

ELLSWORTH EPIPHANY £3600 (£1525 F/O)



Sex sells
Ellsworth calls the 12mm bolts that hold the main pivot together 'Sex Pins'. It's a daft name, but together with details such as the carbon linkage plate brace, they form part of the attention to detail that contributes to the Epiphany's sorted trail manners.

Drawn by hand
One of the few manufacturers still making frames entirely in the USA, Ellsworth's Vancouver, Washington, factory is where the tubeset for the Epiphany is shaped into the specific profiles that define its look and ride feel. Ellsworth also claims its welding techniques add strength and stiffness to the frame.



AT A GLANCE
▲ HIGHS Light and lively. As competent on the descents as it is on the climbs.
▼ LOWS There are barely any downsides to mention here, but this kind of calibre doesn't come cheap.
► BUY IF... You want a great-handling trail bike that can tackle anything you throw at it.

ABS (Anything But Shimano)
A craze for spec'ing non-mainstream components in the '90s led to the growth of companies like Middleburn. Its cranks are still beautiful, but little details, such as the lack of a big ring peg to stop the chain jamming, demonstrate that Shimano still has the edge on all-round functionality.

This light and lively trailster blends pace with surprising big-hit ability

You won't see a huge number of Ellsworths out on the trails, although the brand's been around for a while in the UK thanks to importers Freeborn. The rarity value is certainly no reflection on the bikes, though – we've tested various flavours of the Ellsworth full-suss recipe over the years and always found them a compelling alternative to the mainstream. But this is the first time we've had the opportunity to pitch the mid-travel Epiphany against similar machines from other small-scale manufacturers, so how will it fare?

The facts

With enough travel at each end to embarrass much heavier machinery on the descents, but a build that trims fat to near cross-country whippet levels, the Epiphany is a bike that tries hard to offer the best of both worlds. The result is a chassis that's both curvy and utilitarian, blending elegant main tube profiles with an unapologetically functional rear end.

Subtle top and down tube curves combined with laser etched frame graphics lend the front half the high-end appearance that the pricetag warrants, while the huge rocker arm and square profile seatstays hint at the Epiphany's abilities in the rough. Early incarnations used magnesium rocker arms to save weight, but the material proved unreliable, so Ellsworth switched to machined aluminium. It's a tiny bit heavier but, we're told, far less hassle.

The big news with Ellsworth's suspension design is the Instant Center Tracking (ICT). It's a convenient shorthand to describe a system that keeps the virtual pivot point as close to the chainline as possible, helping to isolate the suspension from both braking and pedalling forces.

Freeborn will supply your Epiphany with your choice of components. Our test bike arrived sporting a choice selection of kit based around a SRAM X9 and Shimano XT transmission, with Hope hubs, Middleburn cranks and Chris King headset and bottom bracket. All top notch stuff, but we'd ditch the 24T inner ring for a 22T equivalent to provide even better wall climbing ability.

The feel

It's not as straightforward as you might think to build a 5in travel bike that's genuinely usable as a trail all-rounder. Trim too much weight and all that travel's wasted in noodly frame flex on the descents. Bulk it up too much and the climbs become a chore. And that's before you even consider how to make five inches of travel pedal well.

Ellsworth has got the balance just about spot-on with the Epiphany. Our test bike's relatively high-end build certainly helps keep the weight down, but Fox's torsionally solid 32 fork puts some metal back where it counts, keeping the front end tracking straight and true through anything you can throw it down. The rear end is similarly unflinching – despite the lanky looking rocker linkages – with the only hint of flex

and shimmy coming from the wheel rather than the chassis.

The much-hyped ICT system delivers on its promise of fully active travel, keeping the rear wheel planted on technical climbs with just a hint of compression damping dialled in on the Fox Float RP23 rear shock. Stacks of space to stretch out over the cockpit, acres of standover height and the light build all contribute to a can-do feeling, making the Epiphany a willing accomplice on the kinds of trails that push your personal definition of what's rideable.

It's not the lightest trail bike out there. By the same token, there are also bikes you can buy that are better suited to heavy, clumsy or particularly aggressive riders whose main interest is cashing in gravity credits. But as compromises go, the Epiphany is a damn fine one.

Summary

Few bikes can match the Epiphany's compelling blend of pace, low weight and sure-footedness. If you're looking for a trail all-rounder that will stand out from the masses, it's well worth a closer look.

WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKE ★★★★★

"A multi-tool of a bike that can help you take apart and reassemble any trail you care to throw its way."

"The much-hyped ICT system delivers fully active travel"



UNWRAPPED HYPE OR HELP?



Many manufacturers make bold claims about their suspension designs and Ellsworth, with its Instant Center Tracking (ICT) system, is no exception. With all that noise, it can be hard to make sense of all the claims, particularly when many rear shocks' compression damping technology can help mask a design's inherent shortcomings. We think Ellsworth's ICT is up there with some of the best solutions, though, lending the Epiphany a solid but supple climbing platform as well as controlled descending without overreliance on shock technology.