

Zambikes Bamboo Bikes Turn Heads In The U.S., Fight Poverty In Africa



An African bike company builds bikes for the poor, funded by selling you a super-light sweet bamboo ride. In Zambia, bicycles grow on trees, or rather bamboo, the primary building material for many [Zambikes](#). Groves of it grow outside the company's factory, which is run by two Zambians and two Americans on a quest to build a local bike for Africans, and employ the "uneducated and underprivileged" to make them for the rest of the world.

So far, Zambike has cranked out at least 8,000 metal bicycles and 900 bicycle ambulances and cargo carts in Southern Africa; they've sold 200 bamboo bicycle frames worldwide. The company's goal, besides benefiting communities around it, is to sell affordable, effective transportation throughout Zambia, a country where the [average life expectancy is 47 years old](#), and infant mortality approaches one in 10 births. The for-profit firm was founded in a partnership with U.S. nonprofit [Akerfa](#), and has employed more than 100 people, says Zambikes cofounder Vaughn Spethmann.

"Our products are saving and changing lives," said Spethmann during an interview with [SOCAP Europe](#). "We are creating opportunity and employment. Our goal of having Zambikes be run by Zambian nationals will ensure that Zambikes will be a catalyst for change for decades to come."

The design is relatively straightforward, though labor intensive. Three-year-old bamboo is cut, preserved, and cured for several months before being cut to size. The frame is then bound with wood glue and plant fiber cords soaked in epoxy, and affixed to the metal components. The whole process takes as long as a week, but produces a 95% bamboo bike that is "one of the classiest, comfortable rides in the bike industry" with almost "magical" vibration absorption, says the company. Models have fetched about \$900 abroad, and a [messenger bike version is now available for export](#).

But you may soon have pick of bamboo bikes. While Zambike has perhaps the strongest environmental and social credentials, a growing number of shops and designers are crafting bicycles out of the material and some are even expanding into solid wood. [Renovo](#), inspired by wooden WWII fighter planes, handcraft their frames from hardwood simply because it's a superior material, says the company, with "engineering properties suit the requirements of most bicycle applications better than any other material." Although not a good candidate for large-scale manufacturing, "where production is limited, and the properties of wood are matched to the product, it is difficult to surpass."

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By <http://www.fastcoexist.com/1678539/zambikes-bamboo-bikes-turn-heads-in-the-us-fight-poverty-in-africa>