

BIKE TEST



Fat Chance Buck Shaver

The best a man can get?

Maybe it's us but we're not sure that we'd pay £1,700 for a bike (even with a cute name) that suggests we're skinflints. The Buck Shaver is the newest model and an entry-level addition to the Fat Chance off-road range. It's the cheapest bike they do.

The Buck Shaver motif that graces the head tube is in remembrance to Pat Egon, a Fat Chance worker who was tragically killed in an accident in 1990. Apparently 'Buck Shaver' used to adorn his favourite bowling shirt (supposedly he was always on the look out for a good deal), and the head tube decal on the bike has been drawn in his likeness.

It should be clear early on that we are dealing with a very different bicycle manufacturer from the norm. Fat Cycles who design, make and generally *are* Fat Chance, are currently based in South Glens Falls, New York (having recently moved from Somerville MA), and in the 12 years that they have been producing bicycles they've achieved a cult-like adoration amongst owners – they even have an organised fan club – COGS (Fat Chance Owners Group).

Originally the brainchild of one man – Chris Chance – Fat City Cycles to an outsider now resembles an amorphous commune whose workers' philosophy is to: 'resist mediocrity and challenge each other's personal best with colour and humour'. Whilst this may sound very politically correct, it does serve to illustrate how they have constantly and deliberately spurned mass production in favour of painstaking perfection.

As a side note Fat Chance have recently been acquired by Serotta, another custom frame company. Hopefully the arrangement should allow Fat Chance to continue producing quality mountain bikes.

The Buck Shaver is the bottom of the Fat Chance ladder at around £675 (frame only). It was conceived to offer a highly responsive race frame without the ultra-stiff feel of the Yo Eddy (Fat Chance's all-out race bike) but for less cash – about £300 less. The softer feel derives from using smaller diameter tubes than the Yo. Both frames, however, share the same suspension-ready geometry and are a little more aggressive than their other stable-mate, the Wicked Lite. This evil doer distinguishes itself by being the lightest and most forgiving of the steel range, mainly due to a shorter top tube and longer chainstays.

Like all Fat Chance frames the Buck is the product of obsessive, meticulous, almost neurotic over-engineering, and, unlike the majority of mass-market frames, is intended to last years or even decades of rebuilding and equipping.



Above: Like Bontrager Fat Chance was one of the first MTB firms to use the wishbone rear end. Consistent with standard wishbone philosophy the Buck Shaver is lightweight, stiff and strong. Trick items on this otherwise 'budget frame' included the Ringle Mojo cable hangers.

Top right: Like an artist signing a canvas, Chris Chance pencils his moniker at the bottom right-hand corner, in this case the left-hand chainstay.

Right: In loving memory. The Buck Shaver is dedicated to Pat Egon, a Fat Chance worker who died about five years ago.



All 'Fat' steel frames are made from True Temper tubing (apart from the Slim Chance road bike, which gets Columbus TLX pipes). Chris Chance reckons raw True Temper 4130 cromoly steel is extremely clean and the resulting tubing consistent in its metallurgical structure. This, he says, is vital to maintain the integrity of any welded joint since impurities in the metal will surface during the high temperatures of the TIG (Tungsten Inert Gas) welding process.

The tubesets for the Yo, Wicked, and Buck are then designed and specified by Chance, the differences between them residing in the tube diameter and the number and length of butts (butting is the change in thickness along a tube to reduce weight). The Yo Eddy for example is quad-butted whilst the Buck Shaver is triple-butted, and the top tube on the Yo is 1 1/4in in diameter compared to 1 1/8in on the Buck.

Our test model arrived resplendent in an 'arrest me red' which although bright and refreshing in comparison with many production bikes, belies some of the most exacting detailing of any builder we have seen. For example, the bottle braze-ons are 'blind' to eliminate any chance of water seepage, and the tubes (except head and seat) are sealed to further prevent water intrusion. New for this year is a seatpost sealing system to ensure a completely water-tight frame and a neat 'toothpick' anti-chainsuck device.

All the cable guides are silver brazed which, although more expensive than brass, melts at a lower temperature to minimise heat stress, leaving the frame stronger. The down tube is gusseted to distribute stress at the head tube joint, once again the aim being to increase durability. We couldn't help wondering, however, why a race frame had rack braze-ons, but apparently these frames are meant to be all things to all men, so when you retire from racing a spot of touring may be on the agenda before you finally bequeath the frame to the grand children and so on.

The quality of the mitring and welding on the Buck is top notch and reaches a level quite literally unattainable by most manufacturers. There is a rumour that a German company took a Fat Chance to Taiwan as an example of how they wanted their own frames assembled, and were told in no uncertain terms 'fat chance'.

The Buck shares with its more expensive brothers non-tapering seat and chainstays, which the company believes are stiffer, and more responsive. To compensate for a more difficult drop-out fit (inherent in joining fat tubes to

skinny drop-outs) Fat City also devised a doming process to produce a conical shape at the end of the stays for a smooth bullet-shape and bulletproof join.

Fat Chance frames come in a choice of sizes ranging from extra-small to large. Our Buck Shaver was a medium which corresponded to a 17in (centre to centre). The top tube was 23in which would normally create ample cockpit room but was somewhat negated by a short stem and seatpost (discussed later). The chainstays measured a fairly standard 167/16in and are asymmetric, ie the right-hand stay is kinked for extra chainset and tyre clearance. Seatstays are wishboned into the seat tube for extra rigidity. Up front the head tube measures 71 degrees, whilst the 72 degree seat tube angle is on the relaxed side which positions the rider over the back wheel to improve climbing (again negated by the seatpost).

It almost goes without saying that the paint on our test model was excellent and gave the impression that it would stay that way. The Test Force particularly liked the understated finish and clear coated decals, the only visible flamboyance being the Chris Chance signature on the chainstays.

For those not so predisposed to modesty Fat City offer their 'Painters Choice' which consists of you supplying the budget and them going wild - fades, splatter, carno, you name it. And if you hadn't already spent enough on Fat City also offer a complete custom service. Specifically tailored versions of their stock bikes are built to customers' exacting requirements. Cheap this option is not.

All Fat Chances come suspension ready. Our Buck was equipped with Tange Struts (suspension length) which are designed for use with an Ahead system and are therefore

Ready and waiting. The Buck Shaver we tested is crying out for a pair of suspension forks.

The fat, oversized suspension hub, low-slung stem and easy-to-adjust Aheadset will fit right in with whatever fork you choose.



Fat Chance – Buck Shaver

Price: £675 frame only **Supplier:** Evolution Imports, 27 Widmore Rd, Bromley, Kent BR1 1RW. Tel: 0181-290 0807
Sizes: 10 (extra-small), 14.5 (small), 17 (medium), 19 (large) **Size tested:** 17 (medium)

FRAME

Material True Temper triple-butted cromoly
Colours Arrest me red or black
Forks Tange Struts cromoly, Aheadset

GROUPSET

Shifters Shimano STX-RC Rapidfire
Crankset Shimano STX-RC 175mm
Chainrings Shimano STX-RC Compact Drive 42/32/22
Bottom bracket Shimano 113mm cartridge
Freewheel Shimano cassette 11-28 7-speed

Derailleurs

Front: Shimano STX-RC
 Rear: Shimano STX-RC long cage

Brakes

Lever: Shimano STX-RC Rapidfire two-finger
 Cantilevers: Shimano STX-RC M System pads

COMPONENTS

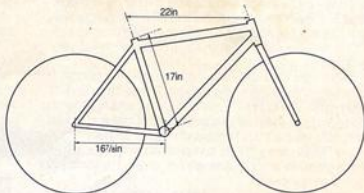
Headset Dia-Compe S Series Aheadset 1 1/8in sealed bearings
Stem Ringle Aheadstem, 120mm
Bars Pace/Renthal Sub-130 alloy, 22in
Saddle Flite, titanium rails
Seatpost Ringle Mobypost, 350mm

WHEELS

Rims Mavic 230, 32-hole
Hubs Shimano STX-RC Parallax cassette rear, Bullseye suspension front
Spokes DT 14G butted stainless
Tyres Panaracer HC Dart and Smoke 26x1.95in, Kevlar bead, directional

EXTRAS

ATI grips, Toothpick anti-chainsuck plate, Ringle seat clamp, Ringle Mojo cable hangers, Onza High-output clipless pedals





threadless. The forks add £152 to the price. The Struts felt ultra-stiff and responsive but our test model was ideally set up for suspension and consequently they felt a little harsh and unyielding in the rough stuff.

At first glance the componentry caused much head-scratching, with the extravagant and expensive nestling next to the relatively humdrum. The chainset, derailleurs, cantilevers, shifters, rear hub, and bottom bracket were Shimano STX RC, an entry-level racing groupset pitched somewhat below LX. The best that can be said is that it worked for the duration of the test, but in no way represents a befitting balance with the frame.

One minor niggle with the drivechain was the inclusion of a wider-than-necessary bottom bracket. If John Wayne was alive today this is the bike he'd ride.

The wheels were handbuilt with double-butted spokes, Mavic 231 rims, up front a bolt-on Bulls Eye suspension hub crying out to be introduced to something bouncier above, and at the rear a disappointing STX RC cassette model. This rear hub will wear much faster than the front because more weight is centred over the back wheel. The Panaracer Dart and Smoke HC tyres (back and front) cleared exceptionally in the wet and dry. However, the rear mysteriously split on the sidewall resulting in a bit of a hoof home.

Before discussing some of the more lavish components it is worth mentioning that the Buck Shaver as tested was supplied by Evolution Imports who also bring in Ringlé and Bullseye components. So this bike can be considered as a showpiece for a number of their products. Consumers would probably equip their own bikes very differently.

Two things contributed to the short over-the-bottom bracket riding position: the 130mm Ringlé stem and Mobypost. We found the stem too short and rigid for this bike, and the seatpost exacerbated the problem; it had very little lay-back and provided no give (comfort) for the rider. The Bullseye hub in combination with the stem and forks made for a super-snappy ride that occasionally bordered on the painful.

Other componentry included Mojo cable hangers, a

Flite saddle (always popular with the Test Force), and Pace/Renthal Sub-130 bars assisted by ATI grips. The only thing missing from the steering department was a pair of bar ends, but Evolution don't import any so they are not here.

Seatpost height was handled by a Ringlé quick-release clamp. Personally we'd go for a simple bolt which does the job better and leaves change for a set of bar ends.

Living with the Buck for the time that we did was a mixed blessing. The obvious quality of the frame made itself felt on every ride despite the shortcomings of the mismatched componentry. The bike was at its best on (typically British) muddy terrain where the lack of suspension wasn't noticeable due to the soft ground. Under these conditions the bike felt as tight and sorted as any MTB you're likely to ride. Powering up short climbs and skipping over rooty descents the Buck felt safe and inspiring. On climbs the back end was every bit as stiff as the most extreme aluminium bikes, power delivery direct to the pedals. Hardtail heaven.

The Buck Shaver is not light (frame only a shade under 5lb) but this doesn't matter. We all spend too much time fretting about a few ounces here and there and ignoring the big issue of excellent design and composition. Chris Chance could make a bike out of a drainpipe and it would feel like a thoroughbred – it's that simple.

In the final analysis it's a bit hard to recommend the Buck Shaver as tested for £1,700 as representing good value for money (a plain XT gruppo throughout would have complemented the frame better).

However, if you want a frame to last you for an eternity of hacking, racing, touring, and general abuse, and, which will not suffer the ravages of use or fashion, the basic £678 frame could very well be a sound investment. And whilst there are undeniably lighter, faster, and cheaper bikes around there are very few which exude the class of a Fat Chance which goes for the Buck Shaver as tested.

Personally though, if we were spending this kind of money we would save up the few hundred extra bucks for the Yo Eddy and hold the irony on the name. **MBI**

Like Remington (who also make a shaver) Sorretta liked Fat Chance so much they bought the company.