

VELOVISION



The practical cycling magazine

ISSUE 38 JUNE 2010 £6

REPORT:
SPEZI
2010

REVIEWS:
CIRCE HELIOS
TANDEM
WEEHOO
TRAILERBIKE



TWICE THE TANDEM

We review a versatile tandem-cum-workbike, the Helios Brut from Circe Cycles. Could it be the ultimate all-rounder?

BACKGROUND

Circe Cycles are an offshoot of Cyclecentric, the distribution company based along with Bike to Be near Cambridge, as you'll have read elsewhere in this issue. They supply their tandems through dealers, with a good number across the UK, and also in Belgium and Germany. They're actively looking for further distributors worldwide.

The Helios tandem is available in no fewer than six specifications, starting with the 'Duo', with 16-speed Shimano Alivio gearing at £999 (inc VAT). Next up is the £1149 'Omnis', replacing the derailleur gears with the Shimano Alfine 8-speed hub gear. Then comes the bike we review here, the Brut (£1199), also with the Alfine transmission but supplied as a workbike with the extended rear carrier – all the other models are specified initially as tandems.

Naturally you can change any model between the two modes by adding either a stoker seatpost and bars (£135) or the rear rack (£135) as appropriate. Depending on the intended use, you may also need to add up to two pannier supports or child seat adaptors (both £29.99).

Continuing up the range, the 'Omnis Plus' adds Shimano Deore disk brakes and an extra chainring for wider gear range, at £1399. The 'Auster' is a drop-barred machine with Shimano Tiagra and Capreo components for £1599, and finally the 'Aurora' is equipped with the wide-range Rohloff 14-speed hub gear, disk brakes and other upgrades for £2249. A frameset is also available for £559.

Weight limit for all models is 170 kg, to include riders and luggage. Cyclecentric offer a two year frame warranty.

Our Brut was a lightly used demo machine with just a few small differences from the current production models, as you'll read

later. It was fitted with a single pannier support and a single seat adaptor. A 'stoker kit' complete with telescopic rear seatpost was also delivered with the bike so we could try it as a tandem, too.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The Brut comes in 'Ford Model T' colours – anything you like as long as it's black. Not a bad choice for a working bike: unostentatious and easily touched up if necessary. The chunky lines of the oversized aluminium frame (with steel fork) replace some of the visual impact lost through lack of colour, perhaps, and to my eyes the machine looks well proportioned as a compact, sturdy bike.

A key feature of this bike is the 20"

wheels, which result in a tandem which, at around 205 cm overall length, is considerably shorter than most – my own two 26"-wheel machines measure 220 cm (SWB 'town tandem – see Issue 33) and 240 cm (Cannondale touring tandem). That makes most difference when manhandling the machine: it's simply easier and more convenient to lift and store.

With front wheel removed, overall length is around 180 cm, pretty much the same as a fully assembled 700c-wheeled solo bike. This could be handy for train purposes. If you have the carrier rack on instead of the back seat, it's a solo bike anyway, possibly avoiding some of the restrictions on tandem carriage imposed by many train companies.



The Circe Helios can be configured as a tandem or as a workbike (OPPOSITE), and the possibilities don't stop there. Some families fit two child seats to the long rear carrier, but this one (BELOW) is set up as a childback tandem, with an extra child seat fitted to a separate rack.



PHOTO: CHRIS HILLS/CIRCE CYCLES

Let's start with those wheels for a change. Both are fitted with 20" (406) Big Apple tyres, 50 mm wide, with 36 spokes. Although our bike was fitted with V-brakes, both the front hub and the rear Alfine hub gear were equipped with spline mounts for Shimano Centrelock disk brakes (or any normal 6-bolt disk via an adaptor).

The frame also has disk brake mounts at both end – in fact it's abundantly equipped with just about all the fittings you could reasonably require, partly no doubt because the same frame is used in all of the models in the range. So there's a tab for a braze-on front derailleur, mudguard eyes, plenty of spare cable stops, three sets of bottle cage bosses and eyelets for a rear rack, headset mounting block for luggage (see Klickfix review elsewhere in this issue) and finally a fixed plate for the kickstand. An optional Pletcher twin-leg stand was fitted to our Brut.

On our demo bike the seatstay rear rack mounts were missing – they're present on production bikes. You will need extra long front supports to fit most rear racks, though, on the very small frame.

The rear dropouts deserve a special mention. Because they need to work on versions with hub gear and derailleur transmissions, they incorporate a chain tensioning mechanism. This is particularly neatly implemented, with the large sliding dropout plates controlled by a locking screw each side for precise positioning, then locked with four



large Allen bolts. Derailleur hanger and disk brake mount move with the dropouts, ensuring good alignment.

The drive system runs entirely on the right-hand side of the frame, arguably a very sensible arrangement for a tandem which doesn't need a triple-chainring final drive. It avoids the need for expensive tandem cross-over cranks, and this 'straight through' drive



system is also said to reduce loads on the rear rider's bottom bracket bearings. The connecting chainrings are both 30T, decent quality replaceable rings in Shimano cranks.

The front 'timing' chain needs to be properly tensioned, of course, to avoid it jumping off. Instead of using an eccentric bottom bracket like many tandems, the Helios bikes have a small jockey wheel tensioner on the lower run of chain, spring-loaded to keep the chain taut. As you'll read later this is a touch noisy, but it's a simple solution which has the advantage of being self-adjusting. Any reduction in maintenance is a good thing in my book.

Incidentally the Helios tandems are all supplied without pedals by default, although most people will get their dealer to fit some. The pedals shown fitted are my own, chosen because they were to hand more than anything else.

The Alfine hub gear with 16T sprocket, driven by the 52T chainring, provides eight reasonably evenly spaced ratios from 32" to 98". About right for the flat, and you can easily change the 52T ring for something smaller if you prefer the gears a little lower for hills, or if you carry a lot of heavy loads.

On then to the stem, and here there's a clear touch of technology transfer from the Airnimal folding bike range. The stem riser slides over a boss on the top of the steerer tube. It only fits in the straight ahead position, and is locked by a quick release. This makes it quick and easy to remove the bars

(though they're still connected to the bike by all the cables, of course). Together with the quick-releases for the front wheel, seatposts and/or carrier, it means you can knock the bike down to a reasonably sized long, thin package in short order. This could help fit it into many cars, I'd imagine.

The Brut model is the only one in the range fitted with the swept-back riser bars you see in the pictures. They're fitted with decent alloy brake levers for the V-brakes front and back, the Alfine twist grip and some well-shaped rubber grips which give good palm support.

Weight as tested in tandem mode (without my pedals) was around 17 kg, and around 18 kg with the rack.

THE TWO MODES

The Brut arrived in workbike mode. In this configuration, the rear seatpost is removed and in its place goes a long rear rack, formed from a large alloy tube with 'ribs' welded on, supporting long rails onto which you can hook panniers. At the front a telescopic adaptor section links it to the captain's seatpost. You have to remove the captain's seatpost to slide it into the adaptor, and, if you wish, to remove the stoker's stem. With the rack in place the whole thing is then secured with quick-releases on the various clamps.

As supplied to us with just a single pannier support fitted at the back, the rack can happily handle a pair of large panniers, but not really any more. There's room along the rails for up to three each side, so it's



FAR LEFT: The rear dropout system is cleverly engineered to provide chain tensioning for hub gears while also accommodating derailleur systems, with or without disk brakes.

LEFT: A veritable cluster of quick releases holds the rear rack in position. The loop towards the front of the rack is a child seat adaptor: Co-Pilot Taxi seats simply slot through and lock in place.

almost a bit of a waste not to get the second pannier support. You may then have to remove the rear rider's pedals for workbike mode, as they could otherwise hit low-hanging panniers mounted toward the front of the rack.

At the back of the rack there's a useful horizontal tube for mounting lights.

The childseat adaptor bolts to the top of the main rack tube and provides strong alloy loops into which Co-Pilot Taxi child seats (£99) are designed to slide and lock securely. If you want to use a different model you're on your own; the fixings are specific to this seat.

Changing back to tandem mode involves undoing all four quick releases for the rack, pulling it off, then just popping the rear seatpost into place. Slide the rear stem onto the front seat post, put it back in place, and you're done. The switchover takes maybe a few minutes at most.

Our rear seatpost was the telescopic model in two sections. This is not as you might expect mainly for larger riders; instead it's designed to collapse down to fit even the smallest. The one-piece alternative would come too close to the ground if lowered completely.

The rear rider's handlebars were quite wide and swept-back, and covered with foam grip material. As shown they gave a fairly upright riding position to match the captain's. If you prefer a more leaned-forward position they can be reversed so the ends point forwards, clear of the captain's legs. The long stem and the length of exposed front seatpost for height adjustment meant that the back bars could be moved to fit almost any rider.

THE RIDE

As someone who rides tandem quite a lot, I found the Helios predictable and controllable, with the steering quite precise and light at any speed. Newcomers to longer bikes who tried it did take a few minutes to feel comfortable: as with any tandem it's a little strange at first to turn the handlebars and not have the bike turn in response as much as you expect it to...

BELOW: This couple, riding a derailleur geared and disk braked version of the Helios, are using a Klickfix adaptor and rucksack bag – see the review elsewhere in this issue for more details.



PHOTO: CIRCE CYCLES

But once you've acclimatised it all feels rather good. It certainly feels much more composed than longer full-size tandems when ridden without a stoker (or in workbike mode); some machines lose stability without the weight on the back. Not so here, helped no doubt by the relatively short wheelbase. The bars are also nice and wide, giving good leverage and control.

With a rear rider on board, the ride remains solid enough, and any flex is only discernable when putting in a bit of power. It's by no means a flexible tandem despite the low frame, just not quite as rigid as some all-out touring machines like my Cannondale or the Santos which we reviewed in Issue 30. The same applied with a substantial load on the rear rack: some detectable flex but not so as to affect ride quality.

The Big Apple tyres helped with the secure feel, I'm sure: they just roll over anything in their path: much less jittery than hard narrow tyres.

The Alfine hub was ideal for around town use, allowing shifts at a standstill and also under load. As a practiced tandem team Debz and

I are now quite good at easing off instinctively as I change gear, but this can take a bit of time to learn. The Alfine is quite forgiving of errors, without the horrible crunch you sometimes get with derailleurs. We rarely hit top gear, nor did we use bottom very much around flat

York, so I have no complaints about the gear range.

Brakes were also very good. Perhaps the fact that our demo bike had already put in a few miles to bed in the blocks helped, but the V-brakes were silent and powerful. Circe do recommend using additional brakes for major descents, and I would definitely agree. With both hubs and frame disk-ready, adding extra brakes is easy enough.

I did have a few very minor quibbles. On quiet roads the tensioner made its presence known by audible chain noise – the loudest thing on the tandem, which was otherwise commendably free of rattles. Not a big deal and absolutely inaudible in traffic. I also found the standard captain's saddle rather narrow and hard, given the more upright position provided for the Brut model with its riser bars. Easily changed at time of purchase if you agree. Finally, those ergonomic grips kept creeping around under my hands instead of providing solid support. A good clean and re-install should fix that... or some lock-on

ones could be fitted. Finally, the kick stand at the back is a bit awkward to reach if you're in workbike mode – but it's hard to see how they could make a neat job of mounting it further forwards.

As you'll have read elsewhere I also used the Brut to try out a selection of accessories from Klickfix and Dahon. The basket seen in some of the photos ended up on the bike most of the time: it was ever so handy and really seemed to suit the bike's style.

CONCLUSIONS

I thought the Helios put in a very solid performance in the time I used it. As a tandem and as a workbike it behaved predictably and well. As far as the components go there were few weak points, and overall I found it an enjoyable ride, handling a variety of transport tasks with panache.

At £1199, and more once you've added pannier and/or child seat supports and tandem conversion kit, the Brut isn't what you might call a cheap option. But it's hard to see how you could achieve the same functionality for much less. Try to buy both a decent quality longtail bike and a childback tandem, even secondhand, and you'll swiftly be in the same ballpark or above.

It strikes me that this is the ideal bike for a hopeful singleton. Useful when you're single, but ready to convert to the togetherness of tandeming should the opportunity arise...

And who knows? Perhaps this might lead on to where the Helios format particularly shines; as transport for growing families. It can adapt over the years to childseats to child pedaller to full tandem, with the workbike function thrown in if needed. And as with most family cycling equipment it should hold value well.

Whatever your relationship status, it could well be worth making a date with the Helios!

Peter Eland

AVAILABILITY

Via Circe Cycles dealers. Contact them on 01954 782020 or see www.circycles.com for a list