



KHS XCT 555

Price: £1249

From: www.khsbikes.co.uk

Tested: Two months



First things first, who the flipping heck are KHS? Not to be confused with Kazakhstan Home Stores, KHS are based in California and have been making bikes for over 30 years. I don't know why they've ignored the UK for so long, but no matter, they're here now and one of the bikes they're bringing here is the XCT 555 from their Trail Range – I think this means 'too heavy to race, too lightweight for freeride'. So, if that describes you then read on...

Rather than trying to reinvent suspension technology, KHS have used the four-bar Horst link, licensed from Specialized. It's proven technology – Specialized, Titus and Ellsworth (among others) have shown that it works, so in theory we're on fairly safe ground with the KHS version. Cartridge bearings mated with a Rockshox Monarch 2.1 shock offers 5.5in of travel out the back while the Marzocchi XCT600 TST2 fork takes care of things up front giving 140mm of 'get out of jail' travel.

There's rebound adjust on the Monarch shock, but no fancy platform damping, the official line being that the Horst linkage eliminates the need for intelligent shocks. The forks don't have adjustable travel but the TST2 knob can be adjusted to run the fork

very firm (giving about 20mm of travel), or a nice and plush 'full travel' setting and most places in between.

SRAM X7 shifters offer 'thumbs-only' control of the X9 rear and Deore front mechs and to keep things rolling WTB rims are matched to a Shimano rear hub and a nameless front hub, with Kenda Nevegal rubber. Hayes Stroker Ryde brakes are on hand to slow things down, with the rest of the finishing kit a mix of Tioga, WTB and Truvativ.

The Ride

Out of the box the forks felt quite notchy, but after a few rides they'd obviously passed their 'bedding in' period and performed faultlessly. I was initially sceptical about the TST2 technology, thinking that adjustable travel would be far more useful, but in fairness I never found myself wishing for a lower front end on the climbs and firming up the fork with the flick of a switch means you can get out of the saddle and still have a pretty firm fork, which all makes for a very efficient climbing machine.

One of the first things that struck me with this bike was how well-balanced it felt. It's not an aggressive riding position, but it's not

too relaxed either, it's somewhere in between – what I'd call 'purposeful'. The big forks at the front end stayed planted on the climbs while the back end seemed virtually immune to pedal-induced bob, even getting out of the saddle to mash the bigger gears barely raised a flicker of interest from the shock. But when you start riding steps and drops the rear end starts working to absorb the hits – traction is never an issue on the climbs.

In tight singletrack it felt comfortable, in more technical rock gardens it felt poised and balanced. The geometry isn't really geared towards all-out descent madness, but point the XCT downhill and there's enough suspension travel to make light of your typical UK trail. I don't feel as if I found the bike's limits in this department anyway.

The only minor niggles I had were a few ankle knocks on the chainstays and some pedal strikes too, but neither spoiled the ride for me. The 2009 version comes with bolt-through Marzocchi 44 forks, Mavic rims and the Monarch 3.1 shock.

Overall: It's a very well behaved bike, great for riding up and down hills. If I'd spent £1249 on one I'd be very happy and the '09 version looks even better.

Ali Chant