

Volagi Liscio

Although it might not look it, this is possibly the most controversial bike of the last five years



Words JAMES SPENDER



THE SPEC

Model
Volagi Liscio
Groupset
SRAM Red 22 S-700 disc
Deviations
None
Wheels
Zipp 303 Firecrest disc
Finishing kit
3T Arx Team Stealth stem,
3T Ergosum Team Stealth
handlebars, Vittoria Rubino
Pro tyres
Price
£1,595 (frameset);
test build approx £6,735
Contact
eaststcycles.com

As a rule I'm not superstitious, but Friday 13th was a pretty unlucky day for me – and SRAM. The news that no one wanted to hear (well, maybe a certain Japanese company did) had just landed in my inbox. It had an angry red exclamation mark in the header and was written in capitals, indicating that the contents were VERY IMPORTANT:

'UPDATE: SRAM Road Hydraulic Brake Recall – STOP USE IMMEDIATELY!'

I was gutted. The SRAM disc-bedecked Liscio and I had been getting on famously but, not for the first time, the universe seemed to be conspiring against Volagi.

You've been served

The brainchild of two ex-Specialized employees, Robert Choi and Barley Forsman, Volagi (pronounced *vol-a-jee*, a portmanteau of the Latin words *volare*, meaning to fly, and *agi*, meaning to act) made the headlines upon its conception in 2010, but for all the wrong reasons. After

seeing the original Liscio at a tradeshow, Specialized promptly filed a lawsuit against the fledgling company.

'In all, Specialized levelled 21 different charges against us,' says Choi ruefully. 'I can't name them all, but they concerned violated trade rights, copyright infringement and contractual breaches.'

Among other things, Specialized claimed the Liscio's design mimicked an old model bike that it once had in development, that Volagi was attempting to use the word *venge* (Spanish for 'go') to name its bike at a time when Specialized was developing the *Venge*, and that Choi had been working on Volagi while still under contract. A protracted court case followed, with a startling result: Specialized had all but one of its charges thrown out.

'The courts said I'd violated my contract by working for Specialized and Volagi at the same time, so I was ordered to pay Specialized \$1 in damages.'

Rumours that Choi paid the nominal dollar in pennies were unfounded. After the decision, he tweeted, 'We 🙏



WHEELSET

Zipp's 303s have been subtly modified to cope with disc brakes. The front wheel is two-cross laced with 24 spokes (instead of 18 and radial) to cope with the extra forces a disc brake exerts. This adds up to a 140g weight penalty over the 1,540g rim brake 303s, but you'd never notice it.

▶ need one hundred cyclists and each one must bring a penny', but later withdrew the idea as it was 'in bad taste'. Volagi recouped many of its legal fees thanks to an out-of-court settlement with Specialized. And crucially, it was able to continue with the Liscio's production.

Wanted flex

Liscio translates as 'smooth' in Italian, and the name is wholly appropriate. Where other manufacturers are beavering away trying to make their bikes stiffer, Volagi has unrepentantly pursued vertical flex.

'One of the things manufacturers do to make bikes more compliant is to lengthen the wheelbase, but that can compromise things like handling,' says Choi. 'So we thought, what if we can isolate the rider, then we don't have to lengthen the wheelbase.'

In essence, Volagi has engineered the Liscio's frame to allow the top tube and stays to flex independently of the

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bottom bracket and drivetrain, rather like a giant leaf spring. To do this it employs 'LongBow Flex' seat stays, which bypass the seat tube and connect directly to the top tube. Sound familiar? Choi points out that the Liscio existed before the Trek Domane. But if it was inspiration for Trek's comfortable flagship, he's more than happy.

'I totally believe our innovation was the motivation for the Domane. But if it means there are more comfortable bikes out there, that's good. If people are more comfortable on a bike, they'll ride more.'

After several outings I was definitely feeling (or rather not feeling) what Choi means. There is an appreciable amount of give at the rear end of the Liscio, which absorbs a large amount of road buzz, although perhaps not quite as much as I had anticipated, especially when factoring the gangly seatpost into the equation. However, it was still a lot more comfortable than many other endurance bikes. This is certainly one for the long miles. ▶

BRAKES

As well as disc brakes, the Liscio also has drillings for normal rim brakes. But do you really want to be the one to spoil these beautiful sweeping lines?





'It rides and feels more like a spritely cross bike with excellent handling'

Modulation – the ability to apply degrees of braking force without locking up – is vastly superior, and the placement and nature of the rotors means they pick up less friction-inhibiting water and grime, and what does end up on the rotors gets shed almost instantaneously when the pads are applied.

Having ridden my fair share of disc-equipped mountain bikes, I can confidently say that SRAM's road hydraulic disc system is – or at least was – exceptional, if at times a little noisy (something I'm sure is not unique to SRAM, but more a nature of the beast). The 160mm rotors proved big enough for anything I could throw at the Liscio and as such I am absolutely sold, despite the recall.

Braking bad

The exact details of the recall are still emerging. It was mooted that a third-party supplier of the brake system's seals had let the side down, then details were uncovered that suggested the piston bore in the lever's master cylinder was slightly ovalised, meaning that when the circular seals stiffened and contracted in the cold, air was allowed to enter the system through the resultant gaps. Whatever the reason, the recall was a crying shame.

To SRAM's credit it has offered free mechanical replacements, with the option of a free upgrade to the revised 2015 model-year hydraulic systems in April, or a €150 refund for those wishing to stick with the mechanical brakes from its subsidiary Avid. But frankly, right now, writing this, none of that matters. I've been lucky enough to ride the future, and I think when the dust settles and market confidence is restored, you'll be happy to ride it too. 🍀



REAR HUB

The rear hub of the Zipp 303 disc wheels has been given a 5mm axle extension to 135mm, now the accepted industry standard over usual 130mm spaced hubs, uniting us with our mountainous cousins.

▶ As if to hammer that point home, the Liscio comes complete with mudguard eyelets, room for 28c tyres and pannier rack mounts, making it as adept at trekking as it is at trotting up mountains. All these extra little bits add up of course – this build coming in at 7.61kg – and together with the flex means the Liscio lacks a certain punch, both off the mark and during high-speed acceleration. Yet the flipside is that it rides and feels more like a spritely cross bike with excellent handling, nigh-on perfect weight distribution and a drizzle of can-do steamroller attitude. Praise indeed, and I haven't even mentioned the disc brakes yet.

Rotary club

Say what you will about the aesthetic, but disc brakes are better than rim brakes. That's a fact. Do you need them? Well, that's up for debate. Dry, rolling miles with quality brake blocks and proper aluminium brake tracks says no, discs aren't necessary. But take a bike out in the rain, point it down a 10% decline and you'll soon see the point of a disc system.

The detail



The Liscio is just as at home with electric as it is with mechanical shifting, but as it stands you'll have to wait for a little while longer to take full advantage as SRAM doesn't (yet) have an electronic groupset, Campag doesn't have discs, and Shimano's Di2 disc is not yet on the market. That hasn't stopped Volagi producing what must be the tidiest all-round cabling job on the market. Gear cables make neat entries/exits, while the front hydraulic hose is semi-integrated into the fork and the rear pops up seamlessly from the chainstay, just in time to connect with the calliper. Uncluttered brilliance, which we'll no doubt more of in the coming (hydraulic-based) years.