

EASTON'S ADVENTURE GAME

The AX- and FOX-equipped Niner RLT

The Easton/FOX-equipped Niner carbon RLT9 is a mixed-terrain warhorse bred for ultra-endurance battles. As the RLT name suggests, it demands the Road Less Traveled. As built, our RLT is the Winston Churchill of gravel rigs; it's robust, pugnacious and driven by purpose. The Easton and FOX components, though, are what distinguish this thoroughbred in a rapidly growing field of adventure bikes.

No longer is adventure the sole provenance of that wildly bearded rara avis who bike-packs from Patagonia to Anchorage, carrying little more than a serape and a tattered copy of "The Monkey Wrench Gang." Adventure has gone mainstream. Thanks to events like the *Peloton* Gravel Mob, Lost & Found and Dirty Kanza, the definition of what it means to have an epic day in the saddle has been shattered.

This bike meets that demand headlong. Niner's RLT line has been there from the start, pushing the launch and growth of the gravel market it helped define. Within one ride it became apparent that this rig was designed for maintaining rider comfort during extended outings. The relaxed frame position keeps the chest open to improve breathing efficiency. It also helps mitigate the inevitable neck pain that comes from pedaling long hours over harsh, jarring terrain.

The frame is indeed a plush ride, but it's the components that make the difference. Easton outfitted this bike with its AX adventure series parts. From a design perspective, the company got the AX series absolutely right. Easton's line of road components has always managed a clean elegance and that same understated beauty applies here. This new AX series offers both carbon and alloy options.

Our test bike arrived with a combination of each: EC70AX bars, EC70stem, EC90 Zero seat post and EA70AX alloy wheels. It also has Easton's new EC90SL Cinch crankset with a built-in spindle-based power meter for watt-addicted adventurers. The most attention-grabbing feature on this is the FOX AX adventure gravel suspension fork, which gives it a "zombie apocalypse escape vehicle" vibe. Based on a repurposed 100mm 27.5 MTB fork, this is what FOX calls an Open Project—basically a beta test you can get your





hands on. With a 2.9-pound fork, the lightweight Easton bits are very welcome when slinging the bike over your shoulder to amble around sections of fallen trail or rocky creek beds.

Eye-catching aesthetics are great, but functionality is the sine qua non of adventure components. Over several rides, the Easton AX and FOX components prove themselves trustworthy accomplices. Even before clipping in, our Wahoo Elemnt immediately found the Cinch power meter. The two remained seamlessly paired no matter where the trail took us. Not a single signal drop or hiccup. This will comfort those riders who prefer to plot their outings to the precise kilojoule. Our cranks came with a 50/34 set-up, which worked fine as long as the path stayed flat or rolling. A 1x11 arrangement, however, would have better handled the steep and long dirt climbs we have in our Southern California testing grounds. The ease of swapping chainrings with Easton's new Cinch system would make the 1x11 decision even easier.

We tested the RLT's climbing bona fides on Mount Lukens, a 7-mile dirt trail to the highest point in the City of Los Angeles. Although we willingly concede it may have been the lackluster engine riding it, the heft of the Fox fork was undeniable while climbing even when set "firm"—despite the crisp power transfer of the EC90SL cranks and the Niner RLT's rear end. But the bike came alive as the climb crested and transitioned into a swooping, narrow descent.

The Fox AX fork immediately damped the otherwise sun-killed washboard surface, earning the price paid on the ascent. Fully opened, the fork has 40mm of travel. That's

just enough to avert a trip to the dentist from all the usual teeth chattering. Easton's EC70 AX bars added confidence to the descent. Coming in Easton's new Maximum Contact Drop shape with just enough flare—16 degrees—for serious stability, while still keeping the brakes in close range. The 44cm bars we tested did require a bit of extra vigilance when encroaching trail brush was an issue, but the position they offer made precise control easy. The EA70AX wheels, with an ultra-wide 24mm internal width, gave the Schwalbe G-One tires a massive footprint, adding even more confidence to the build in sketchy conditions.

If you're planning long, rolling endurance escapes, this RLT is an outstanding choice. If your home turf leans more toward steep, endless climbs, the FOX fork may not be the right choice. Regardless, Easton's line of AX components will improve any adventure bikes looks, comfort, durability and reliability. **P**

Words: Bryan "Bruno" Yates



EASTON AX SERIES eastoncycling.com

EC70 AX bar: 220g (42cm), 80mm reach, 120mm drop, 16-degree flare; \$215. **EC70SL stem:** 140g (100mm), 60-130mm, +/-6 degrees; \$140. **EC90 Zero seat post:** 200g (31.6 x 400mm), 27.2/30.9/31.6mm, 0mm offset, 300/400mm length; \$210. **EC90SL cranks** with Cinch Power Meter: 655g 172.5mm (w/Power Meter) BLE/Ant+, 30mm spindle \$950, \$75-\$95 (1x rings), \$150 (2x), \$50 (bottom bracket). **EA70 AX disc wheels:** 1670g (650b), 1760g (700c tested). 24mm internal width, 27.5mm external width; \$600.

FOX AX SUSPENSION FORK ridefox.com

1360g, 40mm of travel, 650b/700c compatible, FLOAT EVOL Air spring, FIT 4 damper with three settings; \$819.