



Bikes not toys

Trailerbike designer Isla Rowntree is back with a range of children's bikes. Dan Joyce and sons test the Luath 26 and Beinn 24

The children's bike market is saturated with pseudo-mountain bikes that look the part but lack the function: overbuilt steel dreadnoughts that weigh half as much as the rider, with suspension that moves sideways rather than up, cable discs that are no better than V-brakes, and components that aren't downsized for a child.

Not all children's bikes are like this. Puky do some nice Euro town bikes for littler cyclists, while Trek, Giant, Specialized, Scott and Ridgeback all have some good mini-mountain bikes. In 1998 we published an article on buying 'Bikes for kids', now on the CTC website (members can send for a photocopy). But if you're a cycling family, it's been difficult until now to get your son or daughter a decent, lightweight, do-it-all bike – a bike that could be used for street riding or going

to school, for touring, racing or cyclocross as well as forest tracks.

This year Isla Rowntree (see 'Behind Islabikes') launched a range of children's bikes that all look refreshingly sensible. We tested two: the 26in-wheel drop-bar Luath and the 24in-wheel flat-bar Beinn. Islabikes also supplies the practical tyres, scaled-down luggage carriers and mudguards that you'll want for taking these or any other small-wheeled bikes on tour – or just to the shops.

FRAME & FORK

Both bikes are neatly Tig-welded from aluminium in a traditional double-triangle design using round tubes. This has a better strength-to-weight ratio than the fat Y-frames or boxy-tubes you see on some children's bikes. The tubes themselves are quite slim for aluminium, but that's not a problem since smaller frames are stronger and,



(Above) The Sora shifter is reach-adjusted, and there are auxiliary brake levers too (Below) Frame fittings for a (scaled down) rear carrier

more importantly, children are very much lighter than adults.

More weight is saved with the forks, which are rigid chrome-moly steel rather than heavy suspension units. Altogether, the Beinn is the lightest 24in wheel bike I've tested. It's 1-2kg lighter than most bikes in its price range. The Luath is lighter than its mountain bike equivalents, even with a rear rack and mudguards. Weight affects the manoeuvrability and, yes, the fun of a child's bike much more than yours, because it's a bigger proportion of bodyweight. A kilo off your son's bike is like 2-3kg from yours.

The frames both have a sloping top tube for greater crotch clearance. They're scaled well too: the reach is fairly short, in part thanks to 60mm stems, and the bottom brackets aren't forced to be too high by overlong cranks. What this means, compared to

ISLABIKES LUATH 26

PRICE: £299.99 (£346.97 as tested with mudguards & rack)
CONTACT: Islabikes, tel: 01746 710835, www.islabikes.co.uk
WEIGHT: 11.5kg (inc. accessories)
Size: 43cm (suits age 9+)
FRAME: 7005 T6 butted aluminium frame, chrome-moly fork. Fittings for 1 bottle, mudguards, front and rear carriers
WHEELS: Kenda Kwest 32-559 (26 x 1.25in) tyres on DBR-1 double-wall aluminium rims, 28 s/s spoke x2, on aluminium QR hubs
TRANSMISSION: Wellgo alloy/resin pedals, 36T 152mm Prowheel aluminium chainset w' double chainguard, cartridge bottom bracket, KMC Z chain, 11/13/15/17/19/22/26/34T cassette, Shimano Altus rear derailleur, Shimano Sora STI shifter. 8 speeds, 26-80in
BRAKING: Tektro Oryx cantilevers
Shimano Sora and Tektro levers
STEERING & SEATING: 1 1/8in threadless headset, 60mm threadless aluminium stem, 36cm aluminium drop handlebar with cork tape, junior race-style saddle, aluminium micro-adjust seatpost
ACCESSORIES: optional. Ours had mudguards & aluminium rear rack



other children's bikes, is that a smaller, younger rider will fit on them than you would guess by wheel size. The Beinn 24 really will be suitable for riders aged seven and up. And while my 12-year-old tester fitted fine on the 26in wheel Luath for now, if I were actually buying the bike I'd get the 700C version.

Both frames have fittings for racks and mudguards front and rear, which are optional extras on either bike. Clearance is fine with mudguards; without them, there's just room for tyres up to 47mm (1.75in).

COMPONENTS

The number of gears is a mark of status for some children. However, I've seldom seen a pre-teen use a front derailleur effectively. In fact, look at any child's bike and I'll give you even odds that right now the chain is on the smallest chainring and smallest sprocket.

Both these Islabikes have a single chainring and a wide ratio 8-speed cassette. Going from 11 to 34 teeth yields a good range of gears – from 25-80 inches on the Luath and similar to that on the smaller-wheeled Beinn. Those eight gears are easier for a child to use than the 14 or 21 on another bike, so he or she will be in the right gear more often.

The Shimano Sora STI lever accounts for about £50 of the Luath's budget (they're £100 a pair). It's fairly intuitive, with a button lever on the brakehood to shift the chain to the smaller sprockets, and a sideswipe of the brake lever to ramp it up onto the larger sprockets. A reach-adjuster puts this adult-scale lever

within the grasp of child. The Tektro brake lever for the rear brake is likewise easily reachable, and it matches the Sora lever in looks. As well as the drop bar levers, the Luath is equipped with auxiliary bar-top levers, so your child's hands are never far from the brakes.

The Tektro Oryx cantilevers of the Luath and the V-brakes of the Beinn are good quality and don't require much hand-strength to use. On both bikes, the rear brake benefits from the fact that the cable run is less convoluted than it might be for a frame with rear suspension or a non-diamond design.

(For the smallest bikes in the range – overleaf – Isla has sourced thinner handlebars and grips, with a scaled-down front brake lever and a rear back-pedal brake, so even the youngest child should have no trouble stopping.)

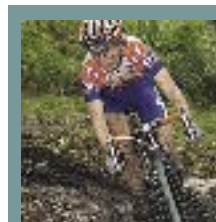
Cranks are correctly proportioned:



(Above) Correctly sized cranks!
 (Below) An 11-34T 8-speed cassette gives a wide, user-friendly gear range

ISLABIKES BEINN 24

PRICE: £199.99
CONTACT: as above
WEIGHT: 10.5kg
SIZE: 31cm (suits age 7+)
FRAME: 7005 T6 butted aluminium frame, chrome-moly fork. Fittings for 1 bottle, mudguards, front and rear carriers
WHEELS: Continental Explorer 47-507 (24 x 1.75in) tyres on DBM-1 double wall aluminium rims, 28 s/s spokes x 2, on aluminium quick release hubs
TRANSMISSION: flat pedals, 36T 140mm Prowheel aluminium chainset w' double chainguard, cartridge bottom bracket, KMC Z chain, 11/13/15/17/19/22/26/34T cassette, Sram SX4 rear derailleur, Sram 3.0 Comp gripshift. 8-speed, 25-77in
BRAKING: Tektro aluminium V-brakes with short-reach levers
STEERING & SEATING: 1 1/8in threadless headset, 60mm threadless aluminium stem, 50cm aluminium flat bar, anatomic saddle, aluminium micro-adjust seatpost
ACCESSORIES: optional



BEHIND ISLABIKES

Isla Rowntree is a lifelong cyclist. She has won many cyclo-cross titles – including National Champion three times, and World Masters – as well as national medals for road racing, track, and

cross country and downhill mountain biking. Her career in the cycle industry began with a Saturday job when she was at school. She later made trailer-cycles under the brands Trailerbikes and Islabikes. Recently she was Head of Sourcing and Design with Halfords; Isla inspired the Carrera Subway 8 (Cycle, Oct/Nov 04). She still rides competitively 'for fun', and also enjoys touring, commuting and club runs. She is Chair of Stourbridge Cycling Club.

152mm for the Luath, 140mm for the Beinn. Not only does this enable the bottom bracket to be a sensible height (as the pedals won't ground like they would on long cranks) and help prevent any toe-overlap with the front wheel, it also, of course, lets your child pedal properly. You'd think all manufacturers would specify short cranks like this – but you'd be wrong. The usual approach among manufacturers knocking out otherwise quite nice bikes seems to be: stick on whatever ought to be on the next size of bike up. (Poor quality children's bikes have it worse, and sometimes get adult cranks!)

The shorter stems of both bikes have been mentioned. As children mostly like to sit a bit more upright than adults, this reduced reach is welcome. There's scope to raise or lower the bars by flipping the stem over or shuffling the spacers a bit. Handlebars are suitably narrow. Those of the Luath deserve special mention: they're not just narrow adult bars (i.e. for women); the reach and drop of the bars is also really small, so they're drops that a child can use all of, as opposed to the tops only.

WHEELS

Of the dozens of children's bikes I've tested, these are the first I've seen with freehubs. Most, even those costing up to £350 or more, come with threaded hubs for a screw-on freewheel. A freehub is stronger, since it puts the drive-side bearings closer to the end of the axle. Children don't exert the same load on wheels that heavy adults do. Nevertheless, they may introduce loads – from, for example, doing jumps off ramps – that adults don't. So having



a stronger wheel is welcome. It's also more upgradeable, as you could fit a different cassette – even a 9-speed.

The wheels have 28 spokes apiece. Given the lighter rider, they don't need as many as an adult wheel. The hubs they're laced to are alloy quick release, so you won't have to carry a spanner, but allen-key skewers would be a sensible alteration if the bike is to be parked at school. Rims are double-wall aluminium ones with a wear line.

By default, the Luath comes with 23mm road tyres and the Beinn with 37mm street tyres. Swapping the tyres at point of purchase is – like the purchase of accessories – one of the *a la carte* options. You can specify 32mm street/touring tyres (as here) or 32mm cyclo-cross tyres for the Luath; or 47mm mountain bike tyres (as here) or 25mm road tyres for the Beinn. You can even buy an extra set of wheels, with tyres, so that the weekday street bike more easily becomes a weekend off-road bike.

RIDE

I'm too big for both of these bikes, so can only observe. The Beinn 24 was on

the small side for even my 10-year-old tester; although he rides a 24in wheel bike normally, he'd have been better off on the Beinn 26. Both the 10 year old and 12 year old fitted the Luath 26 well. The reach looked comfortable and they could easily put a foot down.

Most children today ride bikes with flat or riser bars. Mine have ridden drop bar bikes before, but have had to stretch to use the drops due to an overlong reach. They've struggled with the brakes too. Not here. I showed them how to work the Sora shifter and left them to it. My 12 year old happily switched between tops, brake hoods and drops. In fact, for the duration of the test, he abandoned his own bike for the Luath because it was 'faster and more fun'.

The Beinn looked less work for a child off-road than a comparably priced mountain bike with an aluminium frame and a budget suspension fork. I guess that's down to the lower bike weight, to being in the right gear, and to the fact that bottom end suspension forks don't do much in the first place.

The drop bars are short and shallow, and children can easily reach the brakes

SUMMARY

Both the Luath 26 and Beinn 24 are models of what children's bikes should be: lightweight, correctly scaled, sensibly spec'd, and versatile. Mudguards and racks can be fitted to either bike, or not as you see fit, and there's a good choice of tyres available for both.

The Luath could be used for touring, racing, cyclo-cross, or general street use. The Beinn is suitable for street use, touring (with a flat bar) or mountain biking; its maximum tyre width of 1.75in – due to frame clearance – would be an issue for a heavier adult but isn't for a child.

The simplicity of a rigid fork and a single chainring saves weight and complexity over a suspension fork and a triple chainset without sacrificing function: budget suspension forks *have* relatively little function, while a wide ratio 8-speed cassette offers low and high enough gears.

The wonder is that someone hadn't done this before. It's not rocket science, just uncommonly sensible design. Highly recommended. 🍌

ALSO AVAILABLE

As well as the slightly larger Luath 700C and the Beinn 26-inch versions of the bikes tested, Islabikes caters for younger cyclists. The Beinn 20 (£150, 6-speed) is for ages 5+. Smaller still...



CNOC 16: £109.99
Singlespeed bike for ages 4+ with back pedal rear brake and front V-brake. Lightweight aluminium frame, like its bigger siblings.



ROTHAN: £64.99
Hobby-horse learner bike aimed at ages 2+. Pneumatic tyres, aluminium frame and rims mean it's light and easy rolling.



TRAILERBIKE: £224.99
Return of the original rack-fitting Trailerbike, in improved design. Chromoly frame, 6-speed gearing. For ages 4+.