

INTENSE TRACER 2

Price: £1,699.00 frame only From: Extra UK www.extra-uk.com Tested: Two months



There was a time, not that many years ago, when the mountain biking public were promised great things. This bike will do it all, they said. Six-odd inches of (usually adjustable) travel will be enough for any descent – yet it's light enough to climb like a goat, too.

Sadly, as with much in the world of marketing, it just wasn't true. If the bike was built light enough to make it anywhere near tolerable on climbs then it was terrifyingly twangy in corners. Some odd geometry assumptions were made, which could make more than the bars twitch when the going got rough. On the other side of the coin, the bikes that could descend like the promise would suck the will to live on the way up, either through sucky suspension or sheer mass.

When the original Intense Tracer was released, it was one of the few all-mountain bikes that came close to the original promise. A capable descender, tolerable on the climbs and with enough leeway built in that the rider could choose which side of the scale to veer towards and which compromises they were willing to make. Combined with a touch of handmade Californian mystique and the Intense race-winning heritage, it was rightly popular.

Of course, it wasn't perfect. For a hard riding bike the head angle was a little on the steep side and that, combined with a somewhat pliable rear end meant that the Tracer could quickly take a rider from thrills to terror just as quickly as the ground hugging suspension could eat bumps and cover ground. It's no surprise that this, the second incarnation of the Tracer, has been working out – it's got stiffer, stouter and lost what traces of flab there were around the middle.

It's sprouted more travel too, with your pick of 145 or 160mm of bounce at the rear, adjusted by moving the longer stroke 215x64mm Fox RP23 shock to a different position on the top link. Along with the fact the head angle has been relaxed a degree or so to 67° with a 160mm fork or 68° with a 150mm fork, it's hedging its bets somewhere between new skool slack and old skool steep. There's a proper 1.5in headtube so all forks are catered for and you can stick an AngleSet or similar in, should you decide that's not relaxed enough. It's a jack of all-mountain trades.

The muscular looking and classically Intense clamshell monocoque top tube with extended seat mast remains, as do the neat fishscale welds, but there's an all-new kinked hydroformed downtube that's lighter and stronger than before. The one-piece machined BB shell and lower pivot mount has ISCG05 chain guide mounts and there are now more durable threaded and replaceable 'Zerk' grease nipples on the new, stiffer lower suspension link and yoke, with the bearings now held in by an 'EZ Lock' binder system to make them easier to remove when they're done.

The most noticeable difference is the rear swingarm; now an asymmetrical design with plenty of bracing and a heavily machined bridge joining the seriously chunky chain and seat stays, it makes the original look rather anorexic. The dropouts are now interchangeable items that'll run any of the current crop of dropout standards. Extra UK sent our build with the 142x12mm option that is the pick of the

bunch, being stiff, secure and offering hassle free wheel positioning. A healthy dose of lightweight but sturdy trail components complete the build: Formula brakes, the incomparable Shimano XTR Trail 2x10 drivetrain, the excellent Easton Haven wheels and a set of tapered Fox Float 36 FIT RLC 160mm forks up front.

The Ride

If a bike's character can be shown by the parts people decide to drape on it, then what happened to our test bike is somewhat revealing. Bars got wide, tyres got stickier, the de-rigueur uppy downy post was thrown on and any pretence of it being an all-day epic sort of bike were flung out of the window when the 2x10 drivetrain was ditched in favour of a single ring and chain guide up front. That doesn't mean this is a bike that doesn't like uphill – in fact, quite the contrary. For a hard-hitting bike it's light on its toes. It positively encourages you to push harder and ride faster. Small jaunts turned in to minor epics; the bike's appetite for ground covering both up and down is really rather addictive.

The ground hugging ability of the VPP suspension means that you can get on with the task of turning the pedals rather than trying to work the bike to seek traction. If you've got the legs, it'll keep the rubber in contact with the ground over terrain that has you convinced it'll spit traction. The suppleness comes at the expense of knowing what's on the ground beneath you – but belief in technology will see you through the vast majority of the time.

When the gradient changes you'll need to reconfigure your perceptions of speed. The Tracer exudes a feeling of calm and composure when your mind is rightly screaming that it's time to start controlling the speed. Even the limits of sticky rubber can be found before the bike feels unsettled. It's so well sorted it verges on dangerous. It's confidence inspiring and although not as slack as some of the new crop of AM bikes it's by no means twitchy.

From all-day rides to downhill course jumps and drops, the Tracer 2 has sucked it all up and left the limiting factor, the skin and bones sat on top. It's a bike that will quicken the pulse whether you're sat on it or just admiring the lines and for that alone the price becomes reasonable. Depending on how aggressively you spec it, you can get a bike that'll ride all day to something that is the perfect gravity enduro racing weapon. Weight ranged from around 28lbs to a smidgen under 30lbs with big bars, flat pedals and sturdy sidewall rubber. There's enough spec latitude to make the bike fit your desired niche, although if you live somewhere with more pedalling than plummeting then such a bike is going to be overkill however you spec it.

Overall: Fast, furious and fun, the Tracer is the bike that'll handle 90% of the riding you'll ever want to do. It excels on fast and technical terrain and, like the worst kind of friend, it'll goad you further and faster than you thought possible. It's as near as I've ever been to the all-mountain dream.

Jon.