

★★★★★  
**WRECKED**  
*& Rated*  
MBUK





**BIKETEST**

# PULSE-POUNDRING XC BIKES

We pit four carbon fibre cross-country hardtails against each other to see which comes out a potential podium-topper



## OUR RATINGS

We base our scores on value for money and performance



### EXCEPTIONAL

A genuine class leader



### VERY GOOD

One of the best you can buy



### GOOD

It'll do the job and do it well



### BELOW AVERAGE

Flawed in some way



### POOR

Simply put, don't bother!

**C**ross-country (XC) is one of the most brutal disciplines in mountain biking, requiring razor-sharp skills to navigate a skinny-tyred, upright-feeling bike across increasingly technical terrain, and an absolute willingness to find yourself physically exhausted in a pool of sweat two hours later.

Much like their riders, XC bikes have to be light and skinny to get up hills quickly, able to transfer power to the rear wheel fast and have enough left in the tank to handle tracks strewn with rocks, roots and drops.

The world of XC racing is changing. While the climbs never get easier, courses are getting increasingly technical to test the mettle of racers and their machines. As such, just being lightweight isn't good enough anymore. These days, a winning bike shouldn't hold you back when the course climbs the contours, yet when things get gnarly, its frame shape and the components

bolted to it should be able to stand up to the challenge.

We picked four XC bikes, all keenly priced, but with carbon frames that you'd expect to see at much higher price points. Our testing was designed to show their relative merits, but also to find where their weaknesses lie. Each bike got pushed hard round long XC test loops to make sure they lasted the distance, but also swapped between testers for short head-to-head sprints to get down to the gritty details of what did and didn't work when every ounce of energy we had was getting thrust through the cranks.

From fast, smooth, rollercoaster tracks to rock gardens and roots, as well as long fireroad drags and short, sharp sprints, we put each bike through its paces so you'll know what to expect should you want to put both bike and body against the clock and your competitors, or just ride your local trails hard and fast.

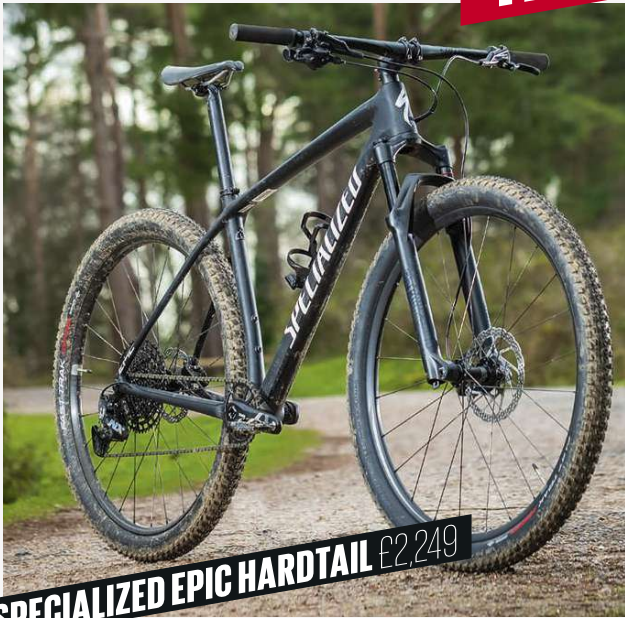
## THE TESTER



TOM MARVIN

While Tom's bread and butter may be trail riding, he's developed an unhealthy obsession with putting on the Lycra and hitting the trails as flat-out as possible for some high-octane fun. Over the years, he's raced multi-day marathons in South Africa and Nepal, 24-hour races all over the UK and plenty of XC races in Scotland, so if anyone was going to burn some winter calories testing head-down, arse-up machines for us, it was going to be him.

# THE LINE-UP



**SPECIALIZED EPIC HARDTAIL** £2,249

Specialized launched their new Epic Hardtail in 2019, with updated geometry and class-leading weights. The top-end S-Works models get a sub-800g chassis, but even this entry-level Epic's frame is under a kilo and built from

their former-top-level FACT 11m carbon. It has the most contemporary geometry here, with the slackest head angle, longest reach and steepest seat angle. However, the kit doesn't come close to what's offered by the others.



**CUBE REACTION C:62 SL** £2,299

The Reaction is Cube's second-tier XC frame, built with their C:62 carbon, which is 62 per cent carbon fibre plus nanoparticles, said to boost durability. In theory, the 27.2mm seatpost – the skinniest on test – should add

some comfort-enhancing give. It's the only bike here with a Fox fork (a 32 StepCast with on-bar lockout). A Shimano XT drivetrain and brake package, and fast-rolling tyres from Schwalbe, complete this lightweight package.



**MERIDA BIG.NINE XT-EDITION** £2,500

Merida are well-versed in building lightning-fast cross-country bikes. As the name suggests, this XT edition of their Big.Nine hardtail gets a Shimano XT 12-speed drivetrain for snappy shifting. Maxxis's Ikon tyres look as

skinny as they are fast and contribute to a competitive weight. Up front, the RockShox Reba fork isn't as light and flashy as the SID and 32 found elsewhere here. Finishing touches include a neat saddle-mounted multi-tool.



**CANYON EXCEED CF SL 7.0** £2,532 (inc. shipping)

We had to triple-check the price when this landed because, while Canyon are known for great value for money, we didn't expect to find Reynolds carbon wheels, a RockShox SID fork and a SRAM GX Eagle drivetrain

on a carbon frame for this price. Winning immediately on value (their direct-sales model certainly helps) doesn't necessarily mean an overall winner though. To come out on top, bikes in our tests have to perform on the trail too.

## DETAILS

### SLENDER LEGS

Fox's 32 StepCast fork has cut-out lower legs to keep the chassis narrower and therefore lighter, while still fitting a Boost front wheel

### SUPERB SHIFTING

The full Shimano XT drivetrain is the best on test, with snappy, smooth and ultra-reliable shifting up and down the block

### COCKPIT ISSUES

The long stem and narrow bar are a definite throwback to sketchier times – a shorter stem would improve handling no end



# CUBE REACTION C:62 SL

**£2,299** Snappy out of the gate, the Reaction has a powerful kick

**F**rom the first push of the pedals, it's clear the Reaction is an XC race bike. Its stiff, box-like belly helps ensure every ounce of power is delivered to the rear wheel. Like all the bikes on test bar the Specialized, it's traditional in shape, although its 110mm stem is an outlier here. Cube have used their buying power well to fit a decent spec, but how does this all tie in together between the tape?

### The frame

The Reaction's frame is a game of two halves, with the down tube and chainstays fairly big and boxy for maximum power delivery, and a more svelte top tube and seatstays keeping weight sensible and adding a touch of comfort, on paper at least. In theory, the skinny 27.2mm seatpost

should add a bit of 'give' too. The frame is dropper-ready, but the seat tube diameter limits your options. Cables enter at the front of the head tube to minimise rub. There's also plenty of protection against chain suck on the driveside chainstay, although this is less of a problem with 1x drivetrains, as fitted here. The rear axle requires an Allen key to remove, which will slow things down in a race situation. Mud clearance isn't the most generous, so you'd struggle to fit a tyre much wider than 2.25in. Frame geometry is middle-of-the-road in this test, with 69-degree head and 73.5-degree seat angles plus a 441mm reach (21in size).

### The kit

Fox's 32 StepCast is a popular XC fork for good reason, with a low weight and race-focused damping, which prioritises efficiency over smoothness on small chatter. You get a full Shimano 12-speed drivetrain

## JARGON

### ON-BAR LOCKOUT

Locking your fork out means less energy wasted through bob on climbs and an on-bar lever makes this process fast in a race situation

### MUD CLEARANCE

Limited room between the rear tyre and seat/chainstays means more chance of clogged-up wheels (slowing you down significantly) and narrows your tyre choices, literally.

and brake set-up, and the bike rolls on Fulcrum wheels, which we had no issues with in testing. Schwalbe provide the Racing Ray and Racing Ralph tyre combo. The rubber compounds aren't the softest, but the treads are among the most aggressive on test. Cube's own Newmen brand provide the long stem, narrow bar (740mm) and fairly slim grips.

### The ride

The Reaction's reactions are punchy, with the direct-feeling back end thrusting you forward with each pedal stroke. That race-optimised damping keeps the 32 fork stable in open mode, and there's also an on-bar lockout for tarmac sprints, which we used to good effect on our faster test loop. The Cube is great for sprinting up short, sharp climbs, but on rougher ascents the fairly hard-compound tyres leave the bike scrabbling for grip as they struggle



OF THE BIKES HERE, THE REACTION IS THE BEST IN LOOSE, MUDDY CONDITIONS. THE TYRES HAVE SHARPER TREADS THAN THE OTHERS, GIVING MORE PURCHASE IN THE SLOP

**HIGHS**

Instant acceleration

Impressive spec, with well-chosen components across the board

**LOWS**

Harsh ride chokes descending speed and rough-trail acceleration

Tyres are thin and need higher pressures to prevent punctures, adding to the uncompromising ride feel

to mould over rocks and roots. That said, of the bikes here, the Reaction is the best in loose, muddy conditions. This is because the Ray and Ralph tyres have sharper, more spaced-out treads than the Ikons, Rekons and Fast Traks found elsewhere, giving more purchase in the slop. The difference is marginal, but the Cube fared best at powering up slippery climbs. On steep drags, the broad range of the Shimano gearing and the stretched position, thanks to the long stem, mean there are few excuses for not getting to the top. With your weight towards the front axle, there's no front-wheel lift or wander.

On the way down, the Cube doesn't quite make the grade. The back end is stiff and the tyres have to be run relatively hard (the skinny carcasses mean you can't reduce pressure much to increase comfort without risking punctures), leading to a jarring ride that makes it hard to maintain speed over rocks or roots.

There's little noticeable flex from the skinny seatpost.

On tight, twisty tracks, the long stem slows reactions, leaving the Reaction feeling a touch more ponderous than the other bikes. When it's steep, your weight is shifted further forward over the front axle, leading to a more nervous feeling; the short 423mm back end does little to add stability here. On fast, flowy terrain though, the Cube holds speed reasonably well, and it thrives on mellower trails, carving between berms with the XT drivetrain and brakes never missing a beat.

**MBLUK VERDICT**

Fast reactions to pedal inputs help on climbs, but the stiff chassis affects descending capability



**FOR A LITTLE MORE**

**Cube Reaction C:62 SLT £2,799**

Spending a touch more gets you an excellent RockShox SID fork, powerful Magura brakes and a SRAM X01 Eagle-based drivetrain.



**FOR A LITTLE LESS**

**Cube Reaction C:62 Race £1,999**

For £300 less you get less refined SRAM GX Eagle gearing and a slightly heavier RockShox Reba RL fork.

## DETAILS

### PROTECTION DETAIL

Canyon's Impact Protection Unit – a rubbery-plastic block behind the headset – prevents the bar spinning too far in a crash and damaging the top tube

### CHUNKY SEATPOST

A wider-diameter post means easier fitting of a dropper in future, although there's theoretically less twang, and therefore comfort, than with a narrower post

### NARROW BAR

Canyon spec a 720mm handlebar – we'd rather a wider one that could be cut down to preference



# CANYON EXCEED CF SL 7.0

**£2,532** Astounding value, with kit that blows the rest away

**C**anyon's online-only 'direct sales' model always makes for decent value, but the kit on this XC race frame still shocked us when the bike landed in our workshop. The drawback is that you can't go to your local shop for a test ride or post-purchase support.

### The frame

This version of the Exceed was first seen in 2015, when its shape shone compared to the competition. Now though, its geometry is in-line with all but the Specialized in this test – a reach of 441mm, 69.5-degree head and 73-degree seat angles, and 432mm chainstays. The frame's carbon construction is smart, with clean lines, concealed cables, protection from chain suck and the brake mount nestled within the rear

triangle. A smart pop-out 'Quixle' handle makes the rear axle quick and easy to remove.

### The kit

For a bit over £2,500, it's incredible that Canyon have managed to spec Reynolds TR 249 carbon wheels and a RockShox SID fork (with a remote lockout). These are backed up by a triple-compound Maxxis Rekon front tyre and standard Maxxis Aspen at the back, a SRAM GX Eagle 1x12 drivetrain and Level TL brakes, and Race Face finishing kit. Our only complaint was with the Selle Italia SLS saddle, which we found slippery when putting the power down.

### The ride

At 10.38kg the Exceed is the lightest bike on test, with a lot of weight saved in the wheel-and-tyre combo. Combined with a fairly direct-feeling frame, low-rolling-resistance tyres and that traditional geometry,

## JARGON

### TORQUE CAP

SRAM's wider-diameter axle end-cap and dropout interface, designed to bolster stiffness between wheel and fork for improved handling.

### DAMPER

Cartridge inside a fork that contains hydraulic circuits to control the rate of compression and rebound, and prevent a pogo-stick-like feel.

the Canyon is a nippy bike to ride. There's no lag between pedal inputs and forward motion, with every ounce of effort seemingly going into acceleration. On smooth surfaces, on- and off-road, the Rekon and Aspen tyres roll quickly and quietly. Their skinny treads do give up grip in loose or slippery conditions though, demanding sharp handling skills to correct losses of traction.

RockShox's SID fork is a classic in XC circles, and for good reason. The chassis offers the stiffness needed on such a bike, and the damper delivers great feel and control. You get an on-bar lockout, which feels snappier than the Fox equivalent on the Cube (pushing the lever forward to firm up the fork feels more intuitive than releasing cable tension to do so). The fork comes with RockShox's Torque Cap dropouts, designed for use with wider-diameter hub end-caps. Many wheels (including these) don't have Torque Caps, so threading



**THE CANYON IS A SHARP-HANDLING BIKE, ESPECIALLY ON TIGHT, TWISTY TRAILS. WITH THE FORK OFFERING DECENT CONTROL AND THE WHEELS SPINNING UP TO SPEED QUICKLY, IT THRIVES BETWEEN THE TREES AND PICKING LINES**

**HIGHS**

Impressive components for the money

Snappy acceleration and handling gives a peppy, involving ride in tight terrain

**LOWS**

Skittery feel over high-frequency chatter and not the comfiest ride, limiting speed in some situations

Direct-to-consumer model means limited opportunities for test rides, and only remote back-up if anything goes wrong

the axle through the fork and hub is a slower process.

Carbon wheels add cachet and help reduce weight. They enhance the bike's reactive personality, and contribute to an aggressive overall feel. However, the Canyon's front end feels a touch harsher than the others here and we think this is likely due to the wheels. We ran the tyres a touch softer than on the other bikes to offset this, although you can't reduce pressures too far without affecting tyre stability under load. Mirroring this aggressive nature is the 34t ring on the GX Eagle drivetrain. Clearly, Canyon want you to be pushing big watts and high speeds on the Exceed. Compared to the XT drivetrains on the Merida and Cube, GX feels a touch clunkier. The dual-release click of the XT shifter also helps you move the chain up the block faster, which could make a difference in a race.

The Canyon is a sharp-handling bike, especially on tight, twisty trails.

With the fork offering decent control and the wheels spinning up to speed quickly, it thrives between the trees and picking accurate lines around and over rocks. On rough, flat-out tracks, the traditional shape and stiff hoops lead to a fairly skittery ride, albeit not one that's out of control. It just doesn't have quite the same planted feel as the Specialized or Merida. Score-wise, the Exceed matches the Epic Hardtail thanks to its top-end kit. While not groundbreaking in its approach, it won't hold you back on anything but the most technical XC courses.

**MBLUK VERDICT**

A fast-handling bike that's exceptionally good value, but is best suited to tight, twisty tracks



**FOR A LITTLE MORE**

**Canyon Exceed CF SL 8.0 £3,032**  
The next model up gets SRAM X01 Eagle gearing and the fancier Select+ version of the SID.



**FOR A LITTLE LESS**

**Canyon Exceed CF SL 6.0 £2,082**  
You lose the carbon wheels and SID fork, but get a Fox 32 Rhythm and smoother-feeling Shimano XT drivetrain.



## DETAILS

### BLOCK BOTTOM

SRAM's NX Eagle rear cassette is heavy and lacks the 10t sprocket of the GX Eagle and Shimano clusters elsewhere in this test

### EASY RIDER

A reduced-offset fork, slack head angle and short stem (for an XC bike) give the Epic a stable handling feel

### FRAME GAINS

The light weight of the FACT 11m carbon frame is a boon on the climbs, while its modern geometry gives the bike great descending performance



# SPECIALIZED EPIC HARDTAIL

**£2,250** Wins the geometry race, but its kit brings up the rear

**C**ross-country bikes have often been slow to benefit from advances in geometry, but Specialized are ahead of the game with the Epic Hardtail. For an XC bike, this is almost as radical as it gets. While it doesn't get full enduro-style figures, the reach is the longest here, the head angle is the slackest and it's also got the only fork with a shorter offset, for extra stability at higher speeds.

### The frame

Specialized use their Fact 11m carbon on the non-S-Works Epic Hardtails. A generation ago, this was their top-end fibre, and it contributes to a claimed frame weight of well below 1kg. The frame itself has a svelte, classy, simple look. Its forward-thinking shape includes

a reach of 455mm on the large size, a 68.5-degree head angle and 74-degree seat angle. The 1,146mm wheelbase is the longest here.

### The kit

The Epic Hardtail is the cheapest bike on test by £50, but even taking that into account, the kit doesn't leave us excited. RockShox's Judy Gold fork isn't anything to shout about, with a simple Motion Control damper and no remote lockout. It does have a short offset though, showing that Specialized have sweated the details. While the SRAM SX/NX Eagle drivetrain is functional, it's a step-down in quality from the Shimano XT and GX Eagle found elsewhere, and the cassette has a narrower 11-50t range. It's not all bad though. The 2.3in Fast Trak tyres have plenty of volume, while the stubby-nosed Power Sport saddle was popular with our testers. The rest of the kit comes from the Specialized stable too.

## JARGON

### FORK OFFSET

The distance between a fork's steering axis (a line drawn through the centre of the head tube) and the front wheel axle. A shorter offset places the tyre contact patch further behind the steering axis (a figure known as 'trail'), giving improved stability and a slower handling feel.

### EAGLE

SRAM's term for 1x12 drivetrains. Most use a 10-50t cassette on an XD freehub, but NX and SX get an 11-50t range and use a regular freehub.

## The ride

Simply put, the Epic Hardtail is capable and comfortable. These days, XC bikes have to be fast descenders and capable when things get technical. Lessons from trail and enduro bikes show that longer and slacker bikes handle descents better, and it's the same here. On the roughest, steepest and trickiest tracks, the Specialized was a step ahead of the other bikes in this test.

Handling through the corners is stable yet sharp, thanks to the short-offset fork and slack head angle, along with the shortest stem in this test giving it that nippy edge. This gives the bike a calmness as it carves from berm to berm, or while pointed through choppy rock and root gardens, where it resolutely refuses to become unstuck. The confidence-boosting feel is fortified by the tyres, whose large volume helps to damp the ride and take the edge off impacts. While more traditional XC



HANDLING THROUGH CORNERS IS STABLE YET SHARP, THANKS TO THE SHORT-OFFSET FORK AND SLACK HEAD ANGLE, ALONG WITH THE SHORTEST STEM IN THIS TEST GIVING IT THAT NIPPY EDGE

### HIGHS

The best geometry here for aggressive riders looking to maximise speed up and downhill

High-volume tyres boost comfort and grip on all but the slippiest of trails

### LOWS

Quality of components is markedly lower than on the other bikes

Fork has a noticeably less refined feel through its stroke

bikes require an element of care on steep sections, riding these on the Epic was verging on fun.

Climbing on the Specialized is OK, too. The tyres' skinny-looking tread digs in reasonably and, with their larger volume allowing slightly lower pressures, they're the most impressive here when crawling up wet roots and rocks. There's a slight loss of zip on fast accelerations, due to the excess weight that the tyres and complete bike are carrying. That said, there's plenty of stiffness in the frame to prevent your legs' power from twisting it from side to side, and the front triangle is stout enough that you can haul on the 750mm alloy bar.

Compared back to back, the fork isn't as smooth or refined as the SID or 32 and stutters a bit when faced with repeated hits or big impacts. It feels OK in isolation though. The chassis is good, with a Torque Cap-equipped hub adding stiffness. Elsewhere, the rest of the kit simply

does its job. Shifting up and down the cassette could be better, with a bit of a clunky feel as the chain jumps between sprockets. The SRAM shifter and Shimano brake levers don't give such a clean-looking cockpit as controls from the same brand and aren't as easy to set up either, because the two clamps don't sit so well together. But the MT501 brakes themselves work well, with a sharp feel and consistent power.

The frame is undoubtedly the best here, but with a compromised kit list, it's difficult to give the Epic Hardtail the winner's badge.



### FOR A LITTLE MORE

**Specialized Epic Hardtail Comp £2,749**  
For £500 more you get a better RockShox Reba fork and lighter SRAM Level brakes and Roval wheels.



### FOR A LITTLE LESS

**Specialized Chisel Comp £1,499**  
A largely similar spec, but this time on the brand's alloy XC frame, adding some grams but saving you £750.

### MBLUK VERDICT

A great frame that's let down by lacklustre kit, but is a solid platform to upgrade from



## DETAILS

### SHIFT ASSISTANCE

Shimano's new 12-speed XT cassette has teeth profiling to help with shifting under power, up and down the block

### RAPID RUBBER

Low-profile Maxxis Ikon tyres roll fast and contribute to a comfortable ride

### BELLY PROTECTION

Merida have stuck a down tube protector in front of the BB to protect the frame from rock strikes



# MERIDA BIG.NINE XT-EDITION

**£2,500** Great overall package, with a solid frame and good kit

**M**erida's name may not be on the tip of your tongue when thinking about your next bike, but the Taiwanese brand have been big in the XC world for years and their line-up has delivered some impressive performances. The Big.Nine isn't the most futuristic of XC hardtails, but it has a good on-track feel and a decent kit list.

### The frame

The low-slung carbon frame may not have the modern geometry of the Specialized, but the finish is just as good. Cables are routed internally (including ports for a dropper) and kept in tension for a rattle-free ride. There's protection for the down tube as well as the chainstays. The rear axle has a removable lever (which can be used on the fork axle too);

you need to pull this out a little to use it, because otherwise the coveled dropouts foul it, and it then feels a bit wobbly, but caused us no issues.

With a short reach (438mm on the large), 70-degree head angle, 73.5-degree seat angle and 433mm chainstays, the Big.Nine is fairly traditional in shape. The head tube is short enough to get your front end slammed, should you wish.

### The kit

A mid-spec RockShox Reba fork props up the front end. The bike benefits from a slick-shifting Shimano XT drivetrain and you also get XT brakes, with an I-Spec integrated clamp for a clean cockpit. Merida provide the bar, stem, seatpost and saddle, and also the rims, which are built onto Shimano SLX hubs and shod with 2.2in Maxxis Ikon tyres. There are no fancy compounds here, but the low-

## JARGON

### INTEGRATED CLAMP

Shimano's I-Spec bar clamps and SRAM's MatchMaker equivalents combine shifter(s) and brake levers for a clean look, while still allowing some independent position adjustment. They can also be used to add dropper post remotes and lockout levers.

### COMPOUND

The rubber mix used in a tyre. Softer compounds grip better, but wear out faster and roll slower.

profile tread rolls quickly enough, they're a reasonable width and the overall wheel weight is competitive.

### The ride

On paper, the Merida doesn't look as good as it actually is on the trails – especially the geometry figures. But as an all-round package, it comes out swinging. With quick and accurate handling, it makes short work of twistier tracks, where its fairly short length and steeper front end help it navigate round obstacles. When things get rowdier, it doesn't shine as brightly as the super-composed Specialized, but the Big.Nine's smooth, planted feel on choppy trails did impress us.

The tyres mould better over edges than they do on the Cube or Canyon, aided by the fork and a bit more give in the rear end, so we didn't feel as nervous hitting technical lines fast and weren't pinged from side to side in the same way. When it came to

**AS AN ALL-ROUND PACKAGE, IT COMES OUT SWINGING, WITH QUICK AND ACCURATE HANDLING THAT MAKES SHORT WORK OF TWISTIER TRACKS**



**HIGHS**

A comfortable ride that felt composed where others were out of their depth

XT gearing performed faultlessly, with precise shifting in all conditions

Comfortable enough for longer outings and rides well on more intense ones too

**LOWS**

A slacker head angle and longer reach would improve descending

sprints, despite its fast-rolling tyres, the Merida didn't have quite the kick of the stiffer bikes. However, the difference felt marginal, and if that's the cost of descending with a little more confidence, we'll take it.

Climbs passed as quickly as on any bike here, with the frame remaining steadfast under power. The Ikon tyres can slip and slide on greasier surfaces, but we were fairly impressed with how they attacked technical ascents, refusing to slip when pushed into steppy climbs. Because the front end is pretty short, it's easy to plant weight over the front wheel on steps to keep it in check, while pulling on the bar to extract as much traction from the rear tyre as possible.

There's little to complain about componentry-wise too. RockShox's Reba sits between their Judy and SID forks and feels good, just not quite as plush as the SID – although we again appreciated the on-bar

lockout. The drivetrain, brakes, wheels and tyres just worked, neither shining nor causing any issues to speak of. When it came to really putting the power down, we'd have liked a wider bar than the stock 720mm number.

The Big.Nine may not be the shoutiest of bikes – it doesn't have the flashy kit of the Canyon, nor the contemporary shape of the Specialized – but it'll get you up the hills fast and back down fairly quickly too, while the components should last a season or two of racing without complaining too much.

**MBLUK VERDICT**

A decent frame backed up with stellar kit; the least compromised package in this test



**FOR A LITTLE MORE**

**Merida Big.Nine 7000 £3,450**

Carbon wheels from Reynolds and a RockShox SID fork boost the price, and should further enhance the performance too.



**FOR A LITTLE LESS**

**Merida Big.Nine 6000 £2,450**

One for the SRAM fans – a small drop in price gets you a GX Eagle drivetrain (albeit with an SLX brake downgrade).



**CUBE REACTION C-62 SL**



**CANYON EXCEED CF SL 7.0**

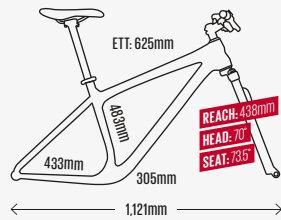
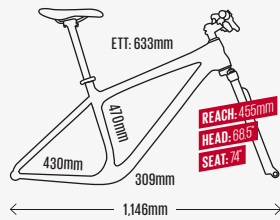
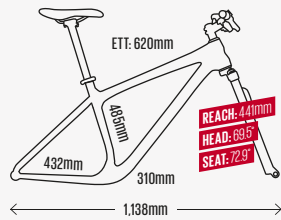
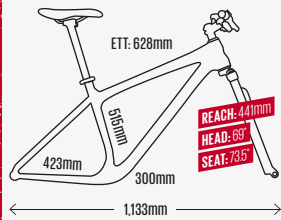


**SPECIALIZED EPIC HARDTAIL**



**MERIDA BIG.NINE XT-EDITION**

<b>PRICE</b>	<b>£2,299</b>	<b>£2,532 inc shipping</b>	<b>£2,249</b>	<b>£2,500</b>
<b>DISTRIBUTOR</b>	www.cube.eu	www.canyon.com	www.specialized.com	www.merida-bikes.com
<b>FRAME</b>	10.6kg (23.4lb), without pedals	10.38kg (22.9lb), without pedals	11.54kg (25.4lb), without pedals	10.85kg (23.92lb), without pedals
<b>SIZES (*TESTED)</b>	C:62 carbon fibre	Carbon fibre	FACT 11m carbon fibre	CF3 carbon fibre
<b>FORK</b>	15, 17, 19, 21*, 23in	S, M, L*, XL	XS, S, M, L*, XL	S, M, L*, XL, XXL
<b>FORK</b>	Fox 32 Float StepCast Performance Elite, 100mm (3.9in) travel	RockShox SID Select, 100mm (3.9in) travel	RockShox Judy Gold 29, 100mm (3.9in) travel	RockShox Reba RL, 100mm (3.9in) travel
<b>HEADSET</b>	FSA Orbit	Integrated	Integrated	FSA No.55E
<b>WHEELS : HUBS</b>	Fulcrum	Reynolds	Specialized	Shimano SLX
<b>AXLES</b>	15x110mm Boost (f) 12x148mm Boost (r)	15x110mm Boost (f) 12x148mm Boost (r)	15x110mm Boost (f) 12x148mm Boost (r)	15x110mm Boost (f) 12x148mm Boost (r)
<b>RIMS</b>	Fulcrum Red 77	Reynolds TR 249 C	Specialized XC 29	Merida Expert CC
<b>SPOKES</b>	Double-buttressed stainless steel	Double-buttressed stainless steel	DT Swiss Industry	Double-buttressed stainless steel
<b>WHEEL WEIGHT</b>	1.99kg (f), 2.57kg (r), inc. tyres	1.80kg (f), 2.30kg (r), inc. tyres	2.03kg (f), 2.87kg (r), inc. tyres	1.81kg (f), 2.61kg (r), inc. tyres
<b>TYRES</b>	Schwalbe Racing Ray ADDIX Performance 29x2.25in (f)/ Schwalbe Racing Ralph ADDIX Performance 29x2.25in (r)	Maxxis Rekon 3C MaxxSpeed EXO 29x2.25in (f)/Maxxis Aspen TR 29x2.25in (r)	Specialized Fast Trak Control 29x2.3in	Maxxis Ikon 29x2.2in
<b>CRANKSET/ BOTTOM BRACKET</b>	Shimano Deore XT, 32t/ Shimano press-fit	Truvativ Stylo 7K, 34t/ SRAM DUB press-fit	SRAM X1000 Eagle, 32t/ SRAM DUB threaded	Shimano Deore XT, 32t/ Shimano BB71 press-fit
<b>MECH(S)</b>	Shimano Deore XT (1x12)	SRAM GX Eagle (1x12)	SRAM NX Eagle (1x12)	Shimano Deore XT (1x12)
<b>SHIFTER(S)</b>	Shimano Deore XT	SRAM GX Eagle	SRAM SX Eagle	Shimano Deore XT
<b>CASSETTE/CHAIN</b>	Shimano Deore XT, 10-51t/ Shimano SLX	SRAM XG-1275, 10-50t/ SRAM GX Eagle	SRAM PG-1210, 11-50t/ SRAM SX Eagle	Shimano SLX, 10-51t/ Shimano SLX
<b>BRAKES</b>	Shimano Deore XT, 180/160mm rotors	SRAM Level TL, 180mm rotors	Shimano MT501, 160mm rotors	Shimano Deore XT, 180/160mm rotors
<b>BAR/STEM</b>	Newmen Adv. 318.0, 740mm/Evo. 318.4, 105mm/Cube Race SL	Race Face Ride, 720mm/ Race Face Ride, 90mm	Specialized Minirise, 750mm/ Specialized XC, 70mm	Merida Expert CC, 720mm/ Merida Expert CC, 90mm
<b>SEATPOST/SADDLE</b>	Newmen Evolution/ Venec Natural Fit	Race Face Ride/Selle Italia SLS	Specialized/Specialized Body Geometry Power Sport	Merida Expert CC/Merida Expert CC



**MBUK VERDICT**

Fast reactions to pedal inputs help on climbs, but the stiff chassis affects descending capability



**MBUK VERDICT**

A fast-handling bike that's exceptionally good value, but is best suited to tight, twisty tracks



**MBUK VERDICT**

A great frame that's let down by lacklustre kit, but is a solid platform to upgrade from



**MBUK VERDICT**

A decent frame backed up with stellar kit, the least compromised complete package in this test



(Asterisk indicates size tested)

**Winner**  
**MBUK**  
**MERIDA BIG.NINE**  
**XT-EDITION**

**WRECKED**  
**& Rated**  
**MBUK**  
**BIKETEST**



## FINAL VERDICT

**W**hether it was on long rides out of the door, across town and around our local trails, or fast, repeated head-to-head shootouts further afield, our quartet of carbon XC race bikes surprised us, both in terms of just how darn fast they were at getting from A to B, but also what they could achieve downhill – although skinny tyres and minimal frame weight add up to a ride feel that's far removed from what you might expect of a trail or enduro bike.

The Cube Reaction C:62 SL is a competent bike, with top-performing components and tyres that instil more confidence than most XC rubber on wet, sloppy trails. However, its traditional shape and super-stiff ride meant it was left behind by the others when push came to shove. Choosing a favourite from the Canyon

Exceed CF SL 7.0 and Specialized Epic Hardtail was tough. The Canyon has some outstanding kit (the fork especially), although the carbon wheels split opinion between 'fast and light' and 'a bit harsh'. The Specialized was the leader when it came to the frames, with a modern shape and sublime finish. If we could have the components from one and the chassis from the other, we'd be very happy indeed.

Overall though, it was the Merida Big.Nine XT-Edition that was the least compromised. Yes, we'd like it to be a touch longer and slacker, but that barely held it back. The equipment bolted to the frame performed really well, and its composed ride – thanks to a more forgiving back end – meant it was our first choice when we wanted to crank out some fast miles. ⚙️

## NEXT MONTH

### £1,000 bikes

What's the best buy at this extremely competitive price point?

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