Stuff

Reality Tested Product Reviews

Carver 96er

Tester: Brad Quartuccio
Height: 6'2"
Weight: 165lbs.
Inseam: 34"

Having different sized front and rear wheels on a mountain bike is not a new idea. Companies such as Ibis and Cannondale produced mountain bikes with 24" rear wheels in the eighties. In the nineties, plenty of downhill riders began experimenting with smaller rear wheels, along with certain aggressive street companies. As 29" wheels caught on here in the 21st century, it was only a matter of time before 29" front wheels found themselves mated to a 26" rear. In hotbeds of 29" acceptance, these hybrid beasts are popping up more frequently as riders experiment with fork length and rake to make the retrofit handle appropriately. Carver Bikes has designed the 96er as an off-the-shelf 29"/26" frame that can accommodate gears or run as a singlespeed and is compatible with long travel, big wheeled suspension forks.

Rarely does the rear wheel get caught up on the trail—if the front wheel can make it through a technical patch, most likely the rear will follow. That's the idea here, that a 29" wheel will make it through the rocks easier, and the smaller rear will go in tow. With the smaller wheel comes lighter weight, faster acceleration and a slightly shorter wheelbase than a full-on 29" bicycle.

Crafted from 7005 series heat treated aluminum, build quality is on par with most other mid-range aluminum frames. The difference is in the details, like both rim and disc brake mounts, an eccentric bottom bracket (EBB), a replaceable derailleur hanger and the dropped top tube for increased standover clearance. The welds are not by any means svelte looking, but they do the job. My size large Carver 96er has a 23.7" effective top tube length, with a 70° head angle, an 11.75" high bottom bracket center and a 43.1" wheelbase. The frame geometry is built around a 515mm long, 100mm travel RockShox Reba 29er fork, as tested. The chainstay measures 16.75" from the axle to the center of the bottom bracket shell, with a quarter inch of adjustment each way via the EBB. Bottom bracket height, seat angle and chainstay length are all variable, though not independently, by rotating the EBB, which is how you tension the chain in singlespeed mode. Price on the frame and eccentric bottom bracket is an economical $400.

The Carver 96er came as a singlespeed, in my preferred gear ratio of 32x17 with a reasonable build of Avid BB5 disc brakes, Surly hubs, Thomson stem and post and a Titec bar. Nothing overly fancy, everything plenty solid. Being intimately familiar with the Reba 29er fork from a previous test bike made set-up a breeze. I installed the stem upside down to get the bars at my preferred height and it was off to the trails…

On trail, the bike feels fast. The 26" rear wheel accelerates as usual, with the 29" front wheel aiding through the rough sections. Climbing felt like a 26" bike, while the twisty sections had a bit of help from the larger front wheel's contact patch, making turning more secure. The larger front wheel also helps prevent the End Overend dismount, as a 29" wheel is much harder to stuff into a hole than its smaller cousin.

As an overall trail bike, the Carver handles well. The true test of just about any bike for me is on a 24-hour race course—if after a day's worth of laps I'm still into the bike, I'm sold. Our local hammerfest, the 24 Hour Champion Challenge at Seven Springs Mountain Resort, is known as a relatively hard, rocky course situated in the Laurel Mountains of Pennsylvania with plenty of elevation change. This past year, a hare-brained plan of racing the course on a four person fixed gear team was born, and while I did everything in my power to bail last minute, the fixed cog went on as our first rider went out for the start. The EBB allowed me to set the bottom bracket height relatively high at 12.75" for ground/crank clearance, and the 26" rear wheel maintained the acceleration characteristics that I prefer. The 29" front wheel was appreciated for going through the rocks, as my strategy of just keeping the power on and hoping for the best worked out. Four laps, 56 miles and just over 21,000 pedal revolutions later I finished, with Team Mondo Guano on top of the 26-team deep Sport class with a total of 15 fixed laps.

The Carver truly does exhibit most of the benefits and few of the drawbacks of a 29" wheel. The weight penalty of the larger wheels is still there, but cut in half. Carrying two different sized tubes can be a bit of a drag, but they can be mixed in a pinch, and it's just more reason to carry a patch kit. I would prefer a head tube that is shorter to prevent having to use a negative rise stem to compensate for the already tall fork/wheel combination. Unfortunately, running a rigid fork on the Carver requires a custom build, as commonly available 29" rigid forks don't have nearly the axle-to-crown height needed to maintain the geometry as designed.

Different sized wheels aren't for everyone, but the concept isn't going away. The 2005 Singlespeed World Championships had plenty of people riding the 29/26 combo, and surely sent others home to do their own tinkering. The Carver convinced me to retrofit a personal ride with the larger front wheel; our editor Michael Browne has been at it for over a year now. The $400 asking price for the frame is enticing, and yes it comes from China. Ride on.

See page 72 for contact information.