

BIKES: OPEN

Open U.P.P.E.R.

The second iteration of the road bike that isn't quite a road bike

WORDS PETER STUART



The spec

Model Open U.P.P.E.R.

Groupset Sram Force 1

Deviations None

Wheels Enve M50 Fifty 29in

Finishing kit Enve Compact Short Shallow handlebar, Enve Carbon stem, Enve two-bolt Carbon Fibre seatpost, Brooks England Cambium C13 saddle

Weight 7.36kg

Price £3,850 frameset only, £8,900 as tested

Contact veloatelier.com

We live in a confused era for the road bike. Categories now overlap so much that an aero bike can be a climber's bike, an endurance bike can be sprinter's bike and almost any bike can be a gravel bike. But there are some bikes that really push the boundaries of what it means to be a road bike – and none more so than the Open Upper.

The Upper is the latest creation of former Cervélo co-founder Gerard Vroomen. A year ago we reviewed its older sibling, the Up, a bike that introduced the concept of multiple wheel size options. It came specced with smaller-than-normal 650b wheels and chunky mountain bike tyres for riding off-road, but they could be switched for standard 700c wheels for road riding.

That versatility is still present on the latest model, but where the Open Up was the rough and tough first-born, the Upper is the overachieving younger sibling. It's lighter and more refined, coming in at only 850g for the frame. That's an impressive weight for a disc brake bike, especially one intended for the rough and tumble of trail riding.

'Test, test, test and then test,' says Open owner Vroomen when I ask how he made the Upper capable of handling harsh terrain beyond the tarmac. 'It's all in the lay-up. It comes down to a combination of materials, direction of the fibre and the number of plies,' he adds, careful not to give his proprietary secrets away.

Vroomen knows a thing or two about carbon composites. When he founded Cervélo in Canada with Phil White back in 1995, the two had already hand-built their own concept carbon superbike. 'We use slightly more exotic materials [types of carbon fibre] in some critical parts of the Upper, and the number of pieces is higher and the shapes are more complex,' he says. 'It's not all about high modulus, though – in the tube joins in general you have more lower modulus fibres but higher strength materials, especially around the head tube where you have those big impacts. I mean, it's more complex than that, but that's the basics.'



The Upper's fork has been designed to weigh only 375g while maintaining a wide tyre clearance. These 700c Enve M50 wheels come with 40mm tyres, but the forks are capable of fitting a wider 1.75in 650b mountain bike tyre

Open road

The Upper looks like an aggressive road bike, both in silhouette and on its geometry sheet, so much so that I began to question its off-road credentials. That's very much part of Vroomen's design intention, though.

'I could go on about this topic for hours,' he says. 'A lot of people will equate a slack head tube with stability off road, which isn't necessarily true. The steeper your head tube is, and the shorter your trail is, the less of a lever all these rocks have to push your wheel to the side.'

Putting Vroomen's theory to the test, I took the Upper onto some of the more technical trails near my home in Surrey. Many would have been made easier with the alternative 650b spec wheels, but with the 29er Enve M50s and 40mm gravel tyres I felt confident riding steep, obstacle-filled forest tracks. The larger wheels actually helped to iron out smaller lumps in the trails, and kept it feeling and looking a little more like a road bike.



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One upgrade I might consider would be a dropper seatpost to make for more control on harder descents (something Specialized has done with its new S-Works Diverge), but then the question arises over whether I should just go the whole hog and get a mountain bike.

Vroomen answers that by saying, 'You know, I've sold people road bikes, TT bikes, gravel bikes and mountain bikes. More people come back to me saying, "I'm having so much fun on this bike," with the GravelPlus bikes [such as the Upper] than any other. People live in real towns and cities and so the first 10 miles of your ride is on asphalt, then you get to something more fun. But those first 10 miles would suck on a mountain bike.'

Sure enough, that was my exact experience of riding this bike.



Off the grid

While testing the Upper, my routine would be to ride out of town on suburban roads, where the bike would happily chip along at 35kmh. Once in the countryside, I'd search for trails and the fun would begin.

I found tracks I never knew existed – I wasn't aware there's an 11% gravel bridleway that climbs Box Hill from the start to finish of the normal road climb. As the terrain became tougher I would gradually drop the pressure in my tyres until I was riding with a psi in the low 20s.

Afterwards I'd pump them back up to around 60psi so I could happily join the signpost sprints on the return leg. The Upper proved itself to be as good as any disc brake endurance road bike in terms of handling, stiffness and weight with 28mm tyres. It's slightly more geared to the road than the Up in this sense, aided by the lower weight and more rigid feel.



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At a £1,500 price increase over the Up, the Upper represents quite a premium for 250g

of difference. It does also have some minor foibles as a pure road bike, largely in terms of comfort, as surprising as that may seem given its off-road capability.

This is a much stiffer bike than most people would expect, and I wouldn't want to take it on a long road ride on less than 28mm tyres at a middling 80psi. This seems to be a well calculated trade-off for Vroomen, though, delivering a more robust and responsive feel when the tyres are bulkier, and ultimately no one is suggesting it should be run on 23mm tyres.

Open bikes represent a niche within a niche – what Vroomen terms GravelPlus. Where the Up is at the off-road end of that niche, the Upper is more at the road end. It remains to be seen whether this is the future of road bikes or a fad that will be seen as an oddity in years to come, but having ridden the Upper for a few months, I find myself championing this new direction. It's just so much fun. We can now not only enjoy great speed, low weight, stiffness and handling, but our rides don't have to stop where the tarmac does.

My lasting impression is that, quite simply, I haven't enjoyed a bike this much in ages.



The detail

The Open Upper is built around compatibility for both 700c and 650b wheel sizes. Such a

change can arguably be done with any disc brake endurance bike, but the key difference here is in the clearance for the 650b tyre – where the stays and fork are adapted to fit a 2.1in mountain bike tyre. For a 700c road wheel, or a 29er mountain bike wheel, the Open can fit a 40mm tyre (left) easily, giving more clearance than on most cross and gravel bikes. For those keen on wide tyres, Vroomen says the 650b option matches the handling characteristics perfectly to a road set-up. A 650b wheel with 2.1in (53mm) tyres comes out with a radius of 342mm, only 1mm more than a road wheel and 28mm tyre. Maintaining this size of wheel and tyre is important to ensure the quality of the bike's handling, according to Vroomen.