

Paul Gallaher

MOUNTAIN KLEIN, about $950

Mountain Klein

No bike has been looked forward to with as much excitement as the Klein. And once it was assembled and on the track, no bike has attracted as much interest. Imagine the reaction an Enzo Ferrari built Jeep would receive and you'll have an idea how mountain bikers react to the Klein. Invariably, the first thing everyone did was pick it up, then, almost as a double take, pick it up again. The bike is light! Ours came out of the box weighing 25.5 pounds, including water bottle cages and bottles! Despite manufacturers' claims of bikes weighing anywhere from 24 to 27 pounds, the Klein was the first bike we've weighed that broke the 27 pound barrier.

After lifting it, riders exclaimed about the shifter and brake cables disappearing into the down tube, the massive, square chain stays, a beautiful aero fork, and the radial wheels. Gary Klein's aluminum road bikes are justifiably famous and those qualities that made them so have been passed on to the Mountain Klein.

This is the first mountain bike we've seen with brazed-on front derailleur mount and cables inside the down tube. The derailleur mount looks sharp but can be a problem if you want to change the large chain ring. The reason for it is simple: the seat tube is too large for derailleur clamps. More unfortunate than the relatively fixed large chain ring size is the limited front derailleur selection. The best wide range, triple ring derailleurs can't be used with the mount. Gary is currently using the Suntour Cyclone II. While the shifting is excellent between the middle and large chain rings and middle to granny, it's terrible from the granny to middle.

There aren't any particular performance advantages in hidden cables and there may be some disadvantages. But they look great and they sure make cleaning the bike easy. Unlike road bikes, mountain bikes invariably return from a ride splattered with mud. Cleaning is a never ending exercise and those hidden cables can't be beat for that. Their disadvantage becomes apparent when replacing a worn cable. Klein has been searching for the right liner tube to facilitate running cables through so this potential hassle should be taken care of in the future. There's also no way to glance at the cables to see if they've stretched and need adjusting. But everyone agreed the cleanliness of the design more than offsets the minor hassles of hidden cables.

The Suntour XC roller cam brake mounted under the chain stays is also appreciated, especially with the chain stays forming a mud umbrella over the brakes. It's remarkable how clean the brakes remain in even the worst conditions. The front brake on the prototype Gary sent is a Shimano Deore cantilever. Whether that will remain the choice on production versions has yet to be decided. Both brake types work fine and which is superior is a matter of personnal choice. The cantilevers are lighter and easier to release for wheel removal while the rollar cams have a more positive feel but can be tricky to adjust properly, sometimes true for cantilevers also. With experience, neither type should be a problem. Effective braking action is subjective and roller cams and cantilevers each have their adherents but more importantly, both types stop a bike.

The radial-spoked wheels were the source of endless opinions. Some riders look at them and immediately state they'll never last; they're not strong enough for trail riding. Others question the wheels' strength only because they've never seen radials on mountain bikes before. In answering why radial-spoking, Gary replies: "The real question is why not radial-spoking; not why. The only problem with radial-spoking is finding a hub flange strong enough to handle the increased pressure. The Hi-E hubs are. Take care of that and there's no reason not to radial-spoke."

The wheels have faithfully maintained their trueness after a month of hard riding. They look great and, like the rest of the bike, are easy to clean. We like them.

As can be expected, the rest of the components are first drawer: US Tubular seatpost, Cinelli saddle, Suntour XC stem, Specialized handlebars, Shimano 600 headset, Araya RM 20 rims, Avocet/Ritchey tires, Shimano 600 rear derailleur, Shimano 6-speed freewheel, Shimano cranks, etc. The bike is tricked out.

Frame angles are middle of the road: 69 degree head, 71 degree seat. Where Klein threw in a curve was with the 17.25 inch chainstays and 42.25 inch wheelbase. The fork is a prototype aero unicrown design with 2 inches of rake. It's hands down the best looking fork we've seen and its performance matches its looks. The resulting geometry makes for an exceptionally