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Outside the Box

Opinion: Thinking about an electric car? An e-bike may make more sense (and save you more money)

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By Megan Ramey

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Transporting a Christmas tree in an electric cargo bike is a Ramey family tradition. KYLE RAMEY



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A year ago, my husband and I capitalized on staying home during COVID to do a DIY kitchen-remodel project. I rode my electric cargo bike, which looks like a wheelbarrow and a bicycle had a baby, to the local Ace Hardware to pick up supplies almost daily.

Inevitably, a truck-driving contractor would approach me in the parking lot and eye my Urban Arrow bike and the supplies in my shopping cart, like eight-foot-long Pex pipe, thinset bags for tiling and drywall mud. “You’re going to bike that load home?”

I let him know that pedaling would be effortless because my bike had a motor.

Record gas prices have Americans talking. Thinking of the men who approached me at the hardware store, I say the following with an excited voice: e-bikes are a solution – and a much cheaper solution than that electric vehicle you’re now thinking about.

E-bikes are the most addictive, fun, transformative product on the market right now, which makes them incredibly effective as a car replacement. You only need to try one, and you’ll want to ride it for the most mundane of errands, like picking up stamps from the post office. If you ride one to work, your co-workers will wonder why you are so damn happy and want to test-ride your bike in the parking lot.

What is an e-bike? A bike with a motor. Some give that electric assist only when pedaling, while others have a throttle that offers a bit of a moped feel. Don’t confuse them with electric motorcycles; you still pedal. Depending on the model and how much of an assist you want, you can go up to 28 mph and travel



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An e-bike isn't for everyone or every trip. But if school, work or errands are less than 15 miles away, it can replace your car for at least some of those trips.

It's not an all-or-nothing proposition. This is how Mary Pustejovsky, a mom in Madison, Wis., puts it: "The electric cargo bike has replaced all our trips under 5 miles. We still use the car for trips to grandma's house 90 miles away or on days when it is super cold."

How much does it cost?

I know, you've got a lot of questions. Let's start with the cost.

The current palate of ebikes ranges from roughly \$1,100 for the cheapest e-bikes that are not pure junk to \$5,000 for well-made workhorse cargo ebikes to \$10,000 for top-of-the-line cargo ebikes with all the accessories – still a fraction of a high-end electric vehicle.



Yes, there are sub-\$1,000 electric bikes. You should not buy them. They are terribly made bicycles with terribly made electronics bolted on, and they will be in a landfill mere months after purchase.

So if you're thinking of an electric bike as a stand-alone purchase on top of your other bills every month, it probably seems expensive. But compare it to the cost of your family's car – or, more likely, cars.

The median annual all-in cost for someone driving 15,000 miles a year (gas, insurance, repairs, depreciation and more) was \$9,366 in 2021 for a medium-size sedan, \$9,968 for a medium SUV and \$11,588 for half-ton truck, [according to AAA](#). Even the annual cost for an EV is \$9,293. And that's when gas prices averaged \$2.36 a gallon.

On average, an American household [owns 1.9 cars](#), so the cost of operating one car doesn't tell the whole story.

If you replaced one car with an electric cargo bike and made most of your in-town trips with it, you would quickly pay for a \$6,000 bike. This simple equation is a large part of why [electric bike sales have exploded](#). Some bike shops, like [Clever Cycles in Portland](#), even offer 0% financing.

Will I be safe?

Another big concern is vulnerability because of traffic. If you feel the roads in your area aren't safe, reach out to your local bike community, ideally women, for route advice.

Decide which streets feel safe to you. They may not be the roads you are used to driving. But the electric boost means that a slight detour is no effort. And you



Decide which streets feel safe to you. They may not be the roads you are used to driving. But the electric boost means that a slight detour is no effort. And you can always stop and walk your bike if you encounter a hairy intersection or street. (Then contact your local elected officials and demand safe infrastructure.)

Again, you don't have to use the bike for every trip.

What about transporting children? Or it rains?

Instead of seeing parenthood as a barrier to ebiking, see your kids as partners in crime to everyday life, squealing "woo hoo" instead of whining from the back seat. The good bikes will accommodate all the sporting, diaper or school stuff, and the really good bikes will seduce your kids into naps, allowing you to pull up to an outdoor cafe while they snooze away.

Last summer I loaded my 12-year-old daughter and an inflatable paddle board on the Urban Arrow and rode 15 minutes to the beach. We could "wheelbarrow" directly to our picnic spot while other parents griped about parking and sweatily hauled gear a few blocks.

If you don't have a cargo bike, adding a trailer bike to an electric bike lets you cheaply carry your kids.

Of course you can haul more than just kids. Last year, for example, I noticed a bunch of freshly cut wood in my neighbor's yard. I used my Urban Arrow to cart it home. I have dozens of serendipitous "carrysh*tolympics" moments like this.



MARKETWATCH PHOTO ILLUSTRATION/MEGAN RAMEY, KYLE RAMEY, COURTNEY COBB

The weather? When it's cold or wet, dress warmly with waterproof layers. Finland has a very cold winter, and 20% of their residents bike every day for transportation. When it's hot, remember that you don't need to sweat on an e-bike – use the assist.

Worried about maintenance? Make sure you buy an e-bike that your local shop will service. Since buying the Urban Arrow in 2016, we have spent about \$500 for brake pads and inner tubes, shifting cable bleeds and small tune-ups – total. Think how much you spend on your car each year.

For theft concerns, check your homeowners or renters policy for coverage, buy one or two reputable locks, park the e-bike on a bike rack and if possible bring it



For theft concerns, check your homeowners or renters policy for coverage, buy one or two reputable locks, park the e-bike on a bike rack and if possible bring it inside overnight.

For mobility-challenged people, there is pretty much an e-bike or e-trike design for every type of challenge.

And I can't emphasize the personal benefits enough! I feel strong, healthy, mentally clear, never worried about finding a parking spot or getting stuck in traffic. I have random conversations with strangers or run into friends on the street. E-bikes are a source of happiness instead of the friction I feel driving.

No, e-bikes are not cheating. And they can have incredible passive weight loss benefits. "I never thought I would weigh what I did in high school again. Now I do," Jon Treffert said in his [interview with "Bicycling" magazine's Selene Yeager](#) about losing 100 pounds and kicking diabetes.

So what are you waiting for? Go test-ride an e-bike. It may change your life, but at least, it will save you gas money in the short term and pay for itself in the long term.

Last October I took my mayor on her first e-bike ride, and she had such a blast that she bought one the very next day.

Megan Ramey is the owner of [Bikabout.com](#), which creates bike travel guides, is an Active Transportation Representative for Oregon DOT, Region 1 Area Commission of Transportation, and coordinates Hood River's bike train and walking bus to school program. Follow her on Twitter [@BIKABOUT](#).
