



Conclusion

Seven punctures, one broken derailleur, 10 cut-down seatposts, hundreds of cups of tea at Peaslake Stores and five weeks spent hammering 18 bikes up and down the Surrey Hills. After all that, we're confident that we've left no stone unturned in our quest to find the very best hardtails of 2016.

Once again we lucked out with the weather, a dry-spell ensuring that all of the bikes were tested in exactly the same trail conditions. And, because we've tested all 18 bikes on trails that we know inside out, we were able to cross-reference them with every other hardtail we've tested. Why is this so important in a standalone test? Well, it means that when we award a bike a perfect 10 rating, we can be confident that it really is best in class, not just the best of the bunch.

£500 BIKES

Producing a top quality hardtail for five hundred pounds is no simple task. Compromises need to be struck to hit this key price point, and more often than not, it's the performance of the suspension fork that suffers. The Ghost Kato 2 is a perfect case in point.

All other things being equal, however, it's the frame geometry and associated attitude that really define the handling of a hardtail. In that respect, Vitus totally nailed the numbers on the Nucleus VR, its profile more closely matching the best £1,000 bikes than its peers. The sizing and fit were also spot-on, with each of the components falling effortlessly to hand.

Using a direct sales model, Vitus can afford to back up the great frame proportions with the best parts package. As such, it was the only sub-£500 bike to sport an air-sprung fork. It was the attention to detail, however, like the lock-on grips and



Miles of Surrey's trails were ridden in the quest for three worthy winners

dedicated front and rear-specific tyres, that really helped raise the bar. From the very first ride, Vitus established itself as top dog, and no other brand came close to challenging its position. The Vitus Nucleus VR is the new benchmark £500 hardtail.

£750 BIKES

We're always fine-tuning the format of the Hardtail of the Year test, and when we dropped the starting price down from £600 to £500, to reflect the abundance of bikes at this lower price point, the VooDoo Bizango 29er was left out in the cold.

One year on and we decided that it was too good not to be thrown in the mix. So, even though it is £150 cheaper than some of its rivals, we were confident that it could still hold its own. What we weren't expecting was for it to win the test.

With the best geometry and the stiffest fork of the group, the VooDoo was instantly ahead of the

Whatever your budget, you're guaranteed to kick-start your riding experience with a bang

game. It helped too that it was the only bike in this category with a short stem.

It was the combination of the bigger wheels and the low bottom bracket, however, that meant we could charge harder and with more confidence on the VooDoo Bizango 29er. We were instantly reminded how easily the Bizango cast its spell on us

when it launched three years ago, and with subtle tweaks to the tubing profiles and specification, the ride quality of the latest version is still every bit as captivating today.

£1,000 BIKES

With a budget of £1,000 there is no need to compromise on performance. It should come as no surprise then, that this was the most closely fought category of the test.

It's not simply about getting a lighter bike with better bits though, and 2016 will certainly go down in mtb history as the year that bike manufacturers finally embraced the concept of the £1,000 trail hardtail — rather than simply producing dumbed-down versions of their high-end XC race bikes.

As such, slacker head angles, better standover clearance, quality tyres, wide bars and short stems prevailed; making it that much harder to separate the six most expensive bikes in this test.

To muddy the waters further, the three main wheel sizes were represented too. Four bikes were rocking regular 27.5in wheels, while the Boardman benefited from the extra rollover of bigger 29in wheels and Norco took advantage of the improved comfort and traction provide by the massive 3.0in tyres that go hand-in-hand with the new 27.5 Plus standard.

In the end however, it came down to two bikes: the Norco Torrent 7.2 and the Ragley Marley. Both bikes excelled but in different areas. The massive tyres of the Norco gobbled up the roughest trails, while the Ragley's agility played to its advantage everywhere else. And that's ultimately what set the Ragley apart in such a stacked field. It really is the perfect do-it-all hardtail.

Next year, we suspect that our Hardtail of the Year test will be even tighter, as more and more brands trickle-down the trail-focused attitude to lower price points. That's no bad thing, but there really is no need to wait around for that to happen, as this year's test-winners all scored perfect 10 ratings. So whatever your budget, if you buy one of the test winners, you're guaranteed to kick-start your riding experience with a bang.



WATCH THE VIDEO

To get a ringside seat at the biggest hardtail test in the world, just go to po.st/HOTY16

ONE STEP UP

For a little more

Got slightly more than a grand to spend on a new hardtail? Well, they don't get any better than the £1,199 Whyte 901. With class-leading geometry, a killer spec and unparalleled handling the Whyte 901 is not just a great hardtail, it's an amazing bike. To read the full review of the 2016 Whyte 901 head to po.st/Whyte901

If your budget will stretch a little further, Whyte's 901 rocks

ONE STEP BEYOND

For the same money

Traditionally we've said that you need to spend more than a grand to get a decent full-suspension bike... then we tested the Calibre Bossnut. With 130mm travel and a spec to rival most £1,000 hardtails, it completely rewrote the rulebook. Sold directly through Go Outdoors, the list price on the Bossnut is £1,299, but by signing up for a £5 discount card the price is instantly reduced to £999.99. Bargain! You can read the full review of the Calibre Bossnut at po.st/CalibreBossnut



A decent full-susser from a camping shop? Well, actually, yes!