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SPENDING

## A Two-Wheeled Option (With a Battery) for Commuters



Matthew Staver for The New York Times

Jeff Baum of Frisco, Colo., uses a \$7,000 electric bike to commute 10 miles to his job in Breckenridge. He says that he has more fun going to work on the bicycle than he did when he drove a sport utility vehicle.

By BARRY REHFELD  
Published: May 6, 2007

**JEFF BAUM** has a breathtaking daily commute. He travels 10 miles each way from his home in Frisco, Colo., to his office in Breckenridge — up and down winding roads that eventually climb to 9,800 feet in the Rockies — to his job as the executive director of the Breckenridge Music Festival.

For most of his 10 years with the festival, he had driven a standard gasoline-powered sport utility vehicle. Last September, though, he started leaving it at home for something cheaper, quieter and cleaner: an electric bicycle.

It takes him a little longer to get to work, but the bike is more dependable, more nimble, more invigorating and just more fun than the S.U.V., he said.

“I personally feel very good about it,” said Mr. Baum, 53, who spent \$7,000 for an Optibike. “I

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get the fresh air and, in fact, by switching to the bike, here is one of the few ways in which I as an individual can have a good impact on our environment.”

Electric bikes have some features in common with traditional bikes. They have working pedals, and most have gears. They look similar to traditional bikes, and riders of both types follow the same rules of the road.

But the differences begin when a rider starts an electric bike’s battery, often with a key. On some models, riders can twist or thumb the throttle on the handlebar and move forward without pedaling. On others, they can pedal lightly and accelerate quickly.

Electric bikes are typically used at speeds of up to 20 miles per hour without pedaling.

They can generally cover 20 to 50 miles on a battery charge, well within the distance of many daily commutes. At the end of a ride, the battery can usually be taken out of its compartment and plugged into a wall with a special cord. After a few hours of charging, it is ready for use again.

The bikes may not go very far or fast compared with cars, but amid higher fuel prices and deepening worries about the environment, they are emerging as a viable option for commuting, shopping and other local trips.

Prices of electric bikes can run from a few hundred dollars for cheap models to \$2,000 or more. Some manufacturers are selling electric mountain bikes, recumbent bikes, folding bikes and even tricycles.

In addition, traditional bikes can be changed into electric versions with conversion kits, like ones that use lithium-ion batteries. Costs of the kits can range from several hundred dollars to more than \$1,000.

The potential savings on fuel can ease any sticker shock. With the gasoline bill for a household running, on average, more than \$2,000 annually, buyers of electric vehicles may recoup much or all of their initial costs in a matter of months to several years.

Electric bikes, popular in Asia and Europe, have yet to gain much of a following in the United States. The number sold here is in the tens of thousands a year, compared with 10 million in a recent year in China.

Finding a place to buy an electric bike can be a challenge. Shoppers have few places to kick the tires and to take test spins, while online retailers can charge \$200 or more for assembly and delivery charges.

Many retailers tend to be on the West Coast and in Florida, in warmer urban areas, where batteries have better year-round performance. In the New York area, several stores also sell electric bikes.

Internet sites also offer information and sell electric bikes. Elridge Daniel, a

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Brooklyn businessman, said he bought a bike online after doing some research there. But he said he regretted that he could not try out the bike first.

Mr. Daniel, who lives in a walk-up apartment, did not even ride that bike after it was delivered.

“It was just too heavy to carry up a flight of steps,” he said. He decided that he needed a lighter bike.

His next choice was a Quando II folding electric bike — about 50 pounds — which he bought for \$1,150 from NYCeWheels, a store on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The Quando, made by eZee, has a lithium-ion battery, which is lighter, more powerful (and more expensive) than the lead acid battery that came with his other bike. He could feel the 20-pound difference in the weight of the bikes when he was at the store recently.

Evelyn Avoglia of Stamford, Conn., was in the shop at the same time to try out the same model.

“I have a regular bike, but it takes up too much room in my studio apartment and leaves me sweaty if I take it to work,” she said after buying an eZee Quando II. Local stop-and-go traffic takes a toll on her 14-year-old [Honda Civic](#), she said, while walking and public transportation are too impractical for where she lives.

Morris Swadener, a retired Navy petty officer who lives near Seattle, used the Web to buy his bike from Veloteq, a company based in Houston, for \$1,450.

He said he was happy with his choice. “I have bad knees and I wasn’t looking to pedal,” he said. “But I wanted to be able to go on bike paths.”

His Veloteq resembles a scooter and has a padded seat big enough for two people, backup pedals at the side of the footrests and a security system. With the key out, the handlebars lock, the rear power wheel shuts down and an alarm goes off if anyone tries to steal the bike. If all that isn’t enough of a deterrent, potential thieves need the muscle to carry off a 170-pound bike.

ALTERNATIVES to the Quando and the Veloteq are the so-called pedal-assisted bikes, which tend to be bigger-wheeled mountain bikes that can provide more range and speed. These models use less electricity when a rider pedals. Among the best-known choices available on the Web and in stores are bikes made by Giant, a traditional bike manufacturer that sells electric models for \$1,075 and \$1,300.

“Good electric bikes will generally cost at least \$1,000,” says Ed Benjamin, president of Cycle Electric, a Florida consulting firm. And many can be found for under \$2,000. Then there is Optibike, a one-year-old company based in Boulder, Colo. It offers three versions, selling for \$5,500, \$7,000 and \$8,000.

Sixteen have sold to date; Mr. Baum's was one of the first. The Optibikes can exceed 20 miles an hour and travel 50 miles on a charge.

Jim Turner, the builder of the Optibike, calls it the "Ferrari of electric bikes." He has taken it up Pike's Peak, and he boasts that in a race against a muscle-powered [Lance Armstrong](#), he would win.

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