



SANTA CRUZ BLUR XC CARBON

Price: Frame £2299 As built approx £5300 From: Jungle www.jungle.co.uk Weight: 23.6lbs Persona: '69 Dodge Charger

The Carbon Blur XC came quite out of the blue from a company known for its aluminium bikes and better known for mid and long travel bikes. Suddenly Santa Cruz appeared with this super-light, carbon machine, completely replacing its aluminium version. A very bold move, but one that seems to have paid off, as everyone seems to like what it's done.

The Detail

Santa Cruz decided that it wasn't going to be worth making a carbon bike if they couldn't make it lighter and stiffer than the bike it replaced. The frame they came out with, still with the VPP2 system, is a pound lighter than the old, ally, XC and yet is noticeably stiffer.

The main frame features 'rounded square' section frame tubes and the carbon extends to both the seat and the chainstays. Looking under the bike, you see some of the neat details, like a bonded-on chainsuck protector and grease ports on all the bearings. There's even a long 'Santa Cruz' sticker on the underside of the downtube, as if they're expecting you to be jumping it into the sky for photos...

The bike can be set up with a 100mm or 120mm fork, as we have here. I've ridden a 100/105mm version of the XC and you could steer it with your eyebrows it was that fast – yet still stiff and predictable on the corners. It seems that nearly everyone prefers the slightly slacker (67/71°) 120mm fork version. Rear travel is 105mm.

Our test bike came with most of the XTR SL build that Santa Cruz offers and this means an XTR drivetrain, Avid Elixir brakes and a Hope/Stan's ZTR 355 wheelset. Finishing kit is Thomson and Easton, with a comfy low rise bar and a 110mm stem. This caused the aesthetes in the office to wince a little as few riders here run anything longer than 80mm, but on this bike it seemed entirely appropriate.

In a world of longer travel, the Monarch shock looks comically tiny and, as such, is sensitive to getting the pressure just right. Fortunately the printed-on sag marking on the shock helps dial it in.

The Ride.

Oh lordy, this is a stiff bike! That's the first thing you notice on the Blur XC. There's not a hint of flex in either the front or back end of the bike. This translates to precise steering and a very reassuring ride-feel. With the black frame and understated (while still expensive) build, the bike's stealth looks belie its speed and versatility. Riders would swing a leg over and pedal off, returning hours later, completely spent and with a slightly puzzled look. How can this bike be so light, fast AND fun?

As you'd expect from a 20-something pound bike, it accelerates incredibly under the slightest pedal load; a few revolutions of the cranks and you're thrown a hundred feet down the trail, regardless of inclination. Most of the time you get the impression you're just ticking over though, even when climbing quickly the feeling that you could always click up a gear or two and really put the hammer down plays on your mind. Unlike other lightweight bikes though the Blur doesn't squirm under power, it's stiff and all your energy is channeled one way; forward.

Descending isn't as nerve-wracking as you'd expect for a bike that has XC in its name, it's up for techy descents and high speed stuff if you are. The stiff front end and non-racing angles (67°/71° as tested) really do lend a big dose of reassurance when the going gets rocky. The lack of frame flex too means that you're happy to just let the suspension get on with suspending, while you pilot the bike through the rocks. Even with a 100mm fork fitted, the steering is lively, but



Subdued and sleek



Asymmetrical decals.



Chainsuck plate.



Disc mounts that don't look like an after thought



Grease ports.



Short stroking shaft.



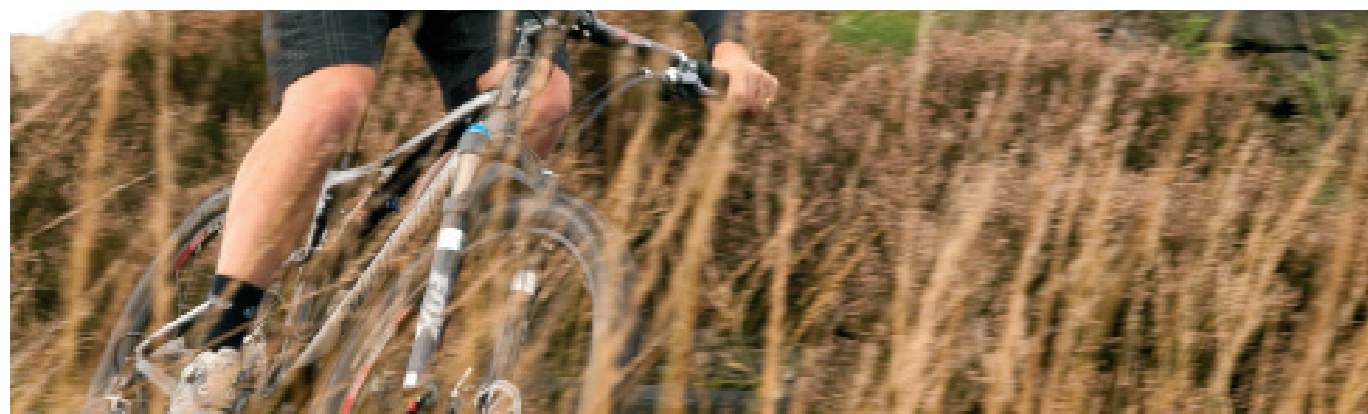
Hidden decals.

still confident and surefooted.

Many riders felt that the top tube could be a little longer than our Medium's 23in, purely so that a shorter stem could be run, but with the 110mm stem fitted, the ride position felt just right for the mix of fast and technical riding the bike was asked to do.

Investing in a grippy rear tyre is a must, as the ability to really let rip on the climbs means you'll be out of the saddle with your weight over the front end which leaves the rear liable to spinning out. In all, it's more 'muscle' than 'finesse' as you feel happier throwing the bike into corners and through sketchy situations. When it comes time to wind it up, though, the Blur XC flies.





CONCLUSION

Yes, all of our top-flight carbon bikes should all be good at this price, and they are. As with anything, though, it depends what you're after within that little carbon/plastic genre...

The Pronghorn isn't a bike for everybody, but it is definitely the bike for a club racer or aspiring XC god. As well as being phenomenally, incredibly light, it's a bike that only really makes sense in the big ring, head down and teeth bared. If you want a bike that'll work for happy trail riding with the odd race thrown in, then find another bike. The same goes if you mainly ride technical, rocky trails and like the muscle the bike around. However, if you want to go everywhere as fast as humanly possible with your hair on fire and have the skills to back it up, then the Pronghorn is about as quick as you'll get.

The Santa Cruz was definitely the riders' choice. It's a bike that dares you to give it all you've got, both up and downhill and then,

when you're spent and broken, just shrugs 'Sucker!' and goes off to find a new rider with fresh stores energy that it can suck the life from. The understated looks and noticeably stiff chassis combines with the effective suspension to give a bike that works well in any situation from XC race to all-day trail riding. Above all that, though, it's a ball of fun to ride.

The Lapierre comes out of this as somewhere between the two extremes of the Blur and Pronghorn. It's not super-light, but is still light, and it's the least expensive of the three, though it's not cheap. What it does is give a fast and reliable ride without doing anything too extreme. It seems to lack the 'fun' ride and feel of the four bar Zesty and Spicy bikes and the weight of the X-Control isn't far off its longer travel cousins. It's a great bike, but falls too much into the 'neither here nor there' ground where there are better race bikes out there and more versatile trail bikes (even within the Lapierre range).