

The bicycle firm that wants to keep older people pedalling

Isla bikes made a name for itself with children's bicycles – now it wants to get grandparents riding

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Jeremy Adams, 76, tries out the Islabikes Joni: 'I can't remember enjoying a bicycle so much.' Photograph: Shelly Morris for the Guardian

Among a certain type of parent, Islabikes has a near-mythical status for creating children's bicycles that, while far from cheap, are seemingly indestructible as well as easy to ride. Now the company has a new

target group: the grandparents.

In a departure for the Shropshire-based company, it has created a range of bikes aimed specifically for riders aged 65 or more, seeking to use its experience in shrinking and adapting components for little hands to create bikes suited to the reduced flexibility and muscular strength of older age.

The bikes feature easy-to-mount frames, with low gears for hills and other tweaks – for example, tyres that are easy to take off in the event of a puncture even for people with reduced grip strength.



Isla Rowntree, the firm's eponymous founder and boss, says she has grander ambitions: challenging the stereotype of advanced age being little more than a gradual chronology of decrepitude.

As such, she has insisted that any advertising images for the bikes will show people who are not only 65 and above, but – unlike the case for many products aimed at such age groups – very obviously look like they are.

"I've been really assertive with our marketing colleagues that we will picture genuine elderly people on these bikes, we will say who they're for and we're going to celebrate what those people represent – that they're active, important, relevant and to be listened to," she said. "I said I wanted people who really look their age, and look fabulous."

Redefining old age might seem a slight over-reach for a relatively niche bicycle company, but Rowntree styles herself as a campaigner as well as a businesswoman.

Isla Rowntree, the founder of Islabikes: 'We're going to celebrate what these people represent – that they're active, important, relevant and to be listened to.' Photograph: Islabikes

A vehement advocate for better everyday cycling infrastructure, Rowntree is also a passionate environmentalist. [One company project](#) involves trying to make zero-waste children's bikes that are rented rather than bought, and returned to the firm for refurbishment once the rider has outgrown the model.

Islabikes came about after friends and relatives asked their resident cycling expert – Rowntree is a former UK cyclocross champion – for advice on bikes for young children, and she found most of them were cumbersome, weighty and poorly designed. The new range had a similar genesis. Rowntree observed how her parents, who are "keen recreational cyclists" in their mid-70s and live next door to her in Ludlow, began to have difficulties using their existing bikes.

While their fitness remained good, their muscular strength had declined, she says, making low bike weight and a big range of gears important: "For the last few years, whenever I've changed a part on my mother's bike, every time she'll ask me: 'Is it heavier than the bit you've taken off?' It never was, but that was her concern.

"It's the same with gears – if you give them a low enough bottom gear they'll winch their way up just about anything, but they don't have the muscular strength to heave it up. All this isn't rocket science, but it makes so much difference."

The three-bike range is primarily aimed at people who already enjoy cycling, and thus have price tags that might startle novices or dabblers. The cheapest, an everyday bike called the Joni – they all have baby boomer-referencing names – is £800, while the lighter and more sophisticated Janis, for road riding, and Jimi, a mountain bike, cost £1,200.

Many older cyclists use e-bikes, which provide pedalling assistance from a small electric motor. Rowntree says her range is intended for "people who want to ride under their own steam for as long as possible, and then might switch to an e-bike when they need to".

For all the similarities in redesigning bikes for children and older people, there is one clear divergence: unlike young riders, adults generally have to brave the roads rather than happily pedalling through traffic-free parks or on pavements. Rowntree accepts that this is an issue



for many who would like to cycle: "I'd love to get to a time when I'm at a social event and when people find out I ride a bike that they don't reply: 'You're brave.' That happens to me all the time. Regardless of the statistics, if people don't feel safe then they won't ride."

Jeremy Adams road-testing the Islabike Joni: 'I'm pleased to see the complete absence of a crossbar.' Photograph: Shelly Morris

Testing it out

Faced by the Islabike Joni, Jeremy Adams, 76, is immediately struck – and impressed – by one aspect of the bike aimed at older riders.

“I’m pleased to see the complete absence of a crossbar,” he says, examining the low, step-through frame. “Apart from an artificial knee I also have a bit of arthritis on the hip, so raising my leg a full balletic lift would have been possible but definitely uncomfortable.”

While the bike is primarily aimed at older people who still ride, the retired museum curator from Lewes in East Sussex is a potentially tougher proposition to impress, confessing he last spent much time in the saddle about 20 years ago.



‘If you can run, you can do anything’: why over 65s are at the park

But after some time poking, prodding and then lifting up the machine – “It’s surprising light” – Adams sets off for a tryout and returns impressed, even with “a few hundred yards of fairly cautious riding” to get used to the responsive disc brakes, a type

he had not used before.

“It was great fun – I can’t remember enjoying a bicycle so much,” Adams says. “If I was to have a long-term relationship with the bike I would make a couple of little adjustments. I’d probably have a more cushioned seat, and raise the handlebars a little bit, but these are minor things.”

Even the £800 price tag is not as much of a shock as it might have been: “My son-in-law leaves these cycling magazines lying around with bikes in it that cost £5,000, so this doesn’t seem too bad by comparison.”