



ROAD TEST

Esker Japhy

words by CAROLYNE WHELAN



FRAME
Custom-drawn, tapered, seamless, quadruple-butted, heat-treated 4130 chromoly. Electrophoretic deposition coating inside and out for rust protection.

TIRES
Schwalbe Nobby Nic 29 x 2.6in.

HEADSET
Wolf Tooth Components

DRIVETRAIN
SRAM GX Eagle

ESKER JAPHY

- GENERAL**
- **BEST USES:** Mountain, off-road touring
 - **PRICE:** \$3,000
 - **WEIGHT:** 30 lbs. as tested
 - **AVAILABLE SIZES:** S1, S2, S3, S4, S5
 - **SIZE TESTED:** S1

COMPONENTS

- **FORK:** Marzocchi Z2 29/120
- **HANDLEBAR:** Race Face Turbine 35 x 780mm
- **STEM:** Race Face Aeffect R 50mm
- **BRAKES:** Shimano SLX 4-piston, hydraulic disc
- **ROTORS:** Shimano RT66, 180mm
- **BOTTOM BRACKET:** Threaded 73mm English

- **CRANKSET:** SRAM GX 170mm
- **DROPPER/LEVER:** SDG Tellis/SDG Lever, S1: 31.6mm x 150mm
- **SADDLE:** SDG Custom Esker BA3
- **WHEELS:** Stans Flow S2 Comp 29
- **THRU-AXLE:** Boost 148 / 174mm / M12x1.75in.

NOTABLE GEOMETRY

- **STACK:** 600mm
- **REACH:** 420mm
- **HEAD TUBE LENGTH:** 95mm
- **BOTTOM BRACKET DROP:** 65mm
- **WHEELBASE:** 1039mm
- **STANDOVER HEIGHT (0% SAG):** 735mm

► When I was first building up the Japhy in my garage, I snapped a photo of my dog through the frame triangle and sent it to a friend. He immediately responded, “Are you testing a Japhy? You lucky duck.” A longtime industry guy, he could tell that bike anywhere, he said, even with only a glimpse at the sparkly red paint and the sleek, thin tubing that goes against many modern builds seen in shops today. The next day, I stepped out of the Adventure Cycling office to grab lunch and saw some coworkers surrounding the bike. “Are you testing this? Wow, what a gorgeous bike,” they said wistfully. I could go on about how stunning this bike is, but you can see it in the photo, and this is a bike review, not a beauty pageant (it would probably win). How does the Japhy actually ride? Surprisingly well, and that’s saying something for a bike I had high expectations for. Esker has a strong backbone in the bike industry, with cofounder and CEO Tim Krueger working for a number of years at Quality Bicycle Products (QBP) — the company that owns All-City, Salsa, Surly, Teravail, and other reputable brands — before starting Advocate Cycles and now Esker. Engineer and cofounder Anders Broste also spent much of his career working at companies like QBP helping design frames before joining forces with Tim.

The idea behind the Japhy is a hardtail bike that can thread the needle between being comfortable and sturdy enough for long hauls, whether that is climbing up and down mountains or going on a loaded-up backcountry tour, while also being punchy enough to be fun

riding your local trails. I’m located in Montana, so all those rides are essentially the same thing for me. This bike came checking all the boxes for me and with a reputation to back it up, so I put it to the test riding every trail I know, fully loaded, and riding there from my house rather than driving to a trailhead, no matter how far away. Surprisingly, even riding up the long, paved climb to one of the trail networks that starts mid-mountain after the residential area ends, I felt strong and — important to note — not annoyed at having ridden knobby tires up 20 miles of pavement. This is due to the 29-inch wheels as well as the 495mm axle-to-crown dimension that, when the fork is locked out, makes it easy to forget you’re on a mountain bike. Just pump up the tires a bit and lock out the fork, ride to the trailhead, let out some air before hitting the dirt and unlock the fork, and you’re good to go.

The trails in Montana, at least the ones I like to ride, are long, twisty grinds up a mountain, followed by a ride along a saddle (a.k.a., the snack spot) and a much-deserved, equally twisty descent. It’s easy for me to get lost, then unlost, then momentarily lost again during the course of a ride because the terrain is beautiful and twisty and my mind wanders. The Japhy handled it all with grace, even all loaded up with extra layers for the descent and an overly complicated lunch setup with a hammock to chill out and figure out where all those winding thoughts led me. While it wasn’t the same sort of playful, kid-like exuberance of the Monē, which was in my stable at the same time, I felt totally in control in the

[Japhy’s eponym] takes readers on a musical quest through the woods, bouncing around to an uncanny and unmistakable beat with precision and playfulness.

best way. I was Calvin and the Japhy was my trusted, logical, but adventurous companion Hobbes who seemed too good to be real. And yet here we were, wrenching up a trail I’d only ever ridden down before, never needing to so much as put my foot down, gravity making sense like some childlike epiphany. The Schwalbe Nobby Nic tires have a wide tread pattern with large gaps between the blocks, which means the muddy sections of thawing snow I rode through cleared quickly from the tires and didn’t slow me down or cause a lack of traction. I also had necessary side traction for climbing up those switchbacks and plenty of forward traction, which came in handy while bombing down the mountain on a loaded bike, especially when paired with the stopping power of the Shimano SLX brakes and 180mm rotors. The Stans Flow S2 wheels are fine. They are round, they held the tires in place, and they are designed to be durable enough to withstand eMTB riding. They’re also heavy. I’m no weight weenie — if I was, I wouldn’t be riding up a mountain with a hammock, sleeping set, and a framebag full of snacks (just in case) — but with a front wheel weighing roughly 2.2 pounds and a rear wheel weighing over 2.5 pounds, it is a bit noticeable. One of the many upgrades available for this bike even at this build level is the option to upgrade to Industry Nine wheels at a few different price points, which would be a strong consideration for me if I was in the market for a new bike.

I was impressed with the performance of the GX Eagle 12-speed groupset. It’s the lowest-tier SRAM groupset to use the XD freehub body,



and as much as I hate the proprietary nature of bike components, it is really apparent when pieces are designed specifically to work together. It was a marvelously smooth bike to both pedal and to shift, no matter what terrible finesse I churned out as I cranked the bike up terrain that seemed to regularly turn a bend just to show me a sudden increase in pitch. This was also helped by the gracious 10–52T gear range that always presented me with the right gear no matter what mountain I was ascending, descending, or riding away from. The GX cranks were 170mm, which is the length for all builds regardless of frame size and, matched with a 65mm bottom bracket drop, offered a good blend of clearance and stability. Speaking of build, the Race Face Aeffect R stem on the S1 (smallest size they make) tested is a petite 50mm, which felt perfect for my short reach.

A benefit of having bike testing as a component of my career is that I don't have to make as many terrible decisions like "what bike is the best bike for me and all the things I want to do on a bike" because I have the blessed opportunity to test so many styles. Most people don't have that sincere luxury, and the cost of bikes seems to be going up far faster than anyone's salaries. Esker seemed to really take those conundrums to heart with the Japhy. The reasoning behind the aforementioned axle-to-crown spec isn't simply for riding to the trail; it also means you can easily swap out the suspension fork for a rigid without compromising geometry. This geometry decision by Esker was guided not just by the idea of the Japhy being a bike that can go the long haul, but it was also a philosophical decision around what kind of riding the bike can do. Additionally, the

portage dropout allows you to change the drivetrain of the Japhy more easily, from adjustments and upgrades to turning it into a singlespeed. Looking for more adjustability? You can buy the bike as a frameset for \$1,000 and build it up as your dream bike. If you'd like to start with a complete bike and just rest easy knowing you *could* switch parts out to make a fully rigid singlespeed or other Frankenstein monster, the build I tested, the GX Complete, is a damn fine bike for \$3,000. There are additional upgrades available, from jumping to the next build level — XT Complete — which runs \$4,000, or adding an upgrade to fork, wheels, or adding a Wolf Tooth Components upgrade package (headset, stainless steel bearings, seatpost collar, grips, rear axle, and multitool), which all have piecemeal pricing. If you are feeling extra special, you can upgrade to a titanium frame, starting at \$2,500 for the frame (\$4,500 for the build tested). The steel frames are built in Taichung, Taiwan, and the titanium frames are built in Beijing, China, which answered my question of how they managed to sell a titanium bike at such a low cost compared to competitors. While the frames are welded overseas, all bikes are assembled in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Esker does offer payment plans if putting that all on a credit card isn't a reasonable option.

For me, I was perfectly happy with my base model Japhy. On writing this review, I had to check the bike multiple times to make sure, yes, this was the lower-priced model, because it felt at all points like a top-tier build. Would it be nice to upgrade to the nicer wheels, or the XT group, or heck, one of those downright dreamy titanium frames? Of course, but Esker gave us two main price points for builds, and I



think this lower-tiered model is a solid ride with thoughtful components that keep the price reasonable by current bike standards. I don't consider myself a jaded person by any means, but I admit to being surprised by all those admirers checking out my bike upon its unboxing. After having the opportunity to ride it for an extended riding season, I understand the hype. It makes sense the Japhy was named in a roundabout way after the poet Gary Snyder, Japhy being for Japhy Ryder, Kerouac's character based off Snyder in *Dharma Bums*. Snyder (one of my favorites) is a poet known for writing about nature. But he isn't (just) a nature writer; he takes readers on a musical quest through the woods, bouncing around to an uncanny and unmistakable beat with precision and playfulness, whether relating a coyote to an unkempt father we want to keep from our friends or relating fourth century Chinese Buddhism to a lesson on axe throwing.

You know what? I think you should get the upgrades to the lighter components. Save the weight. Ride past the library on your way out of town and pick up a copy of *Turtle Island* or *Axe Handles* (or heck, grab 'em both) and throw them in your front bag or backpack on your way out of town. At some point, the sun will be hot and you'll want a snack. This will be a perfect time to set up that hammock, eat a sandwich, and really understand what this bike is all about. 🍷

Carolyn Whelan is the Editor-in-Chief of Adventure Cyclist.

