Chinese food, uphill grinds and the Cornice That Ate Alberta: 14 days on a bike tour down Canada's Icefields Parkway

By McKAY JENKINS

The Do-It-Yourself BIKE TOUR

Alberta's Icefields Parkway beckons bikers with a wide shoulder and jaw-dropping views.

LISA SILVERMAN

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, WHILE RIDING OUR BIKES SOUTH FROM Glacier National Park to our home in Missoula, my wife, Katherine Hinckley, and I crossed paths with a pair of cyclists who were pedaling all the way to Colorado. Beside ourselves with the fractured beauty of the mountains, the gray-blue glow of the glacial rivers and routine encounters with mountain goats and bighorn sheep, we asked our fellow travelers if they felt as pleased as we did to have found such a perfect stretch of road. Surprisingly, they said no. ❦ Glacier, they said, hardly compared with the cycling a few hundred miles north, near Jasper, Alberta. Up there, they said, you had mountains that stretched for hundreds and hundreds of miles, a road with a six-foot shoulder and, because the Canadian parks are so huge, far less traffic than was found near the mighty—but densely popular—fortress of Glacier. ❦ They were right, of course. ❦ Finally able to wean ourselves from an acute addiction to the mountains of northwest Montana, we decided last summer to stretch our imaginative horizons northward and put together a 14-day, 300-mile bike trip from Jasper to Banff, down Alberta's Route 93, the Icefields Parkway. We invited along three friends with varying degrees of cycling experience: a couple, Nick Breifogel and Jillian Gustin, and Walter Cumming. Nick and Walter had both biked close to a thousand miles on various trips through France; Jillian had never ridden for more than an hour straight. We agreed to meet on an early-August day at the airport in Edmonton, Alberta. We would carry all our own gear on our bikes, cook most of our meals and sleep in tents. To whet everyone's appetite for the mountainous terrain that lay ahead—and to ease any anxiety—I enthused about the rare chance to camp near glaciers and described the high point of our route there: a series of cornices, massive overhanging curtains of snow that could break off at any moment and crash down like an apocalyptic train wreck. So enamored did we become of these mythic formations that we came up with a name for one of them. Our trip became an expedition to glimpse the Cornice That Ate Alberta.

We arrived at Edmonton's airport on flights from three cities, each with a bicycle packed in a cardboard box. Although most airlines charge $50 each way to ship a bike, some kindhearted ticket takers have been known to count bikes as free pieces of checked luggage, provided that all other gear fits inside carry-on panniers. This we accomplished by packing smart: We padded our bicycle boxes with our sleeping bags and mats and cold-weather gear, which also helped protect the bikes from the beating they took in transit. We were careful not to pack stoves or fuel bottles with any gas inside, in either the panniers or the bike boxes; airlines tend to be touchy about risking an explosion just because someone doesn't want to buy another can of white gas. We emptied the bottles and stoves and packed them in the bike boxes.

After piling into our rented van, we drove five hours through the farms of western Alberta and arrived in blazing sunshine in downtown Jasper, a gateway to the northern Rockies that is more or less unblemished by the blight that has dulled similar mountain towns to the south. We unloaded outside a local bike shop and put our bikes together on the sidewalk—a wise thing to do, since some part or piece of gear always seems to get lost during the trip out. I've had bikes arrive mysteriously missing skewers (the rods that fasten the wheels to the fork) and headset lock nuts (which attach the handlebars to the frame); somehow these small but essential pieces of hardware managed to slip through the box's handholds. The solution to this problem? Duct tape. Use it either to strap small hardware to the frame of the bike or to

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Once the bikes had been rebuilt and balanced, our racks and panniers screwed to their respective frames and our sleeping gear and tents bungeed to the rear racks, we crossed the street in search of food. Buying provisions for bike touring is, as a rule, considerably simpler than laying in stores for a long canoe or backpacking trip because most bike routes follow public roads that are dotted with restaurants, grocery stores or, at the very least, gas station quickie marts. In most places, local food—and the ability to buy it fresh several times a day—is one of the best reasons to ride in the first place; there is nothing quite like eating fresh wild blueberries in Maine or Flathead cherries in Montana. Crossing New England on an eight-day, 550-mile ride from Maine's Mount Desert Island to my family's home in the Hudson River valley of New York a few years back, Katherine and I looked forward to stopping at farmstands and country stores where we could buy a quart of apple juice and a coffee cake and chat with the locals.

Bike tourers are thus usually exempt from having to carry days' or weeks' worth of food, which, when climbing over, say, New Hampshire's 2,890-foot Kancamagus Pass or Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, can be a very good thing. In this regard, the Jasper-to-Banff route was unlike any other long ride I had done. We knew there were markets at either end of the trip and a handful of restaurants in between, but it could be 60 mountainous miles between food stops, far too long to go with only energy bars in our pockets. Since we had decided to take our time on this trip—riding about 30 miles a day rather than the 60 or 70 most of us had done on more compressed tours—and spend days hiking in between, we were each forced to stuff some 10 pounds of groceries into our panniers and tough out the extra weight.

Moreover, even in the Canadian Rockies, water from most streams must be treated rather than drunk straight. Since sources of pure water were only slightly more frequent than grocery stores—most primitive campgrounds on the route had clean-water pumps—we each carried four quarts of water, twice what I consider standard. On reflection, using a filter to draw water from creeks would have spared us that extra weight.

The next morning, geared up and fully loaded, we left Jasper and headed south along the Athabasca River toward the Columbia Icefield. We had been musing on the climb up to the icefield for months—how the monstrous cornices overhanging the ridges could be seen from miles away, and how keeping them in sight helped exhausted cyclists climb the 2,700 vertical feet to the saddle at Sunwapta Pass.

In the meantime, there was plenty to inspire. At Athabasca Falls, a crush of water rushed through a tiny chasm, roaring and frothing with snowmelt flushed out of the mountains. One day we locked our bikes in camp and hiked up to the Geraldine Lakes, a stunning, glaciated staircase punctuated with waterfalls leading into and out of the turquoise lakes. The August heat shimmered off the snow that fingered down avalanche paths on all sides; ancient rock slides provided root beds for intrepid spruce and lodgepole pines as well as homes for furry pikas, which popped up and

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But it was to the icefield that the road led, and to the icefield we pushed. To our left, a ridgeline known as the Endless Range swept southward like a giant dorsal fin; barren of trees and scarred first by glaciers and then by timeless avalanches, the range made us feel as if we were riding inside a trough. To our right the wide, graveled plain of the Sunwapta River was alive with wildflowers.

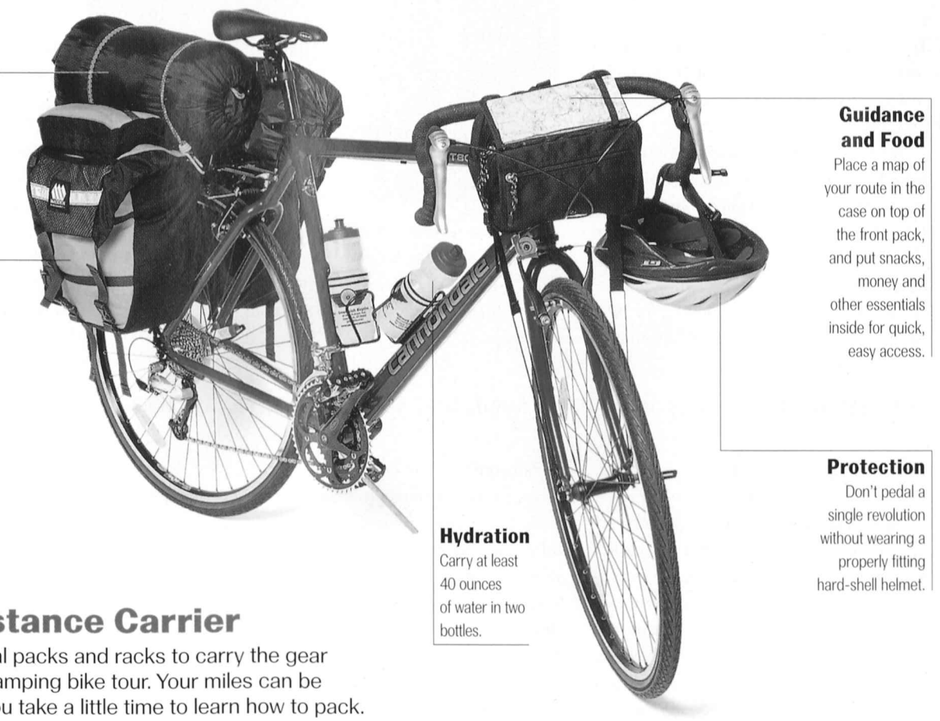
A stiff headwind made progress slow and onerous. There is nothing—not rain, not cold, not even nasty dogs—bike tourers hate more than a headwind. As we pushed along toward the icefield, the wind blew full force down the mountain corridor. Like canoe paddlers, we were compelled to keep our noses pointed as directly into the wind as possible because veering off to an angle meant risking being blown off the road.

Still, up ahead, the icefield loomed, its cornices drooping like colossal white lips. Even from a distance of 15 miles, they seemed to defy gravity, as if they were hanging there to prove the elasticity of snow. Every few miles we passed signs warning of avalanche danger or of unexploded avalanche-control shells lurking on backcountry slopes. The signs are meant primarily to alert winter travelers, but they have a way of directing one's gaze toward the peaks, which even in summer can carry a fair weight of snow. And since the entire length of the parkway runs along the bottom of a steep valley, there is no shortage of snow-crested peaks—many rising above 11,000 feet—to remind the summer traveler of colder and less hospitable climes.

On we pushed. Shortly before nightfall, after a 50-mile ride through the mountains, we finally arrived at the campground just below Sunwapta Pass and directly across from the glaciers. We were deeply tired and gloriously oxygenated, and the only thing left to do before replenishing all those burned calories was to bathe in the icy creek.

Our view from beneath the rinse bucket was spectacular. There are three glaciers visible from the icefield: Dome, Stutfield and Athabasca, the last of which is retreating at a rate of about 50 feet a year—about the same speed, it seemed, that we had moved up the last steep hill to our campsite. In its entirety, the Columbia Icefield covers some 130 square miles, the largest body of ice in the Rockies. An average winter drops 30 feet of snow on the glaciers, which is nonetheless not enough to keep the glaciers advancing. Given that the Columbia Icefield is in some places 1,200 feet deep, it is easy to understand how inexorably moving snow gouges canyons out of solid rock.

Dinner at the icefield, as all meals on the road should be, was a remarkable affair. Supper in the tourist center was already under way, with plate after plate of Chinese food (Chinese food!) arriving to the accompaniment of nuclear-green margaritas. If it is true that food never tastes better than it does on a long bike tour, the same cannot necessarily be said, no matter the extent of your thirst, about margaritas. The stuff we drank that night looked like Scope and tasted about the same. Never again, we decided, would we order Mexican drinks in a Chinese restaurant atop a Canadian mountain.



Long-Distance Carrier

You need special packs and racks to carry the gear required for a camping bike tour. Your miles can be happy ones if you take a little time to learn how to pack.

LISA SILVERMAN (ABOVE), ANDRE GILLARDIN

The next morning, as we nursed our sore muscles in our tents, we heard a *crack* ring out across the valley, followed by a frightening roar. Jumping out of our sleeping bags, we soon discovered the source: The Cornice That Ate Alberta had finally sheared off and come hammering down, its death throes echoing across the valley. Fortunately, the crumbling mass of snow harmed no one as it fell.

Exhilarated, we broke camp and rode off to enjoy the downhill fruits of our previous day's climb. We rolled practically without pedaling for the better part of 20 miles and arrived at the terrific campground at Rampart Creek, where we set up our tents.

After warming up a bucket of water for quick baths—a luxury we deserved after our frigid experience of the night before—we bundled up in our warmest clothes and settled down to a restorative game of hearts around an afternoon pot of tea, the latter strained, it should be stated for those looking for Neat Camping Tips, through Katherine's bra. We intended to go for a hike after playing a couple of hands—no way would we waste a day in the Canadian Rockies playing cards. Six hours later, not only were we still playing, but we had so lost the spirit of friendly gamesmanship that we made a new rule: Whoever had the worst cumulative card score at the end of the trip would be obliged to let the other three dress him or her up as a 1970s rock star for dinner in a trendy Philadelphia restaurant. Suddenly, the game got very intense.

One does not live by bike alone when traveling the Icefields Parkway—the camping and hiking are great too.

Between feverish efforts at shooting the moon, we spent the last few days of the trip riding up and over Bow Pass, the highest point on the parkway. As we climbed to nearly 6,800 feet, it became apparent how vertical terrain, both up and down, presents a group of cyclists with a chance to test its diplomatic skills. Different riders have different tastes for adrenaline. Some enjoy the rush of barreling down mountain roads, at times reaching speeds in excess of 50 miles per hour. Others develop muscle spasms from gripping their brake levers so tight—but don't have to worry about blowing out a tire and careening into a rocky abyss.

The same is true for the uphill grinds. I prefer to put my head down, grip the handlebars and pound up a mountain pass as fast as my legs, drowning in lactic acid, can stand. Others prefer to move more slowly, taking in the scenery (I suppose) and saving their strength (I suppose) for unforeseen challenges later in the day. Whatever the case, if speedy riders can reach the bottom of a long descent 10 minutes before their comrades, they may arrive at the top of the next pass 30 or 40 minutes ahead of riders they rode beside just 90 minutes before. This presents a dilemma for the team: It's relatively easy to bike in pairs or even groups along flat ground, but what should be the policy on hilly terrain? Slower riders hate to be told to step on it, and faster riders chafe under dictates to slow down. Optimal dynamics, it seems, are reached when two or more riders stay close enough together to lend each other assistance in times of need (flat tires, empty water bottles); quicker riders should stop periodically (at the top and bottom of a climb, particularly) but not be forced to alter their natural riding rhythm. These issues, like everything else in the outdoors, are best discussed ahead of time but are rarely ironed out satisfactorily until they have been tested on the road.

We ended our trip with a couple of short rides to Lake Louise and Banff, trips that were notable mainly for the steadiness of the rain that fell on us and the increasing number of tourists and RVs. We did finagle a night in a youth hostel in Lake Louise, despite heavy crowds and having arrived without reservations, and enjoyed using the laundry, which, after four days of riding in the rain, helped make us presentable for our first night in a town in two weeks. Warm, dry and fed, we sat down for a few last hands of hearts, this time in the sauna, and completed a card game that had come to make some in our group as nervous as a ride on a steep downhill grade in a downpour.

For the record, Katherine will be dressing as Cher. ❋

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LISA SILVERMAN (2)