

INTO THE MEAT GRINDER

A summer of shredding produces five pummeled products

After all, a \$2,400 Horst-link frame weighing less than a meatball sandwich better do everything short of carry you to the top.
—Ellsworth Epiphany

When the last zipper let go, the reservoir flopped onto the dusty trail like a landed trout gasping for water.
—Crave Sports Pack

My feet still perspired an awful lot, and the high-tech footwear ended up smelling just as bad as all others post ride.
—Northwave Aerator

Consistent usage is not necessary...and they even relieve soreness after a hard effort. They're like morning-after pills for mountain bike riders.
—SportLegs

The closest operational analogy to describe how it works would be "office chair".... It is simple, elegant and easy to use.
—Maverick Speedball

Ellsworth Epiphany // \$2,395 (frame and rear shock)
760-788-7500; ellsworthbikes.com

If first impressions mattered, the Epiphany probably would have been kicked to the curb before our first ride. It took months of begging and pleading to get our hands on this bike and when it finally showed up, it sported two flat tires, a maladjusted rear derailleur and poorly aligned brakes. Adding salt to the wound, the bike was caked in red dirt—Moab dirt!—a telltale sign that the previous riders had a lot of fun before dumping it on our doorstep.

But after a good once over, the Epiphany showed its true colors. Ellsworth claims this is the lightest 5-inch-travel bike on the market, weighing in a tad over 26 pounds. That lightness of being starts with the frame, which is manufactured in Ellsworth's new factory in Vancouver, Washington. The aluminum tubes have been butted, drawn and swaged to reduce all unnecessary weight, leaving them more manipulated than Demi Moore. The frame, with Fox RP3 shock, weighs just 5.6 pounds.

Bolted to our test bike were FSA Carbon Pro cranks, Fox Float RLC fork, Spinergy Xyclone wheels, Magura Marta brakes, SRAM X.O derailleur with X.9 shifters and FSA bar and stem. They are sensible lightweight

parts that complemented the bike nicely (but differ slightly from either build kit Ellsworth offers—the \$5,025 X.O kit, or the less expensive X.9 option). The question was—how would this lightweight, long-travel machine ride? And more importantly, would it hold up to some abuse?

Ellsworth combines Specialized's Horst-link with its patented Instant Center Tracking system (ICT) to control the rear end. This is a proven system that works as well as anything on the market.

Expectations were high for this bike, especially when it came to climbing—after all, a \$2,400 Horst-link frame weighing less than a meatball sandwich better do everything short of carry you to the top.

With few exceptions, the Epiphany delivered. The lightweight bike, combined with an active, yet snappy, rear end loved steep climbs and squirted forward with little effort on long fireroads. We regularly found ourselves pushing a larger gear than normal, and the rear wheel dug into rocks and ruts delivering traction when it was most needed.

The rear end is surprisingly stiff, thanks in part to asymmetrical chainstays and a beefy magnesium rocker complete with a carbon brace. Cartridge bearings keep things swinging smoothly, with minimal play.

With a 70-degree headtube angle, the Epiphany is snappier than many others in this category, though it can be a bit twitchy at speed or over rough terrain. But the bike whips through corners and absorbs small bumps nicely. It even survived a few larger drops and stunts on some trails worthy of a burlier bike.

That is not to say this bike doesn't have limitations. With thin frame tubes and no gussets, the bike does have a little "give" to it. And with such lightweight components, it is definitely tailored for riding with the wheels planted on firm ground. But if your travel plans don't include repeated trips to Vancouver's North Shore, and you favor long-distance cross-country trails with a lot of climbing and a few technical sections thrown in, the Epiphany could be a worthy purchase. —Lou Mazzante

