

# Formula Thirty Five Fork

**I**talian brand formula is best known for their brakes, but a year or so ago they released their first suspension fork; the Thirty Three. It was a lightweight cross-country model offering 100-120mm of travel but it was only made to suit 26 and 27.5-inch wheels. This struck us as odd when the XC market is dominated by 29ers.

The suspension market is very competitive with many brands vying for a spot, so a product really needs to offer something special to get noticed. While the Thirty Three continues to fly stealthily under the radar, Formula has added another model to their line-up—the Thirty Five. This new fork is pitched at the all-mountain and long travel trail bike market, and Formula lists an impressively low claimed weight that has really drawn some attention to their new offering.

The name refers to the size of the inner legs (stanchion tubes), which are 35mm in diameter. That's pretty big; equal to the RockShox Pike and a fraction bigger than the Fox 34. It also has plenty of travel to suit all the new generation long travel trail and 'enduro' bikes. In the 27.5 variant it offers up to 160mm of travel while the 29er option has up to 140mm. The fork is supplied with a series of 10mm and 15mm spacers that let you customise the travel—both 29er and 27.5 can be dropped to just 100mm travel if required.

Big-legged long travel 27.5 forks are nothing new but the 1,720g (1,775g including thru-axle) weight has people talking. Of course claimed weights and reality are often two different things, so first up we put it on the scales. With a 175mm steerer it came in at 1,710g and the thru-axle adds 51g. That makes the Thirty Five 78g lighter than a Pike and 100g less once you factor in the lighter bolt-up Formula thru-axle (you need a 5mm allen key to remove the wheel while the Pike uses a tool-free thru-axle).

What strikes you first is the bizarre looking levers and dials on the crown—they look more like watch internals than regular damper adjusters. The prominent gold lever is the lockout while the small 2.5mm allen key next to it lets you adjust the lockout threshold; it can be anything from a really solid lock to a firm platform that still moves for mid-sized bumps. The blue thumbwheel is

a detented low speed compression adjuster (there's around 12 clicks from full soft to firm). You'll find the rebound dial underneath the fork and the air spring is in the left leg; it's a single air chamber assembly with a coil negative spring. Like many top-tier forks, Formula employs a self-contained cartridge that ensures consistent damper performance.

## HOT BUTTERED TEFLON

As soon as you push down on the Thirty Five you realise that there's a lot more going on than just impressive performance whilst hanging on the scales. The initial suppleness of this fork is amazing—in this regard it clearly eclipses the best offerings from the better-known brands. There's next to no resistance, so the fork is very 'alive' and ready to suck up the tiniest of trail irregularity.

This trait is taken a step further by the extra light high-speed compression damping, which again allows the fork to absorb impacts without transferring harshness through to the rider. The blue low speed compression dial offers a broad adjustment range that you can really feel (although it takes a number of clicks before it kicks in). Again it feels far more active than its competitors; this is potentially a real bonus for bantamweight riders who don't appreciate a fork that's stifled by heavy compression damping. Adding extra low speed compression makes the fork sufficiently dive-resistant for steeper trails without introducing a lot of harshness on sharper impacts. Heavier riders may need to wind the compression dial most of the way in but it does firm up noticeably in the last couple of clicks (although we also found the damper developed a knocking noise in its firmest settings).

The Thirty Five also moves around a lot when standing on the pedals. Again, winding up the compression will lessen this movement but it will also dull the lively suspension feel—the blue compression dial is also a bit too small for easy on-the-fly adjustment. As a result, hard out of the saddle climbs may have you reaching for the lockout/threshold lever more than with a less active fork (Formula does offer a remote lockout lever if you're into them).

Our fork was set to offer 160mm travel but we never quite used the full amount. With a 65kg rider on board we had 45-50psi in the air spring (25% sag). At this pressure, the negative spring would make the fork sit down a little in its travel, so we only had 155mm of stanchion showing. In addition to this, we were never able to use the final 5-7mm of suspension travel.

For the most part the air spring felt quite linear but it ramps up in the final part, stopping you from utilising the final few millimetres. In practice we were using 150mm of travel, not the full 160mm.

Riders who are in the 80-90kg area will have the full 160mm of inner leg showing (as they'll have higher pressures in the main spring to compress the negative spring), but the progressiveness just before bottom-out still limits the total available travel. Apparently




Formula makes a shorter piston rod that's designed for a different fork. Fitting one to the Thirty Five would enlarge the air chamber, making the spring more linear and able to use all of its travel. You could consider this custom modification if you have similar problems with utilising full travel.

## PRIZE PLUSHNESS

While not achieving the advertised travel isn't ideal, we didn't care in the slightest once on the trail, as the Thirty Five feels simply awesome. It's amazingly plush and the harshness of the trail just disappears, leaving you to guide the bike right where you want it. It's comparable in stiffness to the RockShox Pike and Fox 34, so the steering accuracy is great. Bigger hits are dispatched in a controlled manner too—it really feels like there's more than the claimed travel on tap, not less.

The \$1,449 asking price puts it right up there with its main competitors (more than a Pike but a bit less than a Fox 34) but it more than holds its own in pure performance. With a total weight that compares with many 32mm stanchion forks, it has serious potential for riders who want a burly and stiff shorter travel fork—just pop in some travel reducing spacers.

One thing is for sure; Formula isn't just making up the numbers with this fork. It's a serious contender in the lightweight long travel trail bike market and somehow I feel reluctant to peel it off my bike—mucho bellissimo Formula! 

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