



## A NEW DAWN?

*If ever a bike could be called 'next-generation' it's this one: automatic gears, full suspension and enclosed chain. But is all of this futuristic technology a Good Thing? Peter Eland, self-confessed bicycle technology nut, and Kriss Fearon, who just rides the things, tested the riese und müller Equinox to find out.*

Young, fit and mechanically inclined journalists aren't the best people to test certain sort of bicycle. There is a whole group of cycle users – they might not call themselves cyclists – right at the other end of the demographic and cyclographic scale. The bikes made for these people may make some 'serious' cyclists chuckle, but it's just a question of shifting priorities.

It's also relatively rare that a bike for non-cyclists (almost inevitably urban 'utility' riders) benefits from the same level of design, skills and quality components as a road-race bike, for example. So we were keen to test out what looks like a rare exception, the Equinox from *riese und müller* in Germany.

Coming in at £1400 for UK

consumers (DM 3999 in Germany), the Equinox will require a certain level of commitment – or just spare wealth – from its purchaser. Also, as *riese und müller* bikes are only sold through dealers, you'll have to find one in your area (or at least in your country). This is a very necessary policy, as I'll explain later.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The Equinox is a striking bike, with the bright yellow 'V' of the frame and strange aerofoil-section stem and seat supports. The aluminium frame looks to my eye nicely engineered: nice thick sections where it matters, huge suspension pivot bearings, and everything looking neat and 'finished'. Overall

weight is a claimed 17.9kg, not too bad given the full specification. Everything is included: lights, mudguards, bell, and propstand.

Setting up the machine to suit your proportions is easy: two quick-releases secure the seat, and it slides up and down the long slot in the frame. Stem height can also be quickly adjusted. Given more time, there are plenty of opportunities to change the handlebar position, too – the stem can face either forwards or back to alter the reach, and you can of course easily alter the angle. The shortest person who tried it was 5'0" tall, and she had no problems. I'm 6' 2" tall, and the leg-length was *just* long enough with the seat pushed right back. For very small or very tall folks, *riese und müller* can provide

differently-sized seat supports.

You might want to get your dealer to adjust the suspension for you: the pre-load and damping on the shock can be fiddled with should you wish. Most people will be content to flip over the lever on the left-hand chainstay – this moves the lower attachment point for the shock element, making the suspension 'softer' or (so they say) 22% harder. This really is the matter of a moment.

The automatic transmission is based around Shimano's Nexus 4-speed hub, with an electronic shifting mechanism replacing the traditional cable. Shifts are accomplished thanks to a small battery stored near the bottom bracket, and good for a claimed year's worth of shifting in normal

use. It's all controlled from a neat unit on the handlebars, with the brake lever built in. A small knob lets you choose between 'Drive' (D), 'Sporty' (Ds) and 'Manual' (M) modes. In manual, pressing the up and down arrows shifts the gears for you. In either of the automatic modes, the computer chooses when to shift. Your current gear is displayed on the screen when you change – otherwise, the display shows your riding speed.

This system hasn't really had much of an impact in the UK, but it's been on town bikes in mainland Europe for a year or so now, and I haven't heard of any major problems.

The mechanical part isn't much less innovative. The chain runs right through the suspension swing-arm, guided by a couple of small pulleys. Close-fitting chainguards almost entirely enclose the chain, apart from around the rear sprocket. Here, the electronic shifting box fits on neatly, with a thumbscrew quick-release to remove it.

And this raises an interesting issue. The most obvious reason to remove it would be a rear wheel puncture. Yet, unless you're equipped with an outstandingly comprehensive toolkit, a good memory of the (German-language) instruction manual and an hour or so to spare, I really wouldn't recommend that you try removing the wheel yourself. What with the roller brake torque arm, the shifter unit, and the various chainguards, it's a tortuous procedure. This is why I mentioned that a good local dealer is a really good idea. Save yourself the bother and let a professional do it. The same would naturally apply should anything go wrong with the automatic transmission.

Of course, you can fix most punctures without removing the wheel or you could fit one of those 'removeable' inner tubes which aren't a complete circle, preferably also filled with Slime or another sealing fluid. You could even go to a foam inner tube (see test elsewhere in this issue). Or, you could just accept the slight risk (the tyres look pretty solid) and call a taxi if it happens.



The accessory package is top quality, with top-of-the-range Busch and Müller lights powered by a Shimano hub dynamo in the front wheel. A small light sensor in the headlight switches the system on automatically when it gets dark, and both front and rear lights have surprisingly bright LED 'standlights' which stay on when you stop. There are also reflective sidewalls on the tyres.

A rear 'pannier adapter' is apparently available to fit normal cycle luggage. As it was, I didn't find the elastic and small rear carrier platform much use. You could just about strap a small bag of shopping on but I can't see that it would be very secure. Better to try the optional quick-release basket - there are some substantial bosses on the headtube to attach this. Without either, I resorted to my usual tricks and managed to attach a normal pannier over the seat-back support, with the help of a cable tie or two to keep it in place.

The final touch: to ensure the propstand holds the bike stable when parked, a spring holds the front wheel 'forwards', preventing 'flopping'. It works a treat.

### THE RIDE

Once you've sat yourself on the Equinox and savoured the seat, it's time to go. First-time riders remarked, without exception, on the lightness of the steering. I'm sure

this is down to so little weight being on it - especially for taller riders, and this means extra care cornering on slippery surfaces. There's also an element of 'tiller steering' which take getting used to: as well as the bars rotating, they also swing sideways as you turn. Both effects become second nature reasonably quickly, and the bike is pretty much as manoeuvrable as a conventional upright after a while.

The next thing you notice is the suspension. This really does do what it says on the box: it cushions potholes effortlessly. I used the 'stiff' setting for most of my riding - on 'soft', it felt too squishy by far. Some lighter riders who tried it did appreciate the chance to make it suit them, though. With so little weight on the front, the forks don't really do much unless you hit something really big. One could argue persuasively that they add weight for little effect.

I found I rather liked the riding position - you sit upright, neck and wrists relaxed, and the back nice and straight. Your foot can rest solidly on the ground when stopped. It also felt comfortable in town: unlike a full-blown recumbent, the Equinox isn't too obviously a 'funny bike' to be laughed at. The riding position reminded most people of a motor scooter, and most onlookers seemed to think the styling and 'look' cool rather than ridiculous.

The only downside comes into a headwind: at this point I really

missed tucking down over the bars. Fully upright into the wind, even the lowest gear wasn't really low enough.

So to the transmission. Around town, if you don't want to push the bike too hard, it's great. I really enjoyed the complete relaxation: even though I shift instinctively and often on any 'manual' machine, it was great to be able to just coast to a halt, and know you'd be back in low gear to start off, then not have to bother shifting as you accelerate. Because you don't know when the shifts are about to happen (the computer decides on the basis of your speed alone) you're often shifting under load, and I was impressed at how well the hub handled it. No graunchy shifts, awful crunches or sudden slippage - just a feeling that a cog somewhere had engaged and was 'ramping' you into the higher gear. Shifting down sometimes resulted in a loud click, but nothing alarming.

For my taste, the shifts were a bit 'relentless': it's not a setup for people who like to spin at a nice fast cadence. Accelerating off from the lights, your legs never get a chance to recover - you've just got one gear almost spinning fast enough when it shifts you up again. Strangely, the 'sporty' drive mode shifted you up even faster, making acceleration harder and even more knee-popping. Of course, the answer is probably to take it a bit easier when accelerating, but I do like to keep up with the traffic.

Overall, though, a tentative thumbs up for the system. The only time I really had to use the manual option was into a headwind: it would for some reason keep me in far too high a gear, perhaps because the computer has no way to 'tell' how much effort you're putting in to attain a given speed. The gear range was fine for flat old York, but I wouldn't be so sure if it was somewhere more hilly. As to reliability, time will tell. It stood up to a heavy shower with no problems.

The shifts themselves are accompanied by a 'beep' - it would be nice to turn this off sometimes, when you're not trying to attract attention. Another occasional source of noise was the chain knocking on the inside of the chainstay - this tended only to happen over cobbles, but made a nasty rattle when it did.

Taller riders, like me, will have most of their weight over the rear wheel, and it was easy, if I tried, to wheelie the machine. Generally, it wasn't so easy as to be a problem in traffic, but I did feel the need to take it easy on the occasional hill start.

And the rest? The lighting system worked faultlessly, giving a bright and steady light. Again, it was nice not to have to even bother to turn them on a feeling of that extra bit of luxury.

Mudguards were effective, brakes worked fine. If I'd bought the bike, I'd have asked my dealer to swap the brake cables round I'm used to the front brake on the right.

### SUMMARY

The Equinox has a lot going for it. No, it's really not suitable for men like me who like riding fast, but I can appreciate its qualities for the very many for whom comfort, convenience and quality are important and for whom cost is not a major consideration. Perhaps well-heeled commuters with secure parking each end might fancy it as a suitably stylish substitute for the company car? Perhaps well-off retired folk might find it the perfect vehicle for leisurely pootling. Elderly riders in general would certainly appreciate the easy stopping and starting, the lack of aches and pains from the riding position, and the fact that old hands wouldn't need to fiddle around with gear changers all the time. The quick adjustability also makes it a good bike to share.

Downsides? Maintenance is pretty much a dealer-only job, and that includes fixing a rear-wheel puncture. This may be no bad thing I wonder how many of the target audience would really want to get their hands dirty fixing bikes anyway.

If you're very tall I'd insist on a test-ride to check that the adjustment is sufficient and that you're not always pulling wheelies.

It's a well thought-out machine, and the little luxury touches, and obvious quality, could make you feel good about the cost. It's just a shame that they couldn't make it at a third of the price and put it within the range of more of the very many people who would enjoy it.

**Peter Eland**

### CONTACTS

**The Equinox manufacturers, riese und müller, have agents and dealers around the world. Full details on their website: [www.r-m.de](http://www.r-m.de) or contact them for details of your nearest stockist: Tel +49 6151 366 860 Fax +49 6151 366 8620. They don't sell direct, only through dealers.**



### SECOND OPINION

To the untrained eye, the striking things about this bike are the back rest for the seat and the odd-shaped handlebars.

The seat is generously sized and padded and the back rest allows you to sit upright in a very natural body position. In fact, it's almost like pedalling your favourite office chair. It takes a few minutes to adjust to the leg position, which is slightly forward, but once you do it's very comfortable. I may be biased, since padded seats have a special place in my heart; suffice it to say that this is a very pleasant ride.

The handlebars too are padded and are a figure-8 shape so they accommodate a variety of grip angles - you can even lean on them quite safely, and your hands won't slip off while you're signalling. There isn't much weight on your hands, good news for cyclists who for health reasons can't put much pressure on their arms or wrists, or who have to change hand position regularly. On longer journeys this avoids wrist strain, and the upright seating position means you don't end up with neck or back aches either.

There are two more wow factors. The first is automatic gear changing, which I've never experienced before. I don't know how the Equinox handles hills, but on York's flat roads it's perfect - all you have to do is sit

back, relax and concentrate on the view. But what really made me smile is the suspension. What bliss. No more avoiding potholes, cobbled streets, kerbs, speed bumps; the bike takes all the strain, so you can cycle with your dignity intact. And the chain drive is completely enclosed so that riders don't get oil on their clothes.

Is there a down side? The lack of weight on the handlebars means that the steering feels loose and can be quite wobbly. It has a small turning circle which is not easy to control at slow speeds. And the magnet controlling the automatic gears twisted out of alignment during the test, meaning that the gears only worked on manual. This is not a problem the average person would know how to solve unless it had been pointed out.

It's designed to be practical and straightforward to use, with integral lights and dynamo for those of us who don't want to arrive at our destination with bulging pockets. And most of the major adjustments - including the level of suspension - can be made with levers, so you don't even have to hunt out a spanner. If this sounds too easy, perhaps it is, but the Equinox is a bike for people who want to cycle in comfort without having to think too much about how things work.

**Kriss Fearon**

The bars offer plenty of riding positions and adjustment possibilities



The shift unit and display - seen here in 'Drive' mode



Swing that lever forwards and you're in the 'soft' suspension setting

