LIFESTYLE | MOTORS

Volt Infinity Shimano Steps e-bike: automatic cycle fun in the city

Newcomer aimed at premium end of the market

THE VOLT INFINITY SHIMANO STEPS

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The 2020s will surely go down as the era in which cyclists discovered en masse that they didn't have to sweat - or strain at all really - to whizz up hill and down dale on a bicycle like an Olympian. All day long if necessary, thanks to the advent of the e-bike.

I discovered the joys of power-assisted cycling years ago. Mine - until stolen - magically levelled the steepest hill, while letting me pretend that my thighs had regained teenage-grade fitness, and carrying ridiculous amounts of heavy shopping.

Many new players have entered the market but only one, that I'm aware of, now runs its own, smart, central London showroom complete with swish cafe. Volt has the confidence to do so because of the quality of its product and the following it appears to have built up.

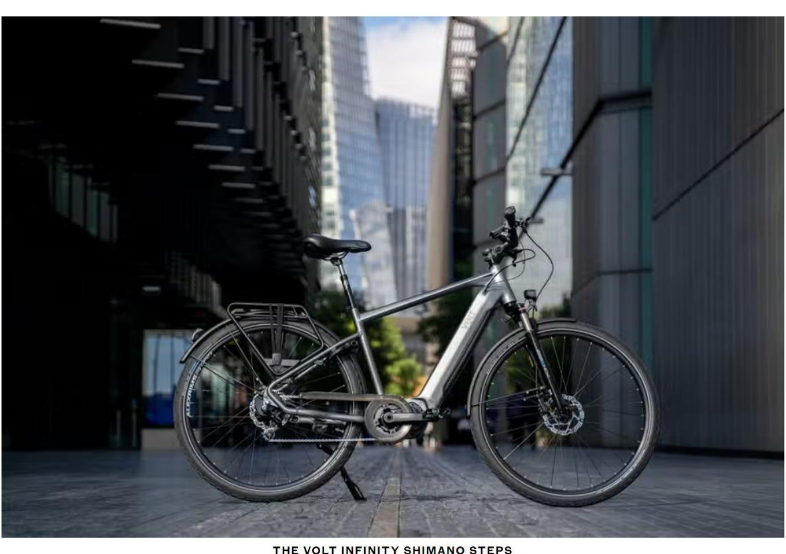
Quite right too, as we reported when testing the practical, slightly bling £2,299 'London' model with built-in racks and fancy paint job not usually seen this side of a pimped Lamborghini.

Volt now claims that the latest incarnation of its Infinity Shimano Steps - its flagship model - 'dominates its competition as the most advanced e-bike on the UK market', a pretty big statement.

It certainly has moved its game on, with the £2,999 model. It's not just that it is undoubtedly a premium model with an impressive high-end spec and generally reassuring build quality - it has a secret up its sleeve: a scintillating, fully automatic gearbox. Really, cycling couldn't get any easier.

Power cut

It doesn't get a lot more fun, either. Riding the Infinity in London traffic is exhilarating. The power cuts in swiftly but assuredly from near-standstill and - depending on which of three power settings are selected - accelerates the bike swiftly to its maximum (legally permitted) speed of 15.5 mph. Power feed-in is very well judged; there's always sufficient 'oomph', but it never catches the rider out, even in low gears.



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The Infinity handles crisply, turns in neatly, brakes extremely well thanks to the Shimano S700 Alfine hydraulic front and rear discs and the ride is nicely judged too, more forgiving than that of the London, for instance. This is due in part to the comfy Velo saddle on Zoom seat post, and the Suntour NCX D-LO Coil forks which nicely absorb London's potholes.

You're probably thinking (just as you insisted you didn't need electric assistance before becoming hooked on it) that there's no point in a self-shifting gearbox when you only have to move a thumb lever in the first place. But it's ridiculous fun, slightly addictive and gives the whole bike a sportier edge than you would think possible.

The point about the Infinity is that - with its slick side-stand, smartly engineered frame, built-in 2.9 kg battery (removable with a key for charging or chargeable in-situ), mid-drive motor, built-in security (including optional GPS tracking), techy screen, high build quality and reassuring Schwalbe tyres - it feels as though it's looking after you. Very nicely indeed.

The claimed range is impressive; 90+ miles. After charging to the max, the Shimano readout promised 113 miles in Eco, 79 miles in Normal, and 56 miles in High - an impressive range, with a full charge from 'empty' taking around 4.5 - 5 hours. A partial charge, from half to 80 per cent, is claimed to take just one hour.

So what else does this exciting new kid on the block have? The screen - roughly the size of a flip-phone - is clear and easy to use, likewise the handlebar-mounted gear controls, which can be set to Auto, or used to whizz up and down through eight gears, manually. The 'correct' gear can be set at a standstill although forward movement is required for the chosen gear to engage.

Factory worker

An app can be used to tweak power feed-in/cadence and so on. In factory mode I found that it worked best - almost always changing at just the right time - in the automatic setting, on High, although it worked fine in the other modes too. Auto was so much fun, I gave up on manual changes altogether. No auto box is perfect all the time, but it worked far better than those I've tested in many new cars, selecting gears superbly.

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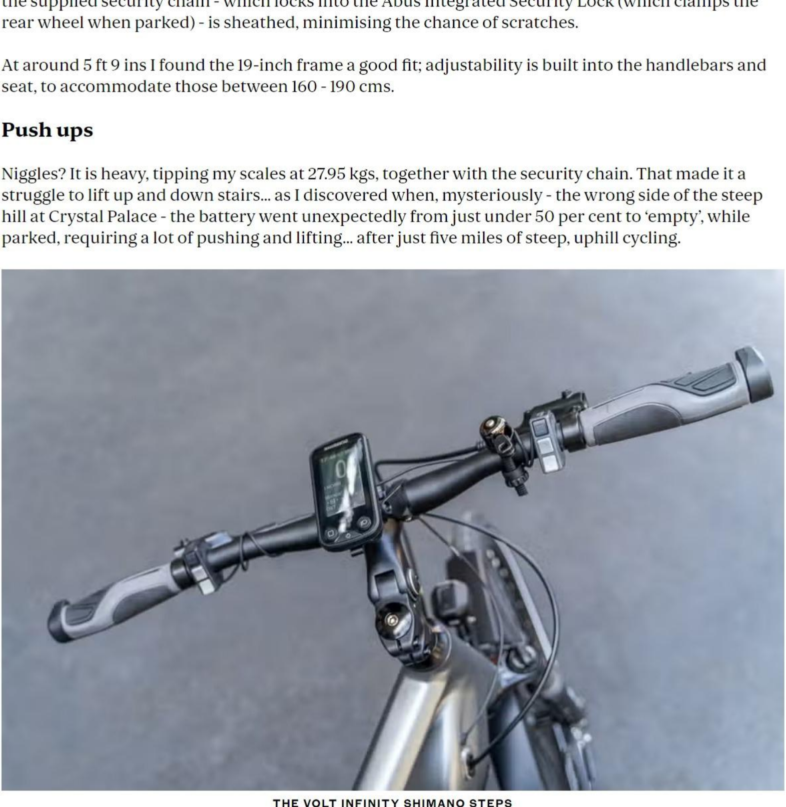
It has the reassurance of rugged, puncture-resistant, smooth-on-tarmac Schwalbe Big Ben tyres and built-in lights, along with lightweight alloy mudguards, while the smooth 250W motor - housed in the bottom bracket sounded quieter than on the London model. The silence was slightly marred by what appeared to be a small amount of chain rattle - which Volt say could be adjusted out.

The overall finish is superb, including the matt paint. If it does chip, Volt can touch it up. Fortunately, the supplied security chain - which locks into the Abus Integrated Security Lock (which clamps the rear wheel when parked) - is sheathed, minimising the chance of scratches.

At around 5 ft 9 ins I found the 19-inch frame a good fit; adjustability is built into the handlebars and seat, to accommodate those between 160 - 190 cms.

Push ups

Niggles? It is heavy, tipping my scales at 27.95 kgs, together with the security chain. That made it a struggle to lift up and down stairs... as I discovered when, mysteriously - the wrong side of the steep hill at Crystal Palace - the battery went unexpectedly from just under 50 per cent to 'empty', while parked, requiring a lot of pushing and lifting... after just five miles of steep, uphill cycling.



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Despite repeatedly refitting the screen the problem persisted until I recharged; I'm putting it down to a technical blip and Volt say they have a dedicated customer service line for customer assistance. The good news is that I was still able to change gear, despite zero pedal power-assistance.

The light Shimano screen is both a blessing and a curse. It works well, ably displaying battery life, range and speed, among other features, but I worried I would forget to remove it, when parking. Some people will take anything. In an ideal world I'd prefer more clearance between the side stand mount and my heel, and while the provided security chain was useful, I didn't totally rely on it, using instead on a chunky new Squire model (below).

The Infinity is expensive, at £2,999. But it does provide lots of bang for your buck in terms of quality, fun, exhilaration and, with a stout rear rack, practicality. If you had one of these, you'd always look forward to the commute to work - or a ride for the sheer fun of it.

Volt Infinity Shimano Steps

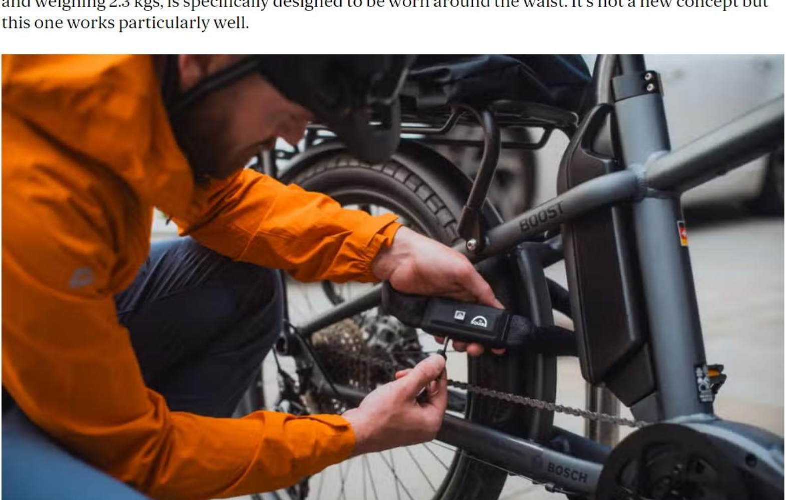
Price: £2,999 - click here to buy
Motor: 250W Shimano Steps
Wheel size: 28 inches
Gears: Auto and manual Shimano 8 SPEED ALFINE DI2
Weight: 27.95 kilos with security chain (27.15 without)
Fork: Suntour NCX D-LO Coil
LCD display: Shimano display showing speed, distance, battery power and gear with walk assist.
Battery: Integrated and removable Panasonic lithium, 2.9 kgs.
Claimed range: 90+ miles.
Frame: reinforced aluminium, 19 inches

Security card

One big problem facing cyclists is striking a balance between optimal security and weight. The thicker the chain or D-lock, the heavier it is.

E-bikes have a card up their sleeve; they make it significantly easier to carry more weight when you're cycling. But when it comes to heaving them up or down stairs or onto public transport, every ounce counts. Especially as e-bikes are heavier in the first place, with their batteries and motors.

Security experts Squire seem to have cracked it with their new Chainlok 10 which, although chunky, and weighing 2.3 kgs, is specifically designed to be worn around the waist. It's not a new concept but this one works particularly well.



THE CHAINLOK 10

It comes with a lightweight, adjustable extender strap, making it possible to find a comfortable fit when you loop it around your waist. Once in place, over or beneath your top layer, the 850mm chain feels almost weightless.

Despite this it is reassuringly solid, made from 10mm hardened square alloy steel chain - about as large a link as I'd consider when cycling. The lock is intriguing and almost seamlessly built into the chain itself so there's no uncomfortable bulge when it's worn. It uses what Squire describes as a 'unique patented linear pin tumbler' lock.

Operated by a sturdy key (two are supplied), it slots into the lock in either direction without the need for turning, while a push-button mechanism does the releasing. It is very easy to use and the device is sheathed in neoprene, making it more pleasant to strap on, and less likely to damage your bike. The release mechanism on the strap is only slightly fiddly to release.

THE CHAINLOK 10

I alternated between wearing the £89.99 Chainlok, 10 and strapping it to the Infinity's rack; both options worked well, and I felt much happier leaving the bike tethered with the Squire, than with the lighter chain supplied by Volt. My only issue was trying not to mislay the extender section while the chain was locked on the bike.

The Chainlok feels very much a class act and looks the part too, which is a large part of its job: acting as a deterrent. It's not terribly sociable, but the idea is that if your bike looks like too much trouble to steal, thieving low-lifes will target someone else's instead. I didn't attack-test the lock but had few qualms about leaving the bike unattended while out on errands. It's been awarded the toughest Sold Secure level for bicycles, achieving Pedal Cycle (formerly Bicycle) Diamond approval.

It is also available in a lightweight £74.99 Chainlok 8 version weighing 1.8kg, constructed from an 8mm hardened square alloy steel chain and achieving Sold Secure Pedal Cycle Silver approval. Both devices carry 10-year guarantees. More at www.squirelocks.co.uk.