

First 170 Km On My Voltbike Mariner

Watching movies in the evenings, I often hit pause and run outside to look at the bike. My body remembers every steep mountain descent, the sudden sideways slipperiness of that mud hole, ambushes of thick angled roots and rocks, big trees crowding close on loose-surfaced downhill turns... and never a misstep from my Mariner. I enter the shed and gaze at this wild creature feeding silently from its black umbilical. *WHAT ARE YOU?* I breathe.

Now, after some 50 km off-road and the rest on crappy rural pavement, I understand that this rugged matt-black machine is not a bicycle, electric scooter or motorcycle. Whether riding through the rainforest or an urban obstacle course, this folding fatbike is a very different breed of jungle animal.

FIRST LOOK

Unboxing my new Voltbike, I felt the thrill and trepidation of meeting a mail-order bride. My first reaction was the same as everyone's – an eyeball-widening double-take, followed immediately by, “What the heck is *that*?”

From 12 to 74 years-old, everyone I encounter covets this folding fatbike. Men love the Mariner because this “Harley of electric bikes” doesn't look like “a girly bike.” Just as many women are attracted to this muscular machine because it looks sturdy, those big tires promise “safety”, and having motor-assist means you can choose as much or as little exercise as you want.

Made by LOHAS in China, where *200 million ebike riders* and 22 million electric bikes sold last year inspire constant innovation, the Mariner commands attention in the way that machines seduce the eye when form follows function in flowing utilitarian simplicity.

“It's big!” my friend Sheila exclaimed. My heart sank. This was not one of those little 20-inch-wheel folders I'd been inspecting online. Not something I could just swing a leg over like my old recumbent or electric scooter, shouting, “Hi ho, Silver, away!”

HEAVY DUTY

Before I could intervene, an X'tra-large pal jumped onto my new bike. Those big tires barely compressed as he gleefully bounced up and down. So yes, this two-wheeled jeep will definitely carry a load.

FIRST RIDES

It was too late for second-thoughts. For better or worse, I was committed to the Mariner as my sole transportation. Maybe worse! At 5' 5", while seated my feet could not locate the ground...

Even after an electrified decade riding a modified BikeE, followed by a café-style Motorino BTR, those first forays on the Voltbike were hairy. Slowing at the end of a driveway, I would pedal ahead for a looksee – and find myself catapulted into the middle of the road by an aggressive and unfamiliar pedal-assist (PAS). When climbing aboard or stopped, I quickly reverted to electric scooter procedure – *lightly squeezing either brake lever to cut out the motor.*

HOW TO MOUNT YOUR MARINER IF YOU'RE NOT 5 FOOT 7

Recalling my big red childhood Schwinn, I relearned how to shove off with my left foot pushing down on the half-raised pedal, then using it as a stirrup to swing my right leg over the lowered saddle. If I'm slow in mounting and that brief burp of PAS 1 or 2 leaves the bike slowing too quickly, a blip of the thumb throttle maintains momentum until I'm fully seated. Then I punch up the PAS to match my cadence.

In more challenging situations where a push-bike takeoff is inconvenient, I easily straddle the top tube. Placing one foot on the down pedal, I stand up while gently goosing the thumb throttle. The bike moves forward in an easily-modulated acceleration, bringing the saddle under me.

Normal landings see me standing on the left pedal and swinging my right leg *forward over the top tube* and onto the ground, while both hands modulate braking to a safe stop. With twin discs and all that tire tread, halting the Mariner – even downhill – is as quick as required.

When stopping quickly I prefer to slide forward off the seat, placing both feet flat on the ground. There's plenty of clearance over the top-tube to avoid singing soprano.

PLAYING WITH BOTH HANDS

My next welcome surprise was that George at Voltbike sets up this plug-n-play bush bike to ride right out of the box. Though the low-end Shimano derailleur occasionally slipped during those first rides, it hasn't hiccupped since. And that gigantic front chain ring means I can still spin the pedals at 37 kph (long after the motor's cut out) – a welcome “first” in my electric biking experience.

In fact, the 9-step PAS and 6 gears on the rear cassette are so perfectly matched, I'm overcome with astonishment and joy every time I ride.

But having run 13-25 amp lithiums on my ebikes, I was concerned about the Mariner's tiny 10-amp battery – necessitated, George told me, to maintain this Voltbike's killer price point. Because the Mariner's geared hub motor is controlled through pedal-assist that can be “dialed in” to match the terrain with the rider's energy, this folding fatbike gets good range from that seven-pound, advanced Samsung/Panasonic battery. A typical day includes hilly road riding at up to 26 kph/PAS 8-9, followed by shortcuts through the woods at 12-14 kph/PAS 2. This mix gives a useful range of 34 km – with one bar remaining on the five-bar “fuel gauge”. (Hilly pavement riding at 7-8 PAS “should” cover around 28 km. I'll let you know.)

GOING UP...

Did I mention hills? Since I live at the bottom of a monster gravity well, I need a bike that will climb, without destroying any more Chinese lithium batteries unable to handle high discharge rates the Samsung/Panasonic doesn't notice. To my delight, this 57-pound electrified fatbike *eats hills*. Long, steep grades on hot summer days are especially yummy.



The Mariner's geared hub motor has so much torque it will probably climb trees. And this goatbike is reassuringly sure-footed over local mountain paths that regularly send over-exuberant mountain bikers to hospital. Which is why this 67-year-old heart attack survivor slapped a golden decal of a mountain goat on one side of that black battery. And its Chinese ideogram on the other.

10 THINGS TO WATCH ON YOUR VOLTBIKE MARINER

Unlike my inquisitive quad-hooved neighbours, this semi-domesticated critter is not all friendly goat-licks.

1. For vertically-challenged persons, unless you're used to riding a full-size bike, take-offs and landings take practice. No worries. The techniques outlined above – and perhaps modified with your own style – are soon mastered.

2. The Mariner's zippy PAS requires caution during introductory flights. Learning to “play” left-handed through its push-button range, while matching power-to-pedal thrust with that right-hand shifter, will soon have you making roadsong like a virtuoso. When you can “shift” using either thumb without looking, you're ready for trails.

3. This fatbike picks up speed down the slightest incline like a boulder rolling off a cliff. Zooming downhill, those big knobbies start feeling unstable at 50 kph. I get on the binders at 45.

4. Mountain bike riders know that when their front tire glances off a root or rock angled across the trail, it tends to kick out like a cranky mule. A 4”-wide fat tire jerks sideways even more abruptly! *You MUST keep both hands on the bars when trail riding.* If you encounter an angled obstacle too late to avoid, take it head on. Those big elephant-pads will roll right over it. Even throwing out your left arm to signal a turn can trigger the wobbles on choppy road surfaces. Again, no biggie if you ride this bike like you'd fly a helicopter – with both hands on the controls.

5. But don't squeeze those iron-hard bar ends in a death grip! Ride easy. Ride with your hands relaxed. Or you'll end up with numb wrists. (See my upcoming post on essential and optional Voltbike Mariner mods.)

6. Do not overinflate those excellent Kenda tires. Just 10.5 pounds of air can be too bumpy on rough trails. I run my Mariner around 9 PSI. Suit yourself. And check tire pressures often.

7. This Voltbike's most annoying drawback is the motor kicking out at 28-29 kph. Not only is this frustratingly below the legal 32 kph allowed in Canada/USA, that herky-jerky, on-off surging just above and below the motor's max governed speed prevents mellow cruising at 30 kph. In 5th gear, I've learned to “downshift” the

PAS to maintain easy peddling on the flats at 25-26. This greatly extends range. And as I discovered yesterday, it's still as fast as a featherweight road bike rolling on $\frac{3}{4}$ x 29-inch tires – whose rider may tire before your battery does.

8. The supplied 2-amp battery charger is compact, lightweight and silent. Perfect for local round-trips under 35 km. But 4-5 hours recharging won't work for a quick turnaround in town. Since the battery is rated for up to 7-amperes charging, a fast charger of 5-6 amperes is on my list for long distance raids. I mean rides.

9. *Oops!* I confess to dropping my new Mariner when I misjudged the required PAS and stopped halfway up a steep mountain trail. (I bailed out and remained standing.) The small scrapes on that handy rear disc brake guard were disguised with a magic marker. (Which is why I chose black.)

Here's the deal. The SECRET to riding this fatbike with confident aplomb on single-track paths and rough mountain trails is by selecting PAS 1-2 and *using the thumb-throttle as required* to maintain momentum.

10. The biggest risk riding this fatbike is getting too many bugs in your teeth from your permanent grin! I'm learning to hum my arias of delight.

Bottom line: I can't stay off this go-anywhere goatbike. If I don't ride every day, I go into withdrawal so severe it can only be cured with the breeze on my face and the quiet hum of the motor and those big knobbies in my ears.



My advice:

Go find a bike that suits your personality and intended riding. If you're riding mostly on good paved roads, skip the Mariner and get a more expensive ebike like the amazing EVO – with road tires.

But if you *wanna have some fun...* grab this thing. It's a steal. –Voltman