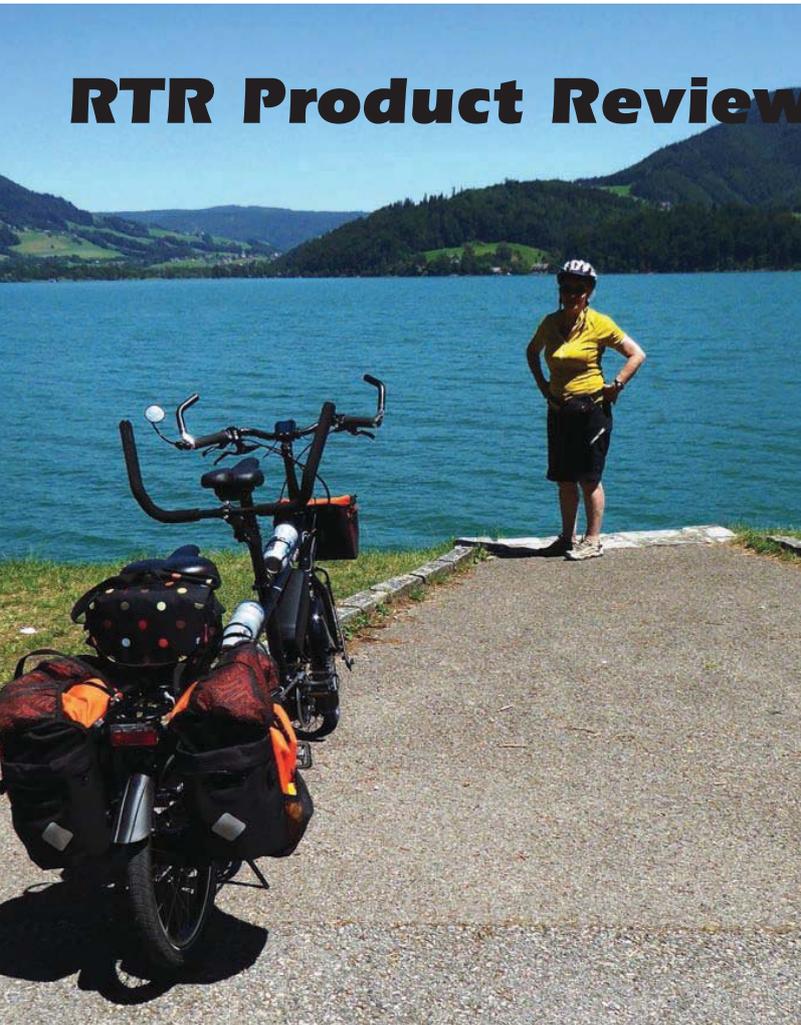


RTR Product Review #243



Circe E-Tandem Tour & Review Electrified Circe Satisfied This Touring Tandem Team

By David Gibbon

As a recumbent or tandem rider, you're already a bit out of the ordinary, but, on an imaginary cycling bucket list, have you got having a go on one of those e-bike things, or doing one of those all-in European package cycling holidays where your baggage gets magically whisked to a hotel at your destination every day, while you whizz along unencumbered, hoping your more hardcore friends never find out about it? If your answer is no, you may be better off donning your Lycra and heading off to set a personal best, but if either of these has crossed your mind, well, read on...

I'm a newcomer to the world of tandems, and I found that tandem builders or websites generally identify pairs of riders of different

levels of strength or experience as being the ideal candidates for tandems, and having done a few tours on separate bikes with my partner Susan, which, what with her having started cycling rather late in life and having a natural comfortable speed a notch slower than mine, did involve a certain amount of waiting or catching up, I was drawn to this idea of togetherness and being permanently in a comfortable conversational range. Naturally, this afforded many opportunities for man's favorite activity of obsessively comparing things online, and the result was a test ride of the British Circe Helios at their factory near Cambridge in Great Britain. The Helios is, unusually, a tandem on 20' wheels, which, while they initially create a

Above left: Lakeside view at Mondsee typifies the scenery found touring throughout Austria's challenging Ten Lakes Tour around Salzburg, known as the Salzkammergut Radweg. Above right: Loaded for bear, the Shimano STEPS-equipped Circe Helios tandem served well on the Austrian tour.

slightly 'toy town' impression, confer a series of practical advantages in terms of wheel strength and adaptability. Via some very long calibrated oversize seat tubes and posts, it manages to offer a range of seating positions to suit stokers of all sizes from the truly young to the very grownup, and has the advantage of a low step-over height, which, when you're knock, knock, knockin' on seventy's door, is



something to bear in mind if you want to get a good few year's use out of it.

And, people do get use out of them. The Helios has just celebrated 10 years of production, and if you have a glance at the enthusiastic owners' Facebook page, you will see that intrepid family groups have ridden their tandems as far afield as Shetland, Iceland, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Worthing, to name but a few. (I realize you may have to Google Worthing). To get even more use out of one, a triplet conversion is available, either as a new bike, or retrofit, and no less a worthy than cycling writer Josie Dew, (she who has been everywhere and done everything cycling-wise), recently took delivery of one. She can be seen with daughters of diminishing sizes installed along the length of the bike, while her youngest rides in a Burley trailer, tastefully festooned with a few items no serious cycle tourist would dream of setting off without, such as push chairs, potties, toys, shower cubicles, etc. She recently set off for

a tour on this juggernaut, and was last seen being directed into the truck lane on the car-ferry to France.

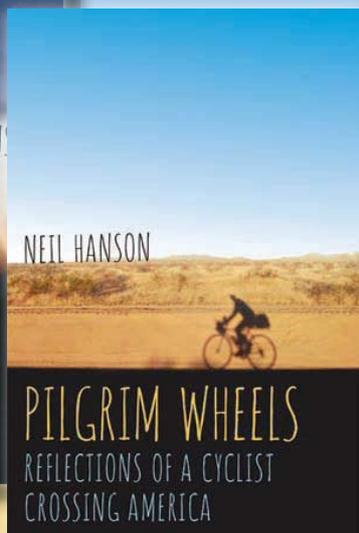
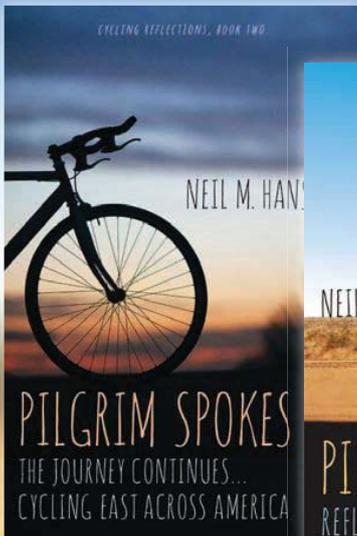
Lesser fools such as I obviously cannot compete with Josie's exploits, though we do have one thing in common, which I'll get back to shortly. To the Helios itself then. As you might imagine after ten years in production, it's well-sorted. The frame is stiff and stable, and we got used to it very quickly. Cornering at speed is particularly reassuring, the bike holding its line very predictably and steadily. Comfort is good, thanks to the standard Schwalbe balloon tires, and in fact; the only perceptible downside of the small wheels is that it's easy to ground the pedals on tight slow turns, which needs a bit of adapting to. A huge upside, on the other hand, is that the whole bike, with wheels still mounted, could be squeezed into the back of a tiny European car. This did involve pushing the front passenger seat right forward, so the non-driver had to sit in the back, but that's



Cycling writer Josie Dew travels far and wide with her Circe Helios triplet, riding with her daughters, and pulling another in the Burley trailer.

just extra practice for the tandem experience. The bike comes in various conformations, adapted for load carrying, commuting, or fast touring, and recently, as an e-tandem, with the Shimano Steps mid-drive motor. Sensibly, Josie chose one of these on her triplet, to help heave the whole thing into motion, and, with fewer excuses, so did we on ours.

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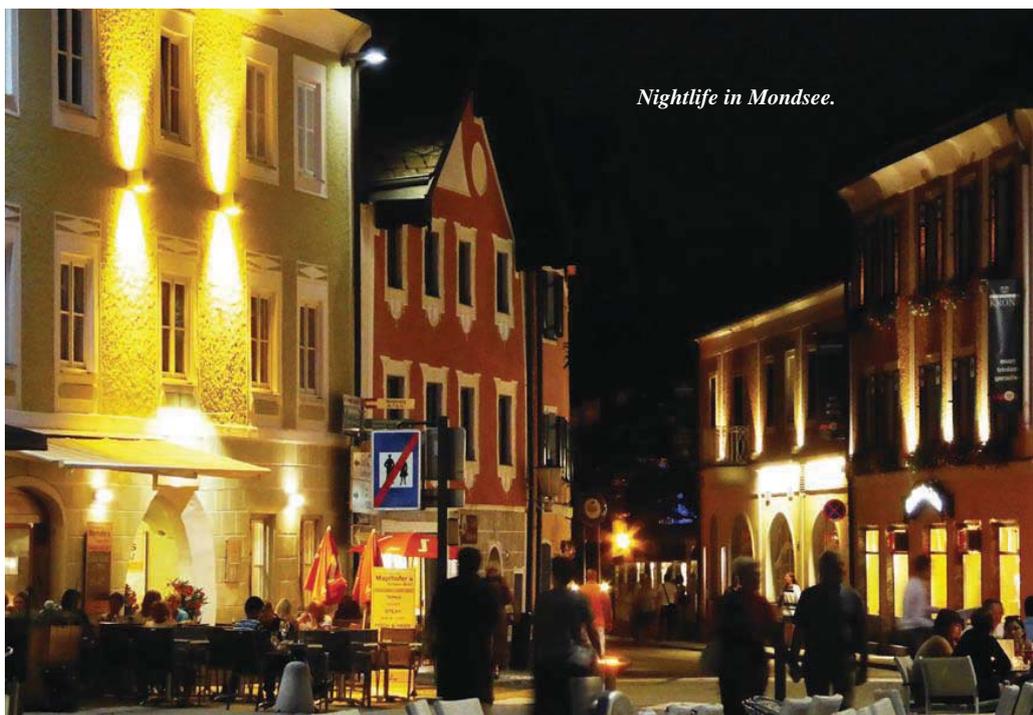
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E-bikes then: beating the advancing years or just plain cheating? We became aware of the issue two years ago on a solo-bikes tour of Lake Constance, Europe's most popular cycling destination. We couldn't understand why large German grandmothers were sailing past us on every uphill until the penny, or rather the Euro, dropped. E-bikes are hugely popular in Germany, and are sold at a rate of 10 to every 1 sold in Britain. This accounts for Bosch having a pretty dominant position in the e-motor market, though Yamaha and Shimano are competing hard.

What the Shimano Steps setup fitted to the Helios brings to the table is its newly developed fully automatic mode, via electronic shifting, of the 8-speed Alfine hub. This is rather fun, initially. Switch on and the shifter automatically selects 2nd gear. From previous e-bike articles you may have read, you will no doubt be aware that e-bikes generally offer various levels of assistance, in this case called ECO, NORMAL and HIGH. If you select HIGH, make sure your stoker is correctly installed (this is a tandem, remember) and stomp on the pedals, there is a real Whoo-Hoo! Moment as the bike surges away to the accompaniment of the sound of the motor's revs rising and falling as the shifter does its stuff. Generally, for urban riding the Steps automatic is A Good Thing, as it reverts to 2nd every time you stop and leaves you free to concentrate on what's around you. On the open road, it's not quite so good. As any touring cyclist knows,



Nightlife in Mondsee.

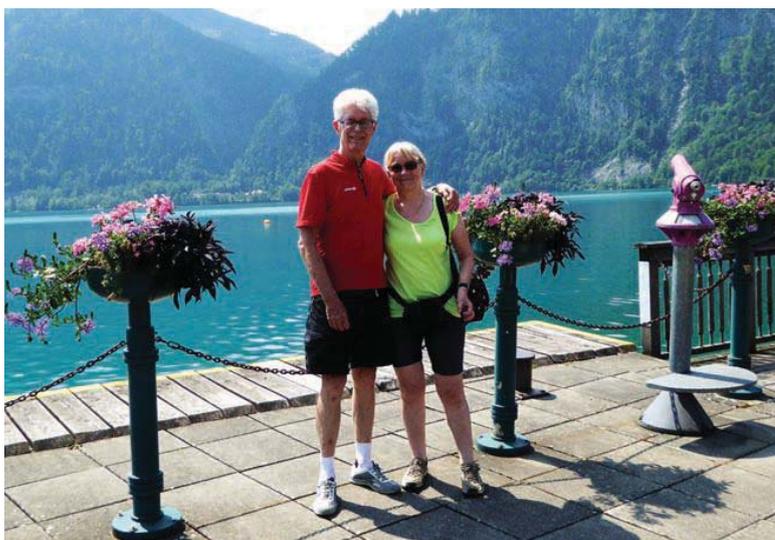
the secret to managing hills is anticipation, changing just before you need to, to keep your cadence steady.

Clever as it is, the Steps computer can't see sudden sharp hills, and though it's supposed to ease the power to permit downshifts, by the time it realizes what's going on, you and your stoker are giving it your all to avoid grinding to an ignominious halt, so the Alfine hub has trouble downshifting. Fortunately, a manual shifting option exists, and works well, and that's what to use out of town.

There is of course, a big, bad, dirty word looming when it comes to e-bikes, and it's RANGE. Forgive me for talking km here, but we were touring in Austria. Ah, I hadn't

mentioned that, had I? Oh well, you've got this far... Anyway, range it is. Typically, when you switch the motor on after a 100% charge, you get something like ECO 93km, NORMAL 84km, HIGH 77km on your display. These are not carved in stone: just as with the onboard computer in your car, they will be adjusted as you go, depending on speed, wind, riding style, and level of assistance chosen.

Forgive me again for being a bit plodding here, but I didn't find this sort of information all that easy to find, so you need to know that the amount of assistance you get depends not only on the level of assistance chosen, but is proportional to your effort on the pedals.



Taking a break along the Attersee in northern Austria.



Author David Gibbon and Susan at the end of their tour in Salzburg, Austria.



Left: E-assist tandems are still quite rare, but our contributors found the Shimano STEPS-equipped Circe Helios to fit the bill for their touring needs. Shown here are the battery and STEPS motor. Shimano makes a City/Trekking version of the STEPS system, as well as a Mountain Bike version. Below: Display and controls; the left hand buttons select the power mode and display, and the right hand buttons select auto or manual and to change gears. Display keeps information available and is easy to read in the bright sun. Computer functions include speed, distance, trip time, clock, gear, estimated range, battery indication.



So if you're in HIGH semi-coasting down a slight hill, the assistance bar display will show almost zero, while if you are pedaling really hard uphill, with the motor howling its encouragement, it will be black all the way across, and, obviously, chewing up the charge. What does this mean in practical terms? It means for real-world loaded touring in fairly hilly areas, using ECO with bursts of MEDIUM or HIGH as needed, you can expect a safe range of 60-80km. That may be enough for you, as a hardened globetrotter, to lose interest here, but coming to it as a

recreational tourist, stopping to admire the sights, and partake of some local gastronomic delights, it could still be a tempting scenario. The second part of the imagined bucket list we started off with, was, in fact, just such a scenario, as all-inclusive tour operators tend to divide their tours into 50-60km days, to allow for sightseeing, skinny-dipping or what have you during the day. We've done a couple of these now, as the appeal of condensation dripping off a tent onto your face can lose its magic eventually. Having done some tours in Germany, including the lovely

Lake Constance route mentioned above, we plumped for Austria this year. The most popular routes in Austria include the Danube river route, and our choice, the somewhat more challenging Ten



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Lakes Tour around Salzburg, known as the Salzkammergut Radweg. The thing with writing about Germany and Austria, as I have discovered previously, is that a particular amount of residual prejudice remains in certain circles, which can make Germanic travel articles a bit harder to sell. Well, let's bite the bullet right now concerning certain aspects of Austria's past. It IS the country where the Sound of Music was filmed, and you will inevitably come up against this sooner or later during your tour. Most notably perhaps in the otherwise charming town of Mondsee, which will shove the Church Where Maria Got Married right in your face as you cycle in at the end of the day. OK, that's dealt with, so what could compensate for that?

Well, Austria has a superb, comprehensive and clearly marked network of cycle paths, and in a week, virtually the only mixing with vehicular traffic you will do is when you're riding into town to find your hotel. Contrary to popular belief, you will also get good value in terms of food and accommodation, unlike nearby Switzerland. I won't bore you with a "then we turned left" description of the tour, as there are tons of information online if you spell Salzkammergut correctly, but the variety of lakes, some tiny and steep-sided, some open and lined with attractive bathing areas, all with charming historic towns and all the picturesque houses and churches you could cope with, is really enchanting. Even in a small, relatively densely populated country like Austria, following the "radweg" gives you a real "away from it all" experience, which makes the last day return to Salzburg with its hordes



of tourists rather overwhelming, though worth braving anyway.

A little bonus on the way, if you're secretly so inclined, is the Schafbergbahn steam cog railway in St Wolfgang, which chugs merrily up to 1783 meters, giving you a satisfying view of where you've been and where you're going.

As a new-to-tandems couple, how did we get on? As readers of this magazine will know, it's a blast. Double the fun, and thanks to Mr. Shimano, not double the pain when climbing. This tour, while not in the Alpine region of Austria, does offer some short, sharp climbs crossing the ridges from one lake to the next. We found the level of electric assistance sufficient to get us up everything - including a delicious moment of revenge for our Lake Constance humiliations, when we came across a group of tough looking MTB-riding tourists pushing their bikes uphill, and hummed past them to mutterings of "Ach, motor!"

The bike performed perfectly, and the only setback was a last day tire puncture. Tandem riders, I have found out, are very familiar with the problems of holding speed down on long descents, and I had fitted a third brake, as Circe advised for serious touring. So no overheating problems. However, as we got to the bottom of the long straight hill leading off the plateau back down to Anthering, the last town before Salzburg, a wobble from the back confirmed that the rear tire had lost pressure.

Above: Stopping it! In addition to front and rear Shimano Deore hydraulic disc brakes, along with a Deore V-brake for added downhill drag.

I had been keeping it down to about 25mph, as Susan doesn't enjoy the scenery blurring past at high speeds, and it turned out that the tire had rotated slightly on the rim, tearing the valve stem. Fortunately, I'd had a look at some Youtube guides to Alfine hubs, so I knew that it was only a matter of detaching the electronic control wire with the nifty little puller Shimano supplies, then simply loosen the nuts and drop the wheel out. Easy!



We booked through the official Austrian agency, OÖ Touristik, where the very helpful Raphaela will deal with all your queries in English. They supply a day-by-day guide, with lots of useful "Tips" (a favorite German word!) and a copy of the excellent Esterbauer Bikeline map book. This, unfortunately, is only in German, but the maps are so finely detailed that you really can't go wrong. Bike



or e-bike hire is also available, if required. Not tandems though. You'll have to get that yourselves, and if you do, you'll find, as you know, that people really do smile at tandems.

If the Circe Helios Steps appeals, there is a separable version which fits into a couple of airplane-compatible cases, so you could bring it home with you, though of course you can't fly with the battery. There are also some US dealers, and if you write to Circe they'll be happy to point you in the right direction. So, as they say in German, Viel Spaß! (Have fun!)

LINKS:

<http://www.circecycles.com/products/e-bike-2/models/> and info@circecycles.com
 OÖ Touristik <https://www.radurlaub.com/en/cycle-tours/salzkammergut.html>
<http://www.josiedew.com/my-books> 



The Circe Helios can fit into two suitcases for air travel, although there may be restrictions on the how the battery can be shipped by the airline.



Above and below: The Alfine hub requires disconnecting one control wire and you can drop it out for tire repairs, Shimano STEPS tools-the black one disconnects the Alfine hub when the rear wheel needs to be removed.



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