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## No denying that alternative bikes are on a roll

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

It must have seemed like a hopeless task to improve on the ingenious, functional efficiency of the bicycle.

But by making it easier to store and easier to pedal, that's exactly what folding bikes and electric bikes have done. Purists may scoff at these newfangled enhancements, but as we observe National Bike Month in May, there's no denying that alternative bikes are on a roll.

**Q:** Let's start with folding bikes. Why would I want one?

**A:** Folding bicycles make cycling more convenient because you can quickly convert them into a compact bundle. This makes them ideal for traveling, even on international plane trips. Since a folding bike can be stashed out of the way in an office, apartment or hotel room, it also reduces the potential for theft.

A folded size of 32-by-25-by-12 inches is fairly typical, and many weigh under 30 pounds and fold up in less than 20 seconds.

Most folding bikes have smaller wheels than regular bikes, and offer a slightly different riding experience. The most exciting news about folding bikes is that there are now so many styles and features to choose from. More than 100 companies worldwide make folding bicycles.

**Q:** Are folding bikes expensive?

**A:** They start around \$150 and top out at more than \$3,000, but many quality folding bikes can be found for under \$1,000.

**Q:** Now let's get charged up about electric bikes. What's their target market?

**A:** Electric bikes have generated great enthusiasm among environmental advocates precisely because their main appeal isn't within the existing cycling community. For current car commuters driving short or medium distances, electric-assist bicycles can offer a money-saving, enjoyable alternative.

These employ a variety of technologies, but basically they use a rechargeable battery to power a motor that reduces the amount of pedaling needed. Electric bikes are especially well-suited to the Seattle area with its steep hills. And because hydropower provides most of our electricity locally, electric bikes are much cleaner and greener than cars or gasoline-powered motorcycles and scooters.

Another big selling point for electric bicycles is that you can ride one to the office without getting hot and sweaty, avoiding the need to take a shower or change clothes at work.

**Q:** What should I look for in an electric bike?

**A:** A reliable, long-lasting battery is crucial. If your battery runs out before your ride does, then you're just lugging around a lot of extra weight. Make sure competent service and replacement parts are readily available for the electric bike you choose.

You can spend from \$300 to more than \$10,000 on an electric bicycle, with plenty of choices under \$2,000. Ask about the cost

and frequency of battery replacement, which will affect your overall costs. Also inquire about battery disposal options, since those batteries should not go into the garbage.

Under Washington state law, the maximum speed for an electric-assist bicycle is 20 miles per hour. You don't need a license to ride an electric bike in Washington, but you must be 16 or older.

**Q:** Would it be too geeky to consider an electric folding bike?

**A:** Not at all. Electric folding bicycles are an expanding market niche with more than a dozen models now available, mostly costing from \$1,200 to \$3,000.

**Q:** Where can I learn more about folding and electric bikes?

**A:** The International Bicycle Fund, a Seattle-based nonprofit group, provides info and links about electric and folding bikes at [www.ibike.org/library/tech.htm](http://www.ibike.org/library/tech.htm). Commercial Web sites such as [www.foldingcyclist.com](http://www.foldingcyclist.com) or [www.electricbikeE.com](http://www.electricbikeE.com) may also prove helpful. Find local dealers with online searches.

**Q:** Is it really a good thing that bicycles have gotten so complicated and high-tech?

**A:** Absolutely. The old reliable non-folding, nonelectric bike will still do the trick for many of us, but more choices mean more bike riders, and more bike riders mean greener, healthier cities.

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