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By Colin Levitch
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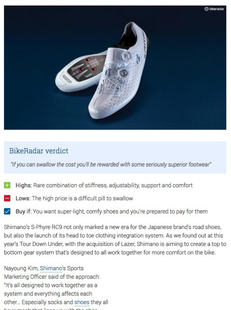
Shimano S-Phyre RC9 review

Shimano's lightest shoes yet

BikeRadar score ★★★★½ 4/5



BikeRadar verdict

"If you can swallow the cost you'll be rewarded with some seriously superior footwear"

Highs: Rare combination of stiffness, adjustability, support and comfort

Lows: The high price is a difficult pill to swallow

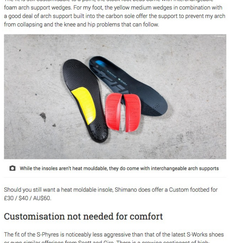
Buy if: You want super-light, comfy shoes and you're prepared to pay for them

Shimano's S-Phyre RC9 not only marked a new era for the Japanese brand's road shoes, but also the launch of its head to toe clothing integration system. As we found out at this year's 'Tour Down Under,' with the acquisition of Lazer, Shimano is aiming to create a top to bottom gear system that's designed to all work together for more comfort on the bike.

Nayoung Kim, Shimano's Sports Marketing Officer said of the approach: "It's all designed to work together as a system and everything affects each other... Especially socks and shoes they all have mesh that lines up with the shoe mesh and our gloves also have really good padding for our shifter."

We've had two testers riding in the S-Phyre's for the last couple of months in Colorado and Australia, and the brands latest pro-level shoe has impressed us no doubt.

Weight weenies delight



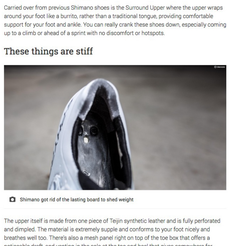
The S-Phyre's are the first time Shimano has used BOA dials on its top end shoes

Weighing in at 545g (Size 43) for the pair, the S-Phyre's are Shimano's lightest shoe to date, weighing about 30g less than the R321 in the same size. Shimano has never been known for its shoes being particularly feathery, especially considering similarly high-end offerings from brands like Specialized, Northwave, and Giro weigh roughly 100g less in the same size.

To reign in the numbers on the scale, Shimano dumped the lasting board on top of the carbon sole and done away with the Custom Fit heat mould panels and footbeds. The customizable panels not only added weight to the shoe but were made of a stiffer material and added cost too. Considering its a feature the majority of people never took advantage of (me included) in previous iterations of Shimano shoes I say good riddance.

Some may disagree with me, but with the shoe available in normal and wide lasts as well as half sizes from size 37-47, I think you'd struggle to find a foot that won't fit in these shoes comfortably.

The fit is still customisable to a point, the stock foot beds come with interchangeable foam arch support wedges. For my foot, the yellow medium wedges in combination with a good deal of arch support built into the carbon sole offer the support to prevent my arch from collapsing and the knee and hip problems that can follow.



While the insoles aren't heat mouldable, they do come with interchangeable arch supports

Should you still want a heat moldable insole, Shimano does offer a Custom footbed for £30 / $40 / AU$60.

Customisation not needed for comfort

The fit of the S-Phyres is noticeably less aggressive than that of the latest S-Works shoes or even similar offerings from Scott and Giro. There is a growing contingent of high-performance shoes that put such a premium on foot retention, and you almost need a shoehorn to get in and out of them. This makes for great performance but does skimp a bit on comfort and convenience.

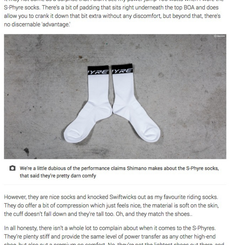
The heel is lined with silver one-way thread, but we still noticed a tiny bit of heel lift

With the RC9's, there is strong, supportive and efficient hold, but one that feels a bit closer to your favourite pair of running shoes rather than plug ski boots. That said, even with the silver sharkskin/cats tongue no-slip fabric lining the back of the shoe, I did notice the tiniest bit of heel lift while climbing seated and really driving my heel back around the bottom of the crank.

The S-Phyre is the first time Shimano has utilised BOA dials instead of ratchets or velcro. As always the IP1 dials offer quick and accurate adjustments as well a pop release for getting out of shoes quickly. The dials themselves are wisely placed as to avoid hotspots, and though the reverse orientation of the top dial is a little bit awkward to use at first, it also prevents it from digging into your foot.

Carried over from previous Shimano shoes is the Surround Upper where the upper wraps around your foot like a burrito, rather than a traditional tongue, providing comfortable support for your foot and ankle. You can really crank these shoes down, especially coming up to a climb or ahead of a sprint with no discomfort or hotspots.

These things are stiff

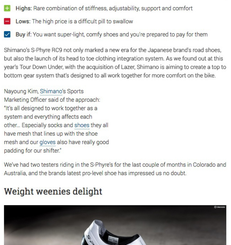


Shimano got rid of the lasting board to shed weight

The upper itself is made from one piece of Teijin synthetic leather and is fully perforated and dimpled. The material is extremely supple and conforms to your foot nicely and breathes well too. There's also a mesh panel right on top of the toe box that offers a noticeable draft, and venting in the sole at the toe and heel that gives somewhere for rainwater to drain.

Also carried over from its predecessor is the Dynalast sole. Shimano says it has optimised the toe spring angle — how much the toe curves up — by placing it slightly lower, supposedly reducing the tension on the plantar, calf and hamstring muscles. The flatter sole seems to mesh my feet quite well and provides for hours of comfort.

As you would expect from a flagship shoe, the S-Phyres rate 12 (the highest possible rating) on Shimano's stiffness scale and I couldn't detect any flex whatsoever. To ensure that no power is lost and further stabilise your heel there's also a hard plastic heel cap bonded directly onto the sole which offers a bit of additional support at the back of the shoe, and creates a very stable pedalling platform.



The super stiff carbon plate is surrounded by plastic which offers awesome protection

The hard plastic heel cap also serves a secondary purpose of protecting the carbon plate in combination with the matte finished plastic that encases the front ¾ of the sole. I really like this addition from Shimano and although it likely adds a bit of weight it looks good and greatly added to the durability of the shoes.

I'm always off my bike climbing onto things on the side of the road to snap a photo and as a result, the majority of my road shoes the soles are full of huge gashes and look like they've served as my neighbor's dog's favourite chew toy. On the S-Phyres the plastic bears the brunt of this abuse keeping the carbon plate safe and gash free.

This is also the first time Shimano has offered a replaceable heel

Also adding to the longevity of the shoes is a replaceable heel pad which is held on by two Philips head screws, something Shimano hasn't previously offered on its high-end road shoes.

Socks? Really?

Initially, we had a good laugh at the Shimano S-Phyre socks, and the brand claims they're "designed and constructed to promote efficient pedalling."

It may not come as a surprise that I didn't see my power jump 100 watts when I wore the S-Phyre socks. There's a bit of padding that sits right underneath the top BOA and does allow you to crank it down that bit extra without any discomfort, but beyond that, there's no discernable 'advantage.'

We're a little dubious of the performance claims Shimano makes about the S-Phyre socks, that said they're pretty darn comfy

However, they are nice socks and knocked Swiftwicks out as my favourite riding socks. They do offer a bit of compression which just feels nice, the material is soft on the skin, the cuff doesn't fall down and they're tall too. Oh, and they match the shoes.

In all honesty, there isn't a whole lot to complain about when it comes to the S-Phyres. They're plenty stiff and provide the same level of power transfer as any other high-end shoe, but also put a premium on comfort. No, they're not the lightest shoes out there, and maybe if the heel was a touch more aggressively shaped the millimetre of heel lift would disappear, but these are only a minor complaints.

The only real complaint I can muster is at the price. These are definitely not light on your wallet, but you get what you pay for, and the S-Phyre RC9's are some of the best shoes I've slipped my feet into.

Colin Levitch

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Originally from Denver, Colorado, Colin now resides in Sydney, Australia. Holding a media degree, Colin is focused on the adventure sport media world. Coming from a ski background, his former European pro father convinced him to try collegiate crit racing. Although his bright socks say full roadie, he enjoys the occasional mountain bike ride, too.

Age: 25
Weight: 70kg / 155lb
Chest: 90cm/35.4in
Height: 175cm / 5'9"
Waist: 81.3cm/32in
Discipline: Road, mountain
Preferred Terrain: Tarmac mountain climbs into snow-covered hills
Current Bikes: BMC TeamMachine SLR01, Trek Top Fuel 9
Dream Bike: Mosaic Cycles RT-1
Beer of Choice: New Belgium La Folie
Location: Sydney, Australia