

COMIN' ROUND THE MOUNTAIN

When it comes to wheel size, could the third time be the charm? We ride the Jamis SixFiftyB2 to find out.



JAMIS SIXFIFTYB2

PRICE: \$4,575 SIZES: 13, 15, 17, 19, 21 in. GEOMETRY (17 in.): TT length (effective): 22.79 in.; ST length: 17 in.; head angle: 69 degrees; seat angle: 73 degrees; bottom bracket drop: 13mm WEIGHT: 29 lb. FRAME: Kinesium aluminum; RockShox Monarch 3.1 shock, 130mm travel FORK: White Brothers Fluid 130 w/130mm travel, 20mm thru-axle COMPONENT HIGHLIGHTS: SRAM X.0 rear derailleur, shifters; 950 11-34t cogset, X.9 front derailleur; Avid Elixir CR brakes w/180mm front, 160mm rear rotors; Truvativ Noir XC 3.3 cranks w/22/32/44t chainrings; American Classic 650B XC wheels; Kenda Nevegal 2.35-inch tires INFO: jamisbikes.com

With the growing success of 29-inch wheels, you'd think that riders and bike makers would be interested in exploring the potential of other wheel sizes. Instead, it seems that wheel-size fatigue has already taken hold. 650B? Good luck with that, all you bespoke folks at the North American Handmade

Bicycle Show. If it's going to survive, 650B needs a big-brand champion, much like Fisher was to the 29er movement.

Enter Jamis. Though it isn't a behemoth along the lines of the Trek Bicycle Corporation, the company is significant—and Jamis has taken the 650B plunge (as has Haro, by the way). Jamis believes 650B is the right answer for some riders, and has launched a pair of 5-inch-travel trail bikes for 2010. We took a ride on the B2 to see what the fuss is about.

THE DIFFERENCE: RIGHT DOWN THE MIDDLE

Put a 650B wheel between a 26-inch and a 29-inch wheel and you'll see that it exactly splits the difference in size. It also splits the difference in benefits and drawbacks. Depending on your perspective that could come out as "still stupid," "just right" or "not enough of a difference to bother."

Jamis thinks it's just right...for some

applications, especially the mid-travel-trail-bike arena. According to Craig Hoyt, Jamis's mountain bike product manager, 650Bs avoid the slower handling of 29-inch wheels and create a bike that's very flickable. "You can jump it, manual it and ride it aggressively," he says.

Jamis currently offers two 650B bikes—the higher-end SixFiftyB2, tested here, and the \$2,875 SixFiftyB1 (which uses the same 130mm frame and fork). That makes Jamis and Haro (Sonix 650B, \$3,120) the only companies to offer complete production 650B suspension bikes. That said, Jamis hasn't become a "650B brand"—the company also offers three 26-inch models based on the same 130mm platform.

Look at Jamis's 650B geometry and you'll see some of what proponents find advantageous. The bikes are available down to a 13-inch size with a 21.22-inch effective top-tube length, which is a full inch (that's a lot) shorter than the shortest TT we've found on a full-suspension 29er. The chainstays on Jamis's 650B bikes are 15mm longer than on the 26-inch versions; for comparison, a Specialized Epic adds 23mm of chainstay in the 26-to-29 jump. And the 650B's wheelbase is just 4mm longer (partially helped by the 2.5-degree steeper head angle, though the fork has 4mm more offset); the 29er Epic has an 11mm wheelbase increase over the 26.

THE BUILD: SLIM PICKINGS, BUT SOLID

One of the challenges 650B faces is the availability of wheels, tires and suspension forks—just like 29ers did at first (and still do, to some degree). The Jamis uses American Classic's 650B wheelset, which performed well—we admire the freehub design and found the wheels stiff enough for the intended use. What we don't understand is why they're 100 grams heavier than American Classic's 29er wheelset.

As RockShox, Fox and Marzocchi have yet to introduce 650B forks, it was up to little guy White Brothers to carry the torch. But our White Brothers fork was so ridiculously sticky at first that we had to rebuild it immediately. That helped a bit. Riding it helped, too, but the fork takes a long time to fully break in. Even after a month of riding, ours wasn't as smooth as an out-of-the-box Fox or RockShox. The good news is that it works well enough and

is stiff enough to silence any real bitching, though it won't cause the engineers in Watsonville or Colorado Springs to lose any sleep.

The rest of the parts are solid choices. One note: Though we like the Crank Brothers Joplin Remote seatpost, the cable routing wasn't the prettiest.

THE RIDE: LIGHT AND LIVELY

It's remarkable the way 650B straddles the riding experience of 26 and 29, at one moment easily carving a tight arc around a switchback and at another providing surprising confidence and stability on a technical drop-in. Yes, there are also negatives: In general, a 650B bike isn't as responsive or light as a 26er, nor as smooth or stable as a 29er.

Truth is, the SixFiftyB2 is quite lively for a 5-inch-travel trail bike of any wheel size. The rear suspension is a single-pivot/four-bar variation that works very well, with pedaling, bump and braking performance as well as rear-end and frame stiffness all getting solid marks. The rear end isn't soak-up-every-pebble plush, but more crisp and buttoned down. The SixFiftyB2 can be slammed into corners and popped off lips almost like a 26-inch-wheeled bike, but the bigger wheels roll over obstacles, through rough terrain and down steps a touch more smoothly. Compared with the few 130mm-ish-travel

29er bikes out there, the Jamis feels more compact and agile, which surprised us because the Jamis's geometry isn't radically different than, say, that of the Specialized Stumpjumper FSR 29.

As for the broader wheel-size debate, 650B is tricky because there isn't that overt difference you find when you jump on a 29er for the first time. That said, the obvious fit for a 650B bike is a rider who is interested in the performance attributes of bigger wheels, but are faced with sizing issues on 29ers. For those simply looking for the right bike for their terrain and riding style, 650B may make the

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buying process a little longer and more complicated, but it's another choice that could ultimately lead to the perfect bike. We think the idea of something a little bigger than a 26er with some of the benefit of a 29er—but without the crazy-ass sizing and packaging challenges—makes for an appealing story for some riders. That said, a wheel size isn't a wheel size until Fox or RockShox makes a fork for it. Even so, the SixFiftyB2 is a sign that 650B could be closer to becoming a "real boy" than we think.—*Matt Phillips*