

bike, showing no discernably bad traits. Straight-line stability, response up hills and sprinting feel are all taken in its stride. The 73 degree parallel frame angles are a very safe bet for this size frame and do, quite rightly, herald from the World Bike Builder's Bible, which De Rosa probably had a hand in writing. Ride comfort was also high – no doubt due to the relatively few spokes in the Campagnolo wheels.

If you are looking for a compact then the De Rosa sizing may work out well if you have previously fallen way between sizes in other brands. The top tubes are all correspondingly shorter, than Giant's TCR for instance, with a 52cm (S), 54.5cm (M) and 56cm (L) reach. The standard – non compact range stretches from a 52cm reach to a lengthy 59cm in an unbelievable 14 frame sizes (1cm increments: 48-61cm). The handlebar stems are also available in one centimetre increments from 9 to 14cms.

The Simoncini has a beautifully neutral feel to it, despite the seemingly steep head angle – just goes to show that 700C wheels produce a muted reaction to subtle changes of frame geometry. As recently debated, it is very difficult to say that the carbon rear end does anything other than save a few grams. Certainly, it was no less comfortable than a full steel frame but as to whether it took any road shock out...

Having more-or-less standard geometry, with very little discernable slope, the Simoncini felt less rigid than a tight steel compact. This manifested itself in slightly more comfort and a little more head shake over bumps. The tall head tube meant that the bars were at a comfortable height for day rides and for

using the drops. Basically the bars were where they are meant to be as opposed to being too low, which is typical of many set-ups. It's worth mentioning that Simoncini will custom-make your frame for you if you have any specific requirements.

WHEELS

BIANCHI 7 DE ROSA 8 SIMONCINI 8
Blanchi use Ambrosio wheels with 28 spokes front and rear. These wheels would be ideal for general training/commuting or for a large, powerful rider. An all-up weight of over three kilos does little for acceleration but these wheels should stay true for a long time due to their solid build. An upgrade to a pair of Campagnolo Ventos (£150) or Sciroccos (£200) would be a good move for an aspiring racer wishing to save some weight for hilly courses. The Bianchi uses Vittoria Rubino tyres, which are ideal for this type of entry-level/training bike. There's a puncture-resisting breaker ply and Kevlar strands are mixed into the top tread for additional puncture resistance without the rigidity of a Kevlar belt.

The De Rosa's wheels are from Campagnolo's medium profile range, having a semi-aero (30mm) section rim. The Zonda's oversize alloy hubs and alloy axles are state-of-the-art, originate from Record quality design and come with the associated smoothness and ease of adjustment you'd expect, along with straight-pull spokes, only 16 in the front wheel with seven triple-grouped clusters in the rear. Our test bike's front wheel retained the radial spoking from 2003 while 2004 designs now use

grouped spokes similar to the rear pattern. In use the wheels felt stiff with good power transfer, the only annoying thing was a catching rim joint on the rear, which ticked on braking. Nothing that five minute with an emery board wouldn't cure, though. The Michelin Megamium tyres are really aimed at training but performed well enough for racing, especially on rough roads. The Megamium has a bead-to-bead puncture protection and overlapped plies below the main tread to aid reliability.

The Mavic Ksyrium Elite wheels on the Simoncini are a perfect match for this mid to top-end bike. While not being quite as light as the alloy spoked Ksyrium SLs, the Elites are much more comfortable and would be my choice over the SLs for all but short and fast crits. The Elites' flat steel spokes are very durable but still afford a conventional degree of comfort. The Michelin Pro Race tyres are grippy and comfortable and roll pretty much as well as the rest of the bunch. Being a Kevlar-beaded folder these tyres are lightweight and can be packed down for ease of carrying a spare for training camps etc.

EQUIPMENT

BIANCHI 6 DE ROSA 8 SIMONCINI 7
The Bianchi has an equipment array that is well matched to its price tag. The Mirage groupset uses Campag's nine-speed set up which is noticeably more clunky than the 10-speeders used on Campag's four more expensive gruppis. That doesn't mean, however, that this bike has a poor gear change: all upshifts occurred before the lever click announced the move whilst speed-increasing downshifts were only a thumb stab away. The only real gripe is to question Bianchi's wisdom on using a branded-up set of generic brake callipers that just aren't up to today's standards. Pulling the levers back to the bars isn't enough to stop quickly due to flex and prolonged hill braking produces the kind of graunching associated with riding an Mtb through a gritty quarry.

Our advice is to upgrade the brakes to Veloce before you take the bike out of the shop. Apart from the brakes the Bianchi has an impressive finishing kit: the ITM Oversize bars and Bianchi stem are very stiff and strong and the branded saddle and seat post blend in well with the bike's cool looks. It also comes with VP's Look-compatible R70 pedals.

The De Rosa has the smoothest-looking equipment spec, using Campag's solid Veloce kit and a mixture of colour-coded Deda and own-branded items. The headset is a Campag Record Internal. The De Rosa bar tape and blue Poggio saddle complete the picture with the saddle's mesh top and urethane gel padding coping well with lumpy country lanes. The Deda Magic bars felt a little narrow at 41cms so check to see if De Rosa varies the bar width per frame size band if you have particular needs. Either way, the Deda bars feel very stiff with no discernable

SIMONCINI CORSA-STRADA £2200

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AT A GLANCE:

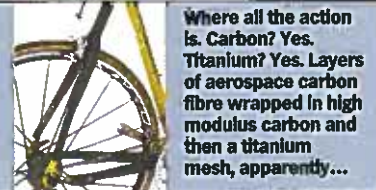
- FRAME: BIANCHI 8 DE ROSA 8 9
- HANDLING: BIANCHI 9 DE ROSA 9 9
- EQUIPMENT: BIANCHI 6 DE ROSA 8 7
- WHEELS: BIANCHI 7 DE ROSA 8 8



As befits the price, the Simoncini boasted the best wheels on test – Mavic's Ksyrium Elites



It's not all Italian. The Japanese company Mizuno provide the forks, which are a lightweight 431g



Where all the action is. Carbon? Yes. Titanium? Yes. Layers of aerospace carbon fibre wrapped in high modulus carbon and then a titanium mesh, apparently...

