

*TRAIL BIKE OF THE YEAR*

The awesome trails of the Basque Country provided the ideal testing ground for our final 10



2015

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# TRAIL BIKE OF THE YEAR

**25 trail bikes. One winner**

**We hammer 25 bikes head to head round our  
UK test trails to see which qualifies for our  
top 10 Basque Country battle**



*TRAIL BIKE OF THE YEAR*

We had some really tough decisions to make after battling it out on all our contenders





**O**ur Trail Bike of the Year shootout is the hardest but most enjoyable test we do. We compile a list of 25 £2500-£3200 trail bikes from every relevant brand, then spend months riding them to the ragged edge on our favourite UK test trails to select a shortlist of 10 bikes to hit a top global riding destination.

### Harder than ever

The bottom end of the top 10 and top of the 15 'nearly theres' was in flux to within an hour of when we shut the van doors and headed for the ferry. Not only did all the established bikes ride better than they did last year, there's some fantastic fresh talent too.

### Evolution not revolution

The seemingly overnight 650b revolution of 2014 unleashed a wave of new frames, forks, wheels and tyres that might've looked similar to 26in or 29in versions but often performed differently on the trail. Nobody quite knew what shape 650b bikes should be and whether they were now the answer to everything or did 29ers still have a place outside of high-speed XC applications.

A year on and both wheel sizes are alive and well and we've got a better idea of what components and geometry works.

### Longer

The most obvious development is more brands heading down the extra long toptube, short stem route pioneered by Mondraker. Lower bottom brackets and wider bars are increasing – and welcome – trends for coping with the high speeds and higher cornering loads of modern trails and riders.

After a backlash against overweight push-not-pedal bikes a few years back, the suspension travel of many all-round trail/enduro bikes is creeping up past the 150mm mark again. We didn't make that a rule for selection as in

many cases shorter travel bikes from some brands are our favourites for hard and fast riding.

### Faster

The average 2015 trail bike is faster down hill or along technical trails than it's ever been. Testing leading up to this has revealed that they're not as compromised as you might expect when it comes to climbing either. In fact, smarter suspension, better 650b and 29in tyre grip and speed sustain and lighter components and complete builds mean some of the fastest descenders are also seriously tenacious technical climbers.

### Smarter

Technology hasn't stood still either. While we're not getting

**“The average 2015 trail bike is faster down hill or on techy trails than ever”**

electrical lockout or shifting at this price yet, lighter, quieter, sequential shifting 1x11 transmissions are common. Tubeless ready tyres and wheels are everywhere, as are dropper posts. Dampers and suspension systems are more advanced than ever too. →

## ROLL OF HONOUR Former Trail Bike of the Year award winners



### 2012 NORCO'S SIGHT

It was looking like two in a row for the Germans until this late arrival from Canada pedalled to the top of the trails and smashed the opposition on descents. The 2012 Sight offered superbly composed suspension, a short stem/wide bar cockpit and fat but fast tyres that blasted techy climbs and burnt ragged berms.



### 2013 WHYTE T-129 S

UK-based Whyte's strongest suit is its handling, and with the T-129 S it proved 29er wheels don't have to be an obstacle to dynamic handling. Despite having 'only' 120mm of bounce it never put a wheel wrong and the high-value, no-nonsense spec packed in trusted favourites and a dropper post to score a clear win.



### 2014 MONDRAKER FOX R

Last year we took our finalists to the trails of Finale Ligure, where a Spanish bike was our surprise winner. Parts and skinny fork spec were off the pace on paper but the radical extended toptube, shrunken stem Forward Geometry Foxy R from Mondraker ran rings around even the lightest, best equipped carbon bikes.

**ROUND 1**

# MAKING THE CUT

The brave contenders, but who missed out on a podium place?

## TREK REMEDY 8 £2500

Trek's carbon Remedy 29er won the women's EWS champs last year. However, despite only 140mm of travel and no dropper post, its 14kg weight means this affordable 650b alloy version struggles to accelerate to the point where we checked for brake drag several times. The chattery top, soggy middle DRCV shock, 70mm stem and wooden tyres leave it feeling more like a heavy, hard work cross-country bike than a dynamic technical trail tamer.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.08kg (31.04lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.trekbikes.com](http://www.trekbikes.com)

- ▲ **HIGHS**  
Decent cockpit stretch and durable Shimano XT SLX spec. Carbon Re:Aktiv shock versions are significantly tighter and lighter but more expensive. Lots of fine sizing options.
- ▼ **LOWS**  
Chattery rear, DRCV shock and wooden tyres don't carry speed. Excessively heavy fork for 140mm and no dropper post. Dull rather than dynamic riding character.

## MARIN MOUNT VISION XM7 £2600

Marin's distinctive chunky alloy front end and even chunkier single-piece carbon back end make the Mount Vision a stiff bike without being over heavy despite an external routed dropper post. The 140mm travel Iso Trac flexstay suspension is plush too. It bounces under power without pedalling though and the Revelation RL fork is a lot harsher when worked hard. The 80mm stem and hard compound Schwalbe tyres need switching too.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.29kg (31.5lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.palligap.cc](http://www.palligap.cc)

- ▲ **HIGHS**  
Structurally super-stiff frame with carbon fibre swingarm. Decent weight considering price and dropper post. Durable Shimano 2x10 drivetrain and Deore brakes.
- ▼ **LOWS**  
Revelation fork really struggles to match rear end control. Short toptube, long stem, sketchy tyres and wooden brakes. RL Monarch needs locking out to stop power bounce.



## WHAT IS A TRAIL BIKE?

You've never been able to hit the hills harder, faster more easily and in more different ways than you can on a 2015 trail bike. But what is a trail bike and what makes them so good? Most importantly how do you choose what bike will work best for you and how did we choose our top 10?

### Going full circle

The name Mountain Bikes originally comes from above the door of Gary Fisher and Charlie

Kelly's shop in Fairfax, California. A shop that sold the first bikes purpose designed for pedalling – rather than pushing up – hills but mainly for bombing back down them at brake burning speed. However, Gary and Charlie knew that their name – klunkers – for these modified beach cruiser-based mongrels wasn't going to get many people through their door. That made renaming these learn-what-works-as-we-make-them lash ups Mountain Bikes was the crucial first move in making mountain

**“Consistent ground connection at both ends means impressive traction on techy climbs”**

## GT SENSOR CARBON EXPERT £2900

With a carbon frame and 130mm travel version of the latest incarnation of GT's distinctive I-Drive suspension the Sensor looks promising on paper. Consistent ground connection at both ends means impressive traction on technical climbs and

massive Continental 2.4in tyres add smooth comfort. The Fox rear shock can choke on big hits and drive feel is slightly elastic. Braking effect can upset already drifty tyres and old-school handling balance so our testers never rated it as highly as the outwardly similar Santa Cruz 5010 C.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 13.30kg (29.32lb)  
**CONTACT**  
[www.cyclingsportsgroup.co.uk](http://www.cyclingsportsgroup.co.uk)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Outstanding front and rear traction under power.

Pedalling rhythm uninterrupted by rough ground.

Impressively stiff, potentially big hit capable frame.

#### ▼ LOWS

Elastic drive feel, braking affects suspension balance.

Old-school handling character.

Adequate not amazing kit.



biking a worldwide riding revolution. Since then these have morphed into all sorts of shapes and sizes from Olympic cross-country race machines with almost road bike-style handling and riding positions to downhill bikes that seem to share more design DNA with motocross bikes.

Having rippled out to every edge of the riding world from racing superlight bikes in skimpy Lycra, to hucking off cliffs in petrolhead pyjamas, the tide of mountain biking has washed most of us right back to where it started. Getting up big hills as easily as possible, pedalling about on top

of them looking for new trails and then bombing along/down them as fast as possible before doing it all over again.

Ironically, that means for all the carbon composite frame, hydraulic suspension, brake and seatpost technology involved, the latest trail bikes are closer to the original klunkers than ever. 1150mm wheelbase lengths, slack head angles and wide bars in super-short stems that bring hands right back behind the wheel for confident high-speed control can be directly traced to recent downhill evolution. Template those same dimensions over a late-'70s

California klunker and you'd be amazed how similar they are. That's because when it comes to bombing downhill, longer, lower and slacker means you can hang it out a lot wilder, whatever the decade.

### Trail bike traits

Thankfully nearly four decades of development mean that while the shapes and play-all-day purpose are the same as the original mountain bikes, all-round performance of the latest models is totally unrecognisable. There are state of the art metal alloy



## BMC TRAILFOX TF02 XT SLX £2600

**B**MC's carbon, stiff mainframe, 2.4in Onza tyres and XT/SLX stop/go gear mean you get a lot of bike for your money. Base geometry and cockpit dimensions are good. The Evo series 34 fork struggles to feel composed at combat speeds and it blows through its 150mm of rear travel easily. Heavy tyres that need low pressures to feel fluid amplify soft pedalling feel even with the Fox damper in Trail mode.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.43kg (31.81lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.evanscycles.com](http://www.evanscycles.com)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Seriously oversized, super-stiff, carbon mainframe.

#### ▼ LOWS

Fox 34 fork adds weight but not control.

Huge heavyweight tyres feel wooden and eat speed.

Heavy for a semi-carbon bike.

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN ALTITUDE 750 £2700

**T**he top alloy Altitude is reasonably specced with Race Face, Maxxis and Shimano 2x10 for £2700 but you'll need to add a dropper post yourself. Our test sample was supplied with one. Getting the linear, pressure sensitive shock setup to match the adjustable Ride 9 shock rate and geometry settings isn't easy either. Done right you can get a plush, reasonably relaxed descender or a radically steep, corner hugging, high traction (but heavy) climber.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.55kg (32.07lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.greenoversports.com](http://www.greenoversports.com)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Adjustable geometry from decent descender to radical climber.

Impressive Shimano hub, Ringle rim wheels and Maxxis tyres.

Technical riding, character tinkerer's dream.

#### ▼ LOWS

Needs a dropper post.

Heavy overall weight.

Obviously linear suspension needs careful tuning.



and carbon frames here that are probably lighter than the reinforced steel forks of the original beach cruisers. Hydraulic disc brakes offer way more control than smoking back pedal coaster brakes and touring bike cantilevers working through motorbike levers.

The latest transmissions offer immediate gearshifts to cope with any terrain between walking speed climbs and motorbike speed descents. Race grade suspension keeps tyres glued to the trail and in total control whether you're crawling up over slippery roots or flying off multi-metre high

Trail bikes are now getting more aggressively angled for more big hit fun

drops. While Hite Rite seatpost springs were a thing back in the '80s now you can control seat height without moving your hands off the bars. Rather than hand re-welded road rims and white wall rubber designed for beach boulevards there's now a massive choice of wheel sizes and widths and an even wider choice of advanced multi-compound rubber to stick on them.

In other words whether your priorities are getting to the top of the hill first and then staying as safe as possible on the way back down, or staying fresh enough on the climbs to blow your mates away on the descent, the modern trail bike is a brilliant toy for playing in the dirt on.

### So enduro right now

While this is the Trail Bike of the Year test, there's another word you'll see everywhere when it comes to mountain biking right now, and that's enduro. Cynically speaking enduro is just the latest version of the original Mountain



## MERIDA ONEFORTY 7.900 £3000

The Merida keeps weight low with a neatly formed alloy chassis and FSA/SRAM 1x11 drivetrain.

Semi-slick Schwalbe rear tyre adds easy speed to a power reactive suspension system and the travel adjustable Pike fork and 30T chainring keep it keen even on climbs. Angles and cockpit are well shaped and you get a Reverb dropper post. Short reach on the large frame and a linear suspension character mean it's sketchy on the descents.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 13.42kg (29.58lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.merida.com](http://www.merida.com)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Climb friendly FSA/SRAM gearing and dual position Pike.

Low weight, fast rear tyre, power reactive suspension. Decent angles and cockpit shape.

#### ▼ LOWS

Linear blow through without small bump smoothness.

Snakeskin tyres lack suppleness subtly.

Only three short reach frame sizes.

## ORBEA RALLON X10 £2999

Orbea's Rallon X10 rocks golden Fox shocks, plus Shimano and Race Face parts as standard and you can tweak spec when you order. Slack, low, long front, short rear numbers look promising on the lifetime warrantied frame too. The deliberately linear rear suspension was designed to work with a BOS Kirk not Fox Float X damper. Together with twist from rear co-axial QR axle that means a defensive not dynamic feel on the trail. It's a heavy, mushy climber too.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.64kg (32.27lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.orbea.com](http://www.orbea.com)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Custom build options for creating your ideal spec.

Impressive base spec including Fox Factory suspension.

Properly plush rock-eating rear end.

#### ▼ LOWS

We'd spec a shorter stem to help handling.

QR skewer rear means obvious wheel wag.

Heavy weight is obvious on climbs.



Bike marketing ploy. Repackaging essentially the same elements into a new sport and bike format that sounds exciting and fresh enough to tempt us to open our wallet and buy a ticket for the next big bandwagon.

However, for once enduro is just a reflection/reaction to what most

Enduro might be the new marketing term of choice, but it's creating better bikes for riders

of us were/are doing anyway; concentrating as much excitement and enjoyment into the most efficient ride or route possible. Whether you are signing up for an event and sticking on a number board, turning up at a trail centre and hitting every run possible or just grabbing a

map and creating your own routes (exploro?) it's a mixture of everything that makes mountain biking great.

The bikes follow the same best of everything principle too. Lightweight, super-efficient frame, suspension and component technology that make cross-country bikes blisteringly quick mean these bikes don't have to be pushed back up to the top or stuck on an uplift truck. That same power happy performance also makes self-propelled singletrack a ton of fun if you've haven't got the time or location to get some gravity on your side.

Even the riding involves a 'best of' compilation of previous mountain biking fashions. The best trail centres and enduro events are a mix of the berms, tabletops and gap jumps of dirt biking, the drops of freeriding, the dirty, slippery, multi-line natural sections of downhill racing and the apres ski trailhead vibe of all-mountain Alpine biking. You might even find a skills park to hone your riding with a bit of



## SARACEN ARIEL 151 £2900

Saracen's Ariel is a super-plush DH-shaped steamroller but needs plenty of power to get it going. The linkage driven Fox Float shock and 34 Evo fork blow through travel easily and very low effective bottom bracket means a lot of crank smacks. If you can supply enough power to get the chunky semi-carbon chassis going it totally flattens the trail to keep the hefty momentum. Frame flex means it can wander at speed and under seat dropper lever and general spec aren't great for price.



**"A super-plush DH-shaped steamroller but needs plenty of power to get it going"**

### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.47kg (31.9lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.saracen.com](http://www.saracen.com)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Plush suspension means a proper speed-sustaining steamroller.

Low slung and very long gravity friendly shape.

Safe and confidence inspiring until pushed hard.

#### ▼ LOWS

Linear suspension and soft frame lack aggro accuracy.

Low spec levels for the money.

High weight despite its semi-carbon frame.



old-school trials hopping or elevated North Shore sections. Wherever you live in the UK you probably don't have to look far to link most of these elements – from singletrack cross-country climbs to dirty downhill – into a local ride either.

Whether you want to go fashion crazy with the full Euro enduro with Strava, a GoPro, ski goggles and a bum bag, or just do the riding you've always done anyway, for the first time in a long time bike development is actually following our riding, rather than just looking for the biggest hits and biggest headlines.

### Size matters: wheels

While enduro might be a sign that the marketing departments are trotting happily along at real riders' heels you'd be forgiven for wondering what the hell is happening with wheels.

You might be a paranoid online conspiracy peddler who believes 650b was another cynical marketing ploy to force you into buying fresh new frames, forks, wheels and tyres. You might believe it's a genuine desire by bike designers to find the optimum all-round size between 26 and 29in wheels. It doesn't

really matter. The fact is in the last 18 months 650b wheels have gone from being nowhere to everywhere.

If you want a faster rolling, smoother, grippier ride than a 26in wheel they are 'better' too. Not by much and certainly not as dramatically different as a 29er in the way they handle and interact with the trail. Still, it's enough of a difference that we'll now refer to a bike that rattles and chokes over rough terrain as 'feeling like a 26er'. Crucially, they're still close enough to a 26in-wheeled bike that they generally 'fit' into corners, accelerate, hop, pop and



## LAPIERRE ZESTY AM 527 £3149

Lapierre's carbon Zesty frame with 150mm travel and matching Pike fork sounds like a recipe for fun. Low weight and efficient pedalling mean it gets up trails smartly as long as your heels don't knock the flared brake protecting stays. While the geometry and cockpit numbers look sound even switching out the hard compound Schwalbe tyres and running through suspension tuning options couldn't get it carving like the Lapierres we used to love.



## NORCO RANGE CARBON 7.3 £2800

Norco's Range matches 2012 TBOTY-winning ART suspension with a RockShox Pike RC fork for a trauma absorbent 160mm travel ride. Shimano stop, go and hub spec and grippy Maxxis tyres are a bonus and external X-Fusion dropper post means simple servicing. Cockpit and proportional chassis geometry is good too. The lack of shock lockout means bounce under power and it's a serious mass despite its semi-carbon build. It also lacks rigidity and accuracy when trails get properly aggro.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 13.23kg (29.16lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.hotlines-uk.com](http://www.hotlines-uk.com)

- ▲ **HIGHS**  
Semi carbon frame makes for low overall weight.  
Efficient pedal feel and 2x10 gear range.  
Decent Race Face, Shimano and RockShox spec.
- ▼ **LOWS**  
Never felt as planted on the trail as we wanted.  
Wide chainstays will harass some heels.  
Schwalbe Performance series tyres need switching immediately.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.54kg (32.05lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.evanscycles.com](http://www.evanscycles.com)

- ▲ **HIGHS**  
Well-balanced size proportional geometry.  
Seriously smooth 160mm suspension travel.  
Decent, mostly durable tough trail spec.
- ▼ **LOWS**  
Suspension pedal bounce means slow climbing.  
Lacks the structural muscle to fight tough trails.  
Heavy weight despite carbon mainframe.



change direction easier than a 29er, particularly at lower speeds.

Whether you like it or not a new wheel size has been a good enough reason for a lot of people to buy a new bike. That's good news for bike shops and let's be honest, it's been great to have

something new to write about when the rest of the biking world seemed to be going road bike crazy. It's also good if you really wanted to treat yourself to a new toy but couldn't justify buying a new 26in-wheeled bike because it wasn't that different to the one you got five years ago and

650b has become the new standard for trail bikes, though well designed 29ers are still strong options

you thought 29in-wheeled bikes looked wonky.

Then again 29ers don't look that wonky anymore and they don't handle as wonkily. Try and follow a big-wheeler up, down or along a rough and not too twisty trail and the same easy rolling, speed carrying advantages that found them fans in the first place are still very obvious. Designers have got smarter at negating the downsides, whether that's with cleverer frame design, evolved geometry, better components or all three.

Even playing the 'what works for enduro?' card can't help us here as while the men's Enduro World Series was won by Jared Graves on a 650b-wheeled Yeti, Tracy Moseley won the women's EWS on a 29er Trek. As we sit in Spain before we start the final phase of test riding we don't know which wheel size will win our annual showdown, with three very strong 29er candidates ready to go mano a mano with the mid-wheelers for overall honours.



## ORANGE SEGMENT S £2500

If you're after a light, uptight 29in racer you're in the wrong place, but renowned UK hardcore brand Orange has packed a huge amount of swagger and attitude into its new short travel, big wheel trail frame. Simple suspension is instinctively communicative and the made in Halifax frames are built to take a lifetime of beatings. Frame twist, weight and low level spec for the price make it a bike that's about the heart choice not the smart choice.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.56kg (32.09lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.orangebikes.co.uk](http://www.orangebikes.co.uk)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Tough, hand-built Halifax frame with tons of colour options.

Sinuous slack and low handling for riding super loose.

Swingarm suspension is naturally rider responsive.

Shimano gears and brakes play way above their price.

#### ▼ LOWS

High weight and flexy frame make it hard to hurry.

Continental tyres are grippless in the wet.



Longer toptubes are becoming the defacto standard now. The Santa Cruz 5010 is an exception to that rule

### Size matters: frames

One definite enduro-inspired change for this year is the fact we've ordered every bike in a large. With 90mm stems now consigned to cross-country duties, 50-60mm stems the norm and minimum distance between bars and steerer 35mm stems increasingly common, we've had to go longer to keep overall stretch the same. There's still a big

difference between what each manufacturer thinks is appropriate for toptube versus seat tube length though and basic bike fit has been a key decider in what bikes made our top 10.

### The story so far

We started hitting the trails on our actual shortlist trail bikes six months ago but the Trail Bike of the Year process goes back

a lot further than that. Obviously the 2014 line up gives us some leads, but watching each brand bring out their tweaks for the new year often changes things significantly.

The Mondraker Foxy R that won last year has gained a kilo for 2015 so we've switched to the same weight but longer travel Foxy XR. While Specialized has finally joined the 650b parade it was our experience on its 2015 29ers that

## SCOTT GENIUS 930 £2600

One for the fast riding 'exploro' warriors, this year is the first time Scott's unique remote controlled travel and feel changing three-mode suspension adds climbing and sprinting advantages without obvious downsides. It's a good shape, great weight and 29er wheels add easy speed for eating miles of trail or metres of climbing. Skinny Fox fork, fragile tyres and no dropper post limit lairy riding in stock form.



## NUKEPROOF MEGA TR PRO £3000

Nukeproof's sawn-off shotgun aggro bike has hooligan potential. Long, low, slack and stiff the TR Pro frame encourages more aggressive riding than its 130mm travel would suggest. SRAM 1x11, Reverb dropper post, sticky front, slick back Schwalbe tyres and DH-style Nukeproof cockpit are all about aggro control. The 150mm RockShox Revelation fork gets worked hard trying to cope with what the rest doesn't flinch from.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 13.15kg (28.95lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.scott-sports.com](http://www.scott-sports.com)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Impressively light and naturally fast rolling. Remote control suspension adds unique level of control. Naturally balanced speed friendly geometry. Fast rolling 29er (tested) or chunkier 650b options

#### ▼ LOWS

Skinny fork and fragile tyres undermine survivability. Cross-country-style cockpit and no dropper post.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 13.95kg (30.75lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.hotlines-uk.com](http://www.hotlines-uk.com)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Tight tracking, low, slack adult combat chassis. Spot on cockpit gear and stop and go spec. Seriously capable rear suspension amplifies travel. Chunky wheels get excellent Schwalbe enduro rubber.

#### ▼ LOWS

150mm Revelation fork is out of its comfort zone. Extra strength means heavy weight for travel.



shone brightest at its launch event, so the big-wheeled Stumpjumper made our long list. Santa Cruz launching its new cost effective carbon range means that the £2700 framed 5010 Carbon CC that was our money no object choice last year now comes in a £3200 complete bike Carbon C

version. Devinci is another brand that grabbed our attention with a carbon frame that's loaded with downhill DNA and Lapierre sneaked a semi-carbon frame into our price bracket for the first time too.

Components make a big difference to inclusion too. The

big news at this price point is that Fox's Evolution series shocks and forks have had a massive overhaul for 2015. New fork seals and damper tunes make them competitive again, rather than a juddering curse that immediately put a lot of bikes out of contention.

While changing crap rubber won't be a deal breaker for most shops at this price, having proper tyre compounds as standard has made a massive difference to levels of straight-from-the-shop confidence. Dropper posts have gone from being an infrequent bonus to default spec and secure, shift simplifying single ring gearing is a regular ratio choice not a rarity.

With enduro fever and the 650b revolution largely starting in Europe, a lot more continental brands have got their act together in terms of embracing this new bike species or evolving the suspension setup and geometry of existing models.

Entirely new online brands have also appeared alongside



## GIANT TRANCE SX £2900

Giant's Trance SX adds a 160mm dual position Pike fork and piggyback Monarch Plus shock to the standard 140mm bike to let it tackle big terrain head on. Giant's super-wide 800mm DH bars and dropper post add confident chaos control. SRAM 1x11 transmission and the super-tough yet lightweight alloy frame keep it one of the most responsive bikes here. The tall fork means an occasionally unstable ride height that kept it out of our top 10.



## TRANSITION SCOUT 2 £2800

Transition's brand new budget Scout came super close to our Spanish shortlist after blowing the trails apart despite budget parts. The outwardly neat simple frame with low bottom bracket and super-short four-bar linkage rear builds into a 13.6kg bike that's efficient and responsive enough for epic days but slammed and slack enough to carve and charge like a mini downhill bike. Pike and Monarch provide spot on suspension too, but it's definitely pricey in parts terms.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 13.49kg (29.74lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.giant-bicycles.com](http://www.giant-bicycles.com)

- ▲ **HIGHS**  
More fork and shock soak for an already confident bike.  
Monster bars and slack angles for power steering feel.  
Proven super-durable, minimal maintenance trail frame.  
Enduro-ready SRAM, Maxxis and Giant own brand kit.
- ▼ **LOWS**  
Extended travel leaves it riding tall.  
Insecure saddle clamp, slightly linear dual position fork, compared to single position Pike.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 13.58kg (29.93lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.windwave.com](http://www.windwave.com)

- ▲ **HIGHS**  
Impeccably well-balanced charge up, carve down handling.  
Sorted hard driving, high traction 'Giddy Up' suspension.  
Super tough, chainguide-ready trail frame.  
Cost effective Deore/SLX stop/go kit.
- ▼ **LOWS**  
High price for the parts you get.  
Tyres and fixed post need immediate upgrading.



its V4 Race direct to Doug at Basque MTB to make the deadline after its insanely fun 120mm travel V4 Essential blew us away on the trails.

### Trial by trail

The last minute Commencal switch also proves that while sifting through websites and spec sheets might have narrowed down our shortlist it's always trail time that really matters. With so many bikes looking so similar on paper it has been more important than ever this year.

It's also meant that we've had to be a lot more unforgiving with our testing. In other words, while it's easy to think that being outside the top 10 is a definite fail, a score of three still means that the bike is enjoyable to ride with no obvious flaws.

While frame size or poor major components choices are hard to get round, suspension issues such as harsh compression tune or over eager dive can sometimes be fixed relatively easily and new

established ones, with Bird and YT both offering outstanding value on state of the art enduro bike platforms thanks to an online direct sell strategy. Traditional bike shops will be interested – and no doubt delighted – to see that neither YT or German online uber brand Canyon were able to supply us with a bike in time. That's despite Canyon obviously

responding to our 'too short' comments from last year with a new extended toptube Race geometry option and YT's Capra scoring the only perfect five in recent memory, meaning both of them had a potentially very good chance of taking the overall win. NS Bikes unfortunately missed the cut with its very promising looking Snabb, but Commencal shipped

After a hard time on UK-based trails, it was time to head to the testing trails of the Basque Country



## BOARDMAN FS TEAM 650 £1000

Boardman's entry-level FS trail bike hasn't really changed for 2015 but it's still unbeatable for the money. Hydroformed triple butted alloy frame with contemporary angles, 650b wheels and 130mm of RockShox damped suspension form the consistently controlled and responsive baseline. Mavic, SRAM, FSA, Continental and Boardman kit complete a bike that's happy to play with bikes three times its price.



### AT A GLANCE

**WEIGHT** 14.48kg (31.92lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.boardmanbikes.com](http://www.boardmanbikes.com)

#### ▲ HIGHS

Great all-round, mid-travel, 650b handling balance.

Smooth welded frame is bang on for weight, stiffness and practical detailing.

Impressively controlled thru-axle Sektor fork and Monarch shock.

Solid all-round trail componentry at a low price.

#### ▼ LOWS

Continental tyres are stickier than before but fragile.

Avid brakes are wooden in feel.

**“The FS Team is happy to play with bikes three times its price”**



The Boardman takes our Value award yet another year

tyres can sometimes be bartered before you buy. That's especially true if you're getting a lot of bike for your money otherwise, and we've reflected that in the scores and rankings. However, we wouldn't be being fair on the designers who've worked double hard to nail every detail if we let those who haven't off the hook.

While our core test team has decades of testing experience a

couple of fresh riders joining our crew this year also underlined that what seem like tiny differences really do make a massive difference when you're out on the trail.

It's also interesting to see that sometimes not knowing the science or the statistics behind a bike can actually be an advantage to judging on-trail performance. For example even our freshest

testers commented that the Vitus was much smoother than several of the 150-160mm bikes we ran it against. So much so that we thought it had sent us the 160mm Sommet not the 135mm rear travel Escarpe until we checked the name on the toptube.

Forks, brakes, overall bike feel and obvious shape were also generally ranked the same by each tester whether they knew

**YETI SB5C £5800**

Yeti has been a legendary innovator since its first iconic turquoise bikes hit the trails, but the latest generation suspension bikes have really hit the sweet spot jackpot. The new Switch Infinity suspension uses a free floating lower pivot to increase both pedalling efficiency and big hit compliance of an already light, tight and sweet handling 127mm travel frame. The only downside is that it's so good at everything it can sometimes tame previously challenging trails too much.



**“The latest generation suspension bikes have really hit the sweet spot jackpot”**

**AT A GLANCE**

**WEIGHT** 12.24kg (26.98lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.silverfish-uk.com](http://www.silverfish-uk.com)

**▲ HIGHS**

A lightweight yet stiff carbon fibre frame.

Sweetly balanced all-rounder handling.

Impressively firm yet traction rich pedalling.

Eats hits and drops like a much bigger bike.

**▼ LOWS**

Super efficient rather than effervescent.

Premium performance and history comes at a price.



the numbers or past history of individual component tests.

Where in-depth experience really mattered was being able to select the right bike from each range. Having ridden both Whyte's longer travel G-150 and T-130 650b options it was the T-129 that blasted its way onto the Brittany ferry to Santander. We chose Santa Cruz's 125mm travel 5010 over the 150mm travel Bronson and

Nukeproof's 130mm Mega TR over the 160mm travel Mega AM for the same 'less is more fun' reasoning too. In contrast the BMC, Marin and Trek failed to impress enough on local climbs and singletrack to balance their average performance on descents. Norco, Merida and Orbea also fell foul of the boulder fields of the moors and Stainburn's red and black rated descents, despite

rolling into action with carbon frames, impressive component spec and top rated dampers.

Just because they didn't make it onto the van doesn't mean the 15 bikes listed here aren't potentially the ideal ones for your sort of riding, so make sure you scroll through our reviews before joining us on the stunning trails of the Spanish Atlantic coast for the top 10 showdown.







## ROUND 2

# THE TOP TEN

## The final showdown

**W**hile deciding our Spanish shortlist was hard enough, things got even more competitive when we unloaded the van in the Basque Country. The trails couldn't have been better suited to our showdown. With the coastal area hammered by storms we headed inland to Ainsa. Not only a stunning hilltop citadel settlement but also home to the Spanish round of the 2015 Enduro World Series. We're not surprised either as the centuries old trails that Jorge and his MTB mates have uncovered over the years are truly world class.

Starting high enough in the mountains for the air to feel thin these ribbons of deserted yet well-marked singletrack thread their way down the drifting ridges and rock-studded gorges. Sweeping corners and power climbs test stability and pedalling efficiency. Sudden off-camber fades and tightening turns get even the best gripping, stiffest tracking bikes scrabbling to save their necks. Slab drops, boulder fields and deep stepped fall line sections into stutter bump and barely bike width switchback turns sort out suspension and steering hierarchy. Swooping, rolling earth 'Badlands' sections act like supersized natural BMX tracks and superb food gets us ready to do it all over again the next day.

While we made sure we tuned and tweaked every bike to get the best from it, the more we fettled the more bikes dropped out of contention. Too linear, too chattery, occasional pedal or impact choke? The smallest suspension niggles

sidelined several bikes and awkward sizing or under par components for price saw several more bikes out of the running. Even bikes that had blown us away in the UK started to feel less impressive as legs burned, shoulders screamed and forearms swelled from the full-on enduro spec riding.

Every stop on the trail became an argument between us for why different contenders should win. With everyone from elite cross-country racers to freakishly quick gravity fiends in our test crew we took every bike to every possible limit. From first rocky, cloudy climbs of the day through the drifts and drops of noon to end of day play on the rollers and ravines of the bad lands, the bikes fought tooth and nail for the final places.

Pedals were swapped, pressures and damping settings refined and brake positions tweaked as we shaved our top 10 down to a top three with every fumbled corner, sketchy landing or squelchy acceleration. As great as they are Bird, Specialized, Vitus and Devinci gradually dropped out of contention in this ultimate test of trail talent. Focus, Cube and Santa Cruz shone brilliantly on the Spanish trails but not quite brightly enough to eclipse the upstart Commencal, big-wheeled Whyte and defending champion Mondraker that kept coming back to the top of the feedback and fun pile. Even by lunchtime on the last day in Ainsa we didn't know what order those three would finish in so it was time for Antonio to take us up the hill for one last trial by trail...

TRAIL BIKE OF THE YEAR



**“There’s a ton of gravity-winning experience and downhill DNA in the new Troy Carbon trail bike”**



## **DEVINCI TROY CARBON XP £3200**

If you follow the downhill scene you won't have missed the fact that Stevie Smith took the 2013 World Cup title on a Devinci and Damien Oton took second overall in the 2014 Enduro World Series. There's a ton of this gravity-winning experience and downhill DNA in the new Troy Carbon trail bike too, which shows very clearly on the trail.

The Split Pivot axle concentric is the obvious shared feature with the Wilson DH bike and Atlas enduro bike and it gives a distinctive ride feel. While it's soft off the top and very plush through the mid stroke if you're off the power, it starts ramping up noticeably in the second half of the travel. That means you'll rarely get the

maximum travel marker right down the shaft unless you properly pile drive it off a drop or nearly trash a rim on a flat slap into a square edge.

You certainly won't feel short changed on travel as it sustains speed extremely well across rough, rocky ground as long as you keep pressure off the pedals. It's also very eager to get the back wheel down onto the ground as soon as possible so traction is consistently excellent particularly when tracking across deep pockets between tree roots. The very short chainstay length also speeds up rear end reactions in terms of suspension response and cut and paste agility.

This balances the relatively low, stretched out front end, which

**The Troy is super progressive, encouraging hard riding in rough stuff**

naturally stays steady and predictable through the 780mm wide bars for a playful yet planted feel. The linear twin travel Pike matches with the easy early stroke to stop the 67-degree (or 67.5 depending on geometry chip position) head angle sinking too much under braking or cornering. We still ran it a bit harder than we would a fixed travel Pike when we were pushing it hard to be double sure it didn't dive, but we were deep into enduro rather than trail bike territory before these traits were obvious.

### **Dual control**

The dual travel fork came into its own when we accidentally peeled



## NEED TO KNOW

**WEIGHT** 14.02kg (30.90lb)

**CONTACT** [www.havendistribution.co.uk](http://www.havendistribution.co.uk)

▲ **HIGHS** Impressively smooth and controlled speed sustain for 140mm. Carbon frameset and Split Pivot mean efficient pedalling.

Surefooted front end amped up with responsive rear.

Deore/SLX spec shows just how good basic Shimano is.

▼ **LOWS** Serious pedal kickback particularly in the granny ring. Slightly soft frame and suspension can dull feedback.

## TESTER SAYS



*"This carbon trail tamer was one of the first 2015 bikes we tested and set the*

*scene in an encouraging way. It's the right shape, well equipped and the handling balance is all about big fun at high speeds. There are some suspension characteristics that need working around and the competition from other bikes proved fierce, but this World Cup DH bred machine is still a ton of fun on any trail."* Guy

The full carbon frame is impressive for the money, but Split Pivot suspension feedback divides opinion

off down a steep downhill track in Boltana and had to winch ourselves back up super-tight switchbacks. Crawling back up in granny gear did make the 'anti squat' pedal pull back of the Split Pivot system really obvious if the shock wasn't totally locked out. There are also occasional moments when the pedal stroke and suspension kickback from deep in the travel coincide to create a sudden choke as though the freehub has skipped a beat.

The flipside is a very firm and direct pedalling feel when you're on smoother trails that don't push the shock too deep. With the carbon frame giving a reasonable 14kg overall weight you can certainly

hustle it faster than its big Schwalbe tyres and relatively heavy and wide Jalco-rimmed wheels would imply.

Our time on the extended descents of Spain proved that Split Pivot is definitely a split personality that works best either being pedalled or flowing through trouble flat out but not if you try and mix the two together.

WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

"Split Pivot split personality delivers downhill flow and trail bike responsiveness."





## SPECIALIZED STUMPJUMPER 29 COMP EVO £2500

If you're looking for an effortlessly user-friendly trail bike with a big stride for covering maximum miles without having to back off on the fun bits, then the latest version of Specialized's legendary Stumpjumper should definitely be on your short list.

Setting up couldn't be easier thanks to the Autosag feature on the custom Fox shock. Blow it up to maximum pressure, sit on the bike, hit the red plunger until it finds the preset ride height and you're ready to hit the trails. Specialized provides the 760mm bars, 60mm stem and Henge saddle on the BlackLite Command Post dropper. The fact the dropper cable is externally routed is a sign that this is one of the cheapest bikes on test.

Look closer and you'll see the 20-speed X7/X9 transmission uses a PG/PC1030 (rather than lighter and more potentially durable 1050/1070) spec cassette and chain. We've no complaints about the performance of the Shimano Deore brakes and the components that really matter on a 29er – the wheels – are an excellent own brand combo. The Roval Traverse Fattie 29 rims have a wide 29mm internal width giving a stable base to the chunky Butcher front and fast rolling semi-slick rear Slaughter tyres. Both rim and rubber are ready to go tubeless for even more on-trail float.

Tyre volume and the shallower contact angle of the 29er wheels compared to smaller sizes offset the

*It's perfect for big mileage trail riders, but steeper angles mean it suffers when the riding gets wild*

relatively firm damping preset of the RockShox Revelation RC fork. On rolling trails and slower speeds the 140mm movement matches the soft feel of the Autosag shock well too. The bigger wheels aren't harder to heave up to speed out of stalled climbs or slow corners than the heavier duty 650b bikes here. That gives the Stumpjumper a smooth and easy roll that translates into an effortlessly lengthening stride and automatic speed increase whenever the trail calms down.

### **Focused climber**

At 13.6kg overall mass is no obstacle to easy and efficient



**“Setting up couldn’t be easier thanks to the Autosag feature on the custom Fox shock”**



## NEED TO KNOW

**WEIGHT** 13.6kg (29.98lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.specialized.com](http://www.specialized.com)

▲ **HIGHS** Impressively light, smooth and speed sustaining performance. Excellent wide yet light wheel and tyre package.

Dropper post fitted and tubeless ready.

Autosag makes initial suspension set up a breeze.

▼ **LOWS** Flexy fork limits lairy trail confidence.

Trad rather than rad handling feel.

## TESTER SAYS



*“Even though this uses the slacker and more aggro Evo geometry with longer travel fork,*

*the Stumpy looks conservative when against the likes of Whyte. It’s rapid and reactive on flowing trails, but when things get steeper and rougher, it’s easy to have the front tuck under. Specialized is a master when it comes to detail, so if you’re not interested in terrifying yourself, it’s a hugely versatile bike.” Jon*

climbing and the longer stem keeps it on line without wandering around on steep sections like some slacker bikes can. As well as comfortable contact points you benefit from Specialized’s SWAT storage to leave your pockets light on long rides.

Despite the Evo being slacker and smoother tuned than the standard Stumpjumper (which Specialized UK doesn’t import any more) it struggles once speeds and stress levels ramp up. Compared to the 35mm legs on the Whyte’s Pike fork the Revelation’s 32mm legs flex under bigger braking, steering and frontal impact loads. This makes the 68-degree, longer stemmed front end more prone to

tucking under. It also makes the fork more prone to choke rather than stroke smoothly, and you won’t be battering across rocks long before your arms start to pump and the skinny grips start to get painful. The fluid easy cruising feel dilutes tracking and traction feedback through the frame, making the burlier Enduro 29 the obvious choice for more belligerent riders.

Own brand Butcher/Slaughter rubber combo is excellent

WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

**“Impressively user-friendly, smooth and speed sustaining big-wheeled trail cruiser.”**





## VITUS ESCARPE VRX £2500

Even if we hadn't been riding with the Vitus design team in the past, the performance of the Escarpe would confirm their DH-biased biking experience. At the risk of making us look dumb – but confirming just how capable the Escarpe is – we thought they'd sent us the 160mm travel Sommet. With the same paintjob, frame layout and Marzocchi 350CR fork it's a relatively easy mistake on paper, but we still hadn't realized after our first two testing sessions.

Despite testing it head to head against 150-160mm bikes from other brands, the Vitus was significantly more controlled in its reactions to really rough stuff. The key is the easy to miss L-shaped chainstay end hidden

between the split halves of the seat tube. By mounting the lower end of the shock on the vertical tip you get an initially progressive feel that responds well to a kick of the pedal. As the back end gets deeper into its stroke the shock moves forward and down making the 135mm stroke feel a lot more like 150mm in terms of its big hit appetite. Once the initially sticky Marzocchi gets into double figure trail hours it complements the back end really well too, with an impressively plush, but never wallowing or vague intervention to all sizes of impacts.

### Online advantages

As the home brand of online bike

The Vitus packs both value and superb suspension, but short geometry hinders it

megastore Chain Reaction, Vitus has serious buying power and straight to customer cost advantages. That means you're getting the same SRAM 1x11 transmission, SLX brakes and RockShox Reverb Stealth internally routed dropper post spec for £500 less than good value £3000 bikes. There are no obvious shortcuts hiding in the detail either. The WTB tyres are reassuringly traction rich and supported on reasonable width rims, which flatter the supple but not floppy feel of the tubeless ready TCS carcass.

At under 14kg it makes effective use of whatever energy you've got to put through the pedals and



**“At under 14kg it makes effective use of whatever energy you’ve got to put through the pedals”**



**NEED TO KNOW**

**WEIGHT** 13.88kg (30.60lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.vitus.com](http://www.vitus.com),  
[www.chainreactioncycles.com](http://www.chainreactioncycles.com)

- ▲ **HIGHS** Excellent SRAM family enduro spec for the price. Floating shock makes the 135mm stroke feel bigger. Max control cockpit and Stealth dropper post as standard. Surprisingly responsive and rewarding under power.
- ▼ **LOWS** Short reach cramps climbing and high-speed stability. Marzocchi fork takes a while to get smooth.

**TESTER SAYS**



*“At first glance the Vitus is a really impressive pick of parts for the money.*

*Look closer though - or better still ride one - and the innovative suspension system buried in the straddling seat tube gives a seriously controlled and capable ride for only 135mm of wheel movement. Add the killer price and it's only the tall and short frame that keeps it out of a top placing.”* Guy

the way it climbed and stayed serious fun even on long, flat, self-propelled singletrack sections were the only reminders it was actually a relatively short travel ride. Whether it's you providing the speed or gravity doing the hard work, the 770mm bars and 45mm stem give enough light, high leverage control to push the Escarpe right to the edge with minimum risk.

The only downside, and the reason that the Vitus didn't score and rank considerably higher given its excellent performance for price ratio, is that those bars are a lot closer than we would want. That not only makes the Escarpe less

stable than it could be at speed but also compromises breathing space on climbs, to the point where we regular knocked our knees on the shifters when we shunted our weight forward for technical climb grip. The kinked toptube design means an already tall seat tube too, so sizing up to get the extra length isn't necessarily an option.

The 135mm of rear travel feels more like 150mm thanks to progressive design

**WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE** ★★★★★

**“Outstanding spec and impressive performance for price despite a short frame.”**







## FOCUS SAM 3.0 FACTORY £2999

The big surprise of last year's test, we knew what to expect from the bang on trend, slackest head angle on test (65.8 degrees) shape of Focus's SAM frame this year.

While opinion was divided on the Air Defence Grey aesthetics, nobody argued about how wide the colour matched neon orange grips were held apart by the 760mm Concept bars. The RockShox Pike fork is colour synced too and while you don't get as much adjustment as the aftermarket spec RCT3 version the factory tune of the RC on the Focus doesn't lose any technical trail confidence.

We're big fans of the matt look alloy cranks from SRAM, and the X01/X1 1x11 gears are a superb ride

simplifying, sequential shifting setup. A Reverb Stealth dropper post completes the SRAM family contribution in typically smooth, slick style. Focus has stuck with fellow German Magura for the MT5 brakes. With 200mm front rotor and 180mm rear the already exceptional power levels of the four-pot callipers are turned absolutely brutal in terms of anchorage. The power comes on abruptly a long way from the bars too so be wary with your braking until you're used to them.

### Tyre trouble

Continental's new Far Eastern factory means a much grippier compound than

Slack angles and low slung geometry make this one for the enduro racers and raggers

previous cheap Conti tyres and keep overall mass surprisingly low. The Mountain King/Trail King combo doesn't feel or roll fast and the lightweight sidewalls and massive 2.4in size on relatively skinny 21mm rims leave them feeling perched and vague rather than planted and predictable when you start getting sideways. We also flatted every Continental tyre on test in Spain but only punctured one (XC grade Maxxis on the Yeti) from the other brands.

The fact it comes with a RockShox Monarch RT shock rather than a Magura item like last year didn't change the ride feel as much as we thought it might. The much more sensitive start stroke of the RockShox



**“With a bit of tuning and tyre swapping it’s a potentially outstanding gravity groover”**



## NEED TO KNOW

**WEIGHT** 13.39kg (29.51lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.focus-bikes.com](http://www.focus-bikes.com)

▲ **HIGHS** Excellent mini downhill-style frame.

Benchmark SRAM family gear, suspension and dropper post spec. Impressively light for its category.

▼ **LOWS** Pillowy suspension needs simple tuning to add support.

Snatchy Magura brakes are powerful but need care in use.

Tyres feel fragile.

## TESTER SAYS



*“Having seen tester Seb fire down hills at warp speed on his longterm SAM 3.0*

*there’s never been any doubt in my mind as to how fast this thing can go. Despite not being super heavy, it can feel a bit of a tank on tighter trails and up the hills, but if you’ve a balls-out downhill focus, the SAM is a great option - just swap out those puncture prone Contis...” Tom*

unit meant more movement under power. With no Pedal mode between the Open and Locked damping modes on the RT model you have to choose between soft pedalling but super-smooth traction or solidifying the shock almost completely for sprinting or stomping up climbs. The very linear way the long stroke shock blows through its travel means adding volume reducer rings (a thankfully simple job) if you want a progressive feel for pushing hard rather than its naturally super plush, pillowy feel.

Add low rear ride height effectively slackening the angles and lengthening the wheelbase plus a 60mm stem on top of the slack fork angle and the steering occasionally struggles to react

fast enough to keep it inside successive tight turns. It sucks down onto big sweepers and ploughs through the roughest sections with insolent ignorance. While we’ve gone deep on the bits that aren’t quite right (to help you make them right), with a bit of tuning and tyre swapping it’s a potentially outstanding gravity groover that’s light enough to get back up for another go faster than most.

Rear shock needs volume spacers for ultimate performance, but that’s easily done

WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

**“Super-smooth, butter plush yet lightweight downhill-styled enduro bike.”**





## BIRD AERIS AM X1 £2650

New British direct sell brand Bird really impressed us with its hardcore hardtail last year and now it's done the same with this top value full suspension gravity bomber.

While some major brands have been slow to respond to the latest long, low and lazy trends translating onto the trail from the steepest, fastest downhill slopes, being small and UK focused has helped Bird join the dots just right.

The long toptube keeps stretch ample even with a short 35mm stem. The 800mm Race Face bars give huge amounts of leverage for holding the already super-stable 66-degree head angle on line. It's super low too, so once you commit to a corner you're

totally locked in right to the edge of your tyres. Bird also lets you spec your choice from a wide range of (normally Maxxis) tyres. That means you can choose your own balance of rolling speed and grip from super tacky glue to semi-slick go.

The custom tuned Monarch RT3 shock is deliberately progressive for ample support whether you're putting the hammer down through the pedals or driving the tyres into a corner. The Pike fork up front is a massive help when it comes to overall composure and control, and while most of the bikes here are running a simpler RC-spec model you get a fully adjustable RCT3 on the Aeris. Together they mean the 140 or

**Bird is a new kid on the block, but the Aeris is seriously impressive**

150mm travel Bird behaves a lot more like a 160mm-plus machine if you stay off the brakes and let it run through serious rock sections or chance your luck off ugly drops. Bird's faith in its solid conventional tubed frameset is born out by a lifetime warranty that means you can ride without worry, and it can even be transferred to a new owner if you decide to sell the bike on.

### Direct buy value

While you can buy the frame in five different colours and sizes from £850, the SRAM X1 gears, RockShox Reverb Stealth post and Race Face Turbine cranks are obvious benefits of Bird's direct sell complete bike value. The



**“Bird’s faith in its solid conventional tubed frameset is born out by a lifetime warranty”**



**NEED TO KNOW**

**WEIGHT** 14.48kg (31.92lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.birdmtb.com](http://www.birdmtb.com)

- ▲ **HIGHS** Long, low, slack and super surefooted chassis character. Excellent RockShox fork and damper control. Direct sell means excellent custom tunable component value. Solid frame gets a transferrable lifetime warranty.
- ▼ **LOW** Frame flex makes it feel sluggish rather than sharp.

**TESTER SAYS**



*“The Aeris’ spec is great for the money, especially considering you can chop and change before you buy. Fortunately the Aeris rides well too; long, low and slack it was one of the most confidence inspiring bikes I rode during the test. Okay, so the back end might be a touch more bendy than some, but aim it down a hill and it’s an absolute hoot.” Tom*

Skinny rear stays mean flex when pushing or pedalling hard

SRAM Guide RS brakes get a 200mm rotor up front for maximum anchorage with impressive levels of cleverly leveraged control. With nine different build package options that can be further customised with five different shock, wheelset (including Bird’s own carbon wheels) and tyre options, plus six different stems holding 17 different bars, plus other tweaks and even optional Anglesets for changing head angle you can personalise your Bird accurately and affordably too.

It also means you can change the final character of your Aeris quite dramatically from a fast rolling mid-weight 140mm trail bike to the heavier duty 14.5kg build we tested here.

Testing head to head with other bikes the Aeris frame definitely has a lazy rather than lively character with obvious flex from the dropped toptube and low, relatively skinny stay rear end. That leaves it sluggish under power even with a semi-slick rear tyre, and it prefers to sway and swoop down the trail to its own rhythm rather than chop, hop and push the pace.



**“The Bird is an excellent value custom kit gravity bomber but it’s lazy not lively.”**



**“It definitely feels like a 140mm travel bike when you’re battering through big stuff”**



## **CUBE STEREO 140 SUPER HPC TM 27.5 £2999**

Cube’s Stereo has been in the running for TBOTY honours every year since it was one of the first firms to introduce a 650b-wheeled chassis in 2013. This latest, shorter travel, lighter and better tuned chassis is the most responsive and potentially radical yet if the frame and ride feel fit you.

Cube has a reputation for standout value without cutting corners and the HPC TM doesn’t disappoint. The full carbon frame gets internal dropper post and control cable routing plus Shimano XTR Di2 electric compatibility. Despite the frame quality it’s still rocking one of the best SRAM and Race Face-based kit packages here for £1 under £3000.

While most Stereo 140s get lighter 140mm travel 32mm legged forks, the TM (Trail Motion) version gets a 150mm travel fork. Even with a proper enduro-ready build that includes Stealth routed Reverb dropper post, E13 chainguide instead of a front mech and 2.35in tyres, the Stereo is the lightest bike on test (excluding the double the price Yeti) by over a kilo!

The mix of low (12.14kg) complete bike weight, semi-slick rear tyre, frame stiffness and suspension that’s firm off the top means an explosive response to any power input. The 150mm Pike fork means it’s attentive and accurate when following any flick or nudge of the 750mm bars and 50mm stem cockpit.

**This special ‘Trail Motion’ version gets burlier Pike fork and aggressive finishing kit**

The Cube/DT Swiss wheels are equally tight and light taking the sharp, incisive ride right through to the trail. At 25mm they’re wide enough to support the Schwalbe tyres at low pressure and they’re easy to turn tubeless. That’s a good job because the Tubeless Easy carcass seemed particularly wooden and clattery over the rocks or even hardpacked dirt singletrack of Spain.

### **Shock retune**

The previously linear shock feel that’s limited aggressive control on previous Stereos has been noticeably retuned. It still pushes through the mid stroke easily once you’re past the initial



**“It’s rocking one of the best SRAM and Race Face-based kit packages here for £1 under £3000”**



### NEED TO KNOW

**WEIGHT** 12.14kg (26.76lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.cube.eu](http://www.cube.eu)

▲ **HIGHS** Superlight yet stiff and future-proofed full carbon frame. Excellent quality enduro-ready kit. Direct sell value with local shop support. Pike fork and progressively retuned rear suspension.

▼ **LOWS** Too short to let its full potential breathe. Wooden tyres and tight compression tune mean chattery ride.

### TESTER SAYS



*“If there were an award for consistent top end TBOTY finisher Cube would win. Its frame*

*construction, component packages and weight have always been outstanding and for 2015 it’s worked hard on its suspension tunes too. There’s no escaping the fact when things get fast, loose and lairy the otherwise excellent Stereo comes up short compared to longer reach trail racers.” Guy*

platform feel but it starts ramping up early to remove excessive wallow. It definitely feels like a 140mm travel bike when you’re battering through big stuff, but there’s a lot more meaningful feedback for carving turns and surfing traction with. The low weight also makes it very easy to flick around or over any stuff that looks like real trouble and it’s a far more aggressive and proactive feeling bike than previous Stereos we’ve ridden.

While Cube has changed the proportions of its frames to make them longer and lower, it hasn’t done it by much. Add a steep 74.5-degree seat angle and 50mm stem and that means a proportionally very short reach that puts you right over an already slightly

steep 67.5-degree head angle. This is okay on flatter, less ferocious trails where only breathing is cramped but a couple of big hits at speed will shunt you worryingly forward over the front wheel, compound the weight balance/steering problem and make you crap your pants. If you’re more into upright exploratory than flat out enduro it’s a stunning value, super-efficient ride that’s hard to beat for the money.

Excellent frame and spec mean the Cube is the lightest bike on test by some way

WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

“Super-light, seriously efficient and stellar spec trail bike but it’s frustratingly short.”



**“The Carbon C retains all the responsive, downright insolent trail attitude of the expensive bike”**



## SANTA CRUZ 5010 CARBON C R AM £3299

Possibly the biggest surprise of the test is that our cost no object bike choice from last year is now available in a version that qualifies for our top 10.

What's really impressive – and brilliant if you're looking for a bargain bike with serious kudos – is that you're going to have to be a proper pea bitching princess to tell any difference. It uses the same front and rear moulds as the flagship £2800 Carbon CC frame and exactly the same black or orange colour options. However, underneath the typically bang on trend paintjob is a cheaper carbon fibre composite, which together with alloy linkages make the frame around 250g heavier. You still get Santa Cruz's

patented VPP twin linkage suspension, complete with DIY serviceable and grease injectable bearings plus moulded rubber belly and chainstay protection. It's routed for an internal dropper too as the £200 KS Lev Integra upgrade of the basic £3099 C R AM spec shows and there are chainguide tabs and a Shimano Direct Mount rear mech hanger option.

What really matters is that the Carbon C retains all the responsive, downright insolent trail attitude of the expensive bike. The frame is just as rock-solid stiff as we've come to expect from Santa Cruz carbon. The VPP suspension also locks into the trail to drive hard but swings open off the power to swallow big hits much better

Thanks to cheaper carbon, you can now get a complete bike for just £500 more than the top end frame

than you'd expect for a 125mm stroke. While not everyone will like the obvious pedal/suspension interaction as the wheel gets pulled backwards by big hits, it does create a visceral, constant feedback connection that encourages you to take speed and traction to the edge wherever possible.

### Smooth fork feel

Top spec Maxxis tubeless tyres also flatter the feel and performance of both the basic Fox Float rear damper and RockShox Sektor fork. Slight structural, negative spring and damper tune differences mean that while the 130mm Sektor isn't as eerily on point as a Pike it's actually smoother than



**“Sizing right on the compact old-school fit is vital for the 5010 to show its full potential”**



### NEED TO KNOW

**WEIGHT** 13.52kg (29.80lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.santacruz bikes.co.uk](http://www.santacruz bikes.co.uk)

▲ **HIGHS** Super-stiff yet lightweight carbon chassis at alloy bike price. VPP suspension maximises power and big hit performance. Serviceable grease ported bearings and conventional bottom bracket boost longevity. Sektor, Shimano, Maxxis kit performs way beyond price.

▼ **LOWS** Interactive suspension feel won't suit everyone. Accurate sizing is essential to get enough length.

### TESTER SAYS



*“On paper the 5010 shouldn't work - it's got less travel, is shorter geometrically and steeper too. However, the taut back end and suspension made us happy to push the 5010 beyond what a 125mm bike should be comfortable on. While the spec might look cheaper, it's all solid, dependable kit that performed faultlessly.” Tom*

the more expensive 140-150mm Revelation RLs on other bikes. Together with the rigidly agile, riot encouraging frame that meant we never backed off from attacking the trail even on super-rocky Ilkley Moor rides or the EWS trails of Spain. Even the relatively short and uptight geometry didn't matter on the trail like looking at it on paper suggested it should. Rather than tripping up and getting nervous like a more neutral, passive bike the 3D effect of the VPP meant it could be snapped in and out of traction or hopped and popped through trouble, preferably as fast and loose as possible.

Low weight, fast rolling Ardent rear tyre and locked down drive feel mean

speed is always easy to come by and you would have no problems hitting a techy cross-country race or marathon event as hard as it'll launch itself down a trail centre terror run.

Sizing right on the compact old-school fit (potentially going up a size or two for extra length if necessary) is vital to get enough space for the 5010 to show its full potential in any context.

WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

**“The 5010 offers totally involving, full gas superbike performance at an affordable price.”**

Kit isn't as high end as others on test, but it's well thought out and functional stuff







## MONDRAKER FOXY XR £3199

The winner of last year's TBOTY showdown was right in the running to repeat the feat all through testing, especially if you're a flat-out speed fiend.

While a lot more bikes are using longer front ends and shorter stems this season, nobody has matched Mondraker's extreme Forward Geometry setup. With a 160mm travel Pike RC in front of the super-short 30mm stem and 760mm bars it's an even better view from the XR than before.

There's a ton of complicated extra long, extra stable wheelbase, ultra-light wheel weighting and other physics behind Mondraker's unique DH/motocross derived thinking. All you actually need to know is that

creates a massive control and confidence 'crumple zone' that can turn even the tamest, sanest riders into suicidal maniacs. Even with a minimal tread Ardent front tyre we were ripping the Foxy downhill at sickening speeds, spraying rocks out of corners as the front wheel surfed in and out of traction. Drifts and split-second saved turns that would leave you with soiled shorts on many bikes here are totally matter of fact on the Mondraker, and whether it's a loose sweeper or a slingshot berm you'll be riding out of your skin after a couple of runs.

The Pike fork means big rocks and drops are no obstacle to open throttle ignorance. The Zero linkage rear suspension offers impressively capable

Planted geometry and 160mm fork mean the Foxy is a whole load of fun at high speed

control once you've found the shock pressure sweet spot, only getting rattly at the ragged edge of steppy, droppy, rocky descents. While they run out of traction quickly if it gets wet and sloppy the big 2.4in carcass Ardent tyres underline the Foxy with extra pneumatic insurance. You do need to keep pressure relatively high though as the fat flanks are nipped in narrowly at the base by the 21mm wide CrossRoc XL rims. Both rims and tyres are tubeless ready.

### Comfortable climber

Surprisingly for what seems such a gravity focused freak it climbs and charges along singletrack really well too. The extra reach means plenty of



**“The Pike fork means big rocks and drops are no obstacle to open throttle ignorance”**



## NEED TO KNOW

**WEIGHT** 13.92kg (30.68lb)

**CONTACT** [www.silverfish-uk.com](http://www.silverfish-uk.com)

▲ **HIGHS** Uniquely chaotic confident high speed, hardcore handling. Insane power assisted front-end poise. Impressive all-round suspension control. Surprisingly good climbing performance.

▼ **LOWS** Expensive for its spec levels. Handling doesn't suit everyone or every speed.

## TESTER SAYS



*“I've made no secret of my love for Mondraker's geometry and this big blue machine would've been my choice. However, there's no getting away from the fact that it's of a significantly lower spec than the bikes it's up against, with a double ringed drivetrain and basic Fox shock. The handling alone was enough to give it a shot at the top spot, but considering value meant it just missed out.” Jon*

breathing space and it's as dismissive of potentially speed killing loose turns or lumps of geology as it is on descents. The Zero suspension pedals well without flicking levers or sacrificing traction and the Ardent tyres add easy speed. It uses a Pike fork not a Fox 34 making it significantly lighter than the 140mm travel Foxy R this year too, and just under the average 14kg weight of bikes in this category and price.

You might be wondering why the Mondraker didn't take the TBOTY win again, and it certainly went down to the wire. As with any extreme there are downsides and in this case it's low speed handling. At speed, the super-short stem steering trips up the long wheelbase to drop bike weight

into the turn. At slow speeds that same dynamic, particularly under braking, can jackknife the front wheel right under. The long fork also gives a precariously high 350mm bottom bracket height that's really obvious as the wheels slow down, suspension rises and the balance emphasis returns to the rider. The less durable SRAM 2x10 X9/X7 transmission with hidden X5 chain and cassette is poor value for a non-carbon frame too.

Super stumpy stem is offset by extra large toptube dimensions

WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

**“The Foxy XR gives you superb control and freaky confidence for flat-out, full-gas riding.”**





## WHYTE T-129 WORKS SCR £3099

The G-150 enduro bike might seem the obvious Whyte for this test but having ridden both it was the 2013 TBOTY winner that made our Spain shortlist and very nearly pulled off the first double win.

Saying this is the 2013 winner is doing Whyte down as it's done a ton of work to this bike. The big difference is the SCR (Single Chain Ring) specific frame. This exploits the extra clearance gained by losing front mech and inner chainring by using a 20% wider main pivot and symmetrical chainstays for a 24% stiffness increase at the point the rear wheel contacts the trail. While most brands fit a skinny 32mm-legged fork to their low-mid travel 29ers to save weight Whyte's backed up the burly rear end

with a 120mm travel, 35mm leg Pike RC. Add 750mm bars, 40mm stem and Stealth routed Reverb dropper and this isn't your average short travel 29er.

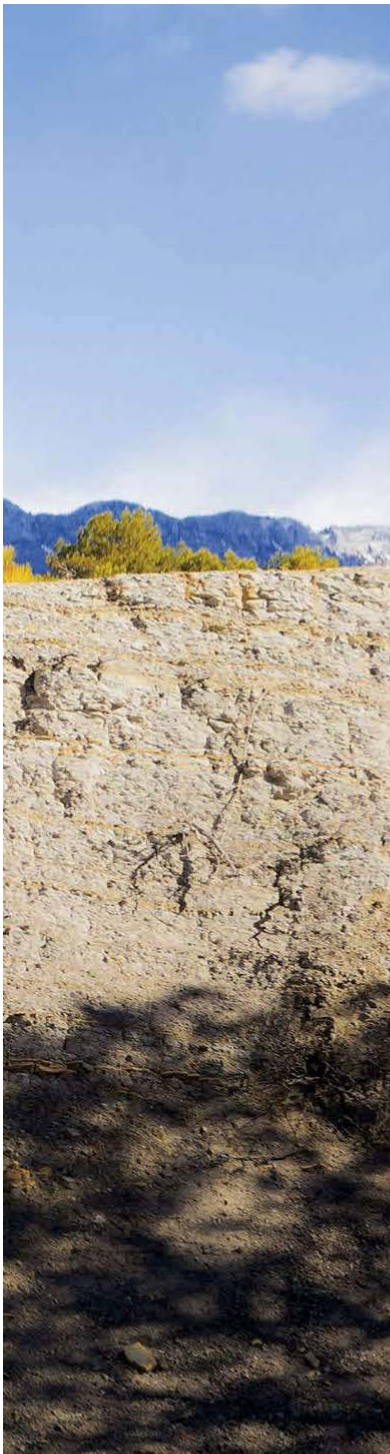
What makes it truly stand out is the way it interacts with the trail. Whyte was one of the first companies to apply the longer, lower, slacker geometry ethos to 29ers and the T-129 SCR gets the benefit of its latest handling evolution. The superbly balanced poise could teach a lot of 650b bikes how to hook into corners, slot the tightest most technical lines or hit sketchy enduro shortcuts with accuracy and authority. Even on the tightest, steepest switchback sections of our test trails the Whyte was never more than a dropped shoulder and toptube knee nudge away from dropping into

**Big wheels and solid kit paired to a well shaped frame mean the Whyte packs a punch despite the shorter travel**

the belly of the berm before setting up for the next neck straining apex. Stiff frame and fork mean heavy braking doesn't fold the SRAM Roam 40 wheels underneath at slow speeds, while tubeless setup as standard means high traction low pressures without pinch flat paranoia.

### Freedom to run

While it's the finely balanced slow speed manners of the T-129 SCR that are the biggest difference to floppier 29ers, the Whyte comes into its own when the trail opens out and you can let it run. Light wheels, fast tyres and low overall weight mean the bigger diameter doesn't dull acceleration and the Whyte starts to pick up speed



**“The Whyte comes into its own when the trail opens out and you can let it run”**



**NEED TO KNOW**

**WEIGHT** 13.17kg (29.03lb)  
**CONTACT** [whyte.bike](http://whyte.bike)

▲ **HIGHS** Excellent high and low speed handling balance. Increased frame and fork stiffness really matter. Low weight and 29er wheels equal easy speed. Impressively weak link free, trail taming spec.

▼ **LOWS** Very limited rear tyre clearance. 120mm of travel only gets you so far.

**TESTER SAYS**



*“Whyte made a bike that was worthy of winning TBOTY back in 2013 but the company hasn’t rested on its laurels. The new T-129 gets altered tubing, some super-smooth details but most importantly it’s now designed entirely around a single ring drivetrain, meaning the back end is significantly stiffer. That makes it even more fast and furious big-wheeled fun.” Jon*

quicker than burlier 650b bikes as soon as you’re off the brakes. The faster you go, the more the shallower contact angle of the tubeless tyres means the Whyte skims over stuff smaller wheeled bikes choke on.

The stiffness, supple damping and slacker angle of the Pike means the front end stays controlled through much rougher, bigger hit sections than the longer travel but steeper and flexier fork of the Stumpjumper. The Factory-spec Kashima coated rear shock adds extensive adjustment too, although you need to tweak it right to keep the back wheel from slapping around and losing traction well before the front end gets freaked out. The short back end also severely restricts tyre clearance to the point where even

the semi-slick 2.1in CrossMark tyre was clogging with mud.

Inevitably there were points on the steepest, big hit sections of descents where the Whyte couldn’t match the longer travel bikes and it really belongs in a different category to the rest of the test. If you want serious technical trail capability, big grin fun and effortless speed with a totally weak link free spec the Whyte is a properly outstanding ‘exploro’ option.



**“Technically tenacious, superbly balanced, explorero entertainer with easy 29er speed.”**



The short rear end is designed for 1x drivetrains only

**“The Meta has an unerring ability to put the front wheel exactly where you want it”**



## COMMENCAL META AM V4 RACE RS 1X £2502\*

Having been blown away by the 120mm travel Meta Trail V4 Essential we were excited to pull the Meta AM V4 Race out of its box in Spain and hit the trails hard.

Whipping the 780mm bars straight in the 60mm stem, the Commencal's long, broad, kinked toptube position was bang on. While the Monarch Plus shock is half hidden in the inset cold forged toptube mount the dials and valves are easily accessible for initial set up or on-the-fly tweaking.

This new V4 version of the Meta AM frame is built around Commencal's new pedal efficient twin phase Contact system cam rocker. Add a semi-slick Ardent rear tyre and sub-14kg weight and the Meta charged up the first cobbled climb of the day with

impressive efficiency. It needs more pressure than normal not to sink deep into its sag, which may be an issue for heavy riders. On steeper climbs some riders complained about the need to shift weight onto the tip of the saddle to compensate for the slack 72-degree seat angle. That wasn't an issue for others and these details were the only potential glitches the Meta showed.

The 160mm Pike fork needs no introduction in terms of flat out, stress free chaos control and the Commencal gets the threshold adjustable RCT3 version not the fixed damping RC of most bikes here. The Meta has an unerring ability to put the front wheel exactly where you want it however rough the trail or tight the turn. While Commencal admits the lighter frame

*The Meta can destroy a descent, but good pedalling manners mean you'll be eager to get back to the top*

isn't as stiff as the previous brick outhouse V3 chassis it's still consistently on point, and the slight flex helps stick the quality Maxxis tyres to the trail like glue. The 28mm wide, tubeless ready Alpha rims give plenty of support to the tyres and 32 spokes keep them stiff and strong.

### Fast and loose

That's a good job as the Meta is a bike that begs to be let loose through the gnarliest terrain. While it makes full use of the shock when it needs to, it never wallows or gets bogged down, with impeccable damping from the RockShox piggyback shock shining through clearer the harder the hits and the bigger the drops. Despite the

\* Price converted from Euros and correct at time of publication



### NEED TO KNOW

**WEIGHT** 13.82kg (30.47lb)  
**CONTACT** [www.commencal-store.co.uk](http://www.commencal-store.co.uk)

▲ **HIGHS** Superbly controlled and beautifully balanced all-round performance. Efficient pedalling and very responsive character. Top spec, fully adjustable RockShox suspension. Excellent value enduro-ready kit.

▼ **LOWS** Slack seat angle needs forward weighting on climbs. Direct sell rather than local shop supported.

### TESTER SAYS



*"If the TBOTY test was Goldilocks, we'd be looking at a sea of porridge and broken chair legs but we'd be waking up in the Commencal bed. It gains height and speed easily, blasts singletrack like it's being chased by a bear and turns every flat out descent into a sublime speed and fun fairy tale. Plus it has flanges on the grips and everybody loves a flange." Guy*

excellent damping and control from every aspect of the ride, the Meta still managed to feel more responsive and agile than most of the other bikes on test including several that were physically lighter. This creates a greed for speed that whoever was riding it just couldn't refuse, and all our testers praised its outstanding blend of playfulness and poise.

If you do need to get rid of speed the super communicative Guide RS brakes are teamed with 200/180mm rotors for serious stopping power. Tucking them inboard of the stays 'Lapierre style' keeps them protected from uplift/crash damage too. The SRAM X1 transmission never skipped a beat and the Race Face Turbine cranks have a one-piece ring spider

and wide BB92 bottom bracket mean serious stiffness underfoot. There's a full 125mm of drop on the internally routed Reverb Stealth seatpost, which leaves the Commencal totally ready to rip with no obvious upgrades to make anywhere. Even better, because Commencal is selling direct rather than through a UK distributor, spec that would have been impressive for £3000 will only cost you around £2500 depending on the euro exchange rate.



**"Infectiously responsive with outstanding control and poise at a great price."**

Direct sales mean stunning value kit for the money



# THE VERDICT

Tough decisions and close calls uncovered our winner

**A**s we unloaded the bikes one last time the arguments had been crackling on for some time. Editor Jon held onto the Foxy that won 2014's TBOTY after the test and then switched to a 2015 edition, upgrading it to the hilt to suit his skilled, flat out, gravity fuelled riding style. He grabbed

every chance to prove the Mondraker was faster down the hill and safer at the ragged edge than anything else.

Whyte's T-129 Works hung onto the big bikes through the rough stuff all week, before casually dumping them on the open sections and climbs, and apart

from rear tyre clearance it didn't put a wheel wrong all week. The final run down the increasingly rocky, steep and twisty base of the brilliant, brutal descent into Boltana was enough to batter it out of the race for top honours.

It was a bike created not far from these very mountains that



held its cool in a sea of smouldering brakes, chattering chains and swollen forearms. Max Commencal has been producing world beating race bikes for two decades and the Andorran brand had developed an awesome arsenal for 2015. Apart from the occasional saddle shuffle on climbs for some testers, the Meta V4 Race consistently set our testing benchmark straight from the box. It skipped and sprinted along the singletrack with easy efficiency and responsive enthusiasm, linking every techy line like the

missing piece of the perfect handling jigsaw. It hooned down every descent, carved corners like a scythe, sucked up big hits and deep drops without hesitation and delivered us to the bottom buzzing for another run.

The 120mm travel Meta Trail is equally brilliant if you want a shorter travel bike and buying direct means the spot on specification comes at a bargain price, giving Commencal a richly deserved 2015 Trail Bike of the Year win. **WMB**

**“It held its cool in a sea of smouldering brakes, chattering chains and swollen forearms”**



**MASSIVE THANKS TO**



Doug and Antonio at Basque MTB. Whether it's the stunning swooping singletrack of the Atlantic coast or the seemingly endless epic enduro riding and awesome eating of the Pyrenees and Ainsa area, these boys are the key to unlocking some of the best riding we've ever done anywhere.  
[www.basquemtb.com](http://www.basquemtb.com)

Brittany Ferries. Get to Spain fresh and ready to rip up the trails, and save yourself a fortune in fuel and French road tolls, by cruising in comfort from Portsmouth to Santander. Unlike a plane there's no hint of a plastic wrapped microwave dinner on the entire boat, just restaurants and bars. Yum.  
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