

AN AIRNIMAL IN AMERICA



Chris Hamm, one of the founders of York's Cyclone Couriers (featured in Velo Vision 4) took an Airnimal Chameleon with him when he went to visit his family back home in Salt Lake City...

BACKGROUND

To begin with, a bit of background and honest admission...

I first laid my eyes (and my backside) on the Airnimal at the Encyclopedia Try-Out Show in May of 2000. Darting through the crowds at the show, beautifully responsive. I swore I could hear my own 'whoosh' as I flew back and forth through the car park. Is love at first sight an over used cliché? It was, and still is, a stunning bike. I wanted it. I remember the long conversations with myself as I struggled to justify the purchase. As a cycle courier and a father of three in a family which relies on bikes for all of our transport, I couldn't really fit the Airnimal into my life as anything other than a trophy. But still, can't a man have a trophy or two? Please?

The Airnimal was folded up, packed up, and taken away. But not by me.

Over the last two years I have

vaguely followed its development. I now and then achieve a great triumph over reason and conclude that the Airnimal is the perfect messenger bike and that I should therefore get two (why not three?) in the interest of furthering my business. All of this after having ridden it for a total of 20 minutes in a car park. Two years of pathetic yearning.

So, I'm off to America for three weeks with my nine-year old boy Jake. I want to take a bike with me. I want to take a fast road bike with me. I want to take a travel friendly, light, fast road bike with me. I want to take...yes, that's right. A quick word with Velo Vision's Peter Eland and a few more words with Richard Loke of Airnimal Designs and it is all arranged. A week later, while out delivering, I receive a phone call. A box has arrived for me back at the office. Ecstatic isn't even

close. I am a lucky man indeed.

The trouble with this sort of obsession is that experience with the reality can often be a let-down. Was I about to have my dream shattered by achieving it?

LEAVING YORK

I finish packing at 02.00, sleep for two hours and we catch a cab to the station; one backpack and one orange suitcase with a small Airnimal logo on it. It's not too large at 61 x 61 x 28cm (24" x 24" x 11"), and the four caster wheels on the bottom and the long retractable handle make it easy for my young son Jake to pull it through the station. Onto the train, and we are told that we are on the wrong carriage so we have to move. I wouldn't want to be doing this with a full size bike bag.



At Manchester Airport I am again profoundly grateful for the rolling hardcase.

Lots of questions from security, mostly interested queries regarding the bike. I guess folding bikes are still a novelty. At the check-in counter I have a few misgivings about handing over the bike, but the full-size case is just a bit beyond carry-on size so I watch the Airnimal disappear down the belt.

We fly into Salt Lake City where we are greeted by my parents and an



LEFT AND ABOVE: The Airnimal Chameleon is designed to optimise performance rather than speed of fold. Nevertheless, it packs down into a compact hardshell suitcase when necessary (BELOW)



assortment of cousins. They all express their disappointment at the fact that my wife and daughters couldn't come over. "Yeah, I wish they were here too, but look at the bike I've got with me..." They are not as impressed as I would like. Oh well.

We are going to spend a few days in Salt Lake and then head up to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. When we arrive at my grandpa's house I open up the case. Looks alright, a small scratch on the main tube, maybe from contact with the cogs? Otherwise it positively glows. I will take it out in the morning.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS (SECOND TIME AROUND)

It's early, I think. It is also 95°F (35° C).

Richard Loke sent me through some assembly instructions before I left York; I think I'll get started right away. Technically the Airnimal is a folding bike, but assembly from its fully packed state is a bit awkward. This comes as no surprise really: the Airnimal website is straightforward in stating its design philosophy. Performance over portability. The idea is that once you let go of the notion that the wheels have to stay on, you can make the wheels a decent size (24", 520) and the frame, less wheels, fold down really small.

As well as the suitcase fold (which requires pedals, stem etc to be removed), the design does permit a quick fold: Seat off, seat post down, front wheel off and back wheel under. With a strap to hold it all together, this makes the Airnimal easy to carry along on the train, put it in the boot of a car or stow away in your bedroom. I figure that's where it really should be kept.

To avoid the baggage handlers you can even pack the frame down into a 56 x 36 x 20cm hand-luggage packet – the wheels are bagged separately, but you've got the valuable stuff with you. But this fold requires you remove the forks, too.

Full assembly from the suitcase, using the bike rack on the back of a Jeep, takes me about 30 minutes. Without the use of a stand this could take a bit longer, but it is all very well explained in the instructions. The only tool I need is a Topeak Alien –

which includes a pedal spanner.

The wheels would benefit from some more support inside the case, especially for air travel. The back wheel required some truing. If I am going to do this again (with one of my own!?) I will use the carry-on option, with the soft shoulder bag and separate wheel bag. I make a note to add some more packing material for protection on the flight home. Besides that, everything is perfect.

I think it would be a very good idea indeed to ride off in search of a coffee.

WHOOSH!

The bike is just as I remember, and I still swear that I can hear a whoosh sound as I ride through light morning traffic. I have to concentrate on remembering American traffic laws.

Now, it is self evident that pressure applied to the pedals in a rotational manner translates into forward motion. There is no need to say this in a bike test is there? That being the case...oh, I don't know. Perhaps there is some exquisite relationship between the Airnimal's smallish wheels, short wheel base and light overall weight which gives me the palpable impression of serious acceleration with a single intense rotation of the pedals. Maybe someone with more physics savvy could explain it all with a brief equation.

Riding with the Harleys: guess who made it up the mountain first?



The Airnimal handles beautifully in traffic. 'Nimble' is a good word, do you like it? I do. Nimble and quick, like a good messenger bike...

My father has a go. He does a few miles on a Schwinn hybrid each day, and initially he is uncomfortable with the 'over the front wheel' feeling. The height of the seat in relation to the bars leads him to believe that his back will be put off, but after a few spins around the block he is smiling and lively in his appraisal. He quickly becomes accustomed to the position and handling. His back is happy.

WYOMING AIRNIMALS

First day out of the city. I am taking it slow while my sea-level system acclimatises to the elevation here (around 2000 metres) at Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Some old French trapper named this mountain range *teton*: breast. The Tetons rise to nearly 4500 metres; glaciers shine brilliant on the steep rock face as I ride out across the sagebrush plains.

The bike is sweet at a good, steady pace. Once I find my rhythm it is easy for me to forget that I am not on a 700c road bike. It positively prefers speed, maybe not a bike for people who like a slower touring pace but it suits me fine. The elastomer suspension eases the ruts and bumps on this old county road without making itself obvious. The carbon fibre fork creates a good balance of stiffness along with a bit of jolt-friendly compliance. The Airnimal feels like a tight spring, not a bike to relax on when riding an uneven road surface. There is

something about this bike that encourages me to ride 'light' in the saddle; out of the saddle acceleration is comfortable and well balanced.

There is a group of cars parked at the side of the road up ahead, lots of people standing alongside, with cameras clicking away. Now they are all getting back into their cars, quite rapidly I must say. Hmmm. Ahhh, now I see why. There is a herd of bison moving across the road. I really must get a picture of this. Get it? Airnimal with animals. I fantasize a chase scene: angry bull buffalo snorting and charging. Airnimal accelerates easily in open mockery of the furiously pounding hooves falling quickly behind...

THE CLIMB I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR
Big Cottonwood Canyon winds its way into the west slope of the Wasatch Mountains until its terminus at Solitude Ski Area. On the opposite slope of the mountains is Park City Ski Resort, where many of the 2002 Winter Olympic events were held. Between these two resorts is Guardsman Pass, a tightly winding narrow road which peaks at 3500 metres. I want to see how the Airnimal feels on a sustained climb, and this seems as good a place as any to find out. I am not by any means a highly experienced hill climber (York is flat), but I feel that I owe it to *Velo Vision* and to Airnimal Designs to suffer a little bit. Very noble, very committed.

There are a couple of Harley Davidsons parked at the bottom and somehow I think it is appropriate to have some photos taken with them. I kindly approach the two guys who look most likely to be the owners of the polished machines. They are very taken with the Airnimal, it appeals to their aesthetic sense no doubt. They offer to ride with me over Guardsman's Pass. Great, let's race. Any wagers?

The Airnimal again impresses me with its design. While not a pure climber (then again, neither am I) it is clearly of a climb friendly geometry. It really excels at the tight uphill switchbacks, especially on the inside corners which involve a lovely

combination of curve and climb. I prefer standing in the pedals; there is some give in the suspension when seated and pushing hard. I am sure that smaller 520c wheels almost 'eat' into corners, and this is a huge benefit on steep uphill corners.

I hit one of these switchbacks in too big a gear and my lungs are screaming for air. Must stop. Nope, there's a group of cyclists stopped just beyond the bend, can't stop now. I will not give in, I must try and look like I deserve this bike. I can feel their eyes on the sleek lines of the Airnimal as I try to sway easily past them. I am not making a whooshing sound any more. One of the riders says something but I can't hear him over the artillery pounding of my own heart. The Harley bikers are parked up around the next bend.



When I stop, one of them says, "I thought you'd stopped a while ago, but then I figured you'd have to at least pass those guys down there. How's it goin'? Looks like the altitude is getting' to ya." Is it all really this obvious?

The descent into Park City is a challenge of a distinctly different sort, and I can almost out run the Harleys now. I do feel slightly unnerved at high speed, is it the short wheelbase or just a healthy respect for life and death? Corners, corners, corners. This bike loves corners. Lean in, weight forward, and again I sense that the Airnimal is consuming the road. I swear this thing is alive.

Park City is an old mining town which struck it very, very rich with the establishment of the ski resort. It

is basically some ski slopes surrounded by a highly exclusive shopping mall. I am approached by a woman, well actually the Airnimal is approached by a woman, who says, "Isn't that a gorgeous bike? I see a lot of those in Aspen." Oh do you? Do you mean bikes in general or this bike in particular? Anyway, I imagine that an 'Aspen Airnimal Outlet' would do quite well. I'll manage the shop.

GOING HOME

Time to pack it up again. It is much simpler to dismantle this time, and I lay my shoes in the bottom of the case to better support the back wheel. I also add a few judicious bits of soft packing around the fork, the cog and the handlebars.

Any complaints? Nothing that amounts to much. I am retentive about rattling – the retention clip



that holds the rear triangle in place rattles. I tried to adjust it to no avail. Yeah, I know, but I can't help it. I would have liked a stiffer elastomer for the climb, but this is easily dealt with. The Airnimal I had was fitted with flat bars/bar ends – I like drops. So what? You can order it with the bars you want.

High-speed descents? Like I said, I don't know if it was the bike or me but I definitely felt a little bit reluctant to sustain my highest speed. Also, I ran out of gears on the way down but that's not an issue with the bike, is it?

Airnimal Designs offer several models tailoring the design to particular purposes: touring, audax, time trialling, even off-roading. The basic Chameleon Sora starts at around £1030, and you can choose



Chris finds the Airnimal a lively descender on the way back down (ABOVE) after suffering somewhat on the way up (BELOW)

whatever level of component quality your budget will stand. The bike we tested would cost around £1250. The hardcase suitcase is an extra £95, all prices including VAT.

SUMMARY

I was kind of hoping that I would come home having accepted that the Airnimal is not right for me. The final test was whether or not it could pull a Burley child trailer. It can and it does a good job of it as well. I have pulled the Burley with a Brompton and it leaves my little ones leaning forward, thanks to the 16" wheels. Also, the Brompton suspension design makes it difficult to lift the front of the attached trailer and turn it around. The Airnimal's 24" wheels provide just the right height for the trailer hitch, and that rattling clip on

the suspension rules out awkward handling. Competition? Some of the Bike Friday range aim at the same sort of performance. In the UK at least it looks like the Airnimal can compete well on price and features – you need a high end Bike Friday to get you suspension, and I like the Airnimal's 24" wheels over the Friday's 20 inchers.

Can I justify it as a courier bike? Performance wise, definitely. Practically speaking? Maybe not. Too pricey, too flashy. A single speed Airnimal... yea, that will do it. Foldable? I think perhaps portable is a more apt description. For my purposes it was perfect.

So, for me it would still be a trophy, if a lovely, functional one. I'd only so rarely actually need its ability to fold. But if I was travelling for my cycling, and not just riding around York delivering packets – I'd be ordering one tomorrow.

The Airnimal is a sexy bike to look at and an exhilarating bike to ride. At a glance its lines are sweet and fluid, upon closer inspection the workmanship is impeccable. It gets a lot of attention from cyclists and non-cyclists alike. I like attention, blame my mother. I also like making whooshing sounds.

AVAILABILITY

Contact Airnimal Designs, Cambridge, UK: Tel 1223 523973 email info@airnimal.com or see their website at www.airnimal.com. Airnimal are happy to ship bikes worldwide.