

THE FOLDING BIKE GOES COOL

Once the pocket protector of the cycling world, these adaptable rides have evolved into a stylish mode of transport

BY MICHAEL HSU

THE APPEAL OF FOLDING BIKES goes beyond the fact that they're easy to transport and store. One minute, these bikes are cruising down the street. The next, they've contorted into an impossibly tight space with a bit of mechanical sleight of hand that can be as mesmerizing as seeing Optimus Prime turn into an 18-wheeler.

Even despite, or maybe because of, their acrobatic prowess, owning one has always had a certain nerdiness attached to it. Like a calculator watch, they're just too convenient to be fashionable. And because early folding bikes were created by engineers rather than designers, many have been pretty clunky looking.

But folding bikes are now mainstream (many of the major bike manufacturers offer at least one model). Some have co-opted the style of their more respected full-sized brethren. Others, like the classic Brompton, have become icons themselves.

With a dizzying number of folding bikes to choose from, one size does not fit all. For our lineup, we elimi-

nated the smallest (you know, anything a clown might ride). Their tiny wheels can make the bike's handling disconcertingly hyper-responsive (a slight turn of your handlebars will send you careening over the curb). At the other end of the spectrum, we included bikes that may be too big to store in a studio apartment but break down easily for travel—perfect for a drive, or even a flight.

Not surprisingly, a folding bike will cost more than a similarly outfitted nonfolder. They have more moving parts and are subject to greater stress because of their diminutive size, so build quality is crucial. And although folding bikes will have fewer speeds than you may be used to, the stripped down configuration is actually better suited for relatively flat urban environments. For relatively flat cities, a three-speed bike will do; those in hillier terrains may want to opt for six.

Live in a tiny apartment? Need to ride the train for part of your commute? Can't keep your bike on the street because you're surrounded by KGB-trained bike thieves? However specific your needs may be, a folding bike may be the most practical—and now—most elegant solution.



Freeman Transport Gravel



RUGGED COMMUTER

Montague Crosstown For the Marines, Montague designed a folding bike that could be dropped out of a helicopter by parachute. Its offering for the urban commuter is just slightly less rugged. The Crosstown is a seven-speed, full-size bike that folds down to 36" x 36" once you pop off the front tire—too big to bring on the subway but small enough to stash in your car's trunk. Like its military-grade counterpart, it uses a proprietary folding system that doesn't cut into or compromise the bike's frame, so ride it as hard as you want. Features that commuters get but the marines did not: a double-bar frame that better absorbs shocks, plus a redesigned mechanism that's faster and easier to fold. \$660 (Optional folding pedals \$35), montaguebikes.com

CLASSIC EASE

Dahon Smooth Hound As the world's biggest folding-bike manufacturer, Dahon makes some of the fastest on the market (yes, people race them). As the name of this bike suggests, however, Smooth Hound is not one of them. The joys of this casual 16-speed cruiser are in its details: a handmade Brooks leather saddle, moustache handlebars wrapped in cork tape, a pump that stows inside the seat post and a fetching midnight blue finish. Collapsing the Smooth Hound requires the half turn of an Allen wrench. The hinges, however, are virtually invisible, which makes it indistinguishable from a standard bike. In fact, the only difference is that this one fits perfectly in the trunk of a Jag or Bentley. \$989, dahon.com



BESPOKE TRAVELER



Freeman Transport Gravel Racer This is the beautiful bike you'll ever put through checked Disassembled, this full-sized, commuter skips handsome waxed canvas bag (above) that just the size restrictions of most airlines. Taking it apart requires one tool and a little elbow grease; the experienced can blaze through it in about minutes. As evident from its styling, the Gravel Racer is a bespoke product. Each one is made to measure, guaranteed for life. The finish is meant to evolve; expect it to patina further with time. \$1,245, freemantransport.com

STREET WHEELS

Puma Pico With a Pico, you get the street cred of a BMX (small frame, sloping top tube) with the gentility of an upright ride (thanks to the high handlebars). The style-conscious Danish bike company Blomberg, which designed the Pico, equipped it to withstand the abuse of the city, too: the bike's tires are chunky; its frame thickens where it needs to; and its folding mechanism is modest. The emphasis here is on ease-of-fold over absolute compactness, yet the bike's dimensions are manageable. In a nod to the Dutch transport bike, there's also an optional shopping bag-sized basket that's welded to the handlebars. \$845, us.puma-bikes.com



EASY CRUISER

Citizen Bike - Barcelona If comfort and value trump speed and compactness, then you'll appreciate this bike's laid-back sensibility. The bike's step-through frame makes hopping on and off a breeze, while its swept-back handlebars (with cushy grips) ensure an upright, more natural riding posture. Despite being Citizen's top-of-the-line bike, this three-speed cruiser's most agreeable feature is probably its price. Citizen ships the bike directly to you, folded and fully tuned for both cost savings and convenience. \$394, citizenbike.com



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Jeremy Liebman for The Wall Street Journal

Freeman Transport Gravel Racer

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Bespoke Traveler: Freeman Transport Gravel Racer



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Freeman Transport Gravel Racer

This is the most beautiful bike you'll ever put through checked baggage. Disassembled, this full-sized, commuter slips into a handsome waxed canvas bag (above) that just meets the size restrictions of most airlines. Taking the bike apart requires one tool and a little elbow grease—but the experienced can blaze through it in about 15 minutes. As evident from its styling, the Gravel Racer is a bespoke product. Each one is made to measure and guaranteed for life. The finish is meant to evoke a Colt .45; expect it to patina further with time. **\$1,235, freemantransport.com**

Rugged Commuter: Montague Crosstown



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Street Wheels: Puma Pico



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perfectly in the trunk of a Jag or Bentley. **\$989, dahon.com**

Compact Icon: Brompton M3L



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F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Brompton M3L

The Brompton has one of the smallest and fastest folds on the market (it goes to a compact 22" x 21" x 11" in fifteen seconds). It's also among the most comfortable, thanks to a rear suspension and its famously stiff frame construction (they're hand-built in the U.K.). Like owners of small dogs, Brompton fans tend to take their bikes everywhere, mostly because they can: The bike fits comfortably under a desk or restaurant table. **\$1,350, nycewheels.com or brompton.co.uk**