

DETAILS

ALL IN THE DETAILS

Merida have gone to the assembly line trouble of having the fork remote cable realigned so that it exits backwards to avoid accidental damage

CHOICES, CHOICES

Like the Scott Spark, you can choose between 650b or 29in models, which are otherwise identical in spec and pricing

GRAM SHAVING

Fox's Step Cast fork has cut-away lower leg sections. Invisible from the side, you can't feel them in the steering or stiffness either, just in the reduced weight

MERIDA NINETY-SIX 9.XT

£3,000 Retro XC character but with well-sorted suspension

We've ridden the Ninety-Six before and it was a pretty sketchy, short and twitchy experience. The latest version is still XC in character but it's a much stiffer and more fundamentally sorted bike, so climbing speed no longer means rough-terrain terror.

The frame

Compared to the Epic and KTM it looks more hench too. The voluptuous double lumps on the head tube extend back into a broad then deep top tube that's buttressed at both ends. The swollen, curved down tube broadens to a rounded rectangle at the conventional screw-in BB. The asymmetric alloy rear end is neatly detailed too, with multiple tubing sections on all the stays and a single-sided rear pivot just above

and ahead of the 148mm Boost rear dropouts. The axle is tapered and matched with a cut-away ratchet handle to save a few grams, while the neat inside-edge brake mounts keep the outside-edge hose routing of the XT callipers safe from crash damage. Further detailing includes the single-piece carbon rocker link, a custom rubber anti-chainslap sleeve and internal cable routing that pops out sideways far enough forward to stop it getting in the way of knees. There's only one bottle cage mount though, even on the large frame.

The kit

The 32 Performance fork uses Fox's latest Step Cast chassis and a 110mm Boost front hub for extra wheel stiffness. Continental X-King tyres are fast without being treacherous in the wet. While not light, the adjustable-bearing Shimano Deore hubs are potentially far more durable than cartridge bearing sets

JARGON

STEP CAST

Lightweight Fox fork design with the inside edge of the lower legs cut away to minimise weight and width but still fit 110mm wide Boost hubs.

CHAIN TUG

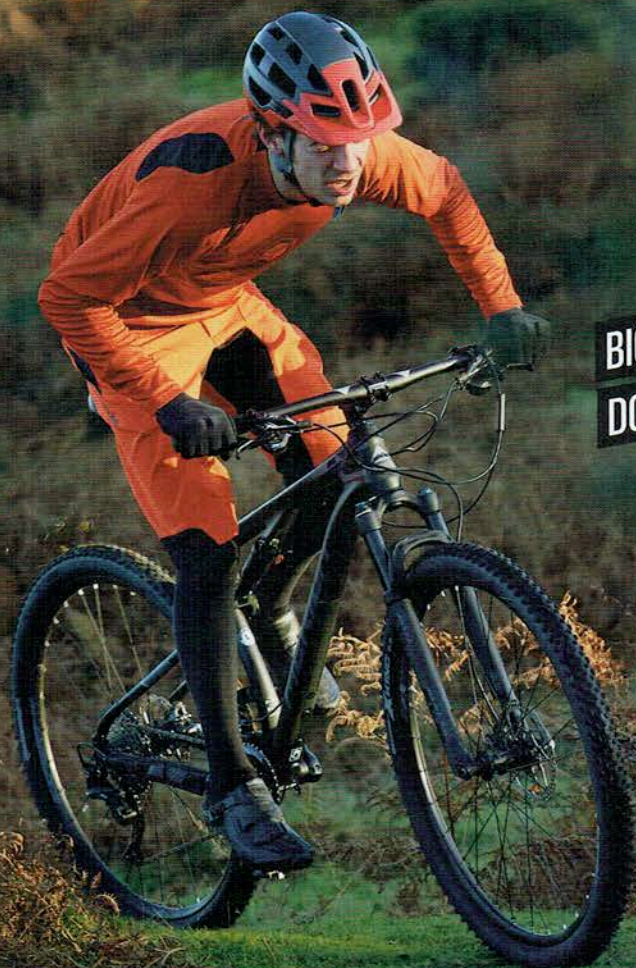
Backwards chain pull on the crankset and pedals caused by suspension compression in systems where the wheel moves rearwards in relation to the frame.

with occasional, simple servicing. Keep an eye on the press-fit BB if you're mashing out the miles, though. Otherwise, the steel chainrings and 22 wide-range gears should spread wear and mean you'll always have the right ratio. The side-swing front mech makes switching between chainrings super-easy, though lockout and front shifter levers make the left-hand side of the bar crowded. Like the KTM, it comes with the stem flipped downwards and foam grips, underlining its unapologetically race-focused character.

The ride

Add a 70-degree head angle and – even with the stem upturned and a 720mm bar – the Merida has '90s-style handling, like the Epic and KTM. But despite its snappy rather than stable steering, the Merida reveals a depth of control that the other two pure racers can't match. The Step Cast fork and Continental

IT'S STILL SMOOTH ENOUGH TO ENSURE
BIGGER BLOCKS AND GENERAL PUNISHMENT
DON'T KICK THE WHEEL OFF THE GROUND OR
COME THROUGH THE CARBON SEATPOST



HIGHS

Light and stiff
frame with sorted
remote control
suspension

Wide range 2x11
gearing

29er and 650b
versions

LOWS

Steep and
twitchy steering

Single bottle
cage mount

tyres give a small but significant grip edge as speeds and trail trauma increase, and the mainframe feels solidly planted despite the Ninety-Six being the second lightest bike here. Also, even though it has the longest back end on test, the Boost spacing gives rear wheel placement a purposeful precision and stops the steering instability dominating the overall handling character.

The impressively solid back end also gives it terrific acceleration punch – we found ourselves deliberately letting other riders close gaps towards the top of smoother climbs with our thumb hovering over the dual lockout like a trigger, waiting to crush them with a flat-out final furlong. With a proper pivoted structure and balanced rear suspension kinematics, fully-open control is good too. Plenty of low-speed compression keeps the Merida relatively efficient and terse in character, but then, this is

a race bike primarily designed for pedalling. It's still smooth enough to make sure bigger blocks and general punishment don't kick the wheel off the ground or come through the carbon seatpost and quality Prologo saddle into your shorts. There's no chain tug to upset pedalling rhythm or traction either.

This all puts it right up top in our pure race-bike ratings. If you want a more trail-style bike and 120mm of travel, check out Merida's One-Twenty range or, if you fancy slightly faster acceleration and handling, see the 650b Ninety-Six models.



FOR A LITTLE MORE

Merida Ninety-Six 9.7000 £3,600

Another £600 gets you a full-carbon frame, Fulcrum Red Power wheels and a RockShox SID RL fork with remote lockout.



FOR A LITTLE LESS

Merida Ninety-Six 9.800 £2,000

A smooth-welded alloy rather than carbon mainframe and SLX rather than XT kit, but you still get a remote control Fox SC fork.

MBUK VERDICT

Stiff, well controlled, sprint-friendly speedster
with retro race handling

