

# Tested: Volt's ultra-stylish London Urban e-bike for commuters

Is it worth the price tag - and does it merit its prestigious design award?



VOLT LONDON E-BIKE

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You might not have noticed, but sales of e-bikes - bicycles which offer electric motor assistance when you're pedalling - have sky-rocketed.

In 2021, according to Mintel, just nine per cent of UK cyclists owned one, but that figure jumped to 14 per cent - one in seven - this May. Accounting for a quarter of spend on bikes, sales of e-bikes reached an estimated £315 million in 2021, up from £275 million in 2020.

Reasons for the boom are varied; more manufacturers have entered the market, offering a dazzling and often stylish array of products, more of us are becoming environment and cost-aware and seeking alternatives to the car, while early resistance ('if you're going to cycle, why not just pedal?') is fading. And the reason you may not have noticed the e-bike boom? They're more discreet.

Not long ago most had big 'bolt-on' batteries but the latest designs are so well integrated it's hard to tell they're battery-assisted at all - until they shoot past you up a steep hill.

## Dazzling

Volt's London Urban e-bike, the latest addition to the firm's range, is such a creation, its battery neatly hidden in the downtube, its minimalist looks and dazzling space-age paint job unfailingly drawing admiring glances. No wonder this handsome, single-speed beauty recently won the 2022 Red Dot Product Design Award. But what's it like to ride, day in, day out, in the city?



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Costing from £2,199, the London Urban e-bike isn't aimed at the budget end of the market. Its immaculate finish, fine build quality, the calibre of its components and fashionable retro looks see to that.

It earns its price tag, however, not just with quality but also quantity; it comes with a lot of kit, including good full-length mudguards, a stylish front rack, built-in front and rear lights, a sturdy side stand bell and of course charging kit. The battery can be charged in-situ, or removed, with a key.

A built-in, key-operated rear lock lets you lock the rear wheel, while a short, soft-wrapped chain (£30 extra) can be slotted into the lock, letting users lash it to a lamp post. Stylish two-tone tyres are from Schwalbe, there are good, effective hydraulic brakes and all the cabling is hidden, neatly, inside the frame. Options, including rear rack (£30), panniers and phone charging cable (£30) are available.



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The second thing I noticed - after all that eye-pleasing quality - when I collected the e-bike from the UK manufacturer's London HQ - is how heavy it is. Volt claims it weighs 21.5 kgs but it tipped my luggage scales at just over 22.2 kgs, or 23.6 kgs with the chain and 'free' Volt bag on board.

**Exhilarating**

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Fortunately, the weight mostly disappears on the move and - as with most e-bikes - the riding experience is exhilarating. It's like having bionic legs - or a strong following wind - as, smoothly, the power feeds in almost as soon as you begin to crank the pedals. There's little appreciable delay and thanks to the torque sensor, the amount of 'return' you get from the rear-wheel-mounted hub motor correspondingly increases with effort.

You still very much feel as though you're powering the bike along with your legs, but the amount of effort required is substantially decreased. The harder you pedal, the more power the battery feeds in but you still get a better workout (if you want one) than when you glide along with minimal exertion, letting the bike take the strain. You can have the best of both worlds.

The handlebar-mounted control pod, complete with clear screen revealing battery reserves and your speed is a very nice touch and easily used. I would prefer, however, a Bosch-style readout estimating the remaining range, rather than just the state of charge. The same pod communicates with a key card, required to 'start' the bike, adding valuable security. It also operates the lights and other settings, including different power settings; off (reminding you of just how heavy the bike is), low, normal, high, or power.





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On 'low', battery assistance is subtle. Select 'normal' and the fun begins. Click 'high' and the bike feels increasingly lively, the only penalty being a faint whine from the motor. Engage 'Power' and you become an Olympian - but with a slightly louder whine. Volt says that the range is 'up to' 60 miles, although that varies depending on the power level.

The brakes work very well, the front rack is extremely useful and the side stand is great for ensuring that that sumptuous paint job remains untarnished.

## **Turbo**

Possibly the best Volt London feature is a discreet thumb paddle on the left handlebar, which can be pushed to 'walk' the bike when you're off the saddle, at 5mph. Push it when you're riding however and it 'turbo' boosts the motor; brilliant for getting away from the traffic lights or flying up hills. It's an exciting feature.

I didn't however, love those 23 or so kgs, when hoisting the bike up steps. It really is quite heavy. The front wheel's tendency to 'flop' to one side when stationary (is it because of the rack, or the fork angle?) was irritating when trying to lock the bike to a rack. Just occasionally, the 'heavy' feeling of the front wheel marred - although only very marginally - low-speed handling. Other niggles? The only suspension is in the saddle post; those used to front fork suspension might find it bouncy over London's rougher roads.



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Many riders will like the fact that the Volt London is a 'fixie', with only one gear. It simplifies the ride and works well. It does, however, have limitations. Although power assistance tapers off smoothly at 15.5mph (the legal assistance limit), exceeding that threshold requires substantially more exertion to reach speeds of around 20 mph, regularly attained by 'ordinary' cycles. I felt myself wanting a higher gear to slow down the pedalling action. Still, it is billed as an 'all round urban machine' - not a racer, so you can comfortably leave the ridiculous-looking lycra at home and ride in high style indeed. It seems it certainly does deserve that prestigious Red Dot award, after all.