



VIVA THE BIBA

We review the Biba 3 cargo bike from Spanish producers Urbanbiba: it certainly looks the part with its load racks front and rear. But how does it ride?

BACKGROUND

The Biba cargo bike, and its parent company, take their name from 'Bike Barcelona': no prizes then for guessing where this machine's made. The company take pride in sourcing as much of the bike as possible locally, so the frame, racks and more are produced in house. Most of the components are EU-sourced, and it's only a few parts

which have had further to travel.

The idea is, say Urbanbiba, to produce an 'urban cargo bike': affordable, practical, stylish and versatile. It's designed to help people become bike-mobile, rather than purely as a courier steed.

Currently the bike is produced in four basic models, according to the gearing used. The one we tested was the basic three-speed S-A hub

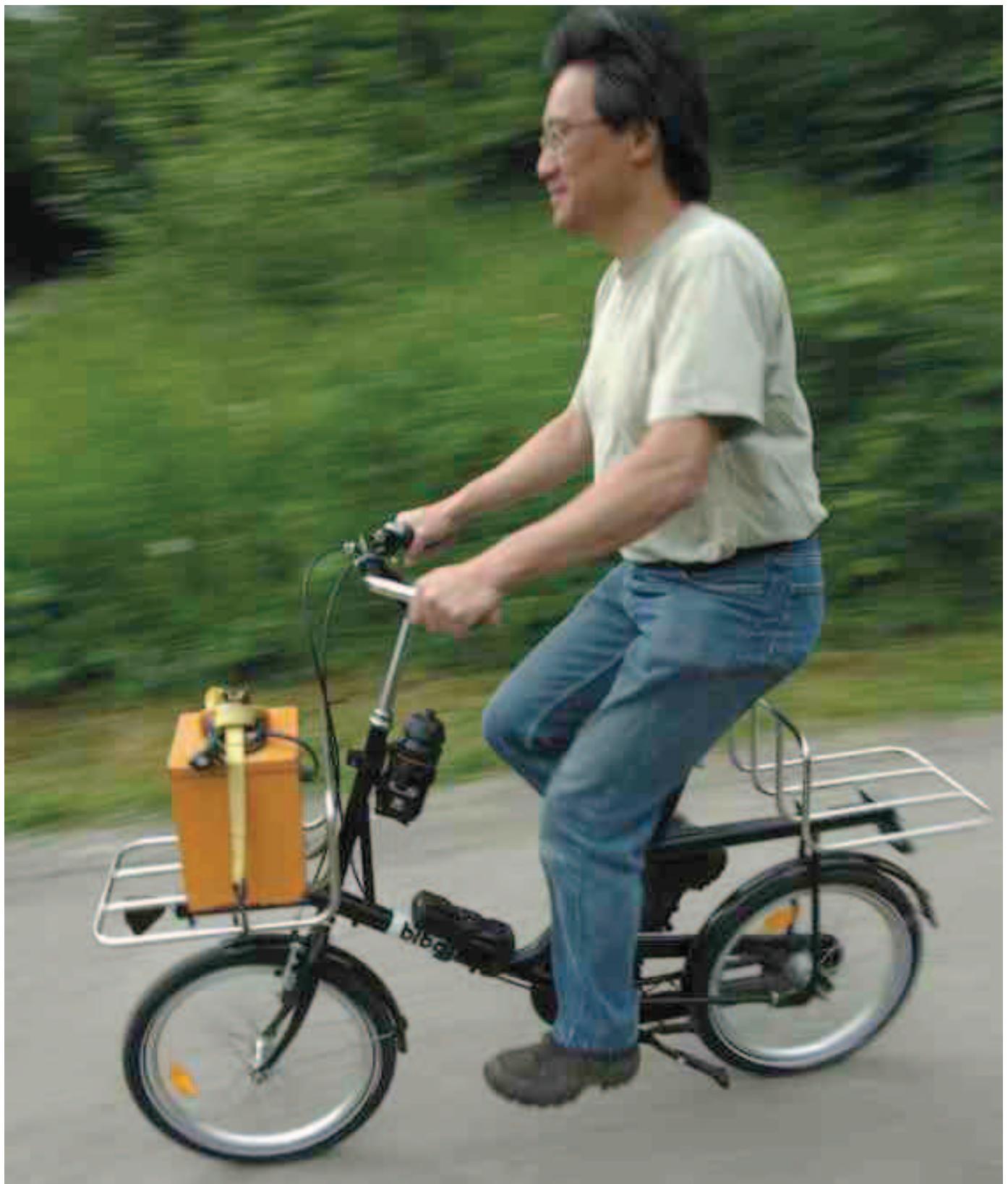
gear version with coaster (back pedal) brake, for £720. There's also a three-speed version with twin V-brakes and freewheel (also £720), an eight-speed (Sturmey again) hub gear version (£815), or an 8-speed derailleur model (£790).

Urbanbiba have also just launched a new model, the Biba mini, with a more conventional rear triangle and no front rack as standard (though all sorts can be fitted). Prices for this start at £630. Also upcoming is a 'Biba longtail' model, with an extended rear load bed to accommodate bigger cargo or two childseats; there will also be an electric assist option.

There are plenty of possibilities for the front and rear carrier locations. Our bike had the large stainless racks front and rear, though the standard UK bike has only the front large rack plus a smaller stainless support at the back to hold standard panniers. Custom made wooden boxes are available, as are child seat adapters. Best visit the website for a full list. Various accessories and upgrades are also possible on request, notably a 'Jumbo' two-leg stand as an upgrade to the standard model. Black is standard, but for £220 custom colours can be chosen instead.

Finally, a note that our review bike was one of the earlier production Bibas – current bikes have minor changes to rack mounts, mudguards and V-brake components, but nothing too significant.

URBANBIBA BIBA 3 CARGO BIKE



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The Biba is a compact machine, with 20" wheels front and back joined by that sinuous steel frame. The main beam dips neatly in the middle to give a low step-through effect, and also a convenient grab point around the balance point of the unloaded bike. With the gleaming stainless steel racks to contrast against the matt black of the frame, most onlookers agreed that the Biba is an attractive-looking machine.

The stainless steel make another less spectacular appearance in the stem and handlebars, too; both are from respected German producer Humpert, who also supply the seatpost. The long adjustment range on the stem, along with angle adjustment of the bars, means that it's easy to achieve riding positions from leaned-over to fairly upright – which is how I left the bike for most of the review.



While we're at the handlebars, note the cork grips. They looked lovely but did occasionally move on the bars, and they're also quite smooth and hard. Urbanbibia offer a rubber alternative, or you can easily upgrade them yourself if it bothers you.

There's just one brake lever on our bike, for the front V-brake. A coaster brake on the Sturmey-Archer three-speed hub slows the back wheel. Both wheels are 36-spoked, 20" (406) models with double-wall alloy rims, shod with Rubena tyres. It's not a brand I know, but a robust-looking tyre with puncture protection.

The transmission is all concealed by that large black chaincase, completely sealing the chain drive from rain and dirt, and keeping your clothes clean too. The cranks are steel-armed models rather than the more common alloy type, presumably as a cost-saving measure. They might be a few grams heavier, but otherwise there should be no functional difference really.



The Biba's stand is fine on good surfaces, but a more substantial model would be a good upgrade.



Good to see a full chaincase.

The Biba comes with a two-legged stand as standard, but it's a fairly basic and narrow model, and it's only really good for supporting the bike unloaded unless you're on a very firm and flat surface. It's still handy to have.

Our bike was fitted with battery lighting front and rear, attached to tidy brackets. It's tempting to suggest that future versions might tuck the lights neatly into the ends of the main tubes. Of course you could fit a dynamo system instead if you prefer.

In some of the photos, incidentally, you'll see the Biba fitted with the Monkii Clip bottle cage adaptor and the Abus lock, both reviewed elsewhere in this issue. With no bottle bosses on the frame this seemed a neat way to add these two urban essentials.

I didn't get to weigh the Biba, but it didn't feel heavy at all for a cargo bike.

No figure is given for maximum payload: riders just need to apply common sense!

THE RIDE

The unladen Biba is a pleasant ride: it rolls along really well, and with an upright riding position and those wide, swept-back bars I found it a comfortable bike too. But the lasting impression was of stability: the steering geometry must be spot on. It'll go where you point it without a trace of small-wheel nervousness, and this really made for a relaxing experience.

It was practical, too, for the moments before and after a ride. It's not too heavy to lift up and manoeuvre, and it fitted easily into the space a normal bike takes up. The twin racks front and rear seemed to make it especially easy to lean against things: they give the bike straight 'edges' which fall naturally against walls and suchlike. I also noted that the frame provides a good selection of triangles through which you can lock the frame to something solid.

The Biba's one of the easier cargo bikes to load up, although as already mentioned a wider two-leg stand would help, especially on soft surfaces. But the stainless steel racks are really good: their shape



ABOVE: The front light mount does the job, but could a future version maybe tuck neatly into the end of the frame tube?



means you can load a wide variety of objects straight on, keeping loads symmetrical and on the bike's centreline. The stainless tubing is ideal for hooking bungee cords or ratchet straps to when securing the load, and the racks are wide enough to provide good lateral support so loads don't wobble. Longer loads can simply jut out each side to whatever distance you're comfortable with!

Using stainless steel for the racks is a really good design decision: it means that the inevitable scratches are essentially invisible. Loading up the Biba with the 25 kg metal-cased site transformer you see in some of the photos would have left marks, or at least yellow paint traces, on almost any other type of rack. Even with the ratchet strap holding it down tight to the rack it moved a little over the bumps. I ended up riding about 8 miles with it, and the rack was still pristine afterwards.

The ride when loaded was still very good indeed. With all of the load on the frame and none on the steering, it retains the pinpoint handling I'd come to enjoy. You can of course feel the weight resisting the corners at times, especially tight turns at low speed. Front rack loads need to almost move sideways in sharp turns. But I certainly found it easy to control. With the bars set for an upright ride there's not much weight on your wrists, so the control forces feel lighter, perhaps, than they might if you were more leaned over. In any case, it worked for me.

It was only on really rough surfaces that the Biba lost some of its composure. It's probably an inevitable consequence of the

small wheels, fairly hard tyres and no suspension, but I found that bigger bumps did rather jar the bike, especially with a load on the front. Careful riding can avoid the worst potholes, of course, and when laden it's wise on general principles to keep the speed down so you can ease the bike over the worst road damage.

The gearing is, anyway, not exactly intended for speed. The ratios work out as 36, 48 and 64 gear inches, so top speed is very much limited by how fast you can comfortably spin your legs. On the flat I didn't find the lack of even lower gears a real obstacle: if you take your time and don't aim for any great acceleration, even loaded up there's not too much straining involved. And the simplicity of the system is commendable...

Hills were a different matter, and with significant weight on board you'll want to be comfortable either getting out of the saddle or pushing the bike on significant gradients

– or choose a version with wider range gearing. Unladen, I found it responded well to a bit of out-of-the-saddle effort, and a modestly fit rider like me could 'dance' it up most short hills.

Braking seemed more than adequate for downhills and sudden stops: the V-brake on the front wheel is a powerful stopper with a good feel, and once I'd got used to the coaster brake that was good too: you can use the strength of your legs to really apply it hard until the rear wheel is on the verge of locking. Really long, steep descents might need more braking (to prevent the rim overheating at the front, and the brake burning out at the back) but in most places the Biba will have all the stopping it needs.

CONCLUSIONS

I really liked the Biba! It has a superbly stable ride, and is relatively light, simple and affordable: just what the designers intended. It's by no means the ultimate cargo bike: look elsewhere if your needs are extreme either for loads carried or terrain to be tackled. But for 'normal' cargo use, it's superb.

It looks smart and should stay that way with its stainless steel carriers and that fully enclosed chaincase to keep the transmission clean. It carries cargo really well, too, both in terms of handling and in the ergonomics of securing the loads.

I don't find much to niggle about. Bottle cage bosses would be nice, perhaps, but it's easy enough to clamp cages on instead, and too

many braze-ons would just add to the cost. The cork grips are stylish but slippery, but those bothered by this can change them easily. All sorts of other upgrades could be added too if you wanted them: Magura brakes, hub dynamos, ergonomic grips and extended gear range all spring to mind, but none are really essential.

The main possible weak points on the bike we reviewed are already addressed in the options list. The three speed hub won't suit hillier places, but there are two 8-speed options. If the wide stainless racks don't suit your luggage, you can go for the narrow version which fits panniers, or wooden boxes to carry loose items. And if the stand isn't to your taste, they offer upgrades for that too.

All in all, and at the relatively modest (for a cargo bike) price of £720, I think the Biba really deserves serious consideration – and not just for cargo carrying 'professionals', but also for anyone who lugs around loads or children on a regular basis. Or for anyone who wants something that bit different – yet very practical – for their town bike!

Peter Eland

AVAILABILITY

Manufacturer: see www.urbanbiba.com

UK distributor: ES Distributions

UK, Tel 07979 080958 or email esdistributionsuk@gmail.com

Test bike kindly provided by Get Cycling, York: Tel 01904 636812 or see www.getcycling.org.uk

Two new models are under development, the Biba longtail (below) and Biba mini (right). Prototypes are seen here at a trade show.

