

At 14.8kg the size L Escarpe VRS is the heaviest bike in test — the hefty KS E Ten dropper doesn't help at the weigh-in

Shimano SLX brakes with 180mm rotors front and rear offer unmatched braking control and reliability

The Marzocchi 350CR fork has Espresso-coated 35mm upper tubes and 150mm of travel

A knobbly 2.3in WTB Vigilante tyre up front increases cornering grip, while a lower profile 2.25in Trail Boss on the rear reduces rolling resistance

VITUS ESCARPE VRS

£1,999.99

SPECIFICATION

Frame 6061-T6 aluminium, 135mm travel
Shock RockShox Monarch RT
Fork Marzocchi 350CR, 150mm travel
Wheels Formula hubs, WTB STI 23 rims, WTB Vigilante/Trail boss 27.5x2.3/2.25in tyres
Drivetrain Shimano SLX chainset and shifters, Shimano XT r-mech, Deore f-mech
Brakes Shimano SLX 180mm
Components Vitus, KS E Ten 100mm seatpost
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 14.8kg (32.6lb)
Contact vitusbikes.com

GEOMETRY

Size tested L
Head angle 65.9°
Seat angle 68.3°
BB height 340mm
Chainstay 435mm
Front centre 749mm
Wheelbase 1,184mm
Down tube 703mm
Top tube 620mm
Reach 452mm

The Escarpe VRS is an all-new 650b trail bike from Vitus. It's the mid-priced model in a five-strong range, and with prices starting at £1,500 for the entry-level Escarpe and topping out at £3,599 for the Escarpe Pro, Vitus has its sights set squarely on the seasoned trail rider. There are also three 29er versions of the new Escarpe (find out how Danny got on with the Escarpe 290 Pro on page 33).

All 650b models share the same frame and all have more travel up front than on the rear. The new frame marks a turning point for Vitus as, along with the Sommet enduro bike, it's been designed in-house from the ground up. And it's stacked with features, including a tapered head tube for increased steering precision, a kinked top tube for improved standover clearance and one of our favourites is the frame-cum-cable-protector under the down tube.

SUSPENSION

Vitus still uses its V-Link four-bar suspension design on the Escarpe, but the new configuration sees the shock mounted to an extension of the chainstays, rather than being anchored directly to the front triangle. This means that the bottom of the shock actually moves forward and down as the suspension compresses and this gives Vitus more control over the progression of the suspension. It's a similar concept to Trek's Full Floater design and thankfully the rear suspension on the 650b Vitus isn't too linear, and doesn't rip through its 135mm travel in a heartbeat. It pedals efficiently too, and we never felt the need to use the threshold setting on the Monarch RT shock.

Still, it's nice to know it's there for blasting up fire road climbs.

It's been more than five years since we tested a bike with a Marzocchi fork and it's great to have the Italian brand back in the mix. With 35mm upper tubes the Marzocchi 350CR is by far the stiffest fork in test. It's coil sprung with air preload and it's got external compression and rebound adjustment, too. We found the stock spring rate to be ideal for riders around 80kg but you need to run the rebound quite fast, otherwise the fork packs down.

COMPONENTS

Vitus has really nailed the sizing on the new Escarpe, where the 60mm stem matches the reach on the size large perfectly. We'd have preferred a wider bar than 740mm though. And much as we like that the Escarpe VRS comes with a dropper post fitted as standard, the 100mm drop on the KS E Ten simply isn't enough on such a capable bike. Vitus obviously recognises this, which is why the bike still comes with a quick-release seatpost collar for those "are we really going down there?" moments.

The WTB Vigilante/Trail Boss tyre combination is the best in test and while they may not be our first choice in every given situation, they are great all-rounders on a £2K bike.

PERFORMANCE

Even with the mismatched travel front and rear, the Vitus felt very well balanced. The burly 150mm travel Marzocchi fork definitely gave it an edge over the more spindly forks in the test, and swapping between all four bikes at the Forest of Dean really brought

home the extra confidence a stiffer fork provides when diving into rooty chutes and steep technical terrain. OK, the damping doesn't match that of the RockShox Sektor, nor is it as plush, but the Marzocchi is the only fork in this test that's actually burly enough for a capable 650b trail bike.

The 135mm travel V-link rear suspension had no problems whatsoever keeping up with the fork, but the back of the bike felt a little flexy when smashing high-speed corners or cutting across off-camber compressions. It's by no means a noodle, but there's not much meat around the rear dropouts, and the chainstay pivots are pretty small.

VERDICT

The guys at Vitus have done a great job of transforming the Escarpe VRS from an off-the-peg frame with good parts into a bespoke trail bike. Best of all, the quantum leap in frame quality and performance hasn't eroded the killer spec one bit.

The Marzocchi fork definitely gives the Vitus a more aggressive attitude than the other bikes in this test, but it also served to highlight some flex in the rear end. Not really what we'd expect given that the Vitus Escarpe VRS is almost 1kg heavier than the Canyon.

8



LIKES
The extra stiffness of the Marzocchi fork

DISLIKES
The frame could be lighter and stiffer



RockShox Monarch floats between the upper link and chainstay



Marzocchi 350CR with stout 35mm legs



Shimano XT: reliability amid a sea of shred