



Karen Darke Paralympian and adventure handcyclist

ADAPTIVE CYCLING HAS always felt like a way to reclaim freedom. After a climbing accident in 1993 left me paralysed from the chest down, I knew I wanted to find a way back into cycling. At the time, handcycles were almost unheard of; I'd never seen one.

I asked Greenspeed, a trike manufacturer in Australia, to build me a tandem recumbent trike, pedalled by the arms at the front. A frame builder in Scotland built me a solo handcycle. From there I moved on to one of the early commercially available machines from Varna, then to increasingly low, recumbent racing designs originally developed by wheelchair manufacturers. I raced on a machine from Carbonbike at Paralympic level.

The evolution of handcycling since those early days has been extraordinary. What was once improvised and rare is now a popular sport and thriving industry. After a 13-year focus on racing and Paralympic handcycling, I felt somewhat starved of my real passion: cycle touring and adventure, exploring wilder places. I missed big landscapes, the feeling of being out in nature, remote, with friends or a small team.

That's what drew me to off-road handcycles and eventually to the

Karen's trike

Bike: Sprint X Tour Handcycle (icetrikes.co).

Price: from £9,520 for the standard e-assist version. (Karen's bespoke Mongolian one was human powered.)

Key equipment for Mongolia:

- Two Nalgene bottles. (Fill with boiling water and drop into a sock for life-saving hot water bottles that you can drink from in the morning.)
- Locally sourced Mongolian horse hair boots, wool-lined, to keep feet toasty at -40°C.
- Thigh-length camel-wool socks (Mongolia sourced).
- Handwarmers.
- Yak wool mittens.
- Everest down suit (borrowed).
- Fur-lined hat and neck warmer.
- Merino wool base layers with hood.
- Plastic, 3D-printed hand pedals and parts to prevent cold metal contact with the body.

More information:
Karen's own website is karendarke.com.



In February, Karen rode her ICE Sprint X Tour handcycle 160km across the ice of Lake Khuvsgul in Mongolia

Near left: John Bakie. Other by icetrikes.co

ICE Full Fat. Built as a one-off by Inspired Cycle Engineering, who had been collaborating with another manufacturer on off-road designs, the fat trike opened up terrain I'd only ever imagined reaching. I'd read about one being used on an expedition to the centre of Antarctica – and I had Antarctic ambitions of my own.

More recently, ICE has developed its own dedicated off-road handcycle with electrical assistance and some beautifully considered engineering. It's designed for accessibility, comfort, packability and serious terrain capability. It feels like a machine built not just to function but to broaden horizons. I rode it across Scottish beaches and beside lapping waves, shedding tears for the connection with nature and adventure I had missed.

My ICE trikes have taken me to extraordinary places. The Full Fat travelled with me to Antarctica – although on deeper snow and ice I had to switch to a sit-ski. But it has carried me to the summit slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro

(cyclinguk.org/handcycle-kilimanjaro) and to Everest Base Camp (with help from an incredible porter team). Destinations that once lived purely in my imagination became reachable.

Like any form of cycling, one machine rarely does everything. Adaptive cycling mirrors conventional cycling in that different journeys call for different machines – road touring, technical off-road riding, steep climbing. Cost and storage make owning multiple handcycles difficult, so a cycle that matches your biggest ambitions is the best starting point.

As I write this, I am about to use ICE's recently released handcycle to cross a frozen lake in Mongolia: 160km across Lake Khuvsgul. I only had the chance to take it for a quick spin around Richmond Park before this.

For anyone considering adaptive cycling, the single most important piece of advice is to try before you buy. Fortunately, there are growing opportunities to experiment and find what suits you (see overleaf). Whatever you choose, I'm sure it will open up a world of possibility. →