



[strong frames] MONSTER-CROSS

Price (frame only): \$1,650

Price (as tested): \$4,010

Custom Fork: \$500

www.strongframes.com

Time to hit the dirt

It's a crystal clear 70-degree day in January, and I am making fast time down fire roads in the Patagonia Mountains of Arizona. My plan is to ride 17 miles of dirt road and then hook up with a sweet section of the Arizona trail. I'm juiced up because I am on a Strong Frames monster-cross, purposely built just for this kind of day.

You may be asking yourself, what is a monster-cross? It's a loosely defined category of bicycles that can be ridden on dirt roads just as well as paved roads, while still suitable for smooth singletrack. This type of bike features drop bars, room for larger tires up to 40 mm wide and beyond and geometries that are closer to road bikes than cyclocross bikes. The bike arrived with head and seat tube angles of 73 degrees along with an

80 mm bottom bracket drop that promised a road bike feel while still being ready for all types of dirt. A monster-cross is the ultimate multi-purpose bike. It can serve as your weekend road bike, everyday commuter, touring steed and a dirt road blaster, with an emphasis on dirt.

Carl Strong has been building bikes in Bozeman, Mont., since 1993. During the last 16 years he has made bicycles for many other companies along with his Strong Frames brand. This long journey has returned full circle. Strong Frames is now a one-man shop with Carl doing all the fabricating and his wife Loretta handling the business end. What comes out of this shop can only be considered artwork. Every bike build starts with a custom fit document and detailed interview with Carl himself. He works hard to identify what you are looking for in your bike. This allows him to develop the right mix of materials and



geometry to build the perfect ride.

My test bike arrived with a custom blend of True Temper and Columbus tubing painted a lustrous orange by Spectrum Powder Works. Carl built a custom fork that smooths out the smaller bumps while still being laterally stiff. Two water bottle mounts were spec'd along with fender mounts and eyelets for racks front and rear.

The component selection is all top shelf and built up to handle the rigors that this bike is intended for. Shifting is handled by an Ultegra SL Compact drivetrain with 50/34 chainrings. When combined with a 12-27 cassette, the two-chaining setup provides ample gear ratios. The brakes are Paul's touring cantilevers, beautifully finished brakes that offer strong braking and plenty of clearance for larger tires. The FSA OS 99 stem, Wing Pro bar and SL-K seat post deliver connection to the bike. The ever-sturdy and reliable XT hubs are laced with 36 spokes to Mavic's 700 cc touring rim, the A719.

This bike proved to be a fabulous tool for dirt roads and commuting so I opted to mount a touring oriented tire. Along came the opportunity to try some Continental TopContact's and I jumped at it. This is Conti's top of the line touring tire and comes in a variety of widths from 27 mm to 47 mm in a 700 cc. Regardless of the size chosen, all versions come with Vectran puncture protection and are handmade in Germany. I chose the 37 mm version to stay on the faster side. This tire proved itself over and over again as I used it to commute to town each day

along with long dirt road rides in and around my hometown of Durango, Colo. To make this bike an even stronger commuter, I added a set of Old Man Mountain racks and a rack bag from Deuter. It sure is great to put all the weight on the bike and revel in the freedom of unencumbered cycling. The rack and bag remained stable on my rides, and it was easy to forget they were back there carrying the load.

So how's the ride? After six months of riding paved and dirt roads, both doubletrack and singletrack, I am really pleased with this bike. The ride is compliant vertically and provides a great platform for dirt road riding. Meanwhile, bottom bracket flex is kept to a minimum and once on a trail I could feel the complete transfer of power from my legs to the dirt. Handling on this bike felt slower than my carbon race bike, but that's to be expected on a bike meant to be ridden in difficult and dicey conditions. The stable handling allowed me to hold a line in the dirt, and when it was necessary to make a last-minute correction, the bike always came through.

Everywhere I traveled people asked me about this bike. Maybe it was the gorgeous paint—orange is my favorite color after all—but the big surprise was to learn how many people are fans of Strong Frames and how well known the brand is.

If you have been looking at all those winding backcountry roads but always felt tentative because you were not sure what kind of conditions you may encounter, then go with the Strong monster-cross and let your worries go. —K.Smith