

THE FOLDING BIKE

The market for folding bikes has exploded in the past few years, and no wonder – these clever machines make commuting a doddle by cleverly foiling the infuriating ‘no bikes on public transport’ rule. When a bicycle is folded, it becomes luggage, giving one in the eye to bike-hating transport planners. For the lowdown on taking bikes on trains and planes, see chapter 8.

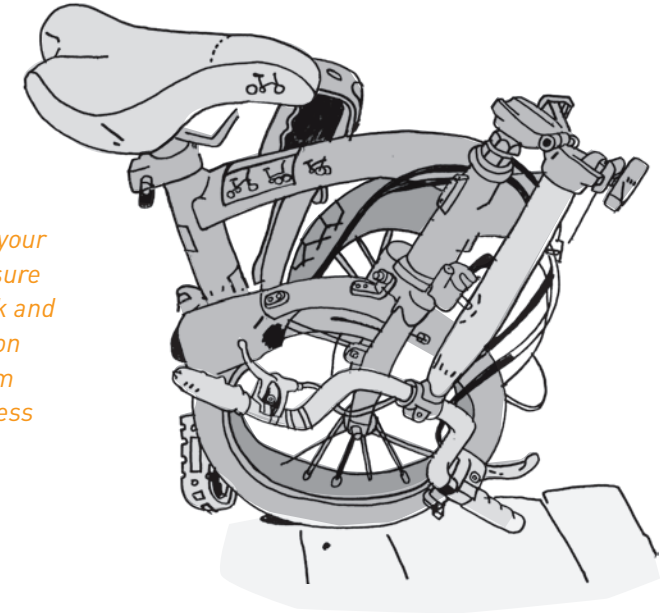
A folder costs £200–£2,000 or even more (and occasionally less), but bear in mind that the cheapest models often fold awkwardly and ride badly. Expect to pay £400-plus for a decent specimen which folds nicely and isn’t too heavy or cumbersome to carry around with you, and twice that if you want something that feels like a ‘proper’ bike to ride. If it is any consolation, folders depreciate far less than standard bicycles, so you can generally sell them on at not too great a loss when you’ve had enough. Because you never leave your bike alone, it is far less likely to get stolen too. Think twice before leaving a folder locked up anywhere. Their high resale value makes them very attractive to thieves.

If you want a bike which folds up small enough to take on trains and planes as hand luggage, you will probably have to live with small (16 or 18 inch) wheels. Some people find this a bit of a trial, as it means your legs will have to go round faster in order to sustain a sensible speed. Bikes with bigger wheels can give a smoother ride, but they tend to just fold in half and so are only useful for stuffing in car boots or hallways (though some are too big to fit in the boot of small cars). If you are going to be folding and unfolding your bike regularly, make sure it is one which is quick and easy to assemble – Brompton folders transform from luggage to bicycle in less than thirty seconds. Manufacturers often give wildly optimistic folding times in the product specifications, so try before you buy, if possible. Some, such as the electric GoCycle, or Moultons, don’t actually fold at all but can be taken to bits fairly easily.

It’s a good idea to try a number of different models before taking the plunge: there really are radical differentiations between folders and, although they are, theoretically, one size fits all, the reality is that they will suit some people far better than others. Some, particularly those which fold into the smallest package, feel very rickety to ride.

Folders are not necessarily only for short jaunts. While doing the Dunwich Dynamo, a 120-mile overnight ride from east London to the Sussex coast, I was passed by a number of Bromptons. I couldn’t quite work out how that was possible, given my wheels were twice the size, but there you go. Bromptons, incidentally, almost always come top of the list when folders are put to the test. You can also buy folding tandems – German brand Bernds makes a well regarded model.

Most ordinary bike shops still don’t stock folders and, if they do, there will usually be a very limited range. You are best off doing some sleuthing on the internet and finding the dealer nearest you, and making a day of it to test ride a few. There is a very good guide to buying a folding bike on the A to B magazine website (www.atob.org.uk), which includes a directory of UK shops specializing in folding bikes. The Folding Society is quite a handy (if nerdy) website for enthusiasts and novices alike, and includes detailed discussions of the joys and foibles of different models: www.foldsoc.co.uk



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PROS

- Perfect for commutes that involve a leg on public transport
- Great for people who live in flats, as they are easy to carry up stairs and don't take up much room
- Never need be locked up outside, so almost thief-proof
- Can be flung in a car without the need for a roof- or boot-rack
- Step-through frame makes wearing skirts practical, and means the bike is easy to mount for people with hip or back problems

CONS

- Cheap models are rubbish
- Decent models are still very expensive
- For the same price, you could buy a really classy ordinary bike which is far nicer to ride
- Small wheel folders in particular often feel unstable, so unsuitable for novice riders
- Lack of gear range can make longer rides on rolling terrain a bit of a night-mare
- Can be difficult to find panniers, baskets and other accessories to fit
- You need to carry tools to fold up some bikes, particularly the more expensive models with big wheels

BRANDS TO INVESTIGATE INCLUDE:

- **AirFrame** (British): www.airframebike.com
- **Airnimal** (British): www.airnimal.com
- **Bernds** (German): www.bernds.de
- **Bike Friday** (American): www.bikefriday.com
- **Birdy** (American): www.birdybike.com
- **Brompton** (British): www.brompton.co.uk
- **Dahon** (American): www.dahon.co.uk
- **GoCycle** (British): www.gocycle.com
- **Mezzo** (British): www.mezzobikes.com
- **Moulton** (British): www.moultonbicycles.co.uk
- **Strida** (Dutch): www.strida.co.uk

