

SANTA CRUZ BRONSON ALLOY R1X

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Santa Cruz's reputation for making high quality full suspension mountain bikes dates back to 1993, and unless you've lived under a rock, you'll know that Santa Cruz has established itself as one of the premium mountain bike brands available for those who have a high-end budget. But, what if you don't have \$6K or more to spend? Well, what we've got on review here is one of the most budget-friendly full suspension bike currently available from Santa Cruz: the \$5499, 27.5 wheeled Bronson Alloy, with R1x groupset. Can the boutique brand's most budget oriented bike measure up to the brand's reputation for high-end-ride ride quality? While we didn't have the bike for as long as our usual reviews, we got a week's worth of riding on the alloy Bronson – enough to be able to give some insight into the answer...

FRAME

It's worth noting that the travel and geometry of the alloy framed Bronson is shared with the pricier carbon Bronson versions. With 150mm of travel out back, the alloy Bronson also features 148mm Boost rear spacing (and comes with a matching 110mm Boost fork). A threaded bottom bracket will please home-mechanics and creak-haters everywhere, while a bottle mount in the front triangle pleases anyone who likes a ride short enough to go sans backpack but long enough to want to avoid pre-dehydration (aka: being quite thirsty). All cables except the rear brake line are internally routed and a front derailleur

can be mounted should you want more than one chainring. One thing, the lower bearings don't feature the grease-injection-ports used in the lower link of the carbon framed models, but all the frame bearings are still covered by Santa Cruz's lifetime bearing warranty – so it's pretty hard to be too annoyed about the lack of grease-injection ports. In fact, we'd say the lifetime bearing replacement is genuinely amazing back-up and means a Bronson owner can look forward to many years of smooth suspension action.

SPEC

On to the spec, the "R1x" group fitted to our Bronson featured a RockShox

Monarch Debonair rear shock, with a Fox 34 Rhythm 150mm travel fork plugged into a tapered head tube. A 50mm stem clamped onto 785mm wide Race Face bars means the bars can be cut down to any size, or left as is for those with wide wings. A single-ring SRAM NX drivetrain with Race Face cranks provided ample gears for all our riding, though the shifter clamp's relative lack of adjustment made it difficult to get the lever into quite the right place for the rider's thumb, even with it paired with (lower-end) Level T brake levers also supplied by SRAM. Novatech hubs laced with 32 J-bend spokes to WTB I-25 rims made for sturdy, traditional wheels, which were shod with Maxxis Minion DHR and DHF tyres, pre-installed with Stans tubeless tape and sealant; an actual tubeless set-up right out of the shop – kudos Santa Cruz. There was one surprising feature: beneath the WTB Volt saddle sat a fixed seat post – that's right, there's no dropper post. On the flip-side, that does leave the buyer in the enviable position of being able to choose their preferred dropper post (rather than put up with some clunky budget post as stock) before they leave the store. Certainly that's what we'd be doing.

RIDE

In terms of fit, the large size has a 445mm reach, which is pretty well in-step with modern length measurements. It suited our 180cm tester perfectly. Uphill, we found the relatively steep seat angle keeps the rider over the bottom bracket and so lessens the upper-body work required to stay forward when the track starts tipping the bike and rider steeply backwards. The VPP suspension system means that the Bronson reacts well to hard pedalling efforts either in or out of the seat and we didn't ever reach for the shock compression lever, because even with the shock fully open, the Bronson errs on the side of a taught feeling at the pedals. If there is a negative to this, it's that when pedalling hard uphill into bumpy ground it can kick you through the feet more than some other suspension designs, especially when you smack a square-edged bump. But the fact that the efficient and sprint-friendly pedalling feel excels everywhere else, combined with its playful nature once pedalling stops and pumping starts on the downhill more than makes up for that foible.

Speaking of downhill, we've spent some time on the inaugural V.1 Bronson from a couple of years back and compared to that earlier rendition, this updated version has tweaked VPP linkage kinematics, along with a RockShox Debonair shock featuring a larger negative air chamber; these two changes gave a noticeably different feel to the rear suspension once pointed down. Gone was the previous tendency to be a

bit too eager to run through travel in the mid-stroke and then ramp up hard at the end, replaced with a much more consistent feel throughout the stroke. This resulted in a more supportive feel in berms and a more poppy ride through woops and hollows, along with the feeling of having more suspension – because it didn't ramp up as aggressively, we were able to access all of the travel, but we still didn't bottom it out harshly. Charging into really rugged and choppy ground the Bronson remained composed and settled – we couldn't phase it. The 66 degree head angle strikes a good balance between slack enough for really steep descents but still leaving enough weight on the front wheel to stick the front end to the ground on less steep descents. Notably, if there was a loss of performance in the Fox 34 Rhythm fork over its pricier siblings, we couldn't feel it during our test rides. The Maxxis Minion with EXO casing tyres played their part too – supremely grippy with a supple carcass to soften trail-chatter, and while they're not the fastest rubber on the pavement trip to the singletrack, once off-road the slightly draggy feeling of the rear is outweighed by the oodles of grip on offer. We also noted the slightly shorter chainstays than the previous model made manuals a touch easier too. Does the alloy framed Bronson lose any performance to the carbon version? That's hard to say without riding them back to back, but we can say that the changes to the rear suspension, along with a revised shock and tweaked geometry made our budget-friendly alloy Bronson ride better than the more expensive Bronson V.1 we'd ridden just a couple of years back.

In terms of price, the Bronson alloy R1x is more expensive than some cheaper brands' offerings, but aside from an entry into a boutique brand, you're getting a number of meaningfully important things done very well, such as a proven and refined VPP suspension, dialled geometry, extremely functional suspension components, excellent tyres fitted tubeless, and a lifetime warranty, including lifetime replacement of the bearings. The drivetrain and brakes aren't top-end components, and it needs a dropper, so it's worth noting the alloy framed Bronson S features a dropper and upgraded drivetrain and brakes – if you have more to spend, that model would be worth looking at. Still, as it stands, the alloy Bronson R1x might be the bottom tier amongst Santa Cruz's full sus options, but based on our riding experience, it's still got the performance heart of the top-end carbon Bronson and is a bike worthy of both getting on and riding it as is and is also worthy of upgrading some of the lower-end parts over the years as you progress your riding.