

LEGEND REDUX

Litespeed Ultimate Gravel

Before carbon took over, a debate about the best frame material enveloped the cycling world. Was it steel? After all it is real. How about alloy? Unfortunately, it was not yet at the level of quality we're seeing today. No, the "it" material was titanium and the "it" Ti builder was Litespeed, a company whose reputation precedes it. So sought-after was the ride quality of the Ultimate road frame that it was commonly re-badged by pros who knew their sponsor provided frames that weren't quite up to snuff. Unofficial victories for the Ultimate were a poorly kept secret and included a USPRO title and a world road championship.

As carbon became the go-to choice for frame materials, it relegated Ti to a niche category—mostly left to custom frame builders. Now, the cycling world is again undergoing a seismic shift, but this time, instead of from metal to carbon, it's from pavement to gravel—and titanium again has a place to shine.

HANDMADE IN THE USA

With only one glance, you know this "handmade in the USA" frame is tuned into its pedigree. In keeping with the look of its predecessors, the raw titanium finish immediately identifies it as a Litespeed. There's no need to hide titanium behind a paint job; it looks plenty good naked. Internal cable routing adds to the overall clean look.

If you saw the Litespeed Ultimate Gravel frame by itself, you would be forgiven for thinking it was intended to be a road bike. The Ultimate uses 3AL/2.5V cold-worked titanium tubing, including a truncated airfoil down tube that adds aerodynamics and stiffness. The rounded, square-shaped top tube adds additional stiffness while the 425mm chainstays help create a race-tuned geometry. The detail most obviously giving away the off-road intent of this frame is the swooping seatstays that build in some vertical compliance to take the edge off of harsh road surfaces. But even those tubes are subtly bladed for an aerodynamic advantage.

THE ULTIMATE BUILD

With so much history behind this frame, we decided a special build was in order with complementing components to bring out the best ride. With room for up to 45mm 700c tires—depending on tread—or 2.0 650b tires, we had plenty

of clearance for 40mm Bontrager GR1 Team Issue tires set up tubeless on durable Easton EA70 SL wheels. Up front, Litespeed's own tapered Carbon Gravel fork also provides plenty of clearance. For the cockpit and seat post, we again turned to the unmatched value of Easton. And we decided on a wide gear range—11–34 in back and 47/32 up front—to make this a versatile rig with a sub-1.0 gear ratio when needed but with still enough gear left for most situations.

IN THE SADDLE

The Ultimate Gravel absolutely rips on the flats. The aggressive geometry made us at times forget we weren't on a road-specific frame. We even took it on a group ride on tarmac, as built, and had no problem staying in the mix when the effort ratcheted north of 20 mph. The swooping seat stays offer a welcome touch of compliance on this otherwise stiff frame—a nice detail to balance out the inherent harshness of leaving the tarmac.

Titanium is always going to lose out to carbon in the weight category, though. Our medium frame weighed 1,341 grams—not a behemoth, but not the lightest either. On extended climbs we began to notice the excess heft of this build, but it wasn't entirely from the frame. The stiff Ultimate really wanted to go faster, but a heavier, durable wheelset pushing 1,800 grams brought the weight up to 8.6 kilograms (18.9 pounds). Other choices made in the interest of comfort, like padding under the bar tape, added to the battle against gravity.

Other than for extended bouts of road climbing, the component choices on this build complemented the frame nicely. The Ultimate is a pure speed machine that transforms

watts into motion. And while titanium is one of the more forgiving frame materials, once you get up to speed off-road your body feels each bump in the road. We designed a build that adds in a bit of additional comfort without encroaching on this frame's ability to fly over the flats.

COMFORT AT THE CONTACTS

To keep things comfy at high speeds, we turned to some pieces of contact-point tech from Selle Italia. First, we chose the new SP-01 Kit Carbonio Superflow that, with a completely disconnected back, takes cut-out saddle design to the final frontier. Each half of the saddle works independently as a leaf spring to provide comfort where you need it most. It's not all flex, though. Carbon rails provide a stable platform to convert power into motion.

Then we added the Italian company's shock absorbing SG-Tape and Bar Pad to the Easton EC70 AX bars. The

SPECIFICATION

litespeed.com

Approximately \$8,000 as built

18.9 lbs (8.6kg) M (w/o pedals)

Build: Shimano Ultegra Di2 hydraulic with RX rear derailleur; Selle Italia SP-01 Kit Carbonio Superflow S Saddle; Selle Italia Shock Absorber Kit; Bontrager GR1 Team Issue tires; Easton EA90 ICM stem; Easton EC70 AX handlebar; Easton EC90 zero seat post; Easton EA70 SL Wheelset; Easton EC90 SL Crankset with gravel rings; Speedplay SYZR pedals





levers especially deserve a moment of praise. The Japanese shifting gurus have managed to give these hoods the same look and feel as their cable-brake counterparts. None of that unsightly, chunky-hood business that ruins the look of otherwise beautiful builds. We wouldn't want to distract from the classic good looks of the Ultimate Gravel and its raw titanium. That would be callous.

One notable drivetrain substitution we made from Ultegra was Easton's phenomenal EC90 SL crankset. This lightweight crank makes swapping chainrings a simple task, giving you the option to easily swap out the ultra-compact 47/32 on this build to a standard compact setup for a road-oriented ride. It provides the versatility to take the Ultimate more places.

The Ultimate Gravel manages to maintain a firm connection to its storied Litespeed history while branching out into new territory. Although the Ultimate hasn't stood atop the road bike world in years, it's nice to see the frame revived and reworked with a purpose that makes sense in today's landscape of high-end carbon. *Pm*

result is one the cushiest handlebar setups we've tried—and with only a 39-gram weight penalty for the padding. For those who need their bike to be a chiseled specimen of beauty, the padding does make the bars look a bit chunky. But the relief from rattling off-road is undeniable. And with 16 degrees of outward flaring, the EC70 AX handlebar is the perfect compromise between stability in the drops and comfortable access to the shifters. This handlebar really nails the balance—some bars flare out so much that you feel like you're driving a semi.

Completing the cockpit is the Easton EA90 stem—one of the best deals in cycling at \$100 and 120 grams. Easton's ICM Garmin stem mount is a nice, simple integrated detail, but it's only available for Garmin computers currently.

EASTON + SHIMANO = GRAVEL MAGIC

Turning our attention to the drivetrain, Shimano's Ultegra RX rear derailleur is just what the gravel doctor ordered. With the flip of a switch, a small clutch on the derailleur engages to reduce chain slap and increase shifting performance over rough terrain. Combined with Easton's compact gravel rings, we have only crisp shifting to report from the hairiest terrain we could find.

Running Ultegra Di2 added to the road bike-like feel of this frame. The shifting was flawless as usual and the familiar ergonomics made switching back and forth between a road and gravel setup seamless. Shimano's Ultegra Di2 hydraulic

