

Kiss Your 26er Hardtail Goodbye

Niner Air 9 Carbon

Niner's first carbon fiber frame is bound to convince a whole lot of small-wheel cross-country racers to ride a 29er next season.

WHO IS IT MADE FOR?

With fast-reflex geometry and a laterally rigid carbon frame, the new Air 9 offers the big-wheel advantage to elite-level cross-country racers.

WHAT IS IT MADE FROM?

The Air 9 Carbon is far from the nine sticks of welded tubing that most 29er folk are presently riding. The high-modulus carbon structure is molded in three pieces: the oversized, rectangular-tube front section is one piece, which



is then bonded to the right- and left-side rear stays. Niner's massively oversized bottom-bracket shell incorporates press-in adapters that fit every bottom bracket imaginable. Rear dropouts are molded carbon with threaded aluminum inserts at the post-mount brake caliper interface.

Should you decide to chuck your derailleurs, the Air 9's internal cable routing means that you won't have superfluous external housing stops cluttering up your frame. The head-badge on the frame's tapered head tube doubles as the derailleur housing stops, and Niner offers plugs to disguise the holes. You won't need to refit the Air 9 with cobby adjustable dropouts, because the eccentric bottom bracket works in harmony with the Niner's conventional vertical-types. The Air 9's chain adjustment is at the bottom bracket, so the vertical dropouts keep the brake caliper and rotor in perfect alignment.

The beautiful monocoque carbon frame's claimed weight is 2.8 pounds. Air 9 Carbon frames are made in 15.5-, 16.5-, 19- and 21-inch sizes and come in Tang Orange or Vana White color combinations.

WHICH COMPONENTS STAND OUT?

Twenty-niners are about wheels, and Niner pulled out all the stops by outfitting our test bike with Geax Saguario 2.0-

inch tires glued to Edge carbon tubular rims on Chris King hubs. The front wheel with brake and tire weighs 3.1 pounds and the rear wheel with brake, tire and cassette weighs 4.2 pounds. The brakes were featherweight Formula R1 discs with 6-inch rotors. The fork was a 3.1-inch-travel RockShox Reba XX Dual Air 29 with a hydraulic remote lockout system.

HOW DOES IT PERFORM?

The Air 9 Carbon feels firm and fast with the liveliest acceleration we have experienced from any 29er to date. Truvativ's 39/26 chainring option is the lowest range available for their XX crankset, and paired with an 11-36 10-speed SRAM XX cassette, the Air 9 Carbon has a "right-now" gearing option for every situation that a cross-country racer will face in the heat of competition.

On the flats: Our medium-sized Air 9 Carbon's steep 74-degree seat angle and 43.5-inch wheelbase made for easy transitions between seated and out-of-the-saddle pedaling. Edge tubular rims are some of the lightest available for 29ers, and in concert with fast-rolling Geax tires, they encouraged us to attack rolling hills in the big chainring rather than downshift to a more prudent gear selection.

In the rough: Niner claims its carbon frame offers some compliance, but we did not sense this on the trail. With 30 psi in the Geax tires, the ride was quite firm, almost bouncy in the rear. Experimenting with tire pressures, however, paid great dividends. Cornering performance, climbing traction and comfort increased noticeably with just a slight reduction of 2 psi in each tire. Once we discovered the Niner's sweet spot, we could ignore gravel and chatter

bumps, and concentrate on a smooth pedaling tempo.

Climbing: With its-taller-than-trailbike low gear, you'll be hammering up steep grades out of the saddle. The good news is that the Niner's 17.35-inch chainstays and low bottom bracket keep the Air 9 Carbon clawing for traction without the tendency to loft the front tire. The rider feels more centered on the bike than when climbing aggressively on a small-wheel racing chassis, and there is no traction penalty when switching between seated and standing modes. As with all 29ers, you'll need to climb with a smooth pedaling circle because the greater mass of the 29-inch wheels does not respond efficiently to erratic acceleration.

Descending: Niner's command of the big-wheel concept is quite evident when descending or negotiating technical sections on the course. The Air 9 Carbon feels in control and stable at speed and in situations where most cross-country race bikes feel skittish. Decisive steering makes short work of switchback corners, and the bike's powerful Formula R1 brakes can pare off speed with surgical precision. While it may appear that the minimal tread of its glue-on tires would not support high-pressure cornering, the Niner's low bottom bracket, almost 2.8 inches below the axle plane, forces the tires into the soil. We found the Air 9 carbon to be quite trustworthy on every turn and twist of our test course.



Remote concept: We are not wild about remote lockout forks, but we found the SRAM XX hydraulic system on the Reba XX fork to be quite useful when we were hammering out of the saddle. A preset blow-off keeps the fork operational over big hits.

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TRICKS, UPGRADES OR TIPS?

We are not complaining, because the Air 9's front end proved amply rigid in the steering department, but we have to wonder how a 15-millimeter thru-axle fork and hub might improve the bike's already stellar steering performance.

There is no upgrade for the amazing wheels and tires that our Air 9 Carbon rolled on. The Edge Carbon Tubular rims with glued Geax Saguaro Tubular tires are in a class by themselves. This doesn't come cheap. The wheels account for \$2410 (over 30 percent) of what our Air 9 Carbon would cost you (\$7742). Rip a tire's sidewall? That'll set you back \$117 (plus glue).

BUYING ADVICE

Niner's Air 9 Carbon is a convincing argument for racers to dump their 26-inch hardtails forever. It shaved almost a minute a mile off our best time around the test circuit—and that is impressive. Much of its speed comes from the fact that a rider can take advantage of its trail-smoothing 29-inch wheels and superior handling and relax, which leaves more beans in reserve for out-of-the-saddle efforts during the race. With more conventional wheels and tires, the carbon Niner would make a sweet fast-paced trailbike for those who insist on a rigid rear end. Considering that the Air 9 Carbon can be converted to a single-speed overnight, you actually get two bikes in one. □



Feels good: A sub-3-pound carbon frame and spot-on geometry make the Air 9 Carbon a best-in-class climber. Truvativ's 39-tooth and 26-tooth XX chainring combination is well-matched to the 29er.



Nine lives: XX is revolutionizing cross-country. Internal cable routing integrated into Niner's cast-aluminum head badge. Oversized bottom bracket cups adapt to a wide variety of cranksets. Formula R1 brakes.

NINER AIR 9 CARBON

Price	\$7742 (\$1899, frame only)
Country of origin	Taiwan
Weight	21.9 pounds
Hotline	(877) 646-3792
Frame tested	16.5"
Bottom bracket height	11.8"
Chainstay length	17.35"
Top tube length	23"
Head tube angle	72°
Seat tube angle	73°
Standover height	31.5"
Wheelbase	43.5"
Suspension travel	3.1" (front)
Suspension travel	None (rear)
Frame material	Carbon fiber
Fork	RockShox Reba XX Dual Air
Shock	None
Rims	Edge Carbon Tubulars (29")
Tires	Geax Saguaro Tubular (2.0")
Hubs	Chris King
Brakes	Formula R1
Crankset	Truvativ XX
Handlebar	Edge Composite Sweep (27.5")
Shifters	SRAM XX
Front derailleur	SRAM XX
Rear derailleur	SRAM XX
Chainrings	Truvativ XX (39/26)
Cassette	SRAM XX 10-cog (11-36)
Tallest gear	26.91 feet (per crank revolution)
Lowest gear	5.48 feet (per crank revolution)
Pedals	Weighed with Shimano XTR