



Santa Cruz Highball Aluminium.

Price: £599 (frame only)

From: Jungle, santacruz bikes.co.uk

Tested: Six months

This is the cheaper version of Santa Cruz's two 29er hardtail offerings and comes with an 800g weight penalty over the higher-end carbon version. The hydroformed aluminium frame features interchangeable dropouts allowing you to run it either with conventional gears or in dedicated singlespeed mode; the singlespeed dropouts having a very neat integral tensioning system. The 'mixed taper' tapered headtube upfront requires an internal 44mm top cup and external 1.5 lower.

Designed around a 100mm travel fork (but happy to accommodate 120mm) the frame shares similar 'racy' geometry to the carbon version with a 70.5° head angle, 73° seat tube angle and, on our medium frame, an effective top tube length of 23in. Shortish chainstays keep the back end tight and the bike has an overall wheelbase of 42.5. One of the advantages of the Highball over the Highball Carbon is the generous spacing of the rear end, offering greater mud clearance and the ability to fit bigger tyres.

First test was to build the bike up with a 120mm travel fork and in singlespeed mode, the dropouts being an easy fit and a doddle to adjust to get chain tension spot on. With a 120mm fork, 60mm stem and 710mm bars the bike felt slightly less twitchy than the XC builds I'd previously ridden proving to be an engaging ride when the going was tight and twisty. The solid back end allows for quick acceleration while the 29er wheels dampen down any trail buzz compared to a similar 26in wheeled hardtail. 'Summer' also gave a good opportunity to test out the ability of the back end to avoid clag

build up which it did admirably even when fitted with 2.4in tyres. The bike felt capable and inspired confidence in its ability to shrug off technical terrain; a sense of mission creep over its XC inspired roots.

So inspired in fact that it had a mid-test rebuild, sourcing a pair of 140mm Revelations, a Reverb and Mavic's more All Mountain orientated Crossmax ST29er wheelset. I also took the opportunity to swap out the dropouts allowing me to run a 1x10 set up. Truth be told I was viewing it more as a big brother to the Chameleon than a cheaper Highball Carbon.

While the longer forks slackened off the handling a touch, the ride remained solid and reliable; stable on climbs with no front end wandering and an absolute blast once pointed downhill. The bike felt light and fast on the climbs, lively, responsive and capable of nimbly finding a way down everything I threw it down. Definitely not one to be ridden sedately, this is a bike that benefits from a saddle down and hooning approach; get it in tight wooded singletrack, flick up the speed and the chuckable frame comes alive holding lines and flying through corners. It's a jack of all trades but seems to master many of them too.

A do it all hardtail? Throughout the test I've put in the miles on a wide variety of trail and ride types and it's shone on them all; whether on all day moorland XC slogs, trail centre blasts, woody singletrack or Calderdale rockfests, the Highball has raised a smile due to its response to rider input.

Overall: A versatile and very inspiring frameset capable of respectable XC builds or as a tech devouring all-mountain do it all. Solid reliable handling is its strength. The only question is: Blue or white?

Dave