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reviewed by Cliff Kuang

Know When to Fold 'Em

A wickedly good collapsible bike comes to the U.S.

STRIDA 5.0

Designed by Mark Sanders

\$799

www.strida.com

Big-city bike riders tend to fall into two camps. There are the utility commuters who don't care if their bike's a junker, as long as it's dependable. Then there are those who dork out over pedals and handlebar tape, or the finer points of steel versus aluminum. The two roll in separate worlds, and so do their bikes.

Strida 5.0 is the newest iteration in a series of foldable bikes by British designer Mark Sanders; after 16 years of adoration in Europe, the line finally landed in the U.S. this fall courtesy of New York-based design distributors Areaware. When I signed up to review the bizarrely shaped 5.0, I assumed it was aimed squarely at those utility commuters, who are usually willing to sacrifice looks and performance if a bike's easy to carry and store. But after a week with Sanders's creation, I'm not so sure. The Strida, with its suave, brushed-aluminum finish, is that rare combination of function and flash; from day one, it drew more stares than Gisele Bündchen in a see-through dress.

The Strida's calling card is its unique, patented frame. Most foldable bikes are shaped like an *H*; the vertical stalks are the steering and seat posts, and the horizontal piece is the frame. To fold everything, you first bend the steering post down via a beefy hinge. The seat post then telescopes into the frame, and another hinge folds the frame in half lengthwise. Contrast that mess of rickety joints with the Strida's elegant origami. When the bike is unfolded, the seat lies along one side of a triangle, with the handlebars at the peak and the wheels

and drivetrain at either end of the base. To fold the bike, you unlock the bottom crossbar and swing it up; the post supporting the front wheel levers back, and the two wheels kiss and fasten, thanks to magnets in their hubs.

Sanders intended the Strida for hybrid commuters who might go from house to railway to street to office. Those aspirations show in every detail, from parallel wheels that make it a cinch to push the folded bike along as you walk—a nifty amenity over any distance longer than a block—to the brilliant greaseless rubber chain. Yet the best part of the design is the stable ride it produces, thanks to a triangle's natural cross-bracing. Nimbleness is a given on a bike with such a short wheelbase, but well-balanced handling results from the frame's lateral strength.

The seat slides up and down the rear post, and riding posture can vary from sitting to nearly standing, depending on your height. But I was skeptical because most foldable bikes come in small, medium, and large models; a one-size-fits-all bike like the Strida usually accommodates only an average-size person like myself. A handy test subject arrived as I was turning figure eights and popping wheelies on a sidewalk on the Lower East Side. Along came a man in a velvet tracksuit—maybe 6'2", 250 pounds—asking where he could buy the thing. I offered him a ride, and he happily sat down and shot around the corner. Realizing I'd handed off an \$800 bike to a total stranger, I gave chase, only to find him nimbly picking his way among the pedestrian shoppers, looking like a bear on a circus bike. Turns out the sturdy frame makes the bike's handling easy to predict straightaway, regardless of your size; what's more, the frame's geometry won't make an awkward jumble of even the tallest rider's arms and legs.

The Strida shines in comparison with other foldable bikes, but it isn't perfect. Sure, the 5.0 has tougher, lighter components than its predecessor

the 3.2, including a stouter flywheel that doesn't backslide during heavy uphill pedaling. But at \$800, the parts should be better. A plastic chain ring (which joins the pedal cranks and chain) seemed flimsy, and the brake levers and neoprene saddle are cheap. Despite Strida's claims of lightness, 19.4 pounds is still on the porky side for a high-end folder (some are under 17 pounds), while the 16-inch wheels are relatively small, slowing the bike down and making it tooth-rattling over bumps. Meanwhile, multiple gears are becoming *de rigueur* for folders, and the Strida has only one.

But it's the mark of a good design that the Strida is perfectible. Its bulk comes mostly from thick aluminum tubes and blocky joints; a cracker-jack frame designer could easily cut weight without sacrificing strength. (Aluminum tube walls can be as thin as a few business cards.) Minor tweaks to the frame could accommodate 20-inch wheels. Those same tweaks could improve the hold points and weight distribution, making the bike even easier to push when it's folded. Sanders has actually proposed similar changes but says that Ming, the manufacturer that now owns the patents, is wary of straying from what already works. That's a pity: The Strida's frame is remarkable, but with a few modifications, the bike could own the world.

Cliff Kuang is a freelance writer based in New York.

When the Strida is folded, the wheels fasten via magnets in their hubs, making it a cinch to push the bike along as you walk.

MARK WEISS (THIS PAGE AND PREVIOUS)

