

First rides

SWINGING A LEG OVER WHAT'S HOT THIS MONTH

ORANGE STAGE 6 EVO SE

£6,400 / 29in / orangebikes.com

NEED TO KNOW

- Alloy trail bike with 140mm travel, 150mm-travel fork and 29in wheels
- Orange's Evo treatment sees the bike get less travel, but tighter suspension

- New asymmetric swingarm design makes the back end vertically stiffer
- Öhlins TTX1 Air shock and RXF 36 M.2 fork tip the bike north of £6k

- Two bikes in the range, including a Team version with Formula coil shock

With its redesigned 29er, Orange's tasty traction now comes with added sharpness

Orange bikes are born for slop. That single-pivot swingarm has always generated stupid amounts of grip on anything off-camber and slidey, so I knew just where I had to take the new Stage 6 Evo SE, the latest 29er trail bike from the Halifax brand. Somewhere that stinks. But in a good way. Grimy trails duly found – not hard this winter – I proceeded to get the usual reward of tenacious grip and emerged spattered and smiling from the first descent. But there was something else going on too, something relatively new to me. The bike felt tighter and stiffer, with more zip when cranking it up. Orange has entered the modern age of the trail bike.

In truth, Orange entered this age in 2020 with the Stage Evo 29, a 120mm-travel bike that's led directly into this new Stage 6 Evo here. That bike showed us the direction Orange wanted to go in with its Evo trail bikes, stripping away as much weight as possible, a little travel, and tightening up the suspension to really differentiate them from its big-hit and plusher enduro bikes like the Alpine. Making a 120mm-travel bike zippy and tight makes sense, and

Transition, Evil, YT and loads more brands have been hammering this point home with brilliant down-country bikes for a few years. But with 140mm travel, isn't the Orange Evo approach just going to rob the bike of its plushness without giving enough of a reward in terms of low weight and speed?

Firstly, though, the details. The Stage moniker tells you the bike runs on 29in wheels, and the Evo treatment means travel is nipped back by 10mm from the old bike, to 140mm with a 150mm fork. The SE version comes with Öhlins suspension, or there's a Team version with Formula coil shock and air fork for £1,200 less. Naturally there's also a frame-only option for £2,600 with a RockShox or Fox shock.

Orange might not have moved on much in the materials it uses or its suspension layout, but it's become an expert in tweaking the tried-and-tested design, now using Finite Element Analysis (FEA). The Stage 6 Evo gets a new asymmetric swingarm design where the non-driveside chainstay drops lower, while the wall thickness of each part of the frame now varies from 1.3 to 1.6mm. The upshot is a bike that's stiffer vertically, but actually slightly more compliant laterally than the old design, Orange says. In really simple terms that means more grip when the bike is lent over, and better efficiency when you're pedalling. The shock has moved too, it noses slightly further into the down tube, which makes the suspension a little more progressive. And perhaps most importantly, the main pivot position has moved lower to reduce pedal kickback and make the bike more neutral feeling.

The elephant in the room is the price – at £6,400 you'd expect to see a motor on there somewhere, or perhaps a carbon frame or wheelset. Instead you get



Öhlins shock + improved suspension kinematics = more supportive ride



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Stage 6 Evo SE: rides fast and loose while keeping it tight



alloy rims and Shimano SLX cycling you through the gears. I'm not going to pass judgement on this though – the internet will do this for me – instead I'll explain why the costs are high. Most obviously, the bike uses Öhlins suspension which is far more expensive than RockShox Ultimate or even Fox factory. Orange also says this is 2022, which is its way of saying that inflation has ripped up the rule book on bikes made by hand in the UK. The rest of the specification is grounded in good sense, with excellent Stans Flow Mk4 rims, Hope Pro 4 hubs and a great Maxxis Minion DHF and DHRII tyre combination. And while the Renthal bar and short Hope stem feel right, the only irritation is that the 150mm-stroke dropper post is too short.

HOW IT RIDES

Tight, in a word. Tighter than the Oranges of the past, in a complete sentence. I remember the comfortable, almost effortless grip on off-camber, rooty terrain of the previous Oranges I rode and it's just the same with the Stage 6 Evo. Aim it obliquely across



Orange is still flying the flag for home-grown engineering excellence



Variable-thickness alloy frame boosts vertical stiffness



Stubby Hope stem pairs well with Renthal bar for a sorted cockpit

It's a controlled, balanced and supportive ride

some slippy, mud-smeared roots and somehow it holds its line and steers you out safely to the other side. The long 471mm chainstay length probably helps too, as it keeps the front end loaded.

What I don't remember is the level of support now on offer, there's no harsh bottom-out even when you're running it pretty soft and it really helps you stay in a neutral riding position on the bike. The bottom bracket is reasonably low, and I avoided whacking my pedals on rock or root, but honestly I'd be happy to have it a few millimetres lower, especially given how supportive the shock is.

How much of this support is down to the bike's suspension characteristics and how much is down to the shock, I just don't know. What I did feel is a remarkably composed ride for a relatively short-travel bike – it's controlled, balanced and supportive. The suspension travel measured up bang-on 140mm, with plenty of clearance between the back to the seat tube and rear tyre at bottom-out. The trade-off, of course, is that it's not as supple as some bikes out there; don't expect the Stage 6 Evo to eat up those

big hits, instead you'll need to use that new-found support to dance round it all.

Dance you will though, because the bike isn't crazy heavy and all that FEA seems to have paid off to help deliver a pretty nimble ride. You benefit on the climbs from this of course, and from the lofted seat position and steep seat tube angle. My only gripe comes from the sizing, though – my bike came up significantly shorter in terms of reach than Orange's numbers on the website. My own ride experience echoed that – I felt a little cramped on the bike and wished I'd opted for the XL for my 6ft 11in frame.

I thought I'd enjoy riding the Stage 6 Evo SE; Orange is too well-practised to get it wrong. But I didn't think I'd be surprised by it. It's got good pace, it's fun to ride, and it somehow made winter fun again.

Jamie Darlow

SPECIFICATION

- Frame** 6061-T6 alloy, 140mm travel (140mm measured)
- Shock** Öhlins RFX 36 M.2 Air, 150mm travel
- Wheels** Hope Pro 4 hubs, Stans Flow Mk4 rims, Maxxis Minion DHF/DHR II 29x2.5/2.4in tyres
- Drivetrain** Race Face Aeffect 32t crankset, Shimano SLX 12-speed shifter and r-mech
- Brakes** Hope Tech 3 E4, 203/180mm
- Components** Renthal FatBar M35 800mm bar, Hope M35 stem, SDG Tellis 150mm post, SDG Strange Bel Air III saddle
- Weight** 14.65kg (32.29lb)
- Sizes** M, L, XL

GEOMETRY

- Size ridden** L
- Rider height** 6ft 11in
- Head angle** 63°
- Seat angle** 75.5°
- Effective SA** 75.9°
- BB height** 341mm
- Chainstay** 471mm
- Front centre** 828mm
- Wheelbase** 1,299mm
- Downtube** 754mm
- Reach** 470mm

mbr 1ST IMPRESSION

HIGHS Great ride feel. Supportive suspension that lets you motor down trails without getting out of shape. That classic Orange grip on anything off-camber.

LOWS The price. The 470mm reach on the size L is a little short. Only three frame sizes.