

set-up with the cables joining the arms at exactly the right angle. Fine tuning is achieved by exact positioning of the brake blocks. The blocks are also of a new design, with bigger slots for mud clearance and heat dispersal and a new compound for wet weather braking. We were extremely impressed by the efficiency of the brakes.

As far as the drivetrain is concerned, at Exage level we could not fault the slick gear changes. The 26/36/46 chainrings boast a more basic version of the split ramps and split teeth of 1992 XTR chainrings, resulting in remarkably smooth changes even under maximum pressure. A 12-28 *Hyperglide* freewheel ensured a more than adequate gear range, and even the gear mechs and cranks were noticeably skinnier than we've used to.

**The wheels**

The wheels fitted on the test bike were from a '92 model. The '93 versions will be with the new Exage hubs, supposedly with upgraded dirt seals, and P23 rims for more weight saving. Tyres fitted were *Ritchey Megabite 2.1s*, good all-rounders with a penchant for gripping hard in loose dirt.

**The other bits**

At the front end, the relatively low

**Ridgeback** *Complite* stem with recessed expander bolt and light alloy bars were more than adequate. Comfortable and hardwearing *Ritchey* hex grips capped the ends.

We weren't impressed by the saddle. It looks classy, with copper rivets to the rear, but did not offer particularly good support over rougher terrain. A long oversize seatpin was fitted, with a neat and light QR bolt.

Pedals, clips and straps were no-name units but they were robust enough for general riding.

**The ride**

Every **Ridgeback** we've tested and talked about conjures up the much touted words of stable, neutral, efficient, predictable and reliable. The 604 is no different. It handled well, if without flair, over all terrain. The reasonable weight promoted stability and a feeling of security for the few beginners who tried the test bikes and, for £379.95, we find it difficult to pass negative comment. Some first-timers in this price category may prefer a higher rise stem; the set-up of the 604 is fairly racy.

The 604 is an all-round machine in a very popular price category. It does not jump out and draw attention, rather it will attract riders looking for function over flair.



The Exage brakes are really impressive. The cables join the arms at exactly the right angle, and even the blocks are of a new, improved design.

**RIDGEBACK 604LT**

Chassis quality	●●●●○
Chassis finish	●●●●○
Gears performance	●●●●○
Brakes performance	●●●●○
Wheels	●●●●○
Handling	●●●●○
Value for money	●●●●○
Overall	●●●●○

Excellent groupset; well proportioned frame

Saddle



**Kona Explosif**

When Kona MTBs arrived in the UK, they were accepted as solid, no-nonsense bikes, built for the sort of mountain biking that designer/racer Joe Murray worshipped. Their reputation as bomb proof all-rounders was complemented by a growing number of Cinder Cones and Explosifs appearing on the race

scene. Their UK market has continued to grow, and now rivals the Canadian based company's US sales figures.

In line with the trends of recent times, **Konas** have been on a diet. The '92 range was a healthy reflection of sensible weight watching with an obvious emphasis of maintaining strength where necessary. The '93 range promises much

more. The combined progress of Far Eastern manufacturers and western designers has resulted in a crop of off-the-shelf production bikes for '93 that will seriously challenge some of the perceived advantages of spending far more money on hand-built machines.

The new **Kona Explosif**, at £945, may not have the exclusivity of a custom built machine, but immediately offers that classy look and feel that we normally associate with hand-built offerings.

**The chassis**

Weighing 23.85lb, it was immediately obvious that the *Explosif* was more than just a bunch of superlight componentry. The frame is basically neatly TIG-welded **Tange Prestige** double butted tubes. The exact tube configurations are:

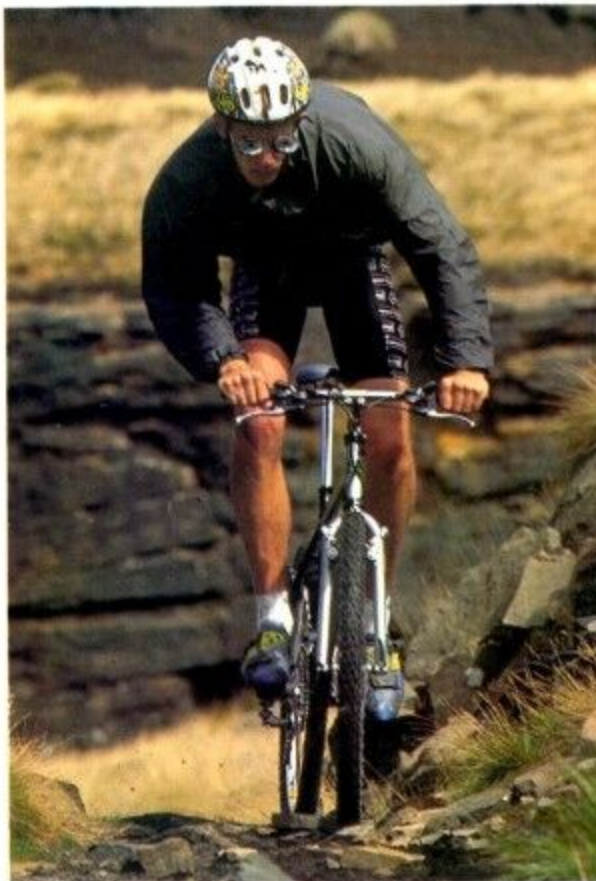
TOP TUBE	Ultimate Ultralight 0.8-0.5-0.8mm
DOWN TUBE	Ultimate Superstrong 0.8-0.5-0.8mm
SEAT TUBE	Concept 1.3-0.6-0.9mm
SEAT STAYS	Concept 0.7mm wall, 15.9-11.0mm overdiameter
CHAINSTAYS	Concept 0.8mm wall, 22.2-14.0mm overdiameter

In lay terms, the noticeable features were that the down tube was ribbed/corrugated, the seat tube ovalised and externally



motorbike mags are always on about how great getting your knee down is. Brant proves you can do it on a mountain bike. He is, of course, 0.1 seconds from the deck.

The new **Konas** show that you don't have to spend lots more cash on a custom built machine.



rack, mudguards and two bottles. Cable lines are particularly smooth, and there's an extremely neat guide unit at the top of the seat tube for the rear brake cable.

**The groupset**

**Kona** have mixed their componentry to obtain maximum benefit from both weight saving and practical function.

In practice, they have sacrificed some functional benefits to reduce weight and price. We have, to date, been so impressed with the new generation **Shimano** brakes that we are starting to question the use of **Dia Compe 897s**. The **Dia Compe** is a super-light brake system and we love the dinky *SS7* levers, simple to set up and adjust, and the *Explosif* has even specced *Kool Stop* blocks. However, the minimalist construction of the cantilever arms and the fact that they fit further away from the frame means the braking function is spongier than other brakes and more care is needed to set them up.

**Kona** have used the new **Sugino Mighty** crankset. It weighs less than *XTR* but isn't quite as smooth under pressured front gear changes. Although a 24 is specced, the *Explosif* had 26/36/46 rings, marketed as *Super Shifter Pro* with shaped ramps on the middle ring for assistance in small to middle ring changes. They work well, but not as well as *XTR*.

The rear mech is *XTR*, with eight-speed cassette and *XT* thumbshifters rather than *Rapidfire Plus*. The thumbshifters are for a seven-speed system but work perfectly on the eight, again not quite as smooth as full *XTR* but as reliable as any thumbshifters. The front mech is *Deore XT*.

**The wheels**

The 32-spoke **Mavic M231** rims are some of the best all-rounders and not too costly. Laced via 32-spokes to an *XTR* rear hub and *XT* front, they make a strong and light wheel set. The back wheel was built with double butted spokes.

Tyres fitted on the test bike were standard **Kona Propulsion** and **Equilibrium**. The spec sheet states **Kona A Drive** and **B Drive**, lighter Kevlar beaded tyres with an open and grippy tread pattern, which we haven't tried yet.

**The other bits**

The saddle and seatpin looked better than they worked. The *Flite*-style saddle scored no points for comfort, and the seatpin had to be overtightened to stop it readjusting over bumps.

**Kona** low profile pedals were fitted, but the new *Joel's Clips* weren't available. The pilot control area was well set up, with a fairly long **Kona Velocity** stem, lightweight bars, and comfortable **Kona Race Lite** hex grips.



The Sugino Mighty crankset weighs less than XTR, but shifting isn't as smooth.



Details like this neat guide unit for the rear brake add to the appeal of the *Explosif*.

**The ride**

We were all impressed. Brant thought it was the best non-suspension production bike he'd ever ridden. **Kona** have always had the knack of producing bikes that just feel right to hammer along on. A lot of bikes will be light in '93, but we doubt that many will weigh sub 24lb, cost sub £950, and still feel as robust and stable as the *Explosif*.

On climbs and descents, it just seems to fly. The steering is superb, shock absorption is excellent for a rigid bike and, on technical single track, it has the precise handling characteristics associated with the best race machines.

The mix of componentry works well together and, though we had reservations about the brakes, our negative comments are only relevant because of the excellence of the new **Shimano** ones.

At £945, or £1,065 with suspension, we would consider the *Explosif* excellent value for money.

**KONA EXPLOSIF**

Chassis quality	●●●●○
Chassis finish	●●●●○
Gears performance	●●●●○
Brakes performance	●●●●○
Wheels	●●●●○
Handling	●●●●○
Value for money	●●●●○
Overall	●●●●○

Superb frame; Ultralight spec; thoughtful component choice

Saddle