

An introduction to a very modern bicycle
that the uninitiated may mistake for a septuagenarian

a photo essay by André Jute

Be warned! If you are easily overcome with bicycle lust, this innocuous booklet will ruin your peace of mind.

I needed a new bike because I moved house from the level ground beside the Bridewell River, a tributary of the Bandon, up the notorious Kilbrogan Hill. I needed two or three gears below what my beloved Shimano Cyber Nexus automatic hub gearbox could give me, so I would have to go to Rohloff hub gears. The ramps to the pavements in front of my new house are also steep enough to throw me off the seat onto the seat tube of a diamond frame every time I stop suddenly for pedestrians or cars while on the ramps; that can be painful. So I wanted a low stepover. And I wanted to simplify my bike still further by losing the front suspension and the suspended seatpost. So I had to recover a measure of suspension with balloon tyres.

Trying to have an individual frame built that was out of the ordinary was a major frustration; the artisan-solderers want to build what they built before. Their idea of meeting their promise that “we give the customer anything he

wants” stops dead at a garish paint job; it doesn’t mean any frame the customer wants except a road, touring or mountain frame. I also looked into building up my own bicycle on an off-the shelf frame but some of the components I would need are either supplied only to OEMs or would attract delivery charges that popped my eyes, like a three-figure sum for a pair of wide mudguards from the States.

Because I insisted on the widest Big Apple balloons on the 28 inch wheels — technically ISO 60-622mm — complete with civilizing mudguards, the shortlist of bikes was not long, and all the bikes on the shortlist were from only two manufacturers, Patria and Utopia, German custom-bike builders of objects to disturb the dreams of cyclists. That’s code for: If you have to ask, you can’t. To Patria and Utopia “custom” means that you take one of their huge range of frames and may then specify components from their approved list; all bikes are built to order only.

Utopia Kranich

André Jute’s Utopia Kranich is a modern recreation of the bestselling unisex bicycle of the interwar years. With a Rohloff 14-speed hub gearbox, hydraulic brakes and Big Apple Liteskin balloon tyres it also has every modern convenience.

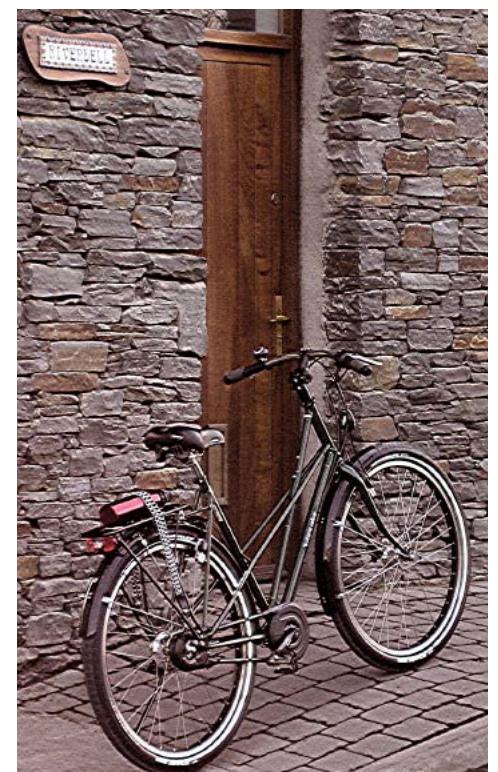




First catch your dealer. Here the huge Utopia Kranich looks like a teenager's downhill stumpjumper thanks to the disproportional scale of the Big Apple tyres on wide 28 inch rims, and the enthusiastic wrapping of Heiko Godlinksi, owner of City-Bike in Einbeck in Germany, the dealer who elected himself to be my supplier by his cheerful initiative. But that box is two meters long, and the bike itself stretches out six feet.

Heiko will help other distance-buyers too to get the right bike. However, he prides himself on personal service and says, "In the summer there are people in the shop and bikes to work on, so maybe I have not so much time." Better to approach him in the winter months. Contact details are on his netsite: <http://www.city-bike-einbeck.de/>

"Surprised not to find Grant at home." On the way to photographing my Utopia Kranich (Crane) straight out of the box, I stopped for this joke picture. Rivendell is an American equivalent of Utopia, in that both make lugged steel aspirational bikes with historical overtones and very strong form/function central directing visions aimed at comfortable touring/routine cycling. But of course Rivendell will never have the chutzpah to describe a Rohloff-hubbed bike as a "basismodel" — basic model — as Utopia unblushingly does. We shouldn't take either the comparison or the joke too far. This photo was taken on McSwiney Quay in Bandon, Co Cork, Eire, not in Walnut Creek, California.

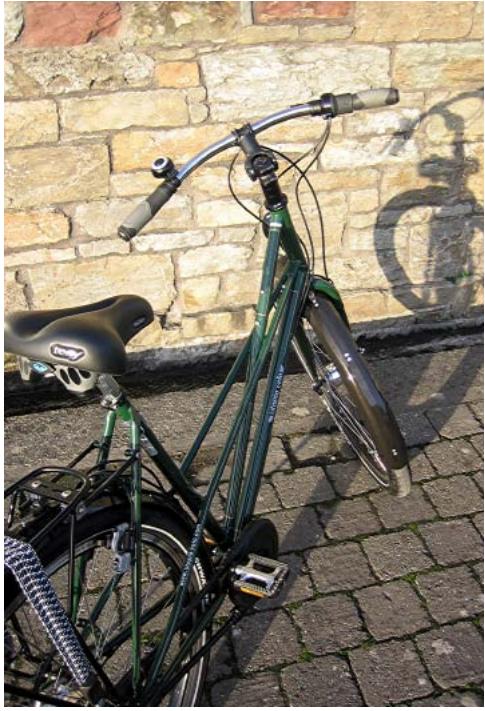


A modest-appearing, unthreatening bike, top, in green. Just as well I didn't order it in the melon yellow (below) I first considered. Since Bentley is now a division of Volkswagen, I thought it would be all right to order a German bike in British Racing Green, and it is fortunate that I did, because the colour, in conjunction with those huge wheels, disguises the size of the bike well, without being as pompous as plain black. Note the full chain case. It is Utopia's own Country chaincase, with flexible chain conduits, brought over from recumbent practice, attached by flexible bellows to semi-rigid lightweight plastic enclosures for the chainwheel and sprocket.



As standard any Utopia is fitted out to a very high standard with hydraulic brakes and wide tyres. This is the bike out of the box, before fitting the pump and excellent custom toolkit that also came with the bike. On my Kranich the options fitted are a SON dynamo hub (in place of a Shimano dynohub), the Country fully enclosed chaincase (in place of DeWoerd's double three-quarters chaincase), the EX clickbox version of the Rohloff hub (in place of the internal version), and Big Apple Liteskins (standard Big Apples are a no-cost option) with extra-light "racing" tubes, together with mudguards wide enough to cover them. The Terry saddle seen is a delete-option which I overlooked deleting; I imagine most of these bikes are delivered to cyclists with their own broken-in Brooks saddle, and I shall certainly replace the standard saddle with my favourite Cheeko90 seat. That crude seatpin is just the thing for a Brooks! But a modern micro-adjustable seatpin is a no-cost option.





Here the frame crosses are visible where the lateral full-length mixte rails pass the "top tube" and the seat tube. The twin lateral rails are soldered to both the single tubes where they cross them; there are more detailed photographs further down. Those are my favourite pedals, the VP 191, of which a pair arrived with the bike.

Everything else you see on my Kranich was supplied as standard, as long as you understand that Utopia interprets "standard" as parts made by the manufacturer either with special features for Utopia bikes or in several cases specifically created from scratch for Utopia. See the sidebar on the right for the attitude of the Utopia founders.



Compare Utopia to, for instance, Gazelle who, in the inimical Dutch tradition going back to De Stijl, design parts for both function and style, and then have them custom made for use exclusively on Gazelle bicycles, making the exclusive components part of the distinctive Gazelle style. By contrast, Utopia not only tolerates but encourages manufacturers to sell these special parts on to would-be competitors. Inge Wiebe of Utopia explains: "We prefer that all the things we invent should be produced by companies who usually make these types of components. If they will sell them to a large number of people it is good for bike-culture. That is the difference between us and Gazelle. Only if we paid for the tools to produce something do we want to sell it alone. An example is our Randonneur handlebar. To us only our frames are that important." Utopia are *the* crossframes specialists (top of page). The firm was founded more than a quarter century ago specifically because Ralf Klagges fell in love with crossframes. Left, the founders, Ralf Klagges and Inge Wiebe, with between them Meester Kluver, the living connection to the most successful crossframe of all time, whom we shall meet again shortly. Further left, Wiebe and Klagges with Bernd Rohloff, here congratulating them on Utopia's 25th birthday — and well he might, as Utopia was the first bicycle manufacturer to specify the then new Rohloff hub gearbox. Immediately left, Wiebe and Klagges (and dog) recently testing new models in the forest at their headquarters in Saarbrücken.



To get the best ride from Schwalbe's balloon tyres one must lower the inflation pressure. That in return requires a much wider rim than was available in the desired 700C diameter. So the Belgian rim-maker Exal created the Exal XL25 rim you're looking at specifically for Utopia. Likewise the Sapim spokes are specially made for Utopia; two of the specialty spokes come as spares in the impressive welcome pack (actually a substantial box of goodies — contents above) for new owners. Even the front light bracket is a special long model developed by BUMM for Utopia. The rack on my bike is a Tournee by SL, a firm since sold to Hebie. Utopia now fits Tubus steel and Racktime (a Tubus brand) aluminium racks. The clever Country chainchase is a Utopia exclusive, in the Gazelle manner.



This is the special Utopia frame lock (not yet fitted to my bike) which also doubles as a brake booster for the standard Utopia fitment of Magura rim brakes; oddly, this special-feature lock is not a standard fitment but an extra-cost option. I'll let Inge Wiebe describe its weird genesis: "Basta has taken over the frame lock we designed long ago. We asked them for years and they wouldn't make one, so we made one ourselves – and they liked it. Now they produce it and we like that." (As a cyclist but also as someone who lives by creating and licensing intellectual rights, I don't know whether to applaud such generosity or cry at it...)

Utopia runs a shop, accessible to everyone, from which their select components can be ordered.

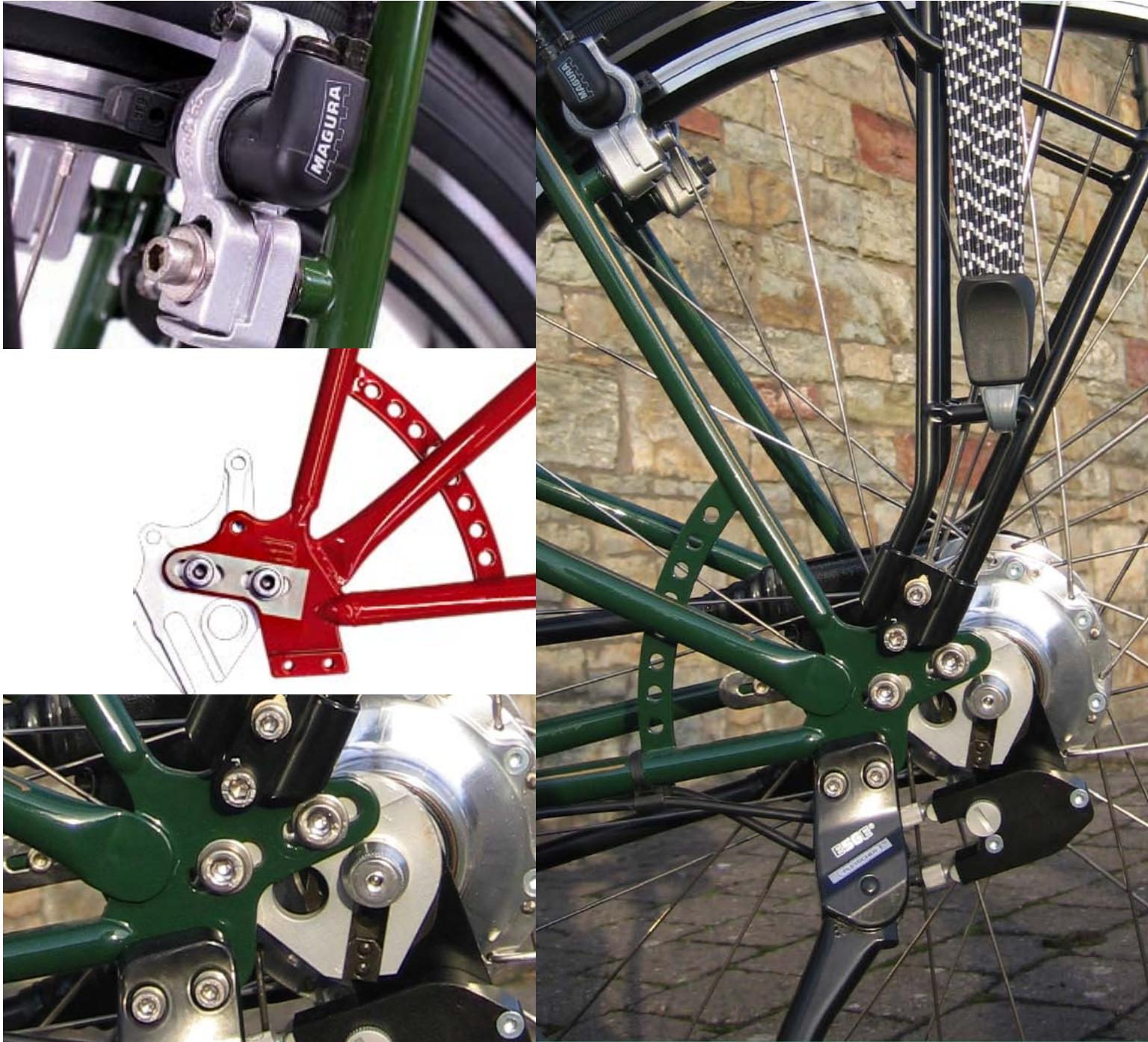


Most Utopia bikes come with top of the range BUMM lights front and back. My Kranich has front and rear senso-plus models, which means that they have built-in light sensors which switch the lights on in low light situations, and off again when the light is ample, and capacitors built-in to keep them burning for a few minutes when the bike stands still and the hub dynamo therefore does not turn, as at stop streets. The standard hub dynamo is a Shimano model and the upgrade is the much-applauded German SON. Both lights have reflectors built in. These work with the reflectors on the VP191 pedals and the huge circular bike-signature reflectors on the sides of the Big Apples, and with the reflective rack elastic to make the Kranich visible from all sides after dark.

The Rohloff rear hub appears to be the quick release model, with the quick release removed and replaced by a hex-key retainer. That's good, exactly what I do on all my other bikes to deter casual thieves. The Rohloff hub could also advertise its presence less loudly than with that yellow and blue sticker — which the customer can't remove because the serial number is on it, and without the serial the guarantee is void. (Rohloff now laser-engraves the serial on the hub.) The nicely counter-balanced stand works smoothly and without a bike-rippling thunk. The triple elastic over the rack is of reflective material as a safety measure.

The Magura HS11 hydraulic rim brakes are Utopia's standard fitment. They say they fit them without the quick release to save weight, and without the booster because in return for the stopping power sacrificed by its absence the brakes become more progressive. Both are possible; I found the HS11 without the booster more docile than Shimano's (probably more powerful) best-model 75 series roller brakes. Quick releases and brake boosters for the HS11 are available as options, and the special design of frame lock Basta builds for Utopia also works as a brake booster. Brake upgrades in the catalogue are Magura HS33 hydraulic rim brakes, Shimano rollerbrakes and Magura and Shimano discs up to 160mm, according to the geartrain chosen, too many combinations to go into here. Says Inge Wiebe of this most catholic component choice: "We want to have only the best, most durable and sustainable components on Utopia velos."





Main photograph, clockwise from top left: Standard Magura HS11 rim brakes, rack, elastic for luggage, Rohloff 14-speed hub gearbox, external klickbox, Esge stand, and chainstay-mixte-seatstay disc brake bracing only on left side of bike. In the centre: All fullsize Utopia bicycles have twin-slot sliding frame ends for adjusting chain tension. The axle hanger is the bright aluminium slotted plate, which slides in the slots on the two big bolts whose nuts are visible this side of the frame. Gearbox torque is taken by a flatsided tongue in the part of the slot below the axle. Also visible on the inside of the right hand chainstay, the fitting for adjusting the chaincase, and beyond that, the bellows that join the flexible centre tube of the chaincase to the stiffer sprocket case. The Kranich rear end is a marvel of packaging. I particularly like the way the mudguard stays are led behind the rack stays and fastened to their inside. The frame ends themselves reward study of their design — isn't that round end to the mixte tube just perfectly right? — and the craftsmanship of the brazing. Small photographs: Top, closeup of Magura rim brake. Bottom, closeup of the exemplary brazing on my Kranich. Centre, latest frame end development from Utopia. Inge Wiebe says, "Since you're talking about craftsmanship in frame-making: now the frame ends are made from nirosta (stainless steel) to have an even better contact between the parts of the dropouts, without the protecting but easily damaged layer of paint. It is pretty complicated to weld stainless steel to CrMo steel but our Dutch frame maker succeeded."

The shadow knows why the Kranich has so long been a best seller for Utopia and, in the mists of history, for Locomotief and Durabo. It looks retro and yet is right up to minute in its engineering, comforts and abilities. The Utopia literature is full of photographs of world travellers who have covered 100,000km (over 60,000 miles) on a Kranich and other Utopia bikes; the Kranich is rated at 170kg for rider, bike and luggage combined. That bodes well for those who merely take day trips or weeklong credit card tours. When I have finished outfitting my Kranich, I shall indulge myself in André Jute's Overnight World Tour of His Little Patch of Beautiful West Cork.





The XL25 rim Exal created for Utopia to permit full use of the Big Apple balloon tyres is 31mm wide on the outside and 25mm inside across the bead retainers. Wheel and tyre dominate any view of the Kranich, until the intricacies of the frame grab one's attention.

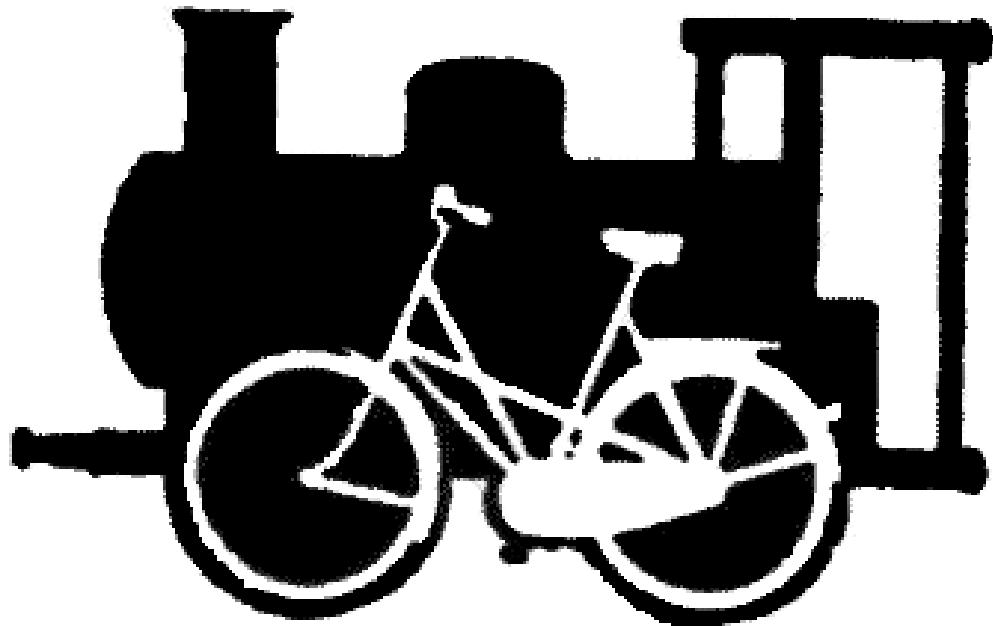
The Crossframe-Mixte

Andre Jute's Utopia Kranich bicycle is a rare crossframe-mixte for solid engineering reasons as well as nostalgic appeal and practical convenience.

When function determines the form of the bicycle
Triangulating the Utopia Kranich

a photo essay by André Jute





The Kranich's frame style is technically a crossframe-mixte and is a modernized (and how!) recreation of Locomotief's famous Super de Luxe unisex crossframe built from 1936 to 1955. In more polite company, "unisex" was rendered as "priesterrijwiel" or "priest's bicycle" since the lowered top tube made it more dignified to ride in a frock. Yes, that really is the Locomotief logo: the Super de Luxe was their top model.



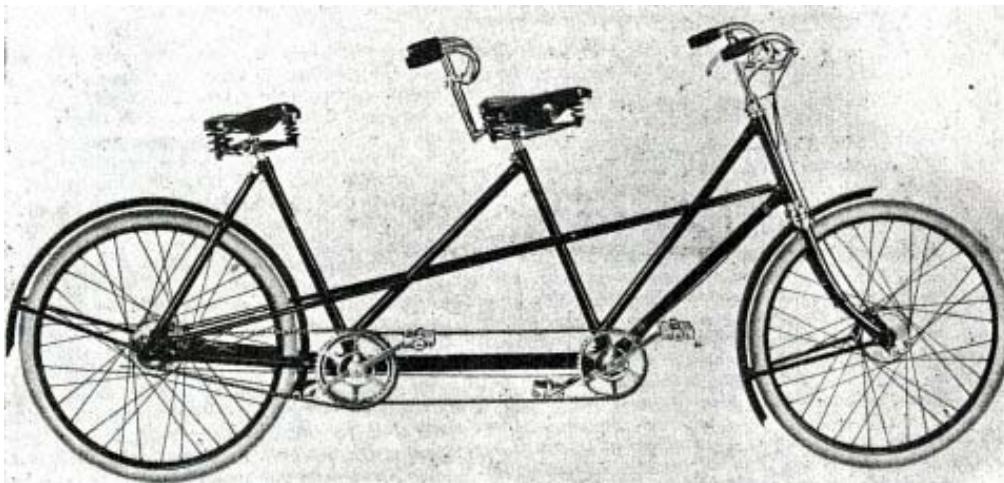
The frame is made by Van Raam in The Netherlands. Utopia had to develop their own lugs for the Kranich because even a straight-up reconstruction would be impossible as the old templates and molds were lost, and in any event the Kranich isn't so much a nostalgic reconstruction as a functional, determined development of an ancient good idea. Utopia, wisely resisting the siren song of trying to claim a bike so much developed is a faithful reconstruction, actively resist the notion of a nostalgia-bike; they prefer to speak of its functionality. The lugs are a mixture of traditional fully socketed lugs and layered lugs. A layered lug can take several forms. One consists of a sleeve socketing a tube or tubes, the sleeve being fillet-brazed to another tube, seen in the centre of the photograph. Another layered form consists of a sleeved tube with another tube fillet-brazed to the sleeve, as at the top and bottom of the head tube in the photograph above. Utopia also uses internal lugs on some of their other cross-frames, and on the largest Kranich frame... A production-efficiency consultant would fall down dead of shock before he can deliver his report on Utopia.





The bottom bracket shell is fully lugged for the bottom tube, seat tube and chainstays and, above it, there is the beautiful lug to join the trapeze "top tube" and the seat tube.

So what makes a crossframe-mixte? And why go to the expense?



Locomotief, who obtained a patent for this design in the 1930s and proceeded to turn their unisex Super de Luxe into an unlikely bestseller from 1936 until 1955, when it must have seemed terminally old-fashioned in the bebop-cruiser age, followed no precedent with the crossframe-mixte, though the same designer created a related tandem in 1935.

The nearest other bicycle design is Pedersen's 1896 ladies' bike which depended on rods for tension in the frame and didn't have the crosses jointed as did Locomotief (and licensee Durabo). I mention the Pedersen simply to stress the originality of the crossframe-mixte idea, not because the similarities will survive even cursory engineering analysis.





In engineering terms the Locomotief and the successor Kranich can be viewed as a two-dimensional trapeze frame with two full-length lateral mixte rails superimposed from head tube to dropouts to give the frame width: that much-desired third dimension which from width delivers stiffness out of all proportion to the extra weight. In addition, the twin mixte rails are attached to the other tubes of the frame everywhere that they cross them. The mixte rails are fillet-brazed to the "top tube" of the trapeze, creating a multitude of frame-stiffening vertical and horizontal triangles.

The ineffably elegant brace of the mixte transverse rails to the seat tube. Notice the tidy cable routing through the chainstay brace and over the mudguard. One cable carries electricity from the hub dynamo to the rear light, the other is a tube for the standard hydraulic rim brakes. The two cables under the chainstay are the gearchange cables for the Rohloff hub transmission whose yellow label is just at the edge of the photograph. Utopia was the first manufacturer in the world to specify Rohloff hub gears on their bikes.



I count 15 separate triangles or externally braced trapezoids, which for practical purposes are as good. You don't need to work a slide rule for long to support the eyeball instinct that the Kranich frame will be stiffer than an equivalent diamond frame. In this form it weighs 16.5kg, which for this class of bike, with the biggest and the best of everything, is excellent. Neither of my similarly-equipped aluminium-framed touring bikes can match that, and weight weenies can specify deraileur gears and save another couple of kilograms though I don't see the point of buying a sorglos (carefree) bike and then adding back the maintenance and wear and tear of derailleurs just to save a little weight.



A proper gentleman's bicycle

of course has gold coachlining by the original craftsman!

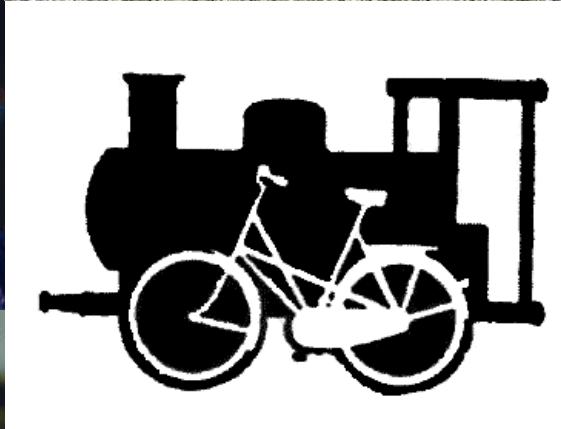
a photo essay by André Jute

Meester Kluver's gold coachlines umbilically connect André Jute's very modern Utopia Kranich bicycle to the bestselling Locomotief Super de Luxe crossframe-mixte unisex bicycle of 1936 to 1955



All right, we know you've been drooling over the gold coachlines (only a barbarian would call them "pinstripes") on the British Racing Green paintwork of my Utopia Kranich, wondering when I would ever stop rabbiting on about stiffness and other deeply boring engineering matters (sorry!) and get down to what counts, how cool the bike looks.

This is Meester Kluver of Van Raam; he doesn't appear to have a first name (Meester is Dutch for Master, a rank earned the hard way by artists and artisans). Meester Kluver, now 89, connects the Locomotief Super de Luxe -- he won't call it "unisex!" -- crossframe-mixte, which he built as a young craftsman in the 1930s, and the Utopia Kranich, with which he was involved from the beginning in 1986. Meester Kluver also connects the Locomotief Super de Luxe and my Kranich in particular: Meester Kluver painted the coachlines on my Kranich. Meester Kluver is cycling history personified.





All text and original photographs

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Other photographs (Meester Kluver, founders and
Herr Rohloff) by courtesy of Utopia.

Locomotief Super de Luxe information and classic
illustrations from two excellent historical bicycle
sites: www.oudefiets.nl and www.rijwiel.net
Opinions are my own, of course.

As much as it is mobile sculpture and
cycling history, my Utopia Kranich is a
most capable and very pleasing bicycle.
See you in the lanes and byways!