



Santa Cruz Chameleon

£1,599 Genre-defining hardnut heads into battle with trail-taming kit

WORKSHOP WISDOM



MBUK'S MECHANIC SAYS...

To clip or not to clip?

Avid's Juicy brake callipers have an extra external clip that's intended to make sure the pads never fall out, even when a wheel is removed. Sounds like an excellent idea. Unfortunately, we managed to dislodge a pad while putting a wheel back in on the side of the trail. In the process of replacing it we then wrecked the retaining clip. The pads stayed in fine without it but we don't recommend you try this at home.

There's a clue to the genesis of Santa Cruz's versatile Chameleon in the fact that our middle-sized test frame, built up with a selection of hard-riding trail kit, is actually a large. Originally created to tackle anything from aerial antics to all-day mountain epics, it's sized by length rather than height to suit the application you have in mind. The question is, as the longest-running long travel model here, can it still cut it?

The chassis

The Chameleon blends strength and stiffness with subtle weight reduction. Just enough that – although it won't give flyweight cross-country bikes anything to worry about – it's a reasonable proposition for day-long rides. The oversized, thin-walled down tube provides a rigid backbone off which to hang everything else, while the curved approach to the head tube junction combines with extra gussetry to provide ample protection against damage.

An elegantly hydroformed top tube wraps around the seat tube and curves into a huge box-section wishbone anchor for the seatstays. A similar box bridge to the rear of

the bottom bracket backs up the theme of massive rear-end rigidity. Santa Cruz reckon you can fit a 2.6in tyre in there but there'd be precious little room left for mud clearance. An eccentric bottom bracket makes for easy singlespeed conversion at the expense of some extra weight, and there's a bottle opener on the driveside dropout for impromptu post-ride beers.

Santa Cruz also say the frame will handle any fork with 100mm (3.9in) to 160mm (6.3in) of travel. The basic D XC spec Chameleon has a 120mm (4.7in) travel fork but we plumped for the extra rock-swallowing ability of the 150mm (5.9in) RockShox Sektor R for an extra £200. The air sprung set-up makes it easy to tweak to individual tastes, though we'd prefer the extra steering precision of a Maxle over the standard QR.

The detail

With 2.35in rubber on its wheels, the Chameleon has enough grip and cushioning to cope with most trail scenarios and have a bit of mud clearance to spare. RaceFace and WTB finishing kit is all top notch, while the 9-speed SLX and Deore transmission are as slick and reliable as you'd expect from

Shimano. In practical terms it loses nothing to the 10-speed.

If you like to get airborne you may prefer a slightly shorter stem. And Avid's Juicy 3 disc brakes are decent mid-range stoppers but aren't the strongest anchors for high-speed descents.

The ride

Those box-section bridges and big stays at the rear end aren't subtle. They signal in no uncertain terms that the Chameleon isn't about compromise in the strength and stiffness department. Even so, the Santa Cruz designers haven't forgotten that a trail bike needs decent ride quality. Luckily for riders' fillings they've got the balance about right.

This is partly down to the fact that the front triangle isn't as overbuilt as the rear, with thin-wall tubes and sensible diameters allowing the frame to absorb a small degree of trail vibration and shock without sacrificing accuracy or strength.

But it's also largely down to the choice of components. From the padding of the WTB saddle to the big knobs and huge air volume of the Maxxis tyres, our test Chameleon's kit worked hard to



THE CHAMELEON WAS HAPPIEST BEING PUSHED HARD DOWN THE TRAIL

provide a hint of comfort in the face of the frame's strength and rigidity. The solid rear end and grippy back tyre gave instant stomp-and-go power, while the prodigious rock-swallowing abilities of the RockShox Sektor fork enabled an aggro, weight-forward riding style that made the front end work hard.

Though it was perfectly possible to cruise along and let

the fork and tyres do all the work for us, the Chameleon was at its happiest when being pushed hard down the trail. The front end weighting allowed that rigid back area to skim straight over the rough stuff, while the fork rarely felt overworked, even right up to the limits of its travel. We never missed adjustable compression damping or a lockout, but the quick release

made for noticeably less precise steering when things got dicey.

While we're splitting hairs, a slightly shorter stem would also make the front end a little more placeable on descents and a bit less prone to wandering on steep climbs. But that's easily fixed. Part play bike and part all-day trail machine, the Chameleon is an effective halfway house between the two extremes.

✓ SO GOOD

- Brilliantly versatile design means you can kit your Chameleon out to tackle literally anything
- Strong enough to handle some real abuse, but it won't rattle your fillings loose

✗ NO GOOD

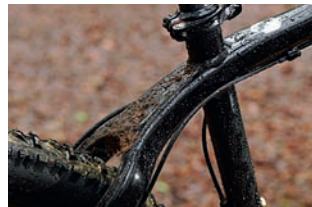
- It really needs a bolt-through front axle for better, more precise steering
- The frame's rigidity won't suit everyone's tastes



A 120mm travel fork plus quick-release front wheel means you'll be working harder to keep the front end going where you want it to



The 9-speed may look like last season's choice but 10-speed only offers some slightly closer-spaced ratios in reality



The massive box-section seatstay bridge is a continuation of the hydroformed top tube and gives the rear end huge rigidity

Mountain Biking UK ★★★★★

Doesn't excel in any particular area, but that's a big part of its appeal. Strong enough to take some serious abuse in its stride but light and comfy enough for use on long rides

»