

Wheels

Captain sensible

Sweden's Kronan is solid, reliable and very sensible - in fact, it's the Volvo of the bicycle world.

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A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

Among the Lycra tights, drop handlebars, bottom-in-the-air cycling brigade, weight (that of the bike rather than its owner) is the equivalent of the 0-60 reading for sports-car owners. 'Just pick it up,' says the proud owner, as the latest carbon-fibre, titanium, multi-thousand pound offering is displayed to his slaving coterie, and they duly swoon. My first acquaintance with the Swedish-made Kronan bike was a variant on this. I picked it up to howk it into the Observer's bike shed, and strained my back.

The Kronan weighs, at a rough estimate, at least twice as much as the slender carbon Trek machine on which Lance Armstrong won last year's Tour de France, but, at £350, it will set you back only a 20th of a replica of Armstrong's bike. The comparison is unfair, however: you can't ride an Armstrong bike to work without mortal fear that it will get scratched or nicked, any more than you could drive a Ferrari to the office.

There's a good reason why, in bike terms, the Kronan is more Giant Haystacks than Calista Flockhart. It is bombproof - literally. It is based on a Swedish army design first made 60 years ago and, indeed, the first Kronans to be sold were actually rescued from an army warehouse where they had gathered dust for decades. They were, however, in perfect working order.

In the same way that Volvos have flashing lights to remind you to put on your seatbelt, the Kronan leaves little to chance. It's made of steel, and that steel is heavily enamelled to counter rust - down to the wheel rims. The brake doesn't involve any cables to fray or brake blocks to wear out - it's a hub brake like that of a motorbike. Dynamo lights means no batteries to forget or to fall out when you hit a pothole.

The tyres are bigger than those of many mountain bikes, while the carrier is sturdy enough bear a small field gun. Indeed, it seems to have a small, backwards-pointing gun barrel on it, although closer inspection reveals that, sadly, this is not some device dreamed up by a Swedish Q for wasting couriers with nose rings who take the mickey, but is in fact more prosaic: it's for you keep your pump in. And if you

thought that was in the sledgehammers-and-nuts category, it pales next to the sturdy ring of steel to protect the reflector on the mudguard from those who take pleasure in destroying such things.

There is, however, a certain overengineered urban chic - as in work boots and divers' watches - to all of this. There may be too many features, but the same could be said of combats and pockets. And some of the fussiness makes eminent sense: you won't get oily yick on your trousers, as the chain has a solid cover. The huge mudguards (steel again, I suspect) keep you clean as well.

There is a ubiquitous, functional elegance about the Kronan: it is precisely the kind of bike you could imagine carrying John Major's old maid through the mist to communion, but it would look as well-placed chained to the railings outside a minimalist flat in Notting Hill. And the beauty of something this substantial is that, when it is chained to those railings - outside house, office or shop - that if a vandal comes along and attempts GBH, he will come off the worst.

The Kronan has gone down well in Holland, where there is a tradition of riding to work or the shops on bikes like this. And as for its appeal here, you only have to look at the success rate of practical-looking, mildly kooky Swedish products in this country, led by furniture and football coaches. The makers also hope it will be adopted by companies who want to set up bike pools or merely to provide their employees with company bikes. Its numberplate is designed to help you work out which one is yours in the bike shed.

It's a stylish enough and user-friendly enough (and, for the accountants, cheap enough) bike to suit this end, but all that solidity comes at a price. Riding up anything bigger than a railway bridge is like pushing a steam roller out of a ditch. 'No complicated gears to go wrong,' boasts the literature, conveniently and rather patronisingly omitting to mention that gears help you go up hills. And on the Kronan, you need all the help you can get.

If you live in a valley and work on top of a large hill, the Kronan would only be recommended for the masochistic. On the other hand, if you make sure the journey is relatively flat, or take to canal towpaths or converted railway lines such as those in the Sustrans network, you can bowl along, cushioned on those huge tyres. But don't lift it without due care and the number of your osteopath ready to hand.

- For more information, go to www.beachcruiser.co.uk.