

Dirt Rag Magazine Reviews the XL Evolve

Tester: Michael Tierney

Age: 44

Height: 6' 4"

Weight: 222lbs.

Inseam: 36"

Vital Stats

Country of Origin: USA

Price: \$5000

Weight: 28.5lbs.

Sizes available: S, M, L, XL (tested)

Contact: www.ellsworthbikes.com



The Ellsworth Evolve is the company's ground-up foray into the 29er world of cross-country mountain bikes, designed to ride similarly to their highly regarded 26"-wheeled models. Ellsworth strives to provide the most efficient suspension design possible, taking into account bump absorption, traction, and energy efficiency. The frame design is based on their internationally patented Instant Center Tracking (ICT) suspension technology, which was initially developed in 1997. The ICT is a fully active system, and theoretically it will not be affected by changes in chain torque, limiting the need for lockout and restricting bobbing effect, yet will remain active during braking.

Rarely does the outward appearance of a bike have an impact on my sense of desirability. In fact I am more inclined to remark upon an ugly exterior than to take note of an expensive hand-painted masterpiece. However, the Nebula Blue Anodized color of my Evolve was of the dark restrained style that I appreciate. The paint job was the basis to observe some exceptional craftsmanship, from the CNC scoring of the linkage to the lateral grooves within the seat tube bearing contact point to its characteristic silver head badge. Also noted were the asymmetrical chainstays, designed for improved strength and an enhanced weight-to-stiffness ratio.

As with other 29ers I have ridden, friends mentioned how well the Evolve appeared to fit me, an observation that was collaborated with how I felt on the bike itself. This was a very tall bike, what with the beefy 2.3" Kenda Nevegal tires and a DT Swiss X470 wheelset combined with the XL size. The 25.5" effective top tube and Thomson stem and seatpost provided a stable, comfortable piloting environment. The bike's set-up, with a wide Precision Loaded handlebar about 2" below the saddle, was a racier position that I hadn't used in a few years. The 28.5lb. overall weight for the Evolve was in part achieved with lightweight SRAM X.0 drivetrain parts and Truativ Noir cranks.

During the testing period, I took the Evolve on 20 outings, totaling 288 miles (average: 14.4) and climbed 24,885 vertical feet (1244.3m) while averaging 94.3 minutes of moving time per ride. All values were collected via a Garmin Edge 305 GPS. Nearly all rides initiated from my door, with approximately 10 % of the ride time occurring on asphalt in order to reach, and return from, the trailhead. The first half of the riding period took place during a rare monsoon period in my city while the second half was composed of classic concrete-like middle-of-winter hard pack.

On descents the Evolve performed as one would expect, easily seeking the fall line when pointed in that direction while being effortlessly slowed with Magura Marta SL brakes. Steering during these high-speed descents—as well as slow, steep descents—was well-modulated by the Fox Float F29. While ultra-tight sections are rare in my riding, I was able to easily retain balance in short and close-in areas. Leaning into turns (especially during the dry second half of the testing experience) was confidence-inducing while the traction during the wet season remained well intact. Concern about roots was a distant memory. On the occasions of steep trail where I needed to come out of the saddle, I could fully feel its height. That is, while attempting to keep my body in a straight line, in order to achieve proper leverage the bike felt it needed to be pushed farther side to side in the horizontal plane compared to other bikes. As a rider focused on cross country, I had only the rare opportunity to hop and huck, but the size of the frame was similarly felt under these conditions.

The Nevegal tires led me to believe that the Evolve not only could steamroll over any obstacle, but also that climbing traction was simply without peer. Climbs that in the past were approached from a side angle were now taken head-on. However, there were consequences as well. Start-up acceleration was hindered by such tire beefiness but also had an effect on overall long-term climbing. I would be willing to give up some of that remarkable traction for less spinning weight in a lighter, perhaps tubeless, tire configuration. Like the NFL all-pro receiver who was asked if he has lost a step, the traction has a "step to give." Go with lighter tires.

The bike arrived with a Fox Float R that had a pre-adjusted compression setting chosen specifically for the Evolve. Set at the fastest rebound setting (externally adjustable), I felt that the reaction of the rear suspension on smaller bumps was not as quick as I prefer. This may be a tribute to the suspension design, as traction and loss of energy are the objectives of the design, but in viewing the rear suspension as a system I prefer a slightly snappier response to smaller bumps.

While I didn't tweak the bike to my exact geometry specifications (since I wanted to ride the bike as presented), there was room for variation in the set-up, but the most significant aspect was that the sizing of the XL frame fit my 6' 4" height. Most 26" XL frames tend to run just a bit small on me, while XXL frames often carry a significant weight penalty. When dealing with this level of design and workmanship, a rider starts to think about the ultimate cross country bike, one that comprehensively serves his or her needs. My personal needs revolve around regularly riding with a pack of lifetime friends who covertly note the slightest perceived change in totem pole position. For me, that means short but regular climbs against significantly lighter riders, long sightlines as well as twisty singletrack, regular logs jumps of various sizes, and many rocky stream crossings. The Ellsworth Evolve should be in the discussion of the all around go-to bike, especially for a rider of my dimensions.

The Evolve is also available in Black Anodized, Project Pink, Smoke Anodized, and Tiger Stripe Anodized.

Exclusive Dirt Rag Web-Only Extras For Ellsworth Evolve

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