

AN AMERICAN IN ITALY

While traipsing through the aisles of the Milano bike show we were surprised to find more than a few booths showing off titanium frames. Among those on display, the Crisp bike really stood out for the exquisite finish work. To our surprise, Crisp Titanium is run by an American, Darren Mark Crisp, who moved to Italy to pursue his dream of becoming a custom frame builder.

RBA: Darren, can you give us some background on your cycling?

Darren: My first bike was an AMF Roadmaster, red and yellow with the classic banana seat. I loved this bike, but soon looked for ways to modify it to meet my needs, which at the time were mostly making ramps and jumping large objects in the back yard! I loved tinkering and tried to make my AMF look as much like the high-zoot Schwinn Scramblers that all my friends had at the time. Eventually I moved to Europe and got heavily into racing on the road and in the woods. When I built my first (lugged steel) frame, I was working for a blacksmith in Mississippi. There were no bike stores that carried a bike that even came close to fitting me. It was during that time that I realized that there must be lots of people in my situation, and began to imagine what the process for others was like and if they had to sacrifice good fit to have a decent bike. That sentiment developed and over time led me to research bicycle frame building, which quickly became a hobby and a passion.

RBA: Could you describe your operation in Italy?

Darren: It's pretty simple; I am behind all aspects of Crisp Titanium. The process starts with dialogue from the cyclist, usually via e-mail or telephone. I also answer about a hundred e-mails that arrive weekly regarding my frames and titanium in general.

I have a titanium-specific studio that I developed to build custom

bicycle frames. My working space is very small, but I don't need a big warehouse, as most of the titanium is ordered on a weekly basis. I use Paragon Machine Works titanium frame parts on almost all my frames, as they are by far the best. I also have CNC milling equipment for cutting the tubes to precision dimensions, which insures great tube miter fits with no gaps. Additionally, I use an ultrasonic cleaner for the tubes and have precision instruments and alignment tables for checking that everything lines up straight.

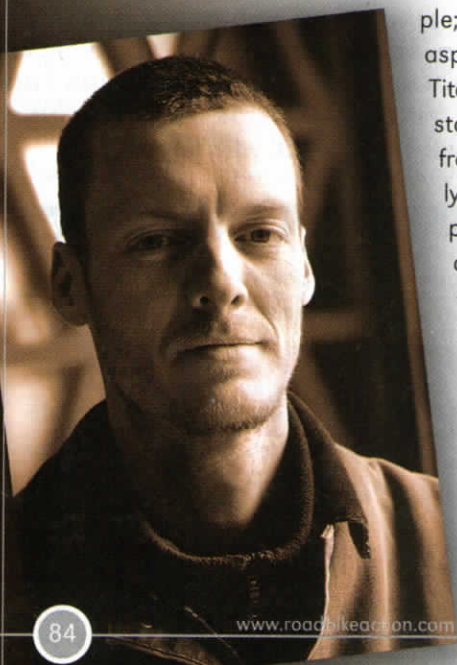
RBA: So what got you to Italy?

Darren: I studied architecture back in 1990 in Castiglion Fiorentino. It is a wonderful place to live and is very conducive to creativity. The first time I came here, I knew immediately that there was something here to "discover" about this ancient and mysterious place. Medieval walled towns, Etruscan ruins...and great food and obviously great cycling. Coming from the Texas plains, the hills of this region were a welcome change and offered me new places to explore on my bike. Using my architecture degree to the max, I washed dishes in the local school for almost two years to provide me with the opportunity to learn the language and to race throughout the country.

In 1997 I started to work for a private company in Milano that builds exclusive high-end retail fashion stores (and using all their expensive tooling to build my frames at night). Prada and Dolce & Gabbana were our main clients, but we also collaborated with Gucci, Calvin Klein, etc. I think my take on bicycle design could only be influenced by the design work that I did while working with these folks. Clean lines, no frills, form follows function, high-tech and the desire to build a better product; I still maintain those characteristics with my bikes. Building high-volume, low-cost products was never a method we employed.

RBA: What is your "design philosophy" for building bikes?

Darren: First and foremost is simplicity. I began working on titanium finishing before my frame-building career started. I don't particularly think that flashy colors and stickers complement a well-built frame; a Bauhaus kind of thing. I spend a lot of time on the finishing of a frame and I think this is really where a CRISP custom titanium frame reveals its value. A hand-stained finish, at least for me, is the best possible finish for titanium. I couldn't justify selling a Ti frame with a wire-wheel finish as most people are used to seeing in titanium. It takes time, but that's why I only produce




about 40 frames a year. I began working on personalization of bicycles and developing methods of permanently engraving tube sets back before 2000. Since then, many of my European competitors have adopted similar methods.

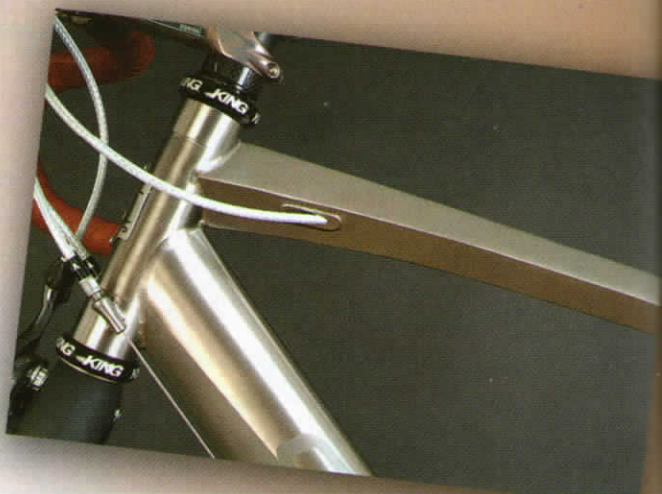
There is no specific method for my builds because each client has a different story, a different cultural experience, and a different expectation of their frame. It is my job to gather all this information and integrate it with an object that will be functional as well as encompassing all of the desires of the cyclist. I even have customers ask me to play certain music while welding their frame so the frame will be "aligned" with their philosophy. During the construction, I send photos of the building process so they can participate in the experience, and in the end they get a CD of the complete build (usually 50-plus photos).

RBA: *Is titanium the only material you work with?*

Darren: Yes. I started building bicycle frames in 1995, using True Temper steel and Henry James lugs for the majority of my work. With the passing of time, I had the possibility to upgrade my tooling and try new materials like aluminum and scandium. In 2001, I had the opportunity to attend the United Bicycle Institute to study titanium frame design.

My decision to work exclusively with titanium is strongly based on my experience in the metals industry. One could spend lifetimes learning about the different materials that are used to build bicycles. I chose titanium because of my direct working experience, along with the magnificent ride qualities of the material which I find superb for building the best cycle frames: corrosion-resistance, supple ride, light weight, and the mechanical strength needed to build a frame for a lifetime.

For more info: www.crisptitanium.com 



Lighter: Only 195 g. Ultra-light, but at the same time safer and more hard wearing. **Faster:** Triple Compound. Combination of three rubber mixtures – fast, grippy, durable. **Tougher:** HD-V Guard. Patented puncture protection using a high density vectran fabric. Maximum safety. www.schwalbetires.com