

De KERF

MOUNTAIN BIKE

An emerald from north of the border

■ When the Medici family's talent scouts were searching for a worthy artist to knock out some family portraits, one of the queries went out to Leonardo Da Vinci. When asked for the best example of his work to be taken back to the patriarch, Leo simply drew a circle freehand on a scrap of parchment and sent the dumbfounded messenger on his way. The art critics, after hearing the tale, measured Da Vinci's perfect circle and immediately offered him the job.

Experience, impeccable attention to detail and a gifted eye for composition are not absolutely necessary in the crafting of furniture and bicycle frames. However, when art and craft are combined, the results can rival any statue or wall hanging.

In northwestern Canada, there are still experienced bicycle builders who make bikes the old-fashioned way. They believe that a machine is lifeless unless it is wrought into a visual expression of both form and function. The world seems to have "outgrown" this way of life, but we do have a record of an era when cars looked like speeding jets, bridges vaulted across rivers, large dwellings became castles, sewing machines were scrolled with lacey floral patterns and even the lowly bicycle was stylized into flowing lines that suggested the wind. Gone are the tailfins, gargoyles and stained glass of an earlier time—at least in the chrome and glass cubicles of modern life.

Sculpted and finely painted bicycle frames were once the very heart and soul of the custom frame builder's business.

Craftsmanship was his stock in trade. Today, the advent of TIG-welded tubing, oversized aluminum frames and full suspension mountain bikes has transmuted the desire for artistic form into the worship of function. Not so at De Kerf! Armed with paint, modern machinery, torches, files and Old World charm, the folks at De Kerf are rekindling the flames of passionate bicycle craftsmanship.

WHAT IS A De KERF?

We were curious, too, so when the Canadian firm contacted us, we agreed to test the little-known brand, just to check out what they were up to. It turns out that De Kerf has been subcontracting high-end steel frames for a few top Canadian brands and an assortment of racers. The company thought the time was about (about) right to sail off in its own direction. They wanted to be sure that the *MBA* test riders were fully aware that beauty was not a requirement for performance, so the company asked serious questions about our favorite top tube lengths and other dimensions and informed us that a De Kerf would be crossing the border in 30 days. One month later, the box arrived.

Wow! A blaze of beautiful metallic emerald green greeted us as we readied the De Kerf for assembly. The frame was a study in every type of brazing and

welding technique used by modern custom builders. Most of the ultra-light Ritchey Logic front triangle was TIG-welded, but not all of it. A triangular gusset was brazed on the underside of the downtube to reinforce the head tube junction, and the seat tube was fillet-brazed and filed smooth. In the rear of the frame, De Kerf crafted its trademark monostay: tapered seatstays pierced by the tubular beams of the monostay. The monostay is unique, even weird, and looks very much like a fork crown. Its parts are machined to a tight enough tolerance that when the junction is brazed, it appears to be glued together (very cool). Each tube has been ovalized or machined in some fashion. All aspects of the frame have undergone some styling touch, right down to its staggered top-tube cable guides and sculpted rear dropouts.

WHAT ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE STUFF?

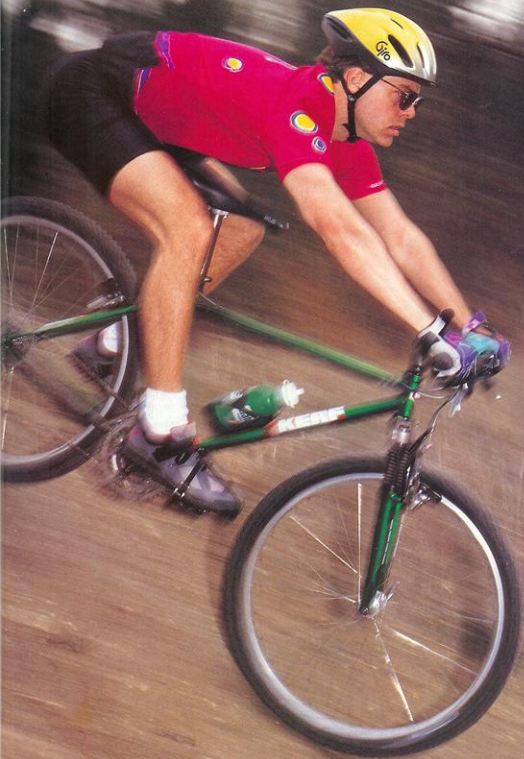
We were getting to that. Because the De Kerf was a custom frame, we ordered it to fit the more Napoleonic-type members of the *MBA* wrecking crew. Our 17-inch frame came with a 22-inch top tube, 16.75-inch chainstays and a low (for a Canadian design) 11.625-inch bottom bracket. Angles were highlighted by a slightly relaxed 72.5-degree seat tube and steep 72-degree head tube. The stem/bar combination was a TIG-welded, titanium creation utilizing three small tubes to connect the handlebar with the quill. The unusual setup harkened back to Tom Ritchey's Bullmoose design (which was the happening thing a decade ago). The odd mini-moose stem works out to approximately 120mm of extension with ten degrees of rise. The whole frame works out to be a fireball: fast-steering, 24.5 pounds and quick.

De Kerf chose a conservative mix of racing components to turn its frame into a

◀ *Classical delight: From a distance, the De Kerf is just another pretty hardtail in the crowd. Up close is a whole different picture. The arts-and-crafts revival may have taken root in British Columbia's cottage bicycle industry.*

Little buddy: Small frames are seldom renowned for holding the line and possessing inherent stability. The little green De Kerf was the exception. Would you do this on your first date? ▶







Flying in formation: De Kerf sweats the tiny stuff. Perfect TIG welds, machined head tube and staggered cable guides are a few subtle ones. One has to wonder if all this beauty is only skin-deep.

dirt-worthy bicycle. The mix is very Canadian. A Shimano XTR drivetrain is mated to a Race Face machined alloy crankset. The titanium-railed Ritchey saddle is supported by a Syncros titanium seatpost. Wheels feature Hugi hubs (32-spoke rear and 28 front) and Mavic 231 rims rolling on a substantial set of Panaracer 2.1-inch Smoke/Dart hard tops. Up front, a trusty Rock Shox Mag 21 stood



Is three a crowd?: A triad of titanium tubes converge from the stem quill to brace the handlebar. As with other items on the De Kerf, the TIG-welded assembly doubles as a styling exercise. In keeping with the spirit of fat, however, the stem is stiff and functional.

Styling Signature: We've never seen a monostay that rivaled the rest of the frame for total construction time. The five-piece mock-crown setup is a De Kerf trademark of sorts. Spare spokes could be stored in the open seat stays. ►

poised, ready and painted to match. A worthy setup . . . eh?

JAMMIN' ON THE GEM

It's a pretty bike, both baroque and renaissance at the same time. After all that descriptive stuff, you might be wondering if we would be willing to really hammer the \$2800 De Kerf. You bet we were! Keep the ground going by fast enough and you will never get a chance to even glance at your bicycle. That theory had to wait, however, because we spent our first few test rides going on

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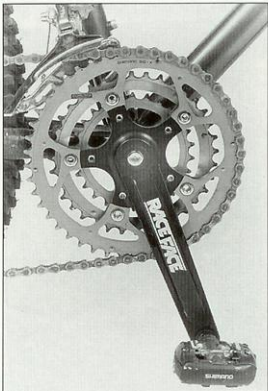


monster death climbs. Climbing the De Kerf was easy, but not effortless. Its geometry was right for ascending, but the handlebar position was too high to get down to business on a long, hard effort. Bar ends would have really been the ticket here (and for any out-of-the-saddle

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Kerfing a berm: A brain surgeon couldn't outcarve the Kerf Monster. Its short wheelbase didn't hamper its high-speed performance . . . until it hit the bumps. After that it was ride 'em, cowboy.



Protruding jaw: Race Face's machined aluminum I-beam crankset was super-stiff. Unfortunately, the Syncros titanium bottom bracket pushed the crank far to the right and out of sync with the drive-train.

sprint work). The bike felt lighter than the scale read due to its nimble handling.

Singletracking was a gas-and-a-half at any speed. The De Kerf matched the Smoke/Dart tires' performance better than any other bike we have tested with the combination. The big surprise to all the *MBA* test riders was how well the short-wheelbase bike took on fast fire road turns. The bike could be maneuvered in the middle of a sliding turn at will. Pick a line, any line, and the neutral-handling bicycle would cruise on through.

Not all was rosy in Kerfland, though. The bike's short wheelbase and the Rock Shox's lockout-style fork valving caused the little green monster to get choppy in

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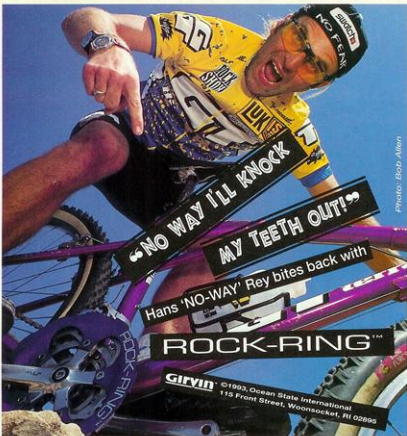
the rough stuff. The bike would slow noticeably when coasting through braking bumps when compared to other bikes in the *MBA* ratpack. The rough ride was the kiss of death as far as keeping the chain on the front sprockets. The Race Face cranks set the chainline far to the right, causing the chain to derail at speed.

WHAT DO WE THINK, EH?

Are you financially solvent? Conservative in your choice of frame materials? Do you wash and wax your truck every weekend? Collect art? If this is you, then the De Kerf could be your next bike. We would suggest adding bar ends and switching the fork oil to 2.5 weight. If you are under 5'7" and are not too sentimental, forgo the cool *faux*-moose bar/stem combo for a zero-rise, low-profile unit. All in all, the De Kerf would be a fine steel for any serious squire interested in taking up fat-tire racing. The bicycle is sure to attract attention anywhere you show up—and if someone asks the inevitable question, "Why bother with all the frills?", you might remind them that robin's egg blue plaster would have kept the Sistine Chapel's roof watertight, as well as Michelangelo's frescoes.

For more information, contact De Kerf Cycle Innovations, 44 E. 4th Ave., Vancouver, B.C., Canada V5T 1E8. ☐

Photo: Bob Allen



ROCK-RING™

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