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Trail Test: Montague Swissbike X-90 26" Folding MTB

Thursday 10th June 2010 - John Hawkins

"You're reviewing a WHAT?!"
"Does it have little wheels?"
"I suppose it flexes a lot in the middle?"
"A folding mountain bike?"



These were just some of the amused and bemused responses I got from fellow riders a couple of weeks ago at a trail advocacy meeting at the local pub, when I mentioned I was trialling a folding mountain bike. And that's hardly surprising. The word "folding" usually conjures up images of 20" wheels, heavy hinge fittings, flexy frames with no top tube, and low end transmission and brakes. Definitely not something you'd choose to ride rough in the bush or use as a substitute for your race bike.

This Montague Swissbike X-90 fits none of these preconceptions. It is a serious attempt to engineer a product as capable as a regular bike, which can also fold and fit inside car boot, or be stashed in a bag and carried on board as luggage in a bus or a plane. After my testing I was pleased to find out that it really does deliver on all accounts.

The Bike

The first thing that strikes you about the bike is the absence of a downtube connecting the steerer (headset) to the bottom bracket and the large, broad-sided oval section top tube. There is a very strong resemblance to the Klein Mantra suspension bike of old. But this bike is not a refugee from the nineties.

Nor is it a midget. No little 20" pothole- and tree root-catching wheels to be seen here. While it still encompasses a folding frame, it is otherwise a full-size 26" mountain bike.

Instead of interrupting one of the structural frame members with a fragile hinge, the Montague uses a tube-within-a-tube pivoting system in the seat tube. With the deep section top tube, the joint to the seat tube is strong and rigid. Instead of a traditional downtube, the rear triangle becomes integral in maintaining frame strength. The rear triangle seat stays connect with the seat tube and top tube, a faux downtube from the top tube connects with the seat stays and bottom bracket. This forms a strong structural triangle for the quick-change anchor mechanism to engage with and lock the frame into alignment.

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Any mountain bike that boasts Avid Elixir R brakes, Truvativ Stylo cranks, SRAM X-0 shifting, and WTB Dual Duty rims is going to be tough and light. The Montague Swissbike X-90 doesn't disappoint in this area. The weight was a pleasant surprise, in the region of 13kg, depending on your chosen tyres. While giving away a good couple of kilos to a non-folding hardtail of similar spec, I thought this was still good given the unique frame and overall spec.

One surprise was the inclusion of a suspension seat post, not something you would normally expect on a X-0 equipped bike. A few hundred grams could easily be shaved by substituting a standard alloy or carbon seatpost. Up front is a Rockshox Recon 351 U-Turn coil fork with travel adjustable from 85-130mm, motion control and adjustable compression and rebound damping. A long 120mm Ritchey stem is matched to relatively narrow 580mm XC flat bars.

Two frame size options are available, 18" and 20". My test bike was the 20". The Montague's geometry is notable for its relatively slack head and seat tube angles. Most cross-country hardtails have a head angle around the 71 or 70 degree mark. The head angle on the Montague was a lot more relaxed than this, approximately 68 degrees. This normally translates to good stability at speed and good descending, at the expense of slow speed handling.



The Ride

Initially, I was quite tentative. The bars at 580mm are quite a lot narrower than I'm used to, and the top tube length was also on the short side for my 6'1", leaving me feeling a little cramped despite this frame being the larger of the two sizes on offer from Montague. With the narrow-ish 26x2.0 tubed Maxxis Flyweight tyres, I was somewhat reserved considering with the relatively low tread height and the wet conditions on my first ride.

However, the more I rode this bike the more I began to enjoy myself. The tyres handled the conditions confidently, subject to the usual rules of staying off wet roots, not pushing your luck on greasy timber boardwalks, and avoiding the mud wherever possible.

At speed, the descending was stable and confident. The narrow bars compensated somewhat for the relaxed geometry so the bike was far more flickable than expected from the slack steering angle. It also meant fitting into the gaps between the trees and bridge handrails was easier. The short top tube was actually an asset when the trail pointed down, giving the bike great technical descending ability over the tricky roll-downs on my local trail. The Montague really seemed to carve on the turns, and the bike felt really sound, firm, and well planted. At no time did I notice that I was riding a "folding" bike – it seemed every bit as solid as my regular hardtail.



Slow speed handling on descents and pinch climbs is not the bike's strongest point. With the slack head angle giving a lot of axle trail on the front, the rider's body weight can have an influence on where the bike steers when going slow. On a couple of occasions, a trail contour or obstacle overpowered my control of the narrow bars, and I needed to quickly pull hard on the anchors to avoid shoulder charging the trailside tree. The long 120mm stem helps, but wider bars such as those more commonly found on all-mountain bikes in the region of 685mm would be a much better match for the steering angle, and be a big help to keeping the front wheel pointed correctly. Similarly, on steep loose climbs, it was sometimes difficult to maintain a line.

Braking was excellent, requiring only the index finger to pull up my 90kg riding weight with ease. Shifting was reliable and smooth despite being sprayed with mud and wet Sydney sand for the entire duration of test riding. At times there were some horrible noises coming from the sand in the transmission but it never once skipped a gear or phantom shifted. While the noises were nothing a trip through the chain cleaner won't fix, riding in these conditions isn't doing your drivetrain a favour.

The wheels felt strong and stiff, easily handling the beating I gave them over rough rock gardens despite the relatively low volume rubber. The suspension seat post was welcome on these trail sections! It did lose its suspension during the first wet ride from grit entering the slide mechanism, but came good on the next outing. Some cable ties around the seatpost boot ends would help keep the nasties out.



The Fold

Folding this bike and reassembling it is really simple, and folding can be completed in about 20 seconds, less with practice (see the photos below). A neat nylon carry bag is available, and it has a separate pocket for the front wheel to avoid rubbing on the paint.

The front quick change lever is a nice touch. It has a syringe-style spring loaded collar to keep it in place when the lever is open so that safety standards are met. However, a pull with middle and index fingers moves it out of the way so that the front wheel can be removed one-handed without having to unwind the nut end of the skewer.



The Verdict

This bike is no toy. It has many admirable qualities, not least of which is its confident descending ability. With wider handlebars it will be an excellent all round hardtail.

A few more frame size options would be welcome. The larger 20" model was probably as short as I'd want to go for a bloke my size. The stiffness and strength of the frame felt great, and while not the lightest hardtail out there at its price point, it is no brick.

It easily folds up and is opened out again just as quickly. It is refreshing to find a full-size bike with this capability, negating the need to make the handling, performance and safety sacrifices normally associated with smaller wheels.

It will especially suit the rider whose work requires travel and who wants to enjoy the local trails while away. The bike easily fits in the boot of a family sedan, and can be carried on to buses without drama, although in NSW at least you may want to cover over the "Swissbike" branding on the bag so as not to tip off the driver. It is perhaps a little large for carry-on aircraft luggage, but a number of the full-service airlines will turn a blind eye if you've only got the one bag.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the Montague – it certainly exceeded my

expectations.

The Montague is not pretending to be a heavy duty downhill bike or the right bike for the competitive cross country racer. If you don't want the hassle of bike racks or messing up the upholstery in the company or family car, but want something that is still fully trail capable and convenient, the Montague Swissbike X-90 may be just for you.

Highlights

- Great descender
- Excellent spec, solid frame design
- Take-it-anywhere convenience of a folding bike
- Lighter than expected

Lowlights

- Needs wider bars
- Needs greater choice of frame sizes

Keep your eyes open, Montague Swissbike dealers will be announced soon. If you can't wait, or have a trade enquiry, contact [Eureka Brands](#) or visit the Australian website: www.montaguebikes.com.au

Folding the Montague SwissBike X90



Step 1: Your bike is ready to fold away



Step 2: Release the lever that fastens the rear triangle



Step 3: Twist the rear triangle around



Step 4: Remove the front wheel



Step 4: Detail - removing the front wheel - once handed with the springed skewer



Step 5: Complete - ready for the car boot or the nylon bike bag.

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