



There is no doubt that the Crosstrac Sonoma is a "plumber's nightmare"! Every test rider took one look at its Buck Rogers styling and cringed. On long rides, whoever was onboard the Crosstrac was always referred to as "Major Tom." The traditionalists hated the bike. The suspension forces doubted it. The avant garde left-wingers had trouble aligning themselves with it. It's wild. It's weird. It's either ahead of its time or out-of-sync with time! There is one thing that we do know—the average off-road rider is not ready for the

trac has done with its radical design), you had better draw them back with superior suspension. Unlike politics, where the louder and longer you yell the more you are believed, in cycling if you blare out your differences you had better be willing to withstand the Missouri test—"Show me!"

How well does the bold and cacophonous Crosstrac message get translated into action? Both good and bad. Good forks and an average rear-suspension system.

to go before it happens, and the progressive nature of air springing and oil damping makes it tuneable.

What didn't we like about the forks? We don't like the crossover air tube. The concept is an old motorcycle one, dropped back in '76 by the motorized set as both unnecessary and unnecessarily fraught with peril (defined as one more thing to go wrong). The compression damping is way too stiff. A fork with this much travel could use more supple damping to cushion the stroke. This level of harshness is too intense. In motocross they call it "mid-stroke harshness." The fork is reassuringly rigid. That's a surprise! Even with four inches of travel, test riders never felt excessive flex out of the long legs. The fork legs are oversize aluminum and the triple clamps are magnesium. Very beefy. Fork seals weeped after the first month of riding.

QUESTION FOUR: WHAT ABOUT THE REAR SHOCK?

As impressive as the front suspension is, the rear is conversely hampered by first-generation suspension design, brake-induced lockup and an oversprung feel. A large Firestone air bladder helps cut the air pressure demands down to reasonable amounts that can be handled on the trail with a Presta pump. The bike's setup worked best with minimal rider sag. This resulted in a rather harsh ride. The long-travel rear end did not deliver a "long-travel" feel. It had lots of travel, but it felt like it delivered only about half of it in a controllable and usable stroke.

Even worse for the rider was the lack of balance between the front and rear. The ultra-smooth front forks weren't matched by the leveraged, stand-up style, air-sprung rear shock. When the riders came down steep, wicked and gnarly downhill chutes—the kind that require a daredevil approach and lots of rear brake—the rear suspension quit working (partially because the plush forks transferred weight forward and partially because the brakes tended to stiffen the rear suspension). It was not an active suspension system in the mold of the Mongoose Amplifier, Mantis Pro Floater and Pro-Flex. It has a semi-high swingarm pivot, long leverage arm and rather reluctant air shock—it's definitely a high-speed, big-hit rear-suspension system.

QUESTION FIVE: DOES IT HANDLE?

This is not a bike that looks like it would handle cross-country trails very well. Lots of these post-Cold War, aerospace industry-derived, break-Moses'-tablets bike designs look best at a bike show—where they can't be ridden. We are not ashamed to say that the Crosstrac has the look of a bike show wonder—all

CROSSTRAC SONOMA

Playing with time

design elements of the Crosstrac. A bike this different isn't likely to find support in cycling's typical safe harbors. From its boom tube main frame to bolt-on seat tube to sliding seat tube angle to Firestone air bladder shock to its reversed front brakes to its stamped monocoque swingarm, there is little or nothing on the Crosstrac Sonoma that owes its heritage to bicycling's forefathers (except the wheels, saddle and handlebars).

The Crosstrac may be a hard nut to swallow on the visual level, but the real test of truth is not how it looks but how it works. The MBA test crew set out to answer the tough questions about the wildly radical Crosstrac.

QUESTION ONE: WHY IS IT SO DIFFERENT?

Crosstrac didn't set out to break all of the rules of bicycle design when it built the Sonoma; it just wanted to rewrite them. This is a purpose-built suspension bike! It is not a traditional diamond frame bicycle with suspension tacked on. The majority of geometry, frame construction and design criteria used on the Crosstrac is made to accommodate the four inches of suspension travel. On many so-called suspension bikes the design limitations of a traditional frame wreak havoc on the function of the fork and shocks. Crosstrac made suspension "job one," then massaged the chassis to fit the remaining room.

It's different by design—the design of the suspension.

QUESTION TWO: DOES THE SUSPENSION WORK?

When you cut the umbilical cord that ties most cyclists to the bicycle (as Cross-

QUESTION THREE: HOW ARE THE 4-INCH TRAVEL FORKS?

Four inches of travel is double what most fork makers offer, but don't think that Rock Shox or Manitou are unwilling to make a four-inch fork; they aren't. It's just that they sell aftermarket forks to fit on a wide range of standard-issue frames. Four inches of travel cannot be acceptably bolted onto your showroom-stock Stump-jumper—it would steer like a wheelbarrow full of melons—but Crosstrac is not trying to get you to put its fork on a Giant, Schwinn, Trek or Cannondale. It made the fork to fit its frame and vice versa.

This is one sweet fork. Hard to believe. We expected it to wallow all around the trail, flex like a fly rod and bob up and down with metronome regularity. Not so! Well, maybe a little so, but overall there's one thing that you can't fault on long travel (and these are the longest-travel forks we have ever ridden with) and that is its ability to eat trail debris. These are the ultimate point-and-shoot forks.

Fork action is very supple. Thanks to the extra travel, the Crosstrac fork has room to play with negative travel, which means that when properly set up the fork has a preset amount of sag, and this negative travel makes the forks iron out small bumps and ripples like they don't exist. It has approximately one inch of free-float travel, which allows the forks to move in both positive and negative directions. Awesome!

Over the bigger bumps there is nothing that can compete with "long travel." Middle-size bumps disappear in the four-inch-travel air/oil forks. Bottoming is *no problemo* because you have twice as far

CROSSTRAC



show, no go! Look at it! It's a veritable assault on the senses. If you made a "connect-the-dots" drawing of a bicycle, the Crosstrac wouldn't hit a single dot.

Surprise! It may be out of proportion, discordant and ungainly looking, but the Crosstrac guys put the numbers in the right place (with or without dots). It holds a line very well, tracks straight and carves with surgical accuracy. In the slow and rough stuff, the mega-travel and clean geometry produce a bike that can work over a pack of bouncing and side-slipping riding partners. In tricky off-cambers the Crosstrac Sonoma could literally paste itself high on the trail and stick.

At 26 pounds our test Sonoma was wickedly light for a long-travel suspension bike, but a close perusal of every nut, bolt, bottom bracket and accessory revealed enough titanium to reopen a ghost town in the West. Crosstrac claims that a complete bike will weigh between 25 and 28 pounds, depending on the gruppo selection. That is a true statement (and your bank statement will get appreciably smaller to hit that 25-pound mark).

QUESTION SIX: HOW ARE THE BRAKES?

Suspension bikes almost always have brake problems. It's hard to get cantilever brakes, designed for rigid, unchanging and straight-line mounting, to be equally efficient when they are attached to monkey-motion parts. Conversely, while it's true that the brake systems themselves



Old fogey: By traditional standards there is little on the Crosstrac that resembles the triangulated lines of a conventional bicycle. Don't let that throw you off! The Crosstrac is the first of a new breed of long-travel suspension bikes.

◀ **In the saddle:** Looks are deceiving. The Crosstrac's massive suspension travel should hinder its ability to handle normal trail, but it doesn't. It's actually a crisp, accurate and relatively agile cross-country bike.



Big bump eater: Hard-anodized aluminum fork legs guide the polished alloy legs across 4" of incredibly plush travel. The fork brace and cantilevers are mounted on the back of the forks to take advantage of the rotational inertia of the front wheel.

aren't as efficient when not mounted perfectly, a suspension bike maximizes the wheels' braking ability by allowing the tires to follow the ground. It's a double-edged sword. Poor performance out of the brakes, but great grip between the tire and ground. The result is passable stopping power, with lackluster feel. The bike stops—it just doesn't give the sensation of crisp braking.

QUESTION SEVEN: IS THE SEAT ANGLE ADJUSTABLE?

You bet! We have to admit that we were more than a little skeptical about the idea of a movable seatpost. Crosstrac's innovative seatpost uses a sliding collar that can be clamped to the seatpost at an almost infinite number of angles (within reason). Most hardcore riders have their personal peccadillos when it comes to seat angle, and pooh-pooed the idea of changing the angle. Then we started to fiddle with it. On the frame jig we cranked the seat angle back to 72.5 degrees, which lengthened the top tube length and increased the amount of weight on the rear end (which we found to be a plus with the air shock rear suspension). Riders could shorten the top tube and set up a sprint position by going forward to a 74. While it's true that you can only find one perfect setting, how do you know where that is until you try a couple of different ones?

CROSSTRAC

Keep in mind that adjusting the seat angle demands similar adjustments in the stem to keep the rider's compartment in sync with the rider's torso. We liked the adjustable seat angle, but were prepared to make multiple adjustments.

QUESTION EIGHT: WHAT DIDN'T WE LIKE?

We had four major complaints with the Crosstrac Sonoma: lateral flex, frame width, frame dimensions and bottom bracket height.

Lateral flex: The swingarm exhibited noticeable lateral flex. When you were cranking the bike, the rear wheel had a tendency to sway from side to side. It was a sensation that every rider noticed right away. The stamped arms are long, and while absolutely stiff against the tension of the chain (which all bikes can't claim), they bow under the side loadings of the rear wheel.

Frame width: The Firestone air spring looks like it came off the end of a plumber's helper. To clear the air bladder shock absorber, the Crosstrac uses a split seat tube. If you fall into the overendowed calf category, you might invest in a bottle of Simichrome and put it on your legs so that they can polish the frame while they rub against it. It is irritating to have your legs rub against

CROSSTRAC

the frame. If you are calf-impaired, you will be fine.

Frame dimensions: Crosstrac makes three frame sizes, and then depends on seat adjustment to span the gaps. It might work on paper, but we had some problems with the overall dimensions of the Sonoma. The head tube is very high. It has to be to allow four inches of travel to work beneath it. When combined with the height of the Aheadset stem, the handlebar height is way up there. It is impossible to get the bike set up in the perfect riding position (saddle three inches above the bars) for riders in the nether regions of the frame's size gaps. If you ride a size in between what the Crosstrac is labeled as, you will be compromised. When you add in the 12-inch bottom bracket height and high head tube, you end up with a bike that will inherently have a tall front end.

Bottom bracket height: As we said, the bottom bracket is 12 inches off the ground. Most modern suspension bikes have 12- to 12.5-inch BBs. You might think that Crosstrac is in the ballpark. Nope! Remember that the Crosstrac has four inches of travel front and rear. That means that when you hit a big bump the bottom bracket is four inches closer to the ground. The result? The pedals hit; this is

especially annoying when you are hammering through the woods (*sans* bike).

QUESTION NINE: WHAT DID WE LIKE?

Up front we want to say that the Crosstrac Sonoma is not a bicycle in the traditional sense. It's not even a suspension bike in the traditional sense (as short as that suspension tradition may be). This is a new breed of bicycle. It's a suspension system first and a bicycle second.

We liked the way the Crosstrac handled. We liked the front forks (very absorbent). We liked the adjustable seatpost (and we didn't think we would). We liked the low pressure requirements of the air suspension (unlike many air shocks that require over 150 psi to adjust). We liked the tire clearance (plenty of room for mud rides). We liked the standover height (room to goof). We liked the ultra-long travel (it's double the fun). We liked the light weight (even if it is titanium-induced).

The real question is: Did we like the bike? This isn't our throw-down-and-die-for bike. It is too disconnected for anyone without a strong ego and sense of self. It handles crisply for a suspension bike, but it's sized funny. It has terrific forks, but the rear suspension is quirky. It has a lot of serious off-road pluses, but it's rather complex for boondocking. It oozes with trickness, but it's quite the ugly duckling. If we planned on riding gnarly, rugged, rock-strewn, rain-rutted trails every day,



The blimp: A Firestone air bladder provides the springing for the oil-damped hydraulic shock absorber. Crosstrac uses crossover air lines with Presta valves for adjustment. Thankfully, air pressures are low enough to change on the trail without a nitrogen tank.

we would be hard-pressed to choose a bike plusher or more adept at the work at hand. Conversely, it's such a special-use bike, by design, intent and practicality, that it doesn't go looking for potential buyers—they identify themselves by their own personal make-up and riding style.

Do we like the Crosstrac? We admire its throw-the-book-away approach, but think the Crosstrac is ahead of its time. That's not bad, and this is a bike of paradoxes. It looks like a downhill, but it works best on cross-country rides. Do you want to be ahead of your time? □