



CARBON VS TITANIUM

Although you can spend an awful lot more on a tri bike, there are some fantastic rides available around the £3k mark. Most will be carbon but, at this price, titanium is a genuine option. **Nik Cook** puts two head-to-head... →



VANNICHOLAS
BLAZE
ON TEST



PLANETX
EXOCET2

© JONNY GAWLER



Supremely comfortable, the Van Nicholas waves the titanium flag with pride

VAN NICHOLAS BLAZE

£3,400.00 www.vannicholas.com

Titanium bikes are viewed with scepticism by many cyclists and triathletes. Can this one prove the doubters wrong?

With 10 years of experience crafting bikes and building exclusively in titanium, Dutch company Van Nicholas are among the undisputed masters of the material. Every bike ordered is hand built in their factory in the Netherlands to your custom specifications and, if you want the ultimate bespoke bike, they'll even custom-build the frame.

THE BUILD

With minimal decals and a bare brushed titanium finish, there's a simple elegance to the Van Nicholas. Where it counts – on

the downtube, seat tube and seat stays – there's subtle aero profiling and the obligatory rear wheel cutaway. The welding is beautiful and, without wanting to come across too geeky, the rear hanger is a pure work of art.

Realising that there's no point having a great frame without matching wheels, Van Nicholas haven't pulled any punches and have turned to fellow Dutch manufacturer, Fast Forward. Retailing at £1,300, weighing a svelte 1,350g with 60mm rims and DT Swiss 240 hubs, the Fast Forward F6R carbon tubulars are a genuine race-ready wheelset. The Easton EC90 Aero forks finish off the heart of the build.

A full Shimano Ultegra groupset, except the Dura-Ace shifters, is certainly no disappointment and we'd certainly always prefer to see spec drop a level on groupset in return for top-end wheels. The cockpit is a Syntace affair that combines the mean-looking CX carbon base bar with the super-comfortable C3 extensions (which won our aerobars groupset last issue). Van Nicholas supply their own leather and titanium-railed saddle, seatpost and carbon brake levers that finish off an impressive 7.86kg build.

THE RIDE

Right from the first few pedal strokes, there's no sign of the twitchiness or handling quirks that you sometimes get with tri bikes. The Van Nicholas instantly makes you feel both comfortable and confident. Rolling round the first few bends, the steering is precise and, up on the bullhorns, almost like a road bike.

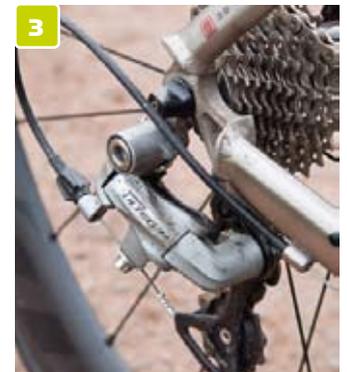
On the open road and settling down on the aerobars, the position

feels fast and, crucially for long-course racing, comfortable and sustainable. This is certainly helped by the Syntace extensions. Following this ride and having won that aerobars groupset, we're converted to the Syntace cause.

There's none of the sloppiness that's sometimes used as a criticism of titanium bikes and we couldn't get any noticeable flex out of it. What you do get in abundance is a sense of life from the frame that can only be described as 'zing'. It feels as though it's working with you to go faster. Whether hammering on the flat, powering over rollers or slogging up a climb, it just keeps on giving. It climbs amazingly well for a triathlon bike and, rather than dreading those inclines, you actually find yourself seeking them out on your training rides just to attack them.

Predictably, the Ultegra groupset delivers crisp shifts and the brakes allow you to appreciate the bike's fantastic downhill handling while remaining in control. Obviously the quality wheels help the cause, but they're merely the cherry on the top of an already mighty fine cake.

“WHETHER HAMMERING ON THE FLAT, POWERING OVER ROLLERS OR SLOGGING UP A CLIMB, THE VAN NICHOLAS JUST KEEPS ON GIVING”



1 Van Nicholas has sought a pair of rapid race wheels from fellow Dutch manufacturer, Fast Forward
2 Winners of our aerobars groupset last issue, the Syntace C3 helped us into a comfortable aero position
3 10-speed reliability: Shimano Ultegra provided its usual crisp and reliable shifts

VERDICT	
HANDLING Climbs and corners like a road bike, but still delivers speed on the flat	95%
SPEC Ultegra does a decent job but the frame and the wheels make the bike	87%
VALUE Titanium is genuinely a bike for life and you can't put a value on that	90%
COMFORT The comfiest tri bike we've ever tested	99%

220 Triathlon **93%**

TRI BIKE TEST

OVERALL VERDICT

The **Exocet 2** is a fantastic bike, an improvement on its all-conquering predecessor and almost impossible to fault in terms of value and performance. If you've got a strict sub £3K budget, it's a no-brainer – and there are even better bargains with slightly lower spec such as the £2,299.99 SRAM Force-equipped model. You'll see a lot of these bikes around and a lot of races won on them.

You probably won't see a lot of Blazes on your patch and that's one of the factors that makes it so special. Titanium can make an exceptional bike and, by leaving the carbon crowd behind, you can own something unique and lasting. It's obvious from its frame, wheels and whole spec that this bike comes from a company that understands bikes.

If you're a long-course racer or relish the challenge of hilly courses, you should seriously consider this bike.

On our test loop, the two bikes are neck and neck. The Exocet is faster on the flat, but the Blaze gets that time back climbing. On multiple laps, though, the Blaze pulls away. You can stay aero longer, the ride is less draining and climbing gains are multiplied. It's always a good sign when we take a bike out to just ride for fun and, on every occasion, that bike was the Blaze.

So the obvious question is this: why aren't all pro riders on titanium bikes? The answer is that companies like Van Nicholas are comparatively small and can't afford the sponsorship to get their bikes under the world's most famous riders. **220**

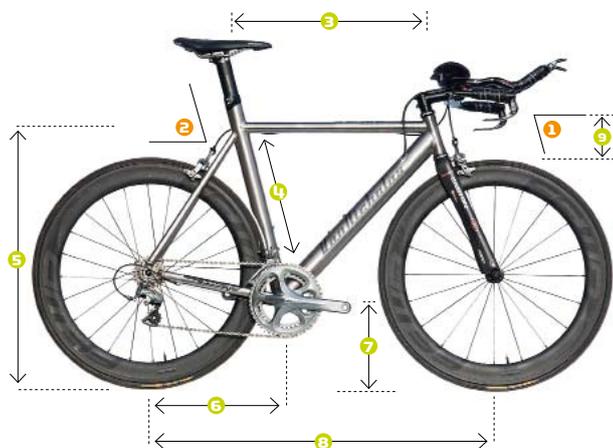


The Van Nicholas is slightly slower on the flat, but climbs brilliantly to take the win

BIKE SPEC VAN NICHOLAS VS PLANET X

VAN NICHOLAS BLAZE

£3,400.00 www.vannicholas.com



Size tested 56cm Overall weight 7.86kg (without pedals)

FRAME AND FORKS

Sizes 52, 54, 56, 58cm
Frame Aero enhanced titanium
Fork Easton EC90 Aero Carbon

TRANSMISSION

Chainset Shimano Ultegra 53/39t
Bottom bracket Shimano Ultegra
Cassette Shimano Ultegra 12-25t
Chain KMC X10
Derailleurs Shimano Ultegra 6700
Shifters Shimano Dura Ace bar-end shifters

WHEELS

Front Fast Forward F6R carbon tubular
Rear Fast Forward F6R carbon tubular
Tyres Continental GP 4000 700 X 22C tubulars

COMPONENTS

Stem Syntace Force
Bars Syntace Stratos CX Carbon base bar
Headset FSA Orbit MX
Saddle Ti-railed Van Nicholas leather
Seatpost Van Nicholas Integrated
Brakes Shimano Ultegra

DIMENSIONS

1 **Head angle** 72.5°
 2 **Seat angle** 76°
 3 **Top tube** 55.7cm
 4 **Seat tube** 52cm
 5 **Standover** 78cm
 6 **Chainstay** 39.5cm
 7 **Bottom bracket** 26.5cm
 8 **Wheelbase** 98.7cm
 9 **Head tube** 11.5cm

PLANET X EXOCET 2

£2,900.00 www.planet-x-bikes.co.uk



Size tested XL Overall weight 8.44kg (without pedals)

FRAME AND FORKS

Sizes S, M, L, XL
Frame Planet X Exocet 2 Carbon TT
Fork Planet X Exocet 2 Carbon TT Fork

TRANSMISSION

Chainset FSA SLK Light Carbon 53/39t
Bottom bracket FSA BB30
Cassette Shimano Ultegra 6700 11-28
Chain Shimano Dura Ace 7901
Derailleurs Shimano Dura Ace 7900
Shifters Shimano Dura Ace bar-end shifters

WHEELS

Front Planet X Pro Carbon 2010 82mm
Rear Planet X Pro Carbon 2010 101mm
Tyres Challenge Crono tubular 22mm

COMPONENTS

Stem Planet X Ultralight CNC
Bars Planet X Stealth bar and extensions
Headset FSA Superlight
Saddle Prologo Nago Evo TTR Ti
Seatpost Planet X Carbon
Brakes Shimano Dura Ace

DIMENSIONS

1 **Head angle** 72.5°
 2 **Seat angle** 78°
 3 **Top tube** 55.5cm
 4 **Seat tube** 52.7cm
 5 **Standover** 78cm
 6 **Chainstay** 38.5cm
 7 **Bottom bracket** 24cm
 8 **Wheelbase** 101.5cm
 9 **Head tube** 12.5cm