

GET SHORTY

With lightweight refinements and ever more sophisticated suspension systems, can short travel trail bikes take the fight to enduro bruisers?

Words: Ric McLaughlin Images: Andy McGandlish



SHORT TRAVEL VS LONG TRAVEL



What is 40mm? Ostensibly, not much – but in the world of mountain bike suspension it's a lot. It's enough even to span the murky world of genres – just a couple of centimetres here or there can separate you from being a bib-shorted member

of the trail bike crowd (didn't we use to call it 'XC'?) from a knee pad-wearing, goggle-polishing member of the enduro elite.

When it comes to choosing our next bike, such are the latest crop of machinery's talents that it's always tempting to go for more travel and, on the face of it, why wouldn't you? More bounce equals a deeper well of trail-taming speed from which to draw. There's a wider margin for error and, for that one biannual trip to the Alps, you won't be undergunned.

Sit in any trail centre cafe on a Saturday morning and the average amount of travel on offer is soaring, with 150-160mm being commonplace – the upper parameter now being the perceived boundary for 'full whack'.

But are we neutering ourselves as a result of this millimetric arms race? Shorter travel bikes, since the days of machines intended for gated racing such as the Santa Cruz Blur 4X, have always represented a lot of fun. You still have an insurance policy of squidge, but not a bottomless one. You end up riding these bikes more like hardtails – every root is a potential launch pad and every corner needs to be dealt

with decisively. They are and have always been bikes for proper riders. We decided to pitch Orange's latest entry into the shorter travel arena, the Four, against its long-limbed lump hammer of a stablemate, the Alpine 160, to find out if short travel still stands a chance.

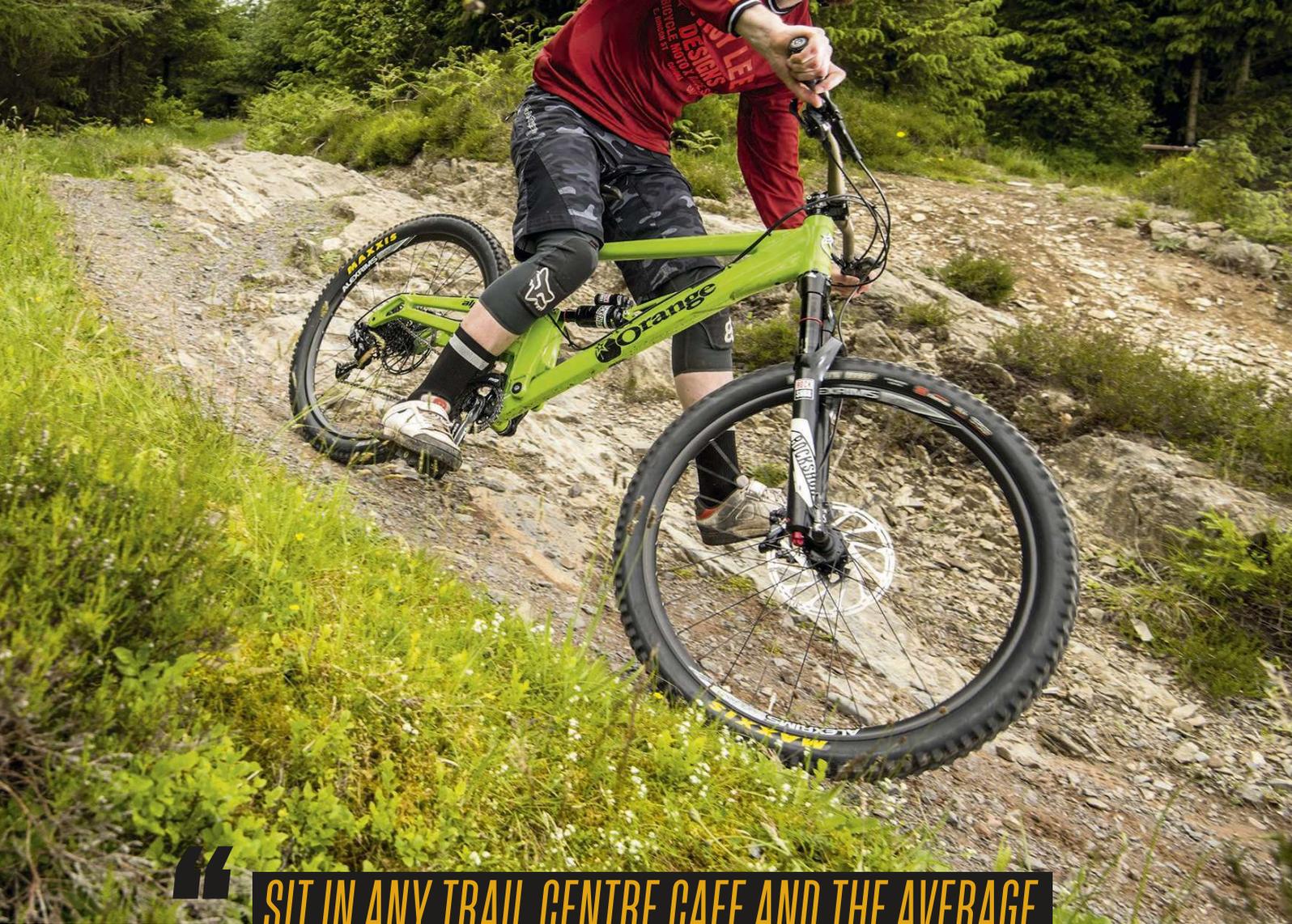
The criteria

Both machines were kitted out in 'RS' build guise. It's the second of three specs for each model and the moniker refers to the RockShox suspension combo at the SRAM builds' heart. Three runs of a famously varied local trail deep in the Scottish hinterland were decided upon, with the fastest times being weighed against each other and the oh-so-subjective balance of ride quality and feel also being taken into account. Would seconds off the clock mirror the level of fun on tap?

Contenders, ready...

The Alpine 160 is a lot of bike. It's a surly, boozed-up prop forward in a city centre on a Saturday night – loud, unabashed and looking for trouble. But as with our be-lageted club bruiser, looks can be deceiving (honest). Of course, the Alpine is no flyweight whippet but right from the first pedal strokes of the opening climb, it's clear that it does 'up' better than it seemingly has any right to. The Monarch shock is largely to thank here – modern air shocks help no end with Orange's age-old Achilles heel of single pivot-induced pedal bob. →





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The fairly steep seat angle means that you feel nicely poised for even technical climbing too. This is the area where I'd lazily suspected that the Alpine would let the side down and, to be honest, you'd probably forgive such a heavy-hitter for doing so – but it climbs well.

I'm soon at the top. An added click on the helmet retention dial and a quick fiddle with the pack (neither Four or Alpine 160 feature bottle mounts), deep breath and dive in.

As favourable starts go, the Alpine scores early. Both wheels break traction through a wide, flat turn that marks the start of my test track and as the loam delicately dusts my inside foot I (accidentally) nudge another gear out of the SRAM remote. I couldn't do it again if I tried but it sets the tone brilliantly. A small kicker then drops into the fastest part of the trail – it's a wide open charge between the pines picking out little pops and holes along the way. The speed tops out at just over 30mph before I drop down two gears, hard on the brakes, release and banging early into a rutted-out right-hander. Roots are sprinkled throughout, and lesser bikes can wash out easily, but the Alpine holds its line admirably.

The next section is one that should perhaps trouble the 160mm thumper most: a long, relatively flat traverse punctuated by awkward, speed-killing roots. Staying tidy, I concentrate on hitting each of the roots with the front wheel just off the deck, dabbing in pedal



strokes where I can. Under these more powerful inputs the back end still feels composed and I steel myself for what lies ahead.

The final third is resolutely big bike territory. The gradient dips away, speeds increase again and a number of make-or-break lines require total commitment. But the big green Orange mops it up like a sponge. The noise level (an acknowledged characteristic of the bikes from Halifax) ramps up slightly and the whole thing is now moving around a lot more noticeably between my knees. But somehow the frame's angles, that RockShox suspension and those mighty Maxxis tyres keep egging me on into taking greater and greater liberties with the bars. It's that feel that you get once you have a full-on DH bike up to combat speed – your eyes are blurring, your fingers hover on the brakes but somehow the bike is telling you that it's all sorted, relax. I drop into the ditch that signals the end of the run and slump into the saddle breathing and giggling profusely. What a bike.

My second run is tidier, the pick of the litter, while my third is a fatigue-induced scrap with lines that I know from experience don't pay off – but goaded by the Alpine's siren's song I try anyway, even managing to swap some bark from my forearms with a stout Scotch pine. Times tallied, my fastest run (the second) was a 3:39. Interestingly that's the same marker, to the second, set on my own long-term test machine, honed and fettled over the course of eight months. A longer stint on this Orange would see that easily hacked down further.

Four play

Now for the Four. Featuring almost the exact same spec as its big brother, the immediate impressions are left to the frame's geometry and reduced weight thanks to the lighter alloy sheeting used throughout. Noticeably lighter under pedal, it's still a lengthy proposition (despite looking decidedly snug) and the back wheel feels tucked right underneath you. If →

ORANGE FOUR

Frame 6061-T6 Monocoque/Reynolds Custom Butted Aluminium tubeset

Fork RockShox Pike 130 RCT3 Solo Air Boost

Shock RockShox Monarch DB RT3

Drivetrain SRAM GX1 with Race Face Turbine cranks and ring (1x11)

Wheelset Hope Pro 4 hubs on Alex Volar 2.5 rims with Maxxis Minion DHF 3C Exo 2.3 x 27.5in (f) and High Roller II Exo TR 2.3 x 27.5in (r) tyres

Brakes SRAM Guide R (200/180mm rotors)

Bar/stem Renthal Fatbar 20mm rise, 780mm wide and Renthal Apex stem 40mm reach

Seatpost/saddle RockShox Reverb Stealth (dropper)/SDG Falcon Orange edition

Weight 13.9kg (30lb 10oz), XL size without pedals

Price £3,700 (complete bike)

Contact Orange Bikes www.orangebikes.co.uk

SHORT TRAVEL VS LONG TRAVEL



DECIDEDLY NORTHERN

There's more to those lines than just flat caps and whippets

The tried and trusted Orange 'look' of triangular blocks of folded alloy sheet has been with us for years now – but you shouldn't dismiss the Four as unrefined for a second. The newest Orange uses a lighter gauge of aluminium to reduce weight, there's internal cable routing placed neatly either side of the shock mount on the swingarm, and rear end stiffness is bolstered by a 12x148mm Boost axle. Noise levels are reduced compared with Oranges of old too. Yet one of the biggest advancements to the design is, in part at least, nothing to do with Orange. The new breed of air shocks really help tame the age-old problem of single pivot pedal-induced bobbing, and open up the bike's capabilities and its mainstream appeal.

the Alpine climbs well, the Four does so with real aplomb, picking its way neatly through anything that you care to throw at it. On the fast-rolling trail centre descent around nearby Mabie Forest the traits denoting the great short travel machines of our time are there in spades

In short, it wants to run, fast. Berms crave to be carved, every lip is a launch pad and you'll probably find a greater percentage of your ride is spent either on the back wheel or attempting to get onto it than anywhere else.

But, sadly, the time for wheelies is over and there is serious business at hand – only this time I feel a sense of growing trepidation. That Alpine was brutally fast. Yet the grip of those Maxxis treads and coolness under speed of the black anodised dampers once again allay any fears. There's a trace more chatter through the fast stuff but you're never skimming out of control – the Four has a fantastic mid-stroke that just seems to ramp up underneath you and hold you in the sweet spot beautifully.

Through the flatter section the Four rewards precision with speed and the bike feels alive compared with the subtle thuggery of the

Alpine. Again, I gird my loins and plunge into the final third. But the chattering, bobbling mess I was expecting never materialises. The Four dispatches the off-camber roots with ease and stays composed through the lumpy braking zones denoting the entrances to the steep, flick-flack turns. There's a feeling of being far more involved too: precise little bunny-hops and back end lifts skirt the bigger impacts, to the Hope Pro4 freehub's steady soundtrack.

At the bottom my forearms are throbbing but I can't discern whether it's the result of holding on tighter or from just riding faster. That actually felt quicker.

Two more chomps at the cherry later and, by the time I get back to the van, my mind's made up – it must have been faster. Taking my time, I throw a leg off the Four, pull out my phone and hit the little chequered flag. I'm like a brainy school child with an exam results envelope – I've passed the test, must have, it's just a question of by how much. I prolong the anticipation by taking off my helmet and slurping down half a litre of water, still reeling from just how fast the 'wee' Orange felt.



“ THE FOUR HAS A FANTASTIC MID-STROKE THAT HOLDS YOU RIGHT IN THE SWEET SPOT ”

But, like the same child in a state of disbelief as their secondary education hopes spiral down the proverbial plughole, I am to be disappointed. The Four stopped the clock at 3:46, seven seconds off Alpine pace.

Decision time

Even with the vagaries of GPS positioning in the midst of a Scottish pine forest, that may sound a lot. But in fact it represents a result for the Four. On the Alpine 160 I was bludgeoning my way down, really taking chances, each one rewarded with grip and forward momentum. This is a bike built for long weeks in the Alps with perhaps less than mindful pilots – it’s the blockheaded descendant of the Patriot, one of the first machines to blur the DH/XC lines.

The Four didn’t deliver the same microwave-off-a-tower-block-roof sensation of speed, but

it did offer something else. An (almost) equally fast capability, via a perhaps more rewarding tightrope of accuracy and control. Its maximum velocity is a lot more readily achievable and perhaps more enjoyable as a result – push the big Alpine over its edge and you’ll be having the biggest crash you’ve had in a long time

But which would I buy? That’s the question. Could I commit to the shorter travel machine knowing in my heart of hearts that that ceiling pace was outside of its remit? I feel I’m almost cheating the question by suggesting that the evergreen Five might just offer the perfect blend of the pair. Both of these machines have impressed greatly and both are mightily capable. Given the choice though, I think the amount of ‘getting away with it’ moments and sheer smiles-per-miles the new Four RS proffers potential for would win out, just.