

FOLDING BIKE TEST



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The folding bicycle has a utilitarian rather than a sexy high-tech image. Don't be deceived, it is at the cutting edge of modern bike technology...

A major plus of cycling is that it is a portable skill. If you ride three hours a week on your bike you are fit enough to ride almost any sort of bike confidently and well. And that opens up all sorts of opportunities, not the least of them, if you commute, being the chance to save actual folding money; not just on fares but on the cost of the bike via the Cycle to Work scheme.

What you really need to make the most of your cycling legs is a bike that is there when you want it and disappears when you don't. So far the folding bike is the nearest we've got. They're brilliant, but you may find your brain starts giving you instant style alerts. A folding bicycle? It doesn't sound very sexy does it? Or technical. Surely a bike that folds must be a massive compromise? Sounds like some sort of 'shopper' that your mum used to ride and so on and on...

Well folding bikes have come a long way since any of that applied. This is a British-led market and amongst today's folders there are some extremely high tech bikes with innovative folding mechanisms and features that are the envy of many 'grown up' bikes. To prove it we're testing four of the best folding bikes on the market, with different wheel sizes and features to give an overview of the options available for a wide range of riders and situations.

FOLDING BIKE TEST



Brompton M3L – £557

Designed and built in South West London, The Brompton is a great British success story - the company has become the largest volume bicycle manufacturer in the UK. Brompton export their clever folding bike all over the globe and for good reason: although over 20 years old years old now, it is considered a global market leader in design, performance and foldability and has a fantastic following around the world.

The Brompton frame, seatpost and suspension swingarm are made from steel, hand welded and bent in the London factory with mainly imported aluminium parts and hub gears from Sturmey Archer or SRAM completing the spec. Sound simple? Well it isn't. Brompton offers more options than Aston Martin and individuality is a significant key to the appeal of the brand.

The Brompton can be as light at 25.5lbs and folds down to a small neat package, something which takes a seasoned owner less than 20

seconds. In use the swingarm, cushioned against the frame by a small bumper, offers a very comfortable ride, coupled with the compliant feel of the steel frame. At the heart of the package are the 16-inch wheels, which allow it to fold down so small. They are light and strong, give a solid feeling ride and make the bike very manoeuvrable. For its application the Brompton ticks every box.

But, good though it is, the Brompton is starting to show its age. If you take away the heritage, the frame does look a little crude and basic with weld quality that wouldn't be as well received on bikes without the name. The hub gears are also pretty crude up against newer, slicker systems like the Shimano Nexus and Alfine. Modifying those systems to fit the Brompton and bring the shifting more up to date would make for a nicer package. But that's the key word; a Brompton is a 'package', an evolving puzzle. That is its strength and weakness - you can't just fit a new bit to a Brompton, any change to a part has a knock on effect. The Brompton really has 'evolved' like no other bike.



Decent quality pump already fitted to the Brompton



Mudguard with trolley wheel hiding the puncture resistant tyres



Brompton folding pedal has great quality and function



Hub gear system requires chain tension device

BROMPTON M3L

Contact: brompton.co.uk

Price: from £557

Weight: 25.5lbs

Frame: Hi tensile and chromoly steel

Fork: Chromoly steel

Crankset: Brompton with 50 tooth chainring

Stem: Chromoly steel

Handlebar: 7020 T6 Aluminium

Brakes: Brompton dual-pivot calipers with Fibrax cartridge pads

Gears: 3-speed Sturmey Archer hub gear

Pedals/Extras: Brompton folding on left. Plastic flat pedal on right

Wheels: Alloy rims, alloy front hub, Sturmey Archer hub rear

Tyres: Brompton high pressure

Saddle: PU foam

Seatpost: Chromed chromoly steel



VERDICT

The Brompton rides well, folds well, is light, well made and, significantly for the British bike industry, has sold itself to the world as the leading folding bike. But new rivals are entering the market and existing companies upping their game. The company is aware that it must keep an eye on things to make sure the Brompton remains competitive and market leading. On their side they have reputation and a loyal following.

Value: 8/10

Performance: 9/10

FOLDING BIKE TEST



Mezzo D10 – £827

Like Brompton, Mezzo is a UK company. The design was developed over several years by Jon Whyte, the legendary designer responsible for some of the most innovative mountain bike designs of the last decade. Perhaps for that reason the Mezzo, unlike the Brompton, is made in the Far East in a factory that produces high tech mountain bikes.

Mezzo introduced their original folding bike in 2005 and it has been hugely successful. The D10 is a new model positioned above the existing D9 and I4 and is very light and stiff, thanks to the aluminium monocoque frame – made from two 'clamshell' halves immaculately welded together.

Where the Brompton is utilitarian to look at the Mezzo is sporty, coming in anodized black, a lightweight scratch resistant finish,

which suits the image of the bike very well indeed. Mezzo are aiming at a customer looking for a more techy, speed machine. The ten speed derailleur transmission is the same as you would find on many racing bikes and the low weight, high lateral stiffness frame means the Mezzo has a real feeling of sprightliness and urgency about it. The gears are a joy to use in comparison to the often-cumbersome feeling hub gears on other bikes

The ease of folding and the size of the folded package, based on 16-inch wheels, are not dissimilar to the Brompton. If anything the process is slightly slicker since the clasps, which the folding mechanisms work around, are immediate, whereas you have to unscrew the Brompton catches. The Mezzo also comes in lighter than the Brompton by approximately 1.5lbs, with the luggage rack fitted (it's an option on the Brompton).



Integrated luggage rack comes on all models



10 speed transmission is very slick



Robot welded frame with detailed shaping adds to stability at speed



Integrated mudguard folds up out of the way with the wheel

MEZZO D10

Contact: mezzobikes.com

Price: £827

Weight: 24lbs

Frame: 6061 aluminium

Fork: 6061 aluminium

Crankset: Mezzo 56T custom alloy black

Stem: Chromoly steel

Handlebar: Alloy riser

Brakes: Alloy dual pivot calliper with alloy three-finger levers

Gears: Shimano 10-speed derailleur

Pedals/Extras: Alloy folding pedals, integrated rack and mudguards

Wheels: Alloy, double walled black 28 hole, sealed bearing hubs

Tyres: Mezzo 16" x 1 3/8" w/ Kevlar protection

Saddle: Mezzo D10 Sport

Seatpost: Mezzo 31.6mm x 500mm hard anodised Black and laser etched



VERDICT

The Mezzo clearly sees the Brompton as the key competition, but it positions itself cleverly. Whereas the Brompton is selling on its history, heritage, design pedigree and proven robustness, the Mezzo is appealing to the customer who is looking for something more sporty and up to date. The Mezzo is light and feels quick and does have the edge over the Brompton for speed helped by the slick and rapid shifting, lower weight and slightly stiffer feel.

Value: 9/10

Performance: 9/10

FOLDING BIKE TEST



Airnimal Joey Sport – £695

Airnimal comes at the folding bike problem from a totally different angle. The Airnimal is not a compact folder like the Mezzo and Brompton; the Cambridge-based company makes a bike with many of the qualities of a bigger wheeled machine which happens to fold for easy transport and storage. It is a novel approach, most folding bike companies seem to focus on the getting the bikes to fold as small as possible and in ten seconds flat. Airnimal have gone for a great riding bike and then made it fold as best as it possibly can.

So the Joey Sport is built around an approximately 24-inch wheel – using the new International Standard sizing, ISO 520 (which is the rim diameter in mm). Only 2 cm smaller than a mountain bike wheel

then, but it still folds to a reasonable size whilst giving the feeling of a full size bike. A perfect compromise has been achieved.

Although the biggest, it's also the lightest bike on test at only 24lb, which, combined with the larger diameter wheel and thin high-pressure tyres also makes the Airnimal the fastest bike on test. Despite its size, the frame has a similar look to other folding bikes with a single main beam. The seatpost is a double extending type and can accommodate riders of all heights without any optional extended versions. To add to the rideability, the Joey is fitted with a simple eight-speed Shimano derailleur gear system with nice quality components such as Airnimal's own branded chainset.



Derailleur gears and 24" wheels offer 'big bike' performance



Plenty of adjustability on the Joey; most folding bike bars are fixed

Airnimal own brand crank is very high quality and folding pedals excellent



AIRNIMAL Joey Sport

Contact: airnimal.eu

Price: £695

Weight: 24.6lbs

Frame/Fork: Aluminium frameset with chromoly fork

Crankset: Airnimal w/ 52 tooth chainring

Stem: Airnimal polished

Handlebar: Polished alloy straight bar

Brakes: Shimano Acera V Brakes and levers

Gears: Shimano Alivio derailleur

Pedals: Not supplied

Extras: Integrated rack and mudguards

Wheels: Alex R390 32 hole w/ Formula hubs

Tyres: Kenda Konzept 25mm

Saddle: Bioflex Sport

Seatpost: Telescopic



VERDICT

The Airnimal makes a lot of sense for someone looking for a great longer distance commuter or just a bike rider who is limited for storage space at home or the office. It makes an awesome option for the travelling businessperson who wants to travel with a quality bike to hand for fitness and recreation. The Airnimal is thoughtfully designed, beautifully made and the performance is unique. It's light, fast, stiff, looks great and is very good value for money.

Value: 9/10

Performance: 9/10

FOLDING BIKE TEST



Dahon Jetstream P8 – £849

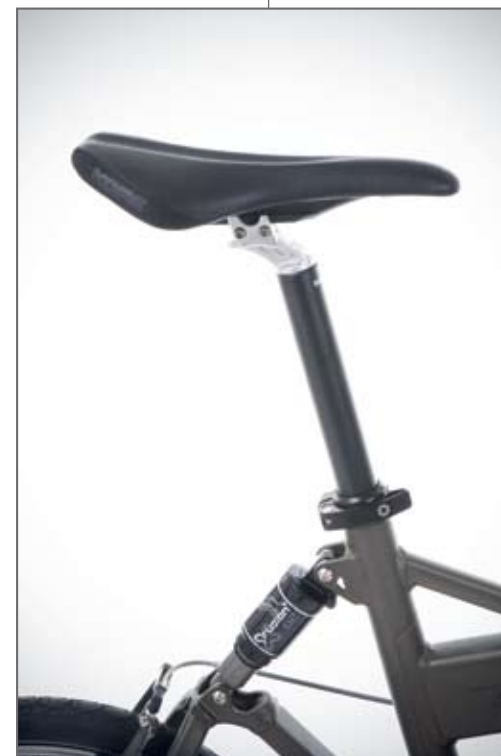
Dahon is the largest manufacturer of folding bikes in the world, making models for many other manufacturers; the company has a bike with every wheel size for every occasion. We wanted to test something a bit different from their range and picked the Jetstream P8 20-inch wheel full suspension model.

The Jetstream's full suspension system consists of an air sprung shock absorber at the rear, (similar to many mountain bikes), and a funky parallel linkage suspension fork. This makes the bike more capable of being ridden on rough terrain. The bike gives out some mixed messages though – the 20-inch wheels offer a robust and stable ride at speed but are really as small as you'd want to go riding off road. Again, the Jetstream is only an eight-speed bike. We'd have expected a few more gears on a bike that is capable of being ridden on some challenging terrain. The truth is this is not strictly an off road bike. Dahon are also promoting it as a bike that

will 'float' over potholed roads and the reality is that this is where most will be ridden.

The Jetstream compares pretty well in the test. Considering it has bigger wheels and suspension extras bolted on, it weighs in at 26.5lbs similar to the others on test, something achieved by clever speccing of the wheels and other lightweight parts. One downside of the weight saving regime is the use of a very firm (maybe over firm for the intended use) saddle with a unique 'i-beam' fitting which makes swapping to a more comfortable saddle a bit of a mission.

As you would expect the folding mechanisms on the Dahon are very well thought out and slick in operation. It's quick and easy to fold, not as small with 20-inch wheels as the smaller wheeled Brompton and Mezzo, but small enough to stow away comfortably.



Superlight parts but 'i-beam' saddle restricts the ability to personalize



Suspension a great feature for rougher terrain

Dahon hinges are excellent and rear shock smoothes out the ride



DAHON Jetstream P8

Contact: dahon.co.uk

Price: £849

Weight: 26.5lbs

Frame: 7005 double-butt aluminium

Fork: Kinetix Q suspension fork

Crankset: Truvativ Touro

Stem: Forged aluminium, patented mechanisms

Handlebar: Kinetix Pro, alloy riser

Brakes: Kinetix SpeedStop V brakes, ceramic pads

Gears: SRAM Twist, SRS technology, 8 speed

Pedals/Extras: SunTour folding

Wheels: Kinetix Comp

Tyres: Schwalbe Marathon Racer, 20" x 1.5" w/ Kevlar puncture protection

Saddle: BioLogic™ Ergo, AirFlo™

Seatpost: Kore I-Beam, 2014AL



VERDICT

The Dahon is a nippy bike to ride and the suspension works well on rough roads, up and down curbs and on some rough tracks and paths. It's light for the features offered and has some great quality parts fitted, especially in view of the relatively low price. The forks can suffer from a bit of judder under hard braking but that's inherent in the design of the fork. Overall a versatile machine that can be used over a wide range of riding situations.

Value: 8/10

Performance: 9/10

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GROUP TEST VERDICT

First we'd like to commend the Airnimal. This is a really great bike that we fear will be overlooked by folding bike buyers because it doesn't pack down as small as the others. It's best to think of it as a performance bike that can fold. It's the fastest, lightest bike and rides with all the confidence and stability of a big wheeled machine.

Then there's the Dahon: a sophisticated bike with lots of features and quality parts. It needs a few more gears to be a credible off roader but is perfect for someone looking for a bike that folds down pretty small but can still be ridden on and off road on a daily basis. The Jeststream is a good commuter that could be ridden with the family at the weekend.

Which brings us to the catfight between the Brompton and the Mezzo, the two true compact-folders in this test. And the winner is... Both. That isn't a cop out though, the Mezzo and the Brompton have as much to offer as each other yet they are quite different. If you already have a quality bike you will be far more drawn to the intricate frame fabrication and robot welding of the hi-tech Mezzo, which is also lighter, marginally faster and has slicker gearing and folding mechanisms. The Brompton folds a little smaller and is an industry icon, the slightly blobby brazing, lovingly applied between cups of tea, just adding to the character of this British design masterpiece. 🇬🇧



BEST PERFORMER ✓



MEZZO D10

BEST VALUE ✓



AIRNIMAL Joey Sport