

## DETAILS

### SPIN IT TO WIN IT

The Merida's 11-speed Shimano Deore drivetrain has an 11-51t cassette, which makes scaling steep climbs a relative doddle

### SMOOTH OPERATOR

Despite the RockShox Recon fork not having particularly sophisticated damping tech, it impressed us on the trail

### WISE UP & SIZE UP

Look at the geometry chart rather than the size names to get a better idea of which frame will fit you and suit your needs best



# MERIDA BIG.TRAIL 500

**£1,350** Versatile long-forked trail bike with great geo, if you size up

**M**erida may not be the first brand that spring to mind when looking for an aggro trail hardtail, but if you ignore the frame size designations and focus on the numbers, the Big.Trail is a bike with great geometry and plenty of nifty details.

### The frame

Built from Merida's Racelite 61 aluminium, the Big.Trail has double-butted tubes (thicker in some areas for strength, thinner in others to save weight) and welds that are smoothed over to give a polished finish. Cables are routed internally through the front triangle. Adding versatility, there are discreet mounts for a mudguard, pannier rack and kickstand. Inside the front triangle are two water bottle mounts, one on the top of the down tube and a second on the underside of the top

tube. The frame uses Boost rear axle spacing, runs on 29in wheels – with clearance for up to 2.5in-wide tyres – and will take a tapered-steerer fork if you ever want to upgrade.

It's the geometry that stands out most, though – but only if you ignore Merida's names for the four sizes. Look at the 'large' Big.Trail and it has a similar reach to the same-sized Sentier 27 and Fuse 27.5 – 455mm, 449mm and 460mm, respectively. These figures are much shorter than you'll find on bikes at the cutting edge of the sport, where there's been a move towards longer, more stable geometry. However, the Merida has an ace up its sleeve – a much shorter seat tube than the other two bikes. This means riders who'd usually ride a large – including our 5ft 10in (178cm) tester – can upsize to the extra-large without any worries about standover height. In fact, even on the bigger size, the seat tube is still 33mm shorter than on the large Vitus. The payoff is a much more generous reach – 475mm, the

## JARGON

### COMPRESSION SPIKE

When a fork's damping prevents it from compressing quickly enough to absorb a bump, resulting in a harsh feel through the handlebar.

### I-SPEC

Shimano's integrated bar-clamp system, which lets you mount a dropper post lever or shifter on the same clamp as your brake lever, reducing cockpit clutter.

same figure found on Merida's One-Sixty enduro bike. Combined with the slack 65.5-degree head angle and steep 75.5-degree seat tube angle (compared to 74 degrees on the Fuse 27.5 and 73 degrees on the Sentier 27), this means that, as long as you upsize, the geometry is much more progressive than on the other two bikes here.

### The kit

For the cash, Merida have struck an impressive balance between spec'ing branded kit where it's most needed and keeping costs down by using in-house components. Up front, there's a RockShox Recon Silver RL fork with 140mm of air-sprung travel and externally-adjustable rebound and compression damping. The 1x11 Shimano Deore drivetrain gets the same 51t lowest cassette sprocket as its more expensive 12-speed counterpart. Other branded parts include Tektro M275 brakes with 180mm rotors and, crucially, tubeless-ready Maxxis Dissector

ON STEEPER OR GNARLIER DESCENTS, THE MERIDA RIDES SIMILARLY TO A SHORT-TRAVEL TRAIL BIKE, ITS WHEELS NOT GETTING SUCKED INTO HOLES OR BUCKED ABOUT BY BUMPS

### HIGHS

Bang-on geometry (if you upsize) gives impressive downhill capability

Calm handling inspires confidence

Comfortable climber

Loads of grip and control

### LOWS

Quite noisy on rough trails

tyres with the EXO Protection casing and dual-compound rubber. These are fitted to own-brand 29mm (internal) rims, built onto Shimano MT400 hubs. Merida also provide their own 150mm-travel dropper post, 780mm bar, 50mm stem, saddle and grips. The bar stands out, with a good shape and not feeling excessively stiff like some 35mm-diameter offerings can.

### The ride

Thanks to its long reach, there's plenty of room to move around on the Big.Trail when attacking climbs standing up. This makes it possible to control how much grip the wheels have with deliberate changes in body position, while any unintended fore or aft movements have little to no effect on the bike's trajectory. As a result, there's less chance of the rear wheel spinning and the accompanying feeling of overweighting the front wheel.

It's a similar story when climbing seated, thanks to the steep seat

tube angle. This positions you centrally over the bike, which not only improves comfort and makes pedalling easier, but also helps to reduce front wheel lift on exceptionally steep inclines, while still letting you drive plenty of grip through the back wheel. It also means you don't have to lower yourself towards the bar to get enough weight over the front wheel. Overall, the Big.Trail is an incredibly competent climber.

The 11-speed, 11-51t cassette provides sufficiently low gearing for the steepest climbs and, when mated to the Merida's 32t chainring, a high enough top gear to not spin out on the descents. With 150mm of travel, the dropper post enabled us to get the saddle in our preferred positions for both descending and ascending, and the Shimano remote was well-shaped with a light lever feel, although we'd prefer to see an I-Spec clamp to reduce bar clutter. While the own-brand saddle is more comfortable than

the Nukeproof Neutron on the Vitus, it still has a fairly convex shape, which put pressure on our tester's soft tissue, rather than just his sit bones. Another niggle is the shaping of the bike's back end. Because the chainstays bend outwards close to the rear axle, they contacted our tester's heels when pedalling. This was initially pretty frustrating, but it wasn't hard to modify the way we pedalled to avoid hitting the frame.

With impressive small-bump performance, the Recon fork is comfortable on both the climbs and the descents. The damping feels controlled through fast, rough sections, with no noticeable compression spike. Plenty of mid-stroke and low-speed compression support makes it easier to go fast on the descents, because the front end of the bike isn't diving into holes and when going around berms.

The fork's stability amplifies the frame's calm handling feel. There's nothing frantic about how the Big.Trail descends, and you can maintain



The seatpost's 150mm drop is ample for getting the saddle out of the way on even the steepest descents



All three bikes suffer from brake pad rattle, which is annoying but doesn't affect performance



We banged our heels on the chainstays, which sweep out to accommodate the 148mm rear hub

a neutral and stable body position without needing to lean back to compensate for compromised geometry. It feels quite long, but not unmanageably so, and you can always fit a shorter stem.

With none of the see-sawing motion that some shorter bikes can suffer from over bumpy terrain, there's plenty of easy-to-control grip. The wheels never feel like they're skipping off the ground and the bike doesn't clatter down the trail. Instead, it's possible to push the tyres into the ground with conviction and confidence.

Ride smoothness is just as impressive. On the sort of steeper or gnarlier descents where you'd expect a £1,000+ hardtail's limits to show, the Merida rides similarly to a short-travel trail bike, its wheels not getting sucked into holes or bucked about by bumps. Admittedly, we weren't going as fast as we would have been on a full-sus down the same trails, but the same on-bike feel was there. It's not a quiet bike,

with a significant amount of cable rattle, chain slap and brake-pad noise on anything other than hyper-smooth trails. We're inclined to forgive the Merida these minor foibles, though, not least because they're fixable – more chain slap protection can be cheaply added, cables can be secured or put in silicone tubes, and, while it's an expensive upgrade, the brakes can ultimately be changed.

Overall, the Big.Trail has to be one of the most capable, fun to ride and impressive bikes for this kind of money, just so long as you pick the right size.

### MBLK VERDICT

An immensely capable bike across a huge range of trail types for not much cash in the grand scheme of things



### FOR A LITTLE MORE

**Merida Big.Trail 600 £1,500**

Increasing your budget by £250 steps you up to a Marzocchi Z2 fork, 12-speed Deore drivetrain and Shimano brakes.



### FOR A LITTLE LESS

**Merida Big.Trail 400 £1,000**

Still fitted with a dropper post, the most affordable Big.Trail comes with an SR SunTour fork, 10-speed Deore and Kenda tyres.