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Ultimate Trail Bikes

2011 means evolution for four trail bike market big players. But where has our riding taken designers? →

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Like human evolution, bike development is driven by changes in habitat and behaviour. Most of us now ride faster off or over bigger stuff, and we expect our bikes to deal with it. Designers have responded with steeds that handle better at speed or on steep descents, and we're seeing an increase in average travel on trail models. Some things aren't changing though. We still need to get up what we want to ride down, as well as drink water and use lights, and the trails still get filthy in winter.

As nothing radical has happened with metal or suspension technology recently, designers have had to drill down the details to deliver year-on-year improvements to our riding experiences. So how do our four 2011 trendsetters stack up on the trail, and what's the DNA development story behind them?

DVDs and photos are now full of ever-more radical images that we're supposedly meant to be copying, and the riding we're doing is changing. Purpose-built trail centres routinely include drops, high-speed bermed turns, jumps and boulder fields even on

intermediate red routes. Your local woods are likely to have a few downhill runs and jump spots in them, and even if you didn't build them yourself they're definitely tempting to include on home run trail rides. The extent to which each bike here has been tweaked to reflect this continuing radicalisation varies dramatically though.

Going through changes

Rocky Mountain is obviously pretty happy with its STRAIGHT UP geometry, only increasing the length of the Altitude's front end by 5mm and concentrating the rest of its efforts on losing 200g of frame weight. Giant's Trance X1 barely changes geometrically either, and is still the sharpest steering, most cross-country (XC) style bike here. A slightly longer fork has been fitted in a new, stiffer, tapered steerer-compatible head tube though. This knocks the head angle back by half a degree and slightly lengthens the distance between the front axle and bottom bracket, producing a noticeable increase in stability and security when you're pushing the soft compound front tyre hard.

2011 offerings have been tweaked to meet the demands of the trails

Specialized is another company savvy enough to use different tyres on opposite ends of the bike. This time the designers have gone for an S-Works front tyre of a totally different compound and tread pattern, and a smaller, faster rolling but harder rubber Control on the rear. Typically, it's done a superb job making the new Evo look the most radical in this test. The lower, slacker frame includes removable mounts for a chain device and 6mm more travel in the

2010 VS 2011

Are brand new models worth their price tags?

The biggest question with these bikes is whether they're worth buying. Especially when now is the perfect time to pick up a 2010 bike at a reduced price. That's something designers are acutely aware of. Marin's wholesale move to a longer travel, more capable performance for the Mount Vision certainly sees it moving up in score compared to its 2010 cousin.

Meanwhile, Specialized has launched an impressively detailed division that reflects what many radical riders are doing. Rocky Mountain and Giant have done a lot of work on the 2011 bikes but they differ much less dramatically from the 2010 models. That means it's up to you whether the fresh bikes are worth the money or you'd rather modify a 2010 ride to create something similar.



Sharper ride feel from Giant's slimmer down all-rounder

GIANT TRANCE X1

Ready to tackle anything

Giant's gone a long way to make some small changes, but it all counts towards keeping this agile and rapid all-rounder in the trail bike game. The geometry might be barely changed but a lighter, tighter, tapered head frame boosts steering accuracy. Inset bottom bracket and post-mount brakes bring it up to date, and its weight can compete with carbon frames in the category.

The component selection is vice-free and versatile. We were surprised how hard we were pushing it on the trails compared to the longer-travel bikes.

The ride is ready to tackle anything from epic technical singletrack to short course racing. A full Shimano suite means it's expensive compared to SRAM peers and last year's Trance X.

Millenary ★★★★★

"Giant's XC all-rounder gets a shade lighter, sharper and more aggressive, but it's a pricey heap."



AT A GLANCE

PRICE £3000
SIZES S, M (tested), L, XL
WEIGHT 12.2kg (26.9lb)
FRAME Aluxx SL aluminium
FORK Fox F125 FIT RL-11, tapered steerer, 15mm QR, 125mm travel
SHOCK Fox FLOAT RP23
WHEELS Shimano XT XC
TYRES Kenda Nevegal 2.1in
CRANKS Shimano XT
GEARS Shimano XT, SLX
DYNO-SYS 30
BRAKES Shimano XT
OTHER STUFF Giant Contact TR 690mm riser bar, Giant Contact 90mm stem, Giant Contact seat post, Fizik Gobi saddle
CONTACT
www.giant-bicycles.com

TESTER SAYS



"Giant is confident with what it's already doing with the Trance X - the designers have

sweated the seasoning details rather than changed the recipe with the 2011 version. The sharper ride feel shows that even small tweaks can make a noticeable difference to ride character when you're ragging it." Guy

"Designers have to drill down the details to deliver improvements"

rear. A 10mm longer fork, roller guided double ring, bashguard chainset, wide bars and Command Post dropper seat post complete the hardcore makeover.

While it doesn't look that out there - mainly because Marin introduced the slacker head, long front centre a while back - the Mount Vision actually gets the biggest alterations. Up front, the company's gone another degree slacker and added a tapered head tube to increase steering stiffness, despite a fork with 20mm more travel than last year. New linkages and a longer shock increase rear travel from 120mm to 140mm too, while cable clips are included for a remote control dropper post.

It's not all about the downhill though. While it's moved from the 'XC marathon' to 'trail' category on the website, the Rocky Altitude's new down tube and main pivot save nearly half a pound. The super

steep seat tube also puts weight forward for excellent technical climbing manners.

The Giant loses another 100g via a whole new tubeset, becoming one of the lightest alloy 120-130mm travel frames available. And Specialized has retuned its custom RP23 shock to give a firmer climbing feel. The increase in travel on the Marin hasn't meant any extra weight either. New linkages and a twin ring system up front eradicate the squishy feel in small chain rings and excessive pedal-related movement. Other tweaks such as direct-fit bottom brackets (Giant and Specialized) and post-mount brakes (Giant) and weight loss in things like wheels, tyres and forks all help shave vital grams. In theory anyway.

Hitting the dirt

The great thing about the Interbike

ROCKY MOUNTAIN ALTITUDE 70

Built for severe terrain

Rocky's taken a radical approach with its all-rounder, but if it works for you and your riding then the peculiar geometry is a positive. Designed to conquer seriously steep terrain is in keeping with its North Shore roots. The steep 76° seat angle and higher than average bottom bracket are outstanding for clawing up technical climbs. Having the seat forward makes it easy to get back over the rear wheel on steep descents too. The pedal and brake neutral four-bar suspension mean excellent traction. The lighter frame is a bonus for climbers.

You'll need to flick the ProPedal damping to stop it bouncing when you give it beans, and the long, singletrack stiffening stem needs changing. Limited frame clearance reduces tyre choice.

MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

"Lighter and a bit longer, it's still Altitude by name, altitude gain by nature for this technical climber."

Scott Wallace - Trail & Mountain Bikes - True PDF format



TESTER SAYS



"Rocky Mountain freely admits that you will either understand the Altitude or you won't, and sales are apparently highly region specific. So if your idea of trails involves as much vertical as possible in the shortest distance then the Altitude might just give you the extreme terrain edge that you have been looking for." Guy

AT A GLANCE

PRICE £3500
SIZES 15in, 16.5in, 18in (tested), 19in, 20.5in
WEIGHT 12.25kg (27.08lb)
FRAME RMB FORM 7003 alloy, 140mm travel
FORK Fox 32 FLOAT RL FIT 15mm, 140mm travel
SHOCK Fox FLOAT R923 XV BV
WHEELS DT Swiss X 1600
TYRES Maxxis Ardent, 2.25in (F), Crossmark 2.1in (R)
CRANKS Shimano XT
GEARS Shimano XT
BRAKES Formula R1, 180mm
OTHER STUFF Easton EA70 Low Rise 685mm bar, EA90 110mm stem, EA70 seat post, Fisk Gobi XM saddle
CONTACT www.silverfish-uk.com

"Rocky Mountain Altitude lives up to its name"

Dirt Demo was that it was our chance to pit all these bikes against each other on seriously technical, zero tolerance rocky singletrack. Limited time meant we were up at dawn, the soon-to-be-scorching sun still aglow behind the peaks of Bootleg Canyon as we fumbled up the trails at 5.30am.

We made the most of the Giant Trance's lower weight and more XC feel, pulling clear with each curving rise of the desert paths. Meanwhile, the Rocky Mountain Altitude lived up to its name close behind. Thanks to the bigger budget spec it was barely heavier than the Trance despite 15mm more travel. It definitely needs a dose of ProPedal shock damping to stop pedalling bob, but the

forward ride position, long stem and relatively high bottom bracket meant it nailed every one of the jagged rock-climb sections.

The Specialized Stumpjumper was nowhere near as heavy as it looked either, and with shock set to stun it worked the extra ground clearance of the double chainset to good effect over the sharp-edged step-ups. The carbon crank arms need remembering through rocky bits if they're not going to end up looking ragged quickly though.

Once we got the shock pressure fettled the Marin Mount Vision was scrambling up okay. Its weight still counts against it on climbs and there's more pedal-induced bob than there is with others if you don't reach down for the ProPedal lever. The way the suspension stiffens and digs in under peak torque will be a bonus for riders who like a more reactive, communicative ride though, ➔

Rough and rocky sections didn't pose any problems for the Altitude

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MARIN MOUNT VISION XM8

Hitting the hard trail spot

Marin has given the muscular, communicative and trail tough Mount Vision chassis the extra travel it needs to offset its solid build. The new tapered head tube controls a longer 140mm travel fork, with a smoother 140mm out back to match. The new slackened handling makes the most of what you can squeeze out of the shock for a naturally dynamic ride.

The pedal vs suspension feel won't please everyone, and the bike's on the heavy side. We'd also prefer stiffer, broader wheels. The suspension does work with the SRAM 2x10 transmission and the Formula brakes will be excellent for more aggressive riders.

Modular QR or Maxle dropouts, lifetime warrantied bearings and guides for a dropper post cable mean it's ready to take some beating over time, and the price tag is respectable.

Mountain Bike ★★★★★

"Same distinctive 3D character and UK-proof durability but with more travel, more balls and better pricing."



Revised suspension and longer shock give greater control



TESTER SAYS



"While it is definitely toned down, the pedal vs suspension feedback and heavier weight of the Mount

Vision still won't be to everyone's taste. More travel and stable geometry let you really make the most of the constantly interactive and playful feel when gravity is in your favour, though." Guy

AT A GLANCE

PRICE £1499
SIZES S, M (tested), L, XL
WEIGHT 12.97kg (28.6lb)
FRAME Hydroformed 6066 aluminium alloy
140mm travel
FORK Fox 32 FLOAT RL, 140mm travel
SHOCK Fox FLOAT RP2KV
WHEELS Maric Crossride Disc
TYRES WTB Wolverine Race 2.2in
CRANKS Truvativ S3400 2.2, 39/26
GEARS SRAM X.9 (R), X.7 (F) and shifters
BRAKES Formula RX, 180mm/160mm rotors
OTHER STUFF Marin finishing kit, WTB Silverado Camp saddle
CONTACT www.marin.co.uk

and the easy sag of the leverage-shifting shock set-up makes it easy to wheelie over steps and ditches that would otherwise mangle momentum.

This basic initial breakdown in climbing prowess stayed the same throughout our test days. The Trance X was a no-brain train driver, setting the pace with an agile enthusiasm and no obvious position change or shock toggling demands. The Altitude needed more shock nursing but gained ground on the really steep climbs, with the Evo hot on its heels. The Marin muscled not far behind except on looser climbs, where the dig-in effect decided to spin out on a regular basis.

While the low slung, impressively tight, sticky steering of the Giant let it hold its lead through faster sweeping turns and pick-your-line boulder barriers, there's only so much the lightweight, shorter travel fork can soak up. The more XC steering set-up that helped our breathing on climbs also reduced leverage when the trail tried to snatch the bike away. In the right hands it's sweetly balanced and predictable character could hold off the others

"The Marin will take some hammering"

for an impressively long time, and on more undulating, fast flowing trails it'll be a proper grin stretcher.

The Rocky Mountain didn't shoot past as the trail got more technical either. Yes it's smoothly competent and controlled, but the forward seat position demanded a lot more body English than the other bikes to keep it balanced. Especially when the tyres started sliding and the long stem killed split-second reactions and slide control. While a stem change would make a big difference, the bike's certainly not a match for the surefooted feel and easy mobility of the Marin.

The new Mount Vision suspension architecture and longer shock also seem to have released even more control and big drop capacity than the 20mm travel gain. Masses of mud room, a sturdy frame build, optional screw-thru axle dropouts and lifetime warrantied bearings mean it'll take some hammering in the long term. There's still more bottom-out bump

TRAIL
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For all-out fun and a great ride we couldn't fault the Evo

WHAT
MOUNTAIN
BIKE
WINNER

SPECIALIZED STUMP JUMPER FSR EXPERT EVO

Evo by name, evo by nature

As an aggressive alternative to Specialized's standard rides we love the Evo. The frame's lowered and slackened, with a longer fork up front and a more downhill-tuned rear shock. Removable frame tabs carry a chainguide for transmission security with a double/bash chainset. Bars and brake rotors are upsized, the broad rim wheels are stiffened, the stem is shortened and a dropper seat post has been fitted for the steep stuff.

The result is a true rally-tuned version of the standard Stumpy – the Evo is a blast for ripping descents and savage singlettrack. It's light and responsive to charge out of corners or up short climbs and nail technical trail pace. There's more flex in the lighter fork and frame than the Enduro, but there's no lack of speed or fun.

★★★★★

"A true trail rude boy, the Evo is the most fun bike we've ridden this year."

and slow speed, brake and pedal-related suspension movement than some will like though, and the wheels flex at high loads. The complete bike specs are also much better value than last year's exchange rate compromised ones, meaning the Mount Vision is definitely back in the park with the other fun bikes.

Summary

There's one ride that rips through our test pack in a shower of rocks and sideways corners, and that's the Specialized. Every time the trail gets interesting it rides exactly like you'd hope a bike named Evo would. The big bar, relaxed head angle and big tyres on broad rims

let you use every millimetre of the trail, however hair-raising the drop off the edge.

The short rear end and low bottom bracket mean you can slam it flat through turns, knowing the wheel will snap out first. The remote control dropper post means nothing gets in the way of your moves on the really steep stuff, and with the chain device there's always a chain on and gear ready. If you know what you're doing the three different shock lever positions give useful shock behaviour changes for more corner-filled or drop-rich trails too. This is a bike designed for blasting trails but it's still lean enough to hang with the pack until the next big thrill. **WMB**



AT A GLANCE

PRICE £2900
SIZES S, M (tested), L, XL
WEIGHT 12.68kg (27.95lb)
FRAME MS alloy, 145mm travel
FORK Fox 32 F150 RL, 150mm travel
SHOCK Fox RP23
WHEELS Roval Traverse AL
TYRES Specialized Purgatory S-Works 28bliss 2.2in (F), Purgatory Control 28bliss 2.0in (R)
CRANKS SRAM Carbon S-220
GEARS SRAM X.0 rear, X.7 front, X.0 shifters
BRAKES Avid Elixir R CR SL
OTHER STUFF Specialized finishing kit
CONTACT
www.specialized.com

TESTER SAYS



"We've hit the trails with Specialized's designers, and those boys can rip. Demands of mass market sales and egos of less skilled or fit riders meant the company's mainstream bikes never quite matched up to more extreme riders' expectations, particularly for suspension. Evo has just unleashed the beast." **Guy**

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