



Words: Guy Kesteven Photos: Russell Burton

SANTA CRUZ NICKEL

TESTER SAYS...

 The more I rode the Nickel the more it impressed me. It climbs well despite its weight, attacks descents with commitment and is brilliantly balanced for blasting through technical singletrack. It pedals more neutrally than the single pivot bikes and costs much less than VPP ones. It's not a ride that screams for attention or demands a riding style, but by being good at everything it's a great all-rounder. *Guy*

With its reworked frameset designed for versatility and all-round riding, is the Nickel set to wow us?

Santa Cruz has been producing a lot of new designs recently. They're mostly carbon configurations of existing models, but we've also been blindsided with two totally new alloy framesets. The bigger Butcher overlaps the current Heckler, but the Nickel tested here fills a whole new travel and mission bracket between the existing single-pivot Superlight and Heckler platforms. It gets up-to-date frame

features and a completely new suspension system to do it with, too.

The facts
As you'd hope for a 2011 frame, things start off with a tapered head tube, using a conventional bottom cup and inset top cup to keep the cockpit low. A kinked top tube keeps standover clearance generous and the S-curved box-to-oval down tube gets a side-welded saddle mount that puts the big main pivot in roughly the same place as Santa Cruz's single-pivot bikes. The main pivot also uses the same serviceable collet design as Santa Cruz's second-generation VPP bikes, so reliability should be excellent.

What's new then? Well, the two Actual Pivot Point (APP) linkages that pivot off the top corner of the back-sloped rear swingarm to drive the shock through a Virtual Pivot Point (VPP)-style hanging linkage. This means that while the rear axle path is very similar to that of Santa Cruz's single-pivot bikes, the APP linkage modifies the shock path to mirror the falling and rising rate of VPP twin-linkage bikes. At 7.3lb for frame and shock it is definitely on the chunky side for its travel/use category.

This also allows Santa Cruz to lean the forward parts of the extensively

AT A GLANCE	
PRICE	£1299 (frame and Fox Float R shock)
TOP TUBE LENGTH	23.0in
SEAT TUBE LENGTH	17in
HEAD ANGLE	68°
SEAT ANGLE	72.5°
BB HEIGHT	13.6in
CHAINSTAY LENGTH	16.7in
WHEELBASE	43.4in
SIZES	S, M (tested) L, XL
WEIGHT	27lb
FRAME	Custom 6061/6066 alloy 125mm travel
FORK	RockShox Revelation Race Dual Air 140mm
SHOCK	Fox RP23
WHEELS	DT Swiss XR400 rims on DT Swiss 240 hubs
TYRES	Panaracer Cedric Gracia XC 2.1
CRANKS	Truvativ Noir
GEARS	XO rear and shifters, XTR front
BRAKES	Avid Elixir CR 160mm rotors
OTHER STUFF	Easton EA70 stem 70mm, Monkey Lite XC bar 700mm, Thomson Elite seat post, WTB Devo saddle
CONTACT	www.santacruz bikes.co.uk



The new suspension design combines Actual and Virtual Pivot Point linkages

hydroformed rear swingarm right back to keep weight low. Slight asymmetry gives extra chain clearance on the drive side too. Elsewhere, the distinctive vertical rear drop-out plates include a bottle opener and rear brake mount.

The frame also features up-and-under bottle cage mounts and big tyre clearance between the indented stays, plus the now obligatory cable routing for a remote controlled adjustable seat post. Big loops of cable between the frame halves make paint protection patches essential, though, so ensure you take the time to protect any one of the seven colour choices – black, red, lime green,

white, sea bright blue and chocolate – prior to riding the Nickel in anger.

Santa Cruz will be bringing out complete packages later this year but, for now, the frame is an ideal host for the latest tough, light components. The distinctively stiff, well-controlled and light Revelation fork we rode was a great match and the Easton short stem, wide-bar set up was spot on, too. We'll never complain about the double SRAM X.O and Avid Elixir double act either. We'd go for bigger volume tyres than the 2.1in Panaracers our bike had, though; while they're fast, they undermine the otherwise surefooted bike on sketchier terrain.

The feel
It's always hard to know what to expect from a bike that's designed for general riding, but it's the versatility and engaging enthusiasm of the Nickel in all situations that really strikes you.

It's heavy for a 120mm bike, but the addition of the APP linkage stabilises the suspension and removes pedal- and power-related bob to a remarkable degree. That produces a planted, predictable feel as you pour on the coal, staying flat and connected to the terrain. It charges with equal purpose in the saddle or out, and the neutral suspension means you can always stab in a few pedal strokes between technical sections to keep speed high without affecting balance.

We're not sure why Santa Cruz describe the Nickel as long, because the medium model is relatively short in the 23in top tube, and you're certainly not going to want to stick on a long stem. What you miss in stretch on the climbs you make up for with easy rider movement, though – you can shift your weight to stick or slide the tyres around at will. The Nickel flicks and hops around any trailside launch lips with an addictive glee, too.

There's still the potential fit-gap problem between the medium and large frames that Santa Cruz has always suffered from, so try to bag a test ride at a demo event if you're unsure. If the frame does fit then the tapered head tube and chunky down tube give a very solid grip on the Revelation forks to let you fully exploit the accuracy of the Maxle stiffened tips. And the reasonably

The Nickel is planted and predictable yet still enthusiastic and fun to ride

The tapered head tube holds a well behaved 140mm RockShox Revelation fork

but not radically slack head angle gives the Nickel an easy confidence on the trail without feeling as though the front wheel is wandering about like a wheelbarrow at low speeds.

The bottom bracket height is also a happy balance between being close enough to the ground to feel in touch at lower speeds and having enough clearance to keep pedalling on rocky and rutted trails. You could always steepen it with a 120mm fork or lower it for a more XC feel. That would match the rear travel more closely too.

With slightly rearward wheel movement and a falling rate through the first bit of travel in the long stroke shock, the back end feels impressively smooth over small stuff. It then tightens up progressively as you push further into the stroke to collect bigger hits and drops without hitting the stops too hard.

Summary
Heavy, but if you want a truly versatile, tackle-anything mountain bike at an affordable price but still with prestige appeal, then Santa Cruz has just dropped a great new option into the running.

WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

"If you want an affordable, versatile, enthusiastic bike that still has prestige appeal then this is a great option."



The curvy alloy frame is well finished and offers plenty of standover room