THE SPEC
Model Mason Aspect **Groupset** Shimano Ultegra Di2 **Wheels** Hunt 30 Carbon Gravel Disc **Finishing kit** Dedacciai Zero100 handlebars, Dedacciai Zero100 stem, Mason Penta UD carbon seatpost, Fabric Scoop Ultimate saddle, Schwalbe G-One Speed 700x30mm tyres **Weight** 8.36kg (size 54cm) **Price** £3,450 frameset inc seatpost, £6,665 as tested **Contact** masoncycles.cc

Mason Aspect

Sussex-designed Mason shows titanium is not just for cruising

Words ***STU BOWERS***

A converted barn in a tranquil corner of Sussex is where all Mason bikes are conceived and designed. And I suspect it is very similar in feel to the workshop in Tuscany where the Aspect is actually made.

Mason Cycles founder Dom Mason is a self-confessed obsessive when it comes to details, and as we sit chatting in his office overlooking the South Downs, he recounts his long search for the right partner for this project.

'Ever since I launched the brand I've wanted to make a titanium road bike to take advantage of the material's properties and show how well we could do it,' says Mason. 'But some of the details I designed into the Aspect required really intricate welds, and titanium is a very tricky metal to work with. It took a long time, more than two years, and many tries but I had to keep looking until I was completely satisfied. I eventually found this place in Tuscany. They can only make very small volumes but they had the skills to create the Aspect frame, so that's where it's made.'

Because the frame is titanium, the quality of the welds are laid bare for all to see. Nothing is hidden by filler or paint, and few could argue that Mason's global search for the appropriate welding expertise has been well worth the effort.

The Aspect's build quality is exquisite, as is the way the graphics and logos are mirror-polished

FINISH
The Aspect frame is micro-bead blasted to give a classic-looking but also incredibly durable finish. There's no hiding behind paint, so all the Aspect's exquisite details and welds are laid bare for everyone to see.

DROPOUTS
The 3D-printed titanium dropouts from Reynolds are hollow but for an intricate web of strengthening gussets. It's a shame they're not visible, but Mason says their stiffness bears out in the ride quality.

into the micro-bead-blasted titanium. The 3AL-2.5V titanium tubeset itself is born out of collaboration with Italian *metalissimo* Dedacciai, but there's a nice little British contribution too. The 3D-printed titanium dropouts are from Reynolds, which Mason tells me are a bigger part of the overall success of the frame than meets the eye.

'At the time we started working with Reynolds on the 3D-printed dropouts no one else was really using them,' he says. 'We've been through about five iterations now. They add a fair bit of expense versus standard CNC'd dropouts, but they really are worth it. A fair amount of the Aspect's ride quality is attributable to the dropouts as 3D printing means they are super-accurate and very stiff.

'It's what you can't see that is most impressive,' he adds. 'Internally there's an elaborate web of gussets for strength. 3D printing also meant we could easily accommodate things like routing for Di2 cabling, plus discreetly build in threads for rack mounts and mudguards too.'

I can't single out the contribution of the dropouts in the ride feel, but what I can say with certainty is the Aspect is very easy to like and very hard to fault.

Long or short haul

The first thing that struck me about the Aspect was just how silky the ride feel is. It deals with creased and pitted road surfaces beautifully. Cattle grids (of which there are many where I ride) provide a good insight into how well a bike dissipates vibrations, and the sensation I got on the Aspect was more 'gently strummed ukulele' than 'fully cranked electric guitar'.

On one particular occasion I hit a big pothole submerged beneath a puddle, and the impact was sufficient to move the bars in the stem, yet I never felt too much jarring through my hands. Granted, the bike was fitted with 30mm tyres, which I only inflated to around 75psi. That contributed to the smoothness, but equally I've ridden plenty of other bikes with similarly wide tyre/low pressure combos that were nowhere near as smooth.

What's more, the Aspect will comfortably accept a 35mm tyre, so I was testing it far from its potential comfort limits.

Mason is clear that he doesn't consider this to be a race bike, and that I shouldn't expect it to ride as such. And I agree – it lacks the super-snappy feel expected of a thoroughbred racer – yet it also proved to be more adept than he gave it credit for.

For most of the time I've been testing the Aspect the weather has been fairly grim (it has been the wettest autumn since records began, apparently). This meant long and leisurely miles – the kind of ride where this bike would be best suited – were out, and I found myself favouring shorter, harder rides so I could get back home to a hot shower and a cuppa that bit sooner. But, as a result, something about the Aspect surprised me.

Despite geometry that caters for the long haul, the Aspect was racier than it looks and faster than I expected

After several blasts around one of my shorter test loops – a circuit of just over 40km with a good mix of flat, often windswept sectors, plus a couple of testing climbs, one very fast descent and what I call the roller-coaster section – I was surprised by my times. They were only a few minutes off some of my best efforts set on far lighter and significantly more aero carbon race rigs.

While I appreciate this isn't concrete evidence, given the potential variables of outdoor riding, I'd like to think I've ridden the route enough to be able to allow for that. So, despite geometry that caters more for the long haul – 425mm chainstays, 1,015mm wheelbase and a generous 170mm head tube – the Aspect turned out to be racier than it looks and was certainly faster than I expected.

Further to that, I also ventured well and truly off the beaten path on the Aspect on occasions, and even the odd boggy forest trail was dealt with relatively adeptly. With mudguards it would make the perfect winter do-it-all bike, but I think titanium bikes must get bored of being branded with that label, so I'll just say that it has a really broad appeal.

Take it personally

Each Aspect is welded to order, which means small personal tweaks can be made to the frame details, and possibly geometry adjustments too, although Mason is less keen to make these without very good reason because they could potentially compromise the ride feel he set out to create.

I ask him if it would be possible internalise the routing of the rear brake hose, as I wasn't keen on it being zip-tied to the top of the chainstay. The answer is no, though with good justification.

'It's just not practical,' Mason says. 'It would require a much larger bottom bracket shell to be machined at a significantly greater cost and with much more waste from the billet, just to route the hose through there. Plus, if you don't have to make holes in things then why would you? This way I didn't have to compromise high-stress areas of the chainstays.' Can't argue with that.

In truth, titanium has never been my first choice for a road bike. I understand its appeal, but I've never really clicked with it. The Aspect has gone a long way to making me rethink that. It's silky smooth, the handling is spot-on and despite being a trifle portly at 8.36kg it delivers an engaging and lively ride feel.