SOMA SAGA

Soma Fabrications' touring frameset arrives

by Patrick O'Grady

Returning to cycling as an adult, a former competitive swimmer gone soft in the service of journalism, I relied upon the tools of my trade. I did some research, interviewed a few shop types, and started writing — checks, mostly, for a series of off-the-rack, ready-to-ride bikes. As I pedaled through flab to fitness, from century rides to amateur racing, I learned through trial and error what worked for me, and more important, what didn't. Taking up cyclocross gave me a chance to play product manager, because my first racing machines arrived as frames and forks. Cyclocross had yet to achieve even niche status in America — on this side of the pond, it was more of a pothole.



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I dressed my framesets up with parts I'd come to rely on in road and mountain-bike racing, read about in books like *Cyclocross: Training and Technique* by Simon Burney, or had scattered about the place awaiting some purpose. Occasionally, an old bike had to die so that a new one might live.

As cyclocross grew in popularity, it became possible to buy complete bikes, and I got hold of a few. But by then I had developed a number of perfectly defensible biases regarding components and so eventually returned to buying steel framesets and equipping them with my favorite bits.

That's how I stumbled across Soma Fabrications. My wife likes to ride, but doesn't much care for streets or singletrack, so, in 2006, I bought her one of their inexpensive Tange Prestige Double Cross framesets and she's been happily navigating the local bike paths ever since.

The frameset got the usual anarchic assembly, a hodgepodge of this, that, and the other, and she liked it so much I bought a Double Cross for myself, the formula for the optimal number of bikes in my garage being n + 1. I built mine up almost entirely with old parts stripped from another 'cross bike that had proved too whippy for me, and I found its ride both lively and comfortable. Plus it had mounting points for racks and fenders, front and rear, making it capable of doing more than going round in muddy circles for an hour.

Naturally, when I saw Soma had begun offering a loaded-touring frameset, I was immediately interested. So was *Adventure Cyclist*, and soon I was in possession of a Soma Saga, plus a box of parts that fell short of a complete build. Oh, boy — Frankenbike time again.

The Soma folks, otherwise known as The Merry Sales Company of San Francisco, don't sell the Saga as a complete bike, but they were kind enough to include a Sugino Alpina 2 triple crankset, Dia-Compe/Rivendell Silver friction bar-end shifters, Soma-label Tektro brake levers and IRD Cafam cantis, Nitto B135 Randonneur bars, Soma Thick N' Zesty tape, and an IRD Techno-Glide headset. I was on my own for the rest, rooting through boxes, appraising idle bikes and making notes as to what would need to be begged, borrowed, stolen, or — as a last resort — bought.

Ironically, my Double Cross became the first organ donor. Having undergone category-reassignment surgery a while back, it was now a touring bike of sorts, and surrendered its beefy Rich Lesnik/Rivendell wheelset, Shimano A520 touring pedals, and Tubus Cargo rear rack. Another bike contributed a Flite saddle, Ritchey seat post, and Cane Creek Crosstop brake levers.

A Tubus Ergo rack was presently unemployed, as was an Ultegra front derailleur, but the Deore rear I had to buy. And since I was in a rush, I also bought a Dura-Ace chain, 9-speed Shimano HG50 cassette, bottom bracket, Origin-8 Pro Fit stem, and some silver SKS P45 fenders for style points. Old Town Bike Shop stitched it all together, I plugged in my Visa card and brrrzzzzap! It's alive! It's alive, it's alive — it's alive!

My build runs 26.3 pounds without racks and bags, but with a lighter set of wheels the Saga would make a refined

townie, with its navy powder coat, vanilla panels, and gold lettering. Sling a messenger bag over one shoulder and head for cube farm or café. Ride it no hands while checking your email via smartphone. Cross your ankles over the stem, lace your fingers behind your head, and have a nap. No, on second thought, don't do any of that. Not around me, anyway. But you'll be tempted, because the Saga serves up a very stable, reassuring ride.

I'm famously timid in corners and on descents, but the Saga makes up for my shortcomings. I believe I could roll up to a stop light on this bike, climb off, stroll over to the button that triggers the pedestrian-crossing signal, punch it, and walk back — and the Saga would be sitting there patiently waiting for me, like a well-trained horse.

But what's a horse without saddlebags? Soma's website describes the Saga as featuring "rear load bias geometry" — geek-speak for "it rides best with loads in the rear or at both front and rear" — and they've beefed up the rear rack mounts in case you're a two-bagger by preference.

So I installed the Cargo and loaded a pair of Arkel B-40s with about 18 pounds worth of this and that and played credit-card tourist for a while, without actually deploying the credit card (my wife had raised questions of authorization regarding the parts purchase).

When I stood to climb with that load, the Saga wanted to wag its butt a bit, like an old, plump lab with bad hips. But like that elderly, chubby mutt, it wasn't remotely frightening. With its fat top and down tubes, long chainstays, and stretch-limo wheelbase, the bike remained eminently manageable, whether going up, down, or around and about. I never needed the 24-tooth granny ring on the Sugino crankset, and not once did I clip my toes on the front tire or heels on the rear bags.

Got more in mind than a casual weekend outing? The frame has three sets of bottle bosses, a flat chainstay plate suitable for a double kickstand, a spoke holder and pump peg, plus the usual eyelets and mounts at dropout and seat stays. And the flat-crown fork sports low-rider mounts and double eyelets at the dropouts. So on went a third bottle cage, fenders, Ergo rack, and some Arkel B-26 bags, plus a Princeton Tec EOS Bike headlight (the Cargo already sported a Busch & Muller 4D Toplight Permanent Taillight).

At this point the Saga was getting pretty stout. Before loading the bags it tipped my scale at 30.9 pounds. Fully loaded front and rear, it weighed in at 61.7 pounds (15.4 up front, 11.2 behind, plus 4.2 pounds of tent and pad lashed to the rack). Happily, I need the exercise and am rarely in a hurry. The path is the goal — and the path I chose included several of my favorite climbs and least-favorite descents, peppered as they are with mule deer, motorists, and other oblivious Colorado wildlife.

I was surprised at how well the Saga climbed while thus loaded — at no point did I feel as though I was wrestling with the bike, and out-of-the-saddle efforts felt just like climbing in slow motion on one of my lighter, pricier bikes.

Adding weight to the front made the Saga track as though it were on rails. I was perfectly comfortable twisting around with one hand on the bars to check for oncoming serial killers and even rode no-hands for short stretches.

And while I was a little tentative on one very steep, fast descent, I soon settled down and enjoyed the ride, whether up hill or down dale.

And out there is where we all want to be. This bike will take you there and bring you back. So what are you waiting for? Compose your own Saga. AC

Patrick O'Grady has written and cartooned about cycling since 1989 for Velo, Bicycle Retailer and Industry News, *and a variety of other publications.*

Specifications: Soma Saga

Price: $499 (frame and fork only)
Sizes available: 44cm, 47cm, 50cm, 52cm, 54cm, 56cm, 58cm, 60cm, 62cm
Size tested: 58cm
Weight: 26.3 pounds with pedals

TEST BIKE MEASUREMENTS
Seat tube: 22 inches (center-to-top)
Top tube: 22 1/4 inches actual, 22 5/8 inches virtual (center-to-center)
Head angle: 72°
Seat tube angle: 73°
Chainstay length: 17 3/4 inches
Standover height: 32 inches
Head tube length: 7 5/16 inches
Bottom bracket drop: 3 inches
Crank spindle height above ground: 10 5/8 inches
Fork rake: 1 25/32 inches (45mm)
Wheelbase: 41 1/2 inches
Frame and fork: Tange Prestige heat-treated chromoly main triangle, butted and tapered chromoly seat stays and chainstays, 1.25-inch butted downtube and top tube, extended head tube. Spoke holder, pump peg, flat chainstay plate for double kickstand, three sets of bottle bosses, double eyelets at rear dropout. Flat-crown Tange Infinity fork has double eyelets at the dropouts and low-rider mounts
Headset: IRD Techno-Glide
Rims: Velocity Synergy Asym 36-hole (rear); Velocity Synergy 32-hole (front)
Hubs: Shimano LX
Spokes: DT Swiss 14/15 gauge double-butted stainless steel spokes with nickle-plated brass nipples
Cranks: Sugino Alpina 2 triple, 172.4mm arms, 48/36/24 chainrings
Front derailleur: Shimano Ultegra
Rear derailleur: Shimano Deore
Shifters: Dia-Compe/Rivendell Silver friction bar-end shifters
Brake levers: Soma-label Tektro aero levers with Cane Creek Crosstop top-mounted levers
Brakes: IRD Cafam cantilevers
Pedals: Shimano A520 touring
Stem: Origin-8 Pro Fit
Saddle: Selle Italia Flite
Seat post: Ritchey WCS
Handlebar: Nitto B135 Randonneur, 45cm
Cassette: Shimano HG50, 11-12-14-16-18-21-24-28-32 9-speed
Chain: Dura-Ace 7701
Bottle cages: Blackburn CS-2 stainless
Front rack: Tubus Ergo
Rear rack: Tubus Cargo
Fenders: SKS P45
Headlight: Princeton Tec EOS Bike
Taillight: Busch & Muller 4D Toplight Permanent Taillight
Gearing in inches:

	48	36	24
11	117.8	88.4	58.9
12	108.0	81.0	54.0
14	92.6	69.4	46.3
16	81.0	60.8	40.5
18	72.0	54.0	36.0
21	61.7	46.3	30.9
24	54.0	40.5	27.0
28	46.3	34.7	23.1
32	40.5	30.4	20.3

Contact: somafab.com, (800) 245-9959