

Empire *MX-6*

Price: £2495 frame only, £3795 as tested.
From: Empire Cycles, empire-cycles.com

Fork / RockShox Revelation
Shock / RockShox Monarch
Hubs / Hope Pro II Evo
Rims / Stan's ZTR Flow
Tyres / Continental Rubber Queen 2.2
Chainset / SRAM X9
Front Mech / SRAM X0
Rear Mech / SRAM X0
Shifters / SRAM X0
Brakes / Hope Evo M4
Stem / Hope
Bars / Renthal FatBar
Grips / Renthal
Seatpost / KS
Saddle / Cotic
Size Tested / Medium
Weight / 33lb
Testers / Sim Mainey and Matt Letch.

This bike has a host of questions following it around. For a simple single pivot, it's causing a lot of headaches - mostly for armchair engineers who insist its pivot is in the wrong place and 'it's made the wrong way'.

Designed and made in the UK, specifically in Bolton, the distinctive looks come from extensive CNC machining. The headstock, backbone and swingarm are all hewn from huge lumps of aluminium, with only the toptube and downtube being 'regular' square tubes. The seat tower is cast aluminium, a technique that got Empire noticed with its AP-1 downhill bike a few years ago. Amazingly the frame only has four welds. The looks are love or hate, but either way it's an impressive feat of engineering. Oh, and before you ask, no, the gaps don't collect mud; the only area that does act as a bit of a shelf is just below the shock.

The frame has been designed to be as user-serviceable as possible and every part of the frame will be available from Empire as a spare part. With a level of modularity not often seen in a frame design, it's well future-proofed. Our Maxle rear end, for example could easily be changed to 142mm just by changing two alloy plates.

Designed with an eye on reliability, the frame uses needle bearings and has an anodised, bead-blasted finish. Empire is quite happy for you to jetwash the frame, although some of the component manufacturers are probably less so.

Full builds come equipped with a blend of SRAM's X0 groupset, RockShox Monarch and Revelation suspension units and fellow Lancastrian machinists Hope provide most of everything else. While the frame might appear a bit on the pricey side, the full build is in line with other bikes of a similar spec.

Trail notes.

The pivot point location is contentious. It may appear high but its location is quite deliberate. Empire has done its sums and found that with a 2x10 drivetrain, the kind of drivetrain they expect most people to run, this pivot position works best for pedalling efficiency. The sums add up too; there was little tuck or wallow when putting down power and it had an air of carrying its 33lbs weight effortlessly, although this weight could still be felt accelerating uphill. We've ridden lighter bikes that felt

heavier and the weight works in your favour when things go down, keeping the bike from feeling too skippy and lending a definite quiet and muted downhill bike feel to the ride.

The test bike came with RockShox Revelations, which is one of our favourite forks, but if this was our bike we'd fit a Lyrik. The bike isn't the lightest out there and there's no point pretending; you might as well embrace its desire to go looking for trouble, add a pound to the front end and wring the most out of it. We crashed hard on this bike as the back end gave us more confidence than the front could handle.

This is the kind of bike that would be happy doing uplift days or being treated to a holiday in the Alps but will also be your weekend trail bike.

Comparisons will be drawn between the MX-6 and the Orange Five but they are very different bikes. The Empire is actually more of an Alpine 160 rival; it's more meat-headed and less interested in anything that isn't full-on. It begs to be let off the braking leash and, if your trails are mostly contouring, you're probably better off looking for another bike; you've got to be committed to make this bike come alive. If you're not willing to ride it hard, you won't enjoy it, there's no room for passengers here. Open it up and you'll be treated to a fine example of a single pivot design which, when done properly and, as here, mated to a quality shock, makes you question the need for more than one pivot.

Our only niggle was with the seat tower. The one on our test bike was designed for a 27.2mm seatpost but Empire is bringing out a 31.6mm compatible version. We struggled to get the saddle as low as we'd like for technical downs, even with the post run as low in the seat mast as possible. This also had the effect that we had to run the post at half travel to get to our optimum pedalling position.

Misunderstood by those who have never ridden one and an enlightening experience for those who have, the MX-6 will continue to cause debate and conversation wherever it goes. It's a trouble maker, in the best possible way.





Overall:

We're not here to compare these three disparate machines against one another. We've gathered them because they invoke the 'Ooh, want!' response in some of Singletrack's riders and writers, so we're right in expecting the sort of 'eye of the beholder perfection' that top shelf frames with quality components command, right?

Out of the three bikes we have here, we reckon we've probably got a bike for all seasons. You've got your flat-out and fast Hard Eddie for the days you're feeling frisky, your Empire for making mighty mountains into molehills and your cheeky, cheery choice for anything that falls in between (and either side of) the two extremes; the Tallboy LTc. If these three were under the tree on Christmas Day, we'd be happy folk indeed.



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The Empire is a bike designed to perform well in a particular bit of the riding spectrum. Riding where there's more down (though not exclusively) than up, where the speeds are high and the terrain is lumpy. It would be easy to draw a map of where the Empire will gain fans (Wales, Peaks, Pennines, Scotland) and where it will confuse and puzzle others (South Downs, Suffolk, Cannock). Especially if we wanted to make sweeping assumptions about how the riders who frequent those places might ride...

Regardless of where you're riding, if you're after something that's unashamedly individual and single-minded – and you like spinning up and then hooning down great big, rocky hills with your arse on fire – then you have to try one. Otherwise, you'll never know.