

FINAL SAY

IF TESTERS COULD CHOOSE JUST ONE

TRAVIS ENGEL

People do strange things when they're far from home. Things they often could easily do in their own neighborhood but never would. Some drink sugary, fluorescent alcohol from tall, strangely shaped plastic vessels. Others rent paddle boats, read books and cheat on their spouses. I, on the other hand, choose a 27.5-inch bike despite having plenty of excellent 29ers in the garage. My pick of the Kona Process CR/DL 27.5 makes that three years in a row.

Back home in the real world, the Orbea Rallon would be a safer bet. It's incredibly capable, but never rides like it's too much bike. Except this choice isn't about safe bets. Like the Process 27.5 itself, this choice is about having a good time. The Kona's short chainstays and small wheels gain it high marks for playfulness. But its long cockpit, long wheelbase and long travel help when playtime is over. Also, it's kinda' heavy. There's something about a dead-solid 32-pound bike that feels ready for anything. And the 76-degree seat tube makes that not matter on the climbs, so maybe it is ready for the real world.

NICOLE FORMOSA

When I looked at my list of favorites from this year's *Bible*, all I could think was, "What are all these little wheels doing here?" In the interest of full disclosure, I only tested bikes in my size, which was about a quarter of the full crop, but still, I've been riding and preaching the virtues of short-travel 29ers for some time. Realizing my favorites all wore 27.5-inch wheels spun me into a brief identity crisis, from which I recovered

in time to continue lusting after the Ibis Mojo HD4. With its rocket-ship climbing abilities—despite having 160 millimeters of travel—and ground-hugging traction, this is the bike that stayed on my mind long after I left Marquette.

RYAN PALMER

I cannot decide which out of all the bikes at this year's *Bible* was my favorite to ride, so I'm choosing my favorite underdog instead. The Norco Sight 29 gets an honorable mention. It surprised everyone by how comfortable and balanced a shredder it was. But it's not that much of an underdog because most people already know that Norco makes fun bikes. It's not enough of a surprise that the Sight rips. The true victory belongs to the Orbea Rallon. Nobody expected Orbea, who's known more for its road and cross-country bikes, to go and make one of the best-riding, most well-rounded, long-travel 29ers ever built. It's slacker that the Evil Wreckoning but climbs far better. It's comfortable on double blacks and blue squares alike, and it's beautiful to boot. I can't for sure say it's my favorite bike, but it's definitely up there. As far as exceeding expectations, nothing else even comes close.

MIKE FERRENTINO

After a couple years where I have been falling in love with mid-travel 27.5-inch bikes, this was the year that the big-and-burly 29er came storming back to the forefront. There were so many long-travel 29-inch bikes in the test herd that were just incredibly well-balanced and fun to ride. I secretly wish I was man enough to justify owning a Transi-

tion Sentinel, because I found myself going faster downhill through ugly rough stuff on that bike than I ever thought I could. But the terrain I ride mostly isn't burly enough to justify the extremity of that bike. I really should be on a Stumpjumper, because that bike checks all the boxes for the reality of my riding. But my tastes run toward the weird, and that means I inevitably pine for something a little exotic. And the bike that did that, as well as impressed me the most, surprised me with its all-round ease of getting familiar with and blew me away with its broad range of capability was one I least expected: the Orbea Rallon.

JONATHON WEBER

Two of my favorites from this year are the same bike in different wheel sizes. Norco's Sight 29 and 27.5 turned out to be the dark horses of the test, and not just because they're both painted black. Coming into the *Bible*, they were probably the bikes I was least excited to ride. It turned out that I wasn't the only one: Every time a local approached us at the trailhead, they'd fondle the Ibis and the Evil and the Specialized and then stroll right by the unremarkable-looking Norcos. Both bikes were also remarkably unremarkable on the trail—but I mean that in the best way possible.

They simply do everything extremely well, with absolutely no fuss. Set them to 30-percent sag and go ride. They'll pedal, climb and descend anything you want, but both are most impressive due to their suspension performance on descents. I hardly had to pay any attention to the Sights while riding them, and if you ask me, that should be the goal for any bike.

The other standout to me was the Nomad. Like the Norco, it did everything incredibly well—even climb, given that it has 170 millimeters of travel. It was supple without giving up on playfulness, and Santa Cruz nailed the details—from the threaded bottom bracket to internally guided cable routing and a shuttle pad on the underside of the downtube.

RYAN CLEEK

As one who's skidded around the mountain bike block a few times, I know what I like, and I feel I have strong, evidence-based opinions that support my feelings. Therefore, I honestly admit my favorite bike of the 2018 *Bible* completely took me by surprise (forgive me, Satan). In the 2017 *Bible* testing sessions, I was not shy about my lack of affection for the Santa Cruz Hightower, and I stand by how I remember that bike performing. However, after putting down several grin-fueled outings aboard the new Santa Cruz Hightower LT, which shares the original Hightower front triangle, yet bumps front and rear travel to 150 millimeters and incorporates a new shock linkage and rear triangle, I was simply blown away. For a long-ish-travel 29er, I found the Hightower LT to be extremely stable when mad-dogg'n through rough terrain, but it also felt agile and playful when pointed down jump-filled and berymy flow-style trails. During our time on the remarkable trail system of Marquette, Michigan, I rode dozens of cutting-edge bikes from the sport's most talked-about brands. Yet, the Hightower LT was the only one I wanted to sneak home inside my gearbag. And, if the frame were black, rather than the "nuclear urine" colorway (for the

record, my name, not Santa Cruz's) I just might have tried.

KRISTIN BUTCHER

Once again, my sleep-deprived week of testing more bikes than I deserve left me drooling more than usual. I was dumbfounded to fall for not just one bike, but two, both of which caught me completely off-guard. The Spot Mayhem made me see a previously unnoticed 27.5+ hole in my quiver. With traction for days and a stability in the air that let me send jumps in a way that I haven't before (namely, by catching air at all), I was ready to commit right up until the last day when I grabbed the trim and sexy Ibis HD4 for a short pleasure ride. Which bike is my favorite? Obviously, the only way to decide is through an extended test on each. Now if I can only get my editor to agree.

LACY KEMP

For the first time in my three-year tenure as a *Bible* tester, my favorite bike was an easy choice. The Norco Sight C2 27.5 was the clear winner. I could not stop riding this bike. It felt awesome on everything. We rode some pretty rowdy rock slabs, my favorite kind of terrain, and it just cruised down everything with no sketchiness whatsoever. I wasn't surprised it was a good climber, but I was amazed at its descending qualities. This is a bike I would love to ride at home on terrain that really tests me. Marquette offered a ton of variety in terrain, but I want to see how it handles on a big all-day epic, which is where fatigue usually gets the best of me.

I also wants to give an honorable mention to the Ibis Mojo HD4. While still on the fence

about wider tires, I admit that the 2.6 tire of the HD4 was totally unobtrusive. The bike climbed great and was a total blast downhill. It was slightly cumbersome on some of the slower techier sections, but overall was a total joy to ride.

WILL RITCHIE

Favorite bike to me means most fun bike. It's the bike that once I ride it, I can't help but want to ride it more—beyond that, I can't help but just want to ride more period. I don't have to justify it—the bike for climbing, bike for real-deal descending, bike for this trip, that trip, long ride, short ride, NorCal, SoCal ... too many nuances. The favorite bike needs to be simple.

My favorite bike is the Evil Following MB. OK—yes, this bike gets a lot of love. Even so, the Following MB actually tells you you're awesome. *I'm hearing voices and they're saying nice things.* I'm not awesome so this is quite nice to hear. Self-preservation minded or not, it's time to pop off that rock, thread those roots, gap—dare I say it—gap that patch of trail to that one. Anything and everything becomes fun. It has this lovely supple, then supportive, then controlled smoothness throughout the stroke, addictively nice.

A close runner-up is the Kona Process CR/DL 27.5. I'm a 29-inch extremist with a religious fervor for the big wheel that is second to none. Evangelical puts it lightly. The Process CR/DL 27.5 with its height-challenged curious wheels makes me wonder if I've gone craz(ier), it's simply splendid.