

TESTED

▶ SANTA CRUZ VP FREE

Price \$9100 (\$3640 frame only)

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At first glance the VP Free exudes a feeling of absolute quality, by far the best on test. Even the Cannondale's construction pales when compared to the solid-looking lines of the VP Free. As for the rest of the bikes they aren't bad per say, but it's like comparing Peter Brock's HSV to the Calais your uncle did up in his spare time. The problem with building bikes in the States, however, is that you can't get away with paying frame builders \$1/hour, so the consumer, you, foots the bill.

The frame has been designed to spread the load over large areas. The welds are big chunky mothers that run forever. All the pivot points are large, accommodating a whole bunch of bearings in each, making for a smooth and quiet ride.

The solid, stiff, frame makes for a "no worries" ride. You don't need to hold back on this bike, it's not going to break under you. Rather concentrate on having fun, and punching down the trails with its 8-plus inches of rear-wheel travel.

Although we tested a small; the low BB, relaxed head angle and longish (for a small) top tube still meant a damn sweet ride even on fast flowing sections. Cornering was a breeze thanks to a super-stiff rear-end but its size made it a bit twitchy when pushed to the limits and the speed increased. The geometry is spot on for its

purpose though, and it relishes steep, demanding FR and DH trails.

The VP Free frame is matched up perfectly with the RS Boxxer fork. Both ends have a similar stroke action, both nicely progressive and moderately fast. If you mix in some of the lighter components available you could get the weight of the VP Free down to something to climb comfortably, but that's not the point of this bike. If you want to go up hills buy yourself a cross-country bike. The Santa Cruz is happy pointing down.

The handlebars are a major letdown. They are too narrow and have an awkward sweep. Also, the Hayes Mags are a great brake but there are better feeling and modulating brake on the market, including Hayes' own El Caminos. It was pleasant to see this bike came equipped with a proper chainguide. Freeride bikes with a dual ring usually just end up being undergeared and throwing the chain on all but the smoothest terrain.

On the pedalling front: VPP rocks! You get all the activity of a four-bar linkage with the pedal efficiency of a single-pivot, and without the feedback (like the Cove and Asterix). The adjustable 5th Element shock gives plenty of progressive travel without a harsh bottom or top-out. And it is easily adjustable with a couple of allen keys.

Under pedalling it sits smoothly into the stroke and reacts to the trail surface without sapping too much energy. The VP Free feels more efficient than single-pivots because of the tendency for it to "sit" into its travel.

The VP Free is close to the ultimate Aussie DHer as it is light, nimble and easier to pedal than its bigger brother the V10.

The VP Free will make an excellent DH race bike for smaller riders and those who realise that quality of travel rather than quantity gets you down a hill fast.

For everyone else: all you need is piles of cash, gravity and the bike will do almost anything for you. Importantly, it will last for years. ▶



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