

# ARGONAUT

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## SPACEBIKE

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# FINDING THE ONE

I told Ben Farver my perfect ride included being chased by goats—so he made me an Argonaut Spacebike **BY LEAH FLICKINGER**

“I want to make your favorite bike,” Ben Farver told me the first time we talked.

Good, I thought. For a custom carbon frameset that starts at \$6,500, I would expect nothing less. More to the point, in the four years I’ve been testing bikes for this magazine, I’ve yet to fall completely in love. In lust, yes, many times. And I’ve had meaningful connections with plenty of excellent road bikes. But I’ve never committed to “the one.”

I imagined that a custom carbon builder would be the ultimate matchmaker: able to translate my wants and needs into the perfect

partner. The idea was intimidating though. I’m not the person who racks up hundreds of miles a week or QOMs every local climb. Maybe I wouldn’t be worthy. But of all the builders I considered, Farver was the only one whose marketing made any mention of designing bikes for women as well as men. At least I felt welcome.

Early on, though, I had some doubts. Ben, who switched to custom carbon in 2007 after establishing himself in the hand-built steel market, doesn’t take meticulous in-person measurements or ride with clients. Instead, he emails a questionnaire from his Bend, Oregon, workshop

that asks for remarkably little hard data beyond age, sex, height, weight, and power output. The rest of the questions are open-ended, along the lines of “What’s your favorite kind of ride?”

Your responses, combined with basic measurements from your existing bike, provide Ben with the essential info for your geometry. “I don’t want to mess with your cockpit,” he says. “There’s muscle memory there that has a lot to do with how you feel on your bike.”

As ambiguous as his methodology seemed, I was certain my answers would prove equally perplexing to him. A sampling: “I don’t have power numbers. I just ride. My fast is not really fast. I get dropped on most climbs. I love swooping over rollers. I like dirt and gravel. On a perfect ride there would be unruly goats.”

And I asked outright for one thing, knowing it sounded ridiculous: “I would love a bike that makes climbing feel easier.”

Lest you imagine that ordering a custom bike is a fantasy come true, understand this: If you’re the kind of person who hems and haws over whether to order home fries or hashbrowns with your eggs, the process can feel like one of those free-fall trust exercises. Choosing paint can send you down a multi-hued rabbit hole. A conversation about toe overlap (“What?! Isn’t that bad?!”) almost made me reconsider my order. And when Ben encouraged me to go with an integrated seat mast, I agonized over the decision, worried I would cut the mast too short and the frame would never fit me right. I had to rely on his reassurances that there would be more than a centimeter of adjustability.

Five days after I sent Ben my completed questionnaire, he wrote back: “I have a really good feeling for your riding style and what you’re looking for—a bike that is light, lively, and exciting, but also comfortable and confidence inspiring. I don’t think you need an especially stiff bike, but one that will respond well to hard, out-of-the-saddle efforts.”

But isn’t that what a lot of folks want? Ben is the real deal though, and my skepticism was tempered by this indisputable fact: When he and I started talking in February, his disc-equipped Spacebike had just earned the prestigious Best in Show award at the National Handmade Bike Show. (In case you’re wondering, the name was

Every Argonaut Spacebike is built in seven frame sections, each with a layup pattern unique to the individual customer—a process that creates less redundant material and allows more control over the fibers through critical sections like the head tube, bottom bracket, and seat tube junction (this page). Farver uses a combination of unidirectional and woven carbon fiber molded in adjustable silicone bladders, and adds a ballistics-grade noncarbon material in certain parts of the tubing to improve durability and dampen vibration. All Spacebikes have a two-part rear dropout (left): a lightweight aluminum piece connects the seat and chain stays, and a durable titanium section (with an integrated derailleur hanger) holds the wheel.



born after a friend on a custom steel bike ribbed him for going supertech with custom carbon. “He said, ‘Whoa, space bike!’” Ben says. “I thought it was funny.”

By late March, he’d sent me a rough draft of my geometry, using my questionnaire and measurements from a recent fit session on a bike I’ve ridden thousands of miles. The biggest difference: a shorter wheelbase thanks to a slightly steeper head tube angle (73 degrees vs 72) and shorter chainstays (410mm vs 412mm). Exactly three months later, my frame arrived. (Current wait time is 10 to 12 weeks.)

As I unpacked the box, a gaggle of staff gathered at my office door admiring the teardrop-shaped tubes and the understated matte clearcoat, black gloss logo, and tiny triangular accents in Argonaut’s signature blue. The frame

came with a Chris King I8 headset, an ENVE 2.0 road fork, and a custom ENVE seatpost topper. I chose a Dura-Ace ST-9000 11-speed mechanical drivetrain with a compact 50/34 crank, an 11-25 cassette, reliable Dura-Ace C24 wheels, and an ENVE compact road bar and stem.

The geometry is not seismically different from the bike I’ve logged so many miles on. But the small tweaks add up. “Even half a degree difference in head tube angle affects handling,” Ben told me. This difference had been one of the sticking points in our early conversations. Going with a steeper head tube angle would give me a little more toe overlap than on most production bikes I’ve ridden. “A lot of companies use a slack head tube to make the bike more stable and decrease toe overlap on smaller frames,” Ben said. “If you | CONTINUED ON P. 98

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really hate toe overlap, I can do that. But it will feel sluggish, and won't handle and descend as well." (In the end, after nearly 1,000 miles of testing, my toes never hit the front wheel.)

Then there's the way the carbon is used in the frame, or the layup pattern. Unique to a custom builder—and a compelling reason to go with one—is the ability to use different types of carbon in various thicknesses and patterns on specific parts of the frame based on characteristics

of an individual rider (weight, power output, riding style). For me, that meant dialing stiffness just enough to be comfortable without sacrificing acceleration and liveliness. "If I made it too stable," Ben told me, "you'd be bored."

This precision tuning is also why Ben talked me into the integrated seatmast instead of a traditional post—the builder has that much more carbon real estate to tailor without adding redundant material to the bike. "I can tune

it specific to your weight," Ben explained. "It's a more complete custom solution."

As I started putting miles on the bike, I didn't need long to realize that my pie-in-the-sky plea for climbing to feel easier had been answered. For starters, let's talk about weight—at 14 pounds, 1 ounce fully built, the bike is insanely light. I tend to feel like I'm dragging my bike up hills; in contrast, the Spacebike almost seemed to surge ahead of me.

Over time I also discovered that I was more inclined to stand on climbs, which made me feel stronger and less defeated by the endeavor. I chalked it up to the geometry, but Ben explained that it was more likely weight distribution within the frame. "I keep the top half of the bike as light as possible," he says, "and focus the balance of the mass on the bottom half." This reduces what he calls "throw weight," which translates to a feeling of less bike moving around underneath you when you're out of the saddle—a feeling, he explained, that probably made standing on climbs more rewarding.

I love riding mainly because it's fun—and here's where the Spacebike got really exciting. Cornering became an opportunity to push my limits. I pedaled and leaned through turns with more confidence than ever, the bike responding to nearly imperceptible nudges (a millimeter shift in my weight, a tilt of my wrist). It whisked me over gravel and dirt like a sure-footed dance partner. When I stood out of the saddle and went hard to hang onto a charging group, the bike accelerated with smooth force. On descents I became fearless. I also love riding because of all the sensations—the aroma of pine needles, the clackety hooves of scampering goats, the deep hum of the road. The Spacebike transmits enough of that hum that I feel connected to the surface, without drowning out everything else.

Did Ben make my favorite bike? For sure, even though it took time for me to shed my skepticism. And the experience was just as eye-opening. I've seen builder questionnaires that ask clients to place stiffness on a scale that essentially goes from "not so much" to "very." I wouldn't know how to answer that without qualifiers. And that's the beauty of a process like Ben's. Even people who ride a lot can't always accurately quantify things like stiffness and compliance. But pretty much anyone can talk about what they love about cycling. An intuitive builder is able to divine a bike's performance characteristics from the words we use.

Ultimately, Ben deciphered my ramblings and then crafted a bike that makes all the things I love about riding even more exquisite, a bike that excels in ways I didn't even know how to ask for.

And yeah, it's definitely the one. ●