



SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Drop-bar bikes for children are rare, especially ones versatile enough for touring and transport as well as racing. Guy Kesteven and daughters test two for 8-10 year olds

There are few things guaranteed to make you feel as warmly optimistic as watching kids ride bikes. Not just razzing them round back streets doing skids but actually heading somewhere a few miles from home under their own steam – to explore, experience and start to scratch that independence itch without the isolating barrier of an engine and windows.

But what are the practical issues with getting youngsters as young as eight or nine onto a proper 'road bike' and how have two of the best-established junior bike providers gone about it? Our junior test team has spent a busy month aboard an Islabikes Luath 24 and a Dawes Espoir 3000 24.

Islabikes Luath 24

When it comes to small bike specificity, nobody comes close to Islabikes. Ex custom builder, multiple national champion and previously a designer for both Raleigh and Halfords, Isla

Rowntree set up Islabikes to plug a gap in the market: children's bikes designed from the ground up to give top junior performance from toddlers to teens.

The Luath 24 is the smallest of Isla's geared drop-bar bikes (there are smaller flat bar bikes and, believe it or not, track bikes). While frame size is actually a centimetre taller than the Dawes, a 1.5cm lower bottom bracket and a less padded saddle mean a minimum saddle top to ground height at least 2.5cm lower (even allowing for saddle squish). It's 5cm shorter in reach too, with a unique, downsized drop bar to stop small riders being overstretched.

At 9.41kg with the skinny 23mm road tyre option (9.59kg with 32mm cyclo-cross tyres) it's also a true thoroughbred that our speed-thirsty testers were delighted by straight away. While it has only a rear shifter operating across an 8-speed cassette, it's good for a 40kph (25mph) plus top end, with a 32-tooth rear cog for climbs.

There are three larger Islabikes Luaths than this: the 26, the 700 (small) and 700 (large)

The chainring is replaceable too, and the guards it's sandwiched between are tough alloy rather than easily snapped plastic.

Add wheels that are 770g lighter (370g front, 400g rear), even with the lightly treaded Kenda Small Block cyclo-cross tyres fitted, and on smoother surfaces it simply left the Dawes standing. The pedals are toe-clip compatible and it will take a four-point rack and mudguards for touring or the school run. The smoother ride quality was noticed by all our test urchins on longer trips.

Islabikes only supply bikes direct from their Ludlow base, which means the reach adjuster shims are pre-installed on the Shimano STI shifter for short pull control. Meanwhile the left hand brake is a specific short reach piece anyway, which leaves the bars looking a little lopsided but works fine. The Tektro brakes also deliver sharper, more powerful and confidence enhancing anchorage than the Dawes.

Interestingly, while we thought



NEED TO KNOW

Islabikes Luath 24

Price £399

Weight 9.59kg (with 32mm tyres)

Recommended age 8+

Other options Luath 26, Luath 700 (small), Luath 700 (large)

Frame and fork: 7005 T6 butted alloy frame, fittings for mudguard, rear carrier, 1 x bottle. Cro-moly steel fork with mudguard fittings.

Wheels: 32-507 Kenda Small Block Eight tyres (Kenda Kontender 24x1in fitted as standard), Islabikes Luath double wall rims, Islabikes sealed bearing hubs, 28 stainless steel spokes

Transmission: resin and aluminium toe-clip compatible pedals, 5-arm aluminium chainset, 145mm, 36T churning with twin alloy chainguards, KMC chain, Sram 8-speed 11-32T cassette. Shimano Sora ST1 shifter, Shimano Altus rear mech. 8-speed, 25-74in

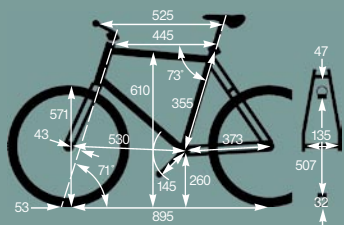
Braking: Tektro Oryx cantilevers, with Shimano Sora front lever, Tektro short-reach rear lever, and Tektro RL726 cross top levers.

Steering & seating: Islabikes custom 350mm compact handlebar, Islabikes custom 65mm threadless stem, CH sealed bearing Aheadset. Islabikes Luath saddle, single-bolt aluminium seatpost.

Accessories: none. Optional: aluminium rear carrier (£29.99), mudguards (£19.99), bottle and cage (£2.99 and £4.99)

Contact: Islabikes Ltd 01584 856881, www.islabikes.com

Saddle top to floor: min 680mm, saddle top to pedal: min 590mm



Despite the same 507 wheel size, the Dawes suits a slightly larger rider (i.e. age 9+)

that the cyclo-cross style auxiliary levers fitted for braking from the flat centre section of the bar were a great idea, our testers found the narrower hand position less controlled. This meant they tended to brake from the drops and then move their hands to shift from the hoods. We thought this might be an issue in traffic or on rolling roads but after an hour's cycle path practice it became second nature.

The Luath's short trail makes it very manoeuvrable. With the smooth and skinny Kenda road tyres fitted the steering can sometimes even stray the wrong side of twitchy. While it's something our riders soon learned to cope with, constant wobble corrections aren't the most relaxing thing for a parent to watch when there's no other route option than the road.

Small section tyres are also

"With a range of accessory options, it's ideal for first forays into racing or touring alike"

much less forgiving if a child clips a pothole or rutted section and are a lot less comfortable and controllable on reclaimed railway track style paths with loose gravel. So, unless your child will actually be racing, we'd recommend paying £30 more when ordering for the much greater versatility and only slightly slower rolling



speed of the wider Kenda Small Block Eight tyres (pictured).

Dawes Espoir 3000 24in
With both bikes together, it's obvious from the first glance that the Dawes is a chunkier-cut chip off the big bike block altogether. While frame height is actually a centimetre less, the much larger volume 40mm tyres and a deeply padded saddle mean that longer legs are needed to straddle the Espoir than the Luath. A longer top tube and stem also create a longer reach to the bars, potentially overstretching the smaller riders who could otherwise squeeze aboard. Lack of auxiliary levers and less powerful brakes meant bigger hands were needed to bring the Espoir to a stop than the Luath too.

Once aboard, those same components also dominated initial ride impressions. The saddle is initially more comfortable and (at half the maximum 100psi pressure) the tyres ride a lot smoother on rougher trails. A bit more trail and heavier wheels equipped with

fatter tyres give the Espoir more stable steering, making it more of a tank in terms of what it could plough through when playing out.

Speaking to Lawrence Cox of Dawes (at CTC's York Cycle Show), that's a deliberate and understandable choice. Selling through a wide range of local dealers, they see their bike as a general purpose road-bike styled ride that can take the rough as well as the smooth. While the Islabike is undoubtedly well made, the thicker tyres, deeper rims and increased spoke count of the Dawes should give it a longer lifespan if that life regularly includes skid competitions, the occasional board-and-bricks jump session, or being borrowed 'for a go' by bigger kids.

It comes drilled and ready for a three-point rear rack and mudguards, which means it's practical as well as playful, and there's much more room between frame and tyres on the Espoir than the Luath to allow for more tyre/guard clearance.

At over a kilo-and-a-half heavier than the Islabike, the Dawes requires significantly more effort to get it going and coax it up climbs, though. A fair amount of that weight comes from the inclusion of a non-replaceable double chainring chainset, front mech and shifter. These proved divisive among our testers. While the press button downshift is easy and immediate, the big lever swing required to shift into the big ring was right at the limit of what most minor mitts could manage. As the bigger gears it delivers are only really useful for tailwind or downhill situations, most of our riders barely used the front shifter.

However, several of our testers thought having 16 gears was brilliant in terms of bragging rights, regardless of how often they used them.

Conclusion

They might share the same 24in wheel size but the bikes here appeal to different junior audiences. The Dawes Espoir 3000



(Above and top) A single chainring saves weight and complexity compared to a double

(Above right) Lever reach is less on the Islabike, but our testers didn't like using the bar top levers

is intentionally a bigger bike in terms of fit, headline gear appeal, and its ability to cope with the more rough-and-ready parts of a kid's bike life. Although the weaker, hoods-only braking takes some getting used to, in handling terms it's a more stable and forgiving ride overall.

Islabikes have done a beautiful job of shrinking the true road bike experience as small as possible. Its carefully calculated fit, low weight and more responsive wheels (in either tyre format) make it feel like a true throughbred. Powerful but pint-size-controllable braking means confident management of higher speeds too. With a range of well thought out accessory options, it's ideal for first foray's into racing or touring alike. Skinny tyres, thinner saddle and faster handling make it most suitable for more experienced riders, however. In both cases we'd go for more easily handled mountain bike options with a flat bar and slick tyres if you're not sure your child is ready for a full road bike.

NEED TO KNOW

Dawes Espoir 3000 24in

Price: £399.99

Weight: 11.18kg

Recommended age: 9+

Other options: Espoir 3000 26in

Frame and fork: Aluminium frame with fittings for 3-point rear carrier, mudguard, 1 x bottle. Steel fork with mudguard fittings.

Wheels: 40-507 Kenda Kwik tyres, Elan V-section rims, unbranded sealed-bearing hubs, 32 stainless steel spokes

Transmission: resin pedals, Aluminium double chainset with plastic chainguard, 150mm, 42/34T pressed steel chainrings, KMC Z chain, Sram 11-30T 8-speed cassette, Shimano Sora STI shifters, Shimano C-series front mech, Shimano Altus rear mech. 16-speed, 26-88in

Braking: Alhonga cantilevers with Shimano Sora levers

Steering & seating:

Aluminium 370mm compact handlebar, Dawes 80mm threadless stem, unbranded headset. Dawes saddle, aluminium single-bolt seatpost.

Accessories: none

Contact: www.dawescycles.com

Saddle top to floor: min 715mm, saddle top to pedal: min 600mm

