With carbon you either have a stiff frame or a flexible frame. It's very hard to blend the two. Titanium is there already.'

'Titanium is forgiving to ride, forgiving when you crash – it won't dent easily like aluminium [where tube walls are thin to save weight] or flex as much as steel [where the tube diameters are narrower, again for weight savings]. This makes titanium the perfect material for a bike. Gravel especially.' 🌸

