

Off-the-Grid and On the Road: Touring Alaska's Prince of Wales Island

by Geoff Kirsch
photos by Libby Sterling



Which brings me to the harshest reality of cycling in Southeast Alaska — rain. The entire region comprises Earth's largest remaining temperate rain forest. Prince of Wales receives 120 inches of rainfall annually. That's 100 inches more than the state average and almost twice that of Astoria, Oregon, the third wettest city in the U.S.

Essentially, I was outfitted as a kayaker with neoprene booties, neoprene gloves, and dry bags. So inclement was the weather at certain points, I had to wear ski goggles.

As for bicycle equipment, Karla took a road bike with thin tires, front and rear panniers; Libby opted for a mountain bike with mid-width tires and rear panniers only; and I rocked my usual rig — mountain bike, fat tires, and, to tote the gear, my daughter's trailer.

In retrospect, I chose poorly. Chalk the trailer up to thriftiness; panniers and racks are expensive. But you get what you pay for.

Reaching POW necessitates going through Ketchikan. We took the scenic route, loading our bikes onto an Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) ferry from Juneau. Overnighting aboard an AMHS ferry is an experience in and of itself, sort of

like taking a cruise operated by New Jersey Transit. Accommodations exist, but they're hardly luxurious. On our ship, the M/V Matanuska, we could have reserved a three-berth cabin with private bath for about \$100 (in addition to the passenger fare). Like duti-



ful Alaskans, we opted for sleeping bags in the solarium for free.

The bar opens from 11 AM to 11 PM, and is great for chatting up strangers. On our trip there were Austrian tourists

butchering Red Hot Chili Peppers songs; a kid and his grandfather on a "bucket list" trip; a group of middle-aged Harley riders who couldn't believe we had fun without "burning dinosaurs;" and a British cyclist in the midst of riding solo from Fairbanks to Argentina, who claimed to be afraid of camping in undeveloped campgrounds because of bears. We hadn't the heart to tell him that bears lurk around developed campgrounds, too.

While you've got to love a bike tour whose first leg includes beer, fries, and halibut burgers — be careful. Eventually, you arrive in Ketchikan, where it will probably be raining, and getting dark. The eight-mile ride to Ward Lake Three C's Campground would have provided a rude awakening even if I hadn't been groggy with food and drink.

Encumbered with panniers for the first time, Libby and Karla wobbled a bit but quickly got the hang of it. My disembarkation didn't go nearly as smoothly. True to form, less than 100 yards off the ferry, my trailer slipped from the hitch, immediately gumming itself in the rear tire, derailleur, and chain. The last time this happened, it



Bambi? If Sitka deer are all you see on POW, you might consider yourself lucky.

CASEY GREENE

took two days and three people to fix it. This time, thankfully, I disentangled without having to disassemble. However, my gearing wouldn't be the same for the remainder of the trip. Neither would my right knee, which had also jammed in the melee.

Another problem: While I'd trained pulling a 30-pound toddler, I hadn't ridden fully loaded down with all my stuff. The ride to Ward Lake proved absolutely grueling. At the crest of one hill, Karla stopped and asked if I was going to have a

heart attack. I said no, but wasn't entirely convinced.

By sheer grit — and cursing — I willed myself to the campground just as darkness fell, drifting off to the steady pounding of rain on our tent and salmon splashing in the creek. At least I hoped it was salmon.

Morning broke cold and gray with mist lifting off the trees as though the mountains were on fire. The ride back to town proved no easier. Now I faced a sobering dilemma — I'd over-packed. This isn't

hard to do. In addition to regular rainfall, summer temperatures on POW range from the mid-40s to the mid-80s, which means toting many layers and second set of everything I couldn't get on Prince of Wales. Like bike seat bolts, for instance.

It was day three of my POW bicycle tour and I hadn't even made it to the island. In fact, I'd barely even bicycled at all. With 150 miles of pedaling ahead of me, including a mountain pass Karla said her Honda struggled to summit, I seriously considered bagging the whole thing.

But just as the clouds settled over my mood, the sun came out briefly, and I found myself before a public street map of Ketchikan with the inscription: "There's no such thing as can't."

So I sucked it up and repacked the trailer. I stashed every ounce of luxury I could jettison in a utility room at the hotel: my travel guitar, a bag of homemade brownies, anything made of cotton (including underwear), even the cardboard boxes my instant Indian food came in. By the time I'd reconfigured, my spirits had lifted substantially. The ride back to the ferry felt comparatively effortless. Mind over matter, I boarded the boat to Hollis, POW. No turning back now.



Mt. Hood Loop
June to October
\$300 per person

Bike the Cascade Huts Mt. Hood Loop
Self-Guided Multi-Day Trips in Oregon's Mt. Hood National Forest

- Enjoy a 4-day, 3-night, 130+ mile ride around spectacular Mt. Hood, cycling along forest roads with single-track options every day.
- Begin and end in Hood River, biking through the stunning scenery of the Columbia River Gorge, Mt. Hood National Forest, and the historic Oregon Trail.
- Our system of fully-stocked huts provides cyclists a challenging yet convenient way to enjoy the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest.




cascadehuts.com
971.322.3638

Cascade Huts is an equal opportunity recreation provider operating under special use permit on the Mt. Hood National Forest, USDA Forest Service.

www.TopperRacks.com (800) ATOC-021

ATOC www.Atoc.com

(800) 659-5569 www.Draftmaster.com



Roof top carriers for singles tandems recumbents



Pivoting & non-pivoting styles available

A NEW DIVISION OF ATOC



Receiver hitch carriers for singles tandems trikes recumbents



series **Randonneur**

Performance you want, Protection you need.




AQUAFLOW

PRB Double Shielding

Vittoria has the largest range of armored tires in the industry - from protected race tires to our virtually indestructible Randonneur, and everything in between. More choices, fewer setbacks...all riding on 50 years of bicycle tire expertise.

Visit your local dealer or find one at www.vittoriausa.com.

Vittoria

www.vittoria.com
Ph. 1-800-223-3207

The inter-island ferry is smaller than its state-run counterpart, and full of regulars. A word to the wise — stake out your territory as spaces fill quickly, especially in the coffee shop, which again serves surprisingly excellent halibut burgers.

Soon, POW loomed in all its verdant glory. Evidence of clear-cut logging exposed various scars, folds, and gashes in the mountains, like a person who suddenly shaves his head.

We landed in Hollis, which isn't a town as much as a ferry dock and a few houses. Aside from a vending machine in the IFA office, no services exist. The closest accommodations, a few summer rental cabins, are nearly six miles away. We were headed to Harris River Campground, a looping complex of gravel laid down atop muskeg, about six miles farther away.

Now, we were touring. At Maybeso Creek — POW is a crazy, wild place with crazy, wild names, like LAGNAF Creek (as in "Let's All Get Naked and ... well, you get the picture") — we stopped to view thousands of salmon, some eviscerated by bears, the luckier ones spawning.

Considering most POW tourism involves hunting and fishing, the sight of three people on bikes wearing fluorescent-colored

rubber clothes was a spectacle. For the rest of the week, we kept hearing "You're the ones on the bicycles; we heard you were headed our way." For a big island, POW is pretty small.

"You got an electric motor on that thing?" some guys yelled from a passing truck.

"No," Karla called back. "We're powered by halibut burgers."

Karla likened us to bicycle ambassadors, and she had a point. Most people who slowed at the sight of two women and an oversized man pulling a trailer festooned with Dora the Explorer stickers stopped to chat.

After a wet night and soggy morning at Harris River, we lubed up and rode 11 wind-swept miles toward Klawock. On one side of the "highway," spruce-covered mountains dropped into swampy muskeg, chockablock with stands of gnarly, stunted trees. The other side opened every so often to ocean views. Sitka deer bounded through iridescent purple fireweed. An eagle swooped down almost to eye level, checking us out.

Cycling in the rain is really dramatic. Although my gears ground and my knee throbbed, I persevered. Still, I can't describe my relief at the following words: "Now Entering Klawock." Far from being a

bustling business center, the town features a supermarket, two gas stations, two liquor stores, and, inside an old converted school bus, the Klawock Diner.

Overpacked, undertrained, and drowning my sorrows in coffee, I slumped at our table, weighing my choices. I wasn't about to spend the next six days at the Klawock Diner, though its gregarious owner, Rod Heppe, himself an avid cyclist — "I ride an old Peugeot carbon-fiber, you know, to get my frustrations out" — probably would have let me. But the thought of riding another 20 miles to that evening's destination was enough to make me want to lose my lunch, which was a shame, because it was a particularly delicious lunch (halibut burgers yet again).

And, as my wife made abundantly clear, death was not an option.

The way I saw things that rain-spattered afternoon, there was only one solution: a support vehicle. In retrospect, I could have made it — two days later, the sun came out and I found my legs, too — but I can't remember being so happy to get someone on the telephone. Hollis Adventure Rentals was the fourth number I'd called, the only one to answer.

"But it may not be what you're looking



On the move An Alaskan black bear.

for," the man said, even though I would have taken a Yugo. "It's a 4x4 crew-cab with a canopy cover — that be okay?"

I told him I'd make due.

After a protracted attempt at hitchhiking back to Hollis — tricky if you're a big, bearded, bedraggled dude with gear — I made it to the Hollis Adventure Rentals compound, at the end of Peninsula Boulevard (the sign's spelled "Peninsula," I kid you not). There, I engaged the services of "Kicking Bird," a Dodge Ram pickup. Apparently, proprietor Darren Lamp names all his vehicles (there is Birdy the Outback, Edward the Conversion Van, and my personal favorite, Gladice the Toyota Titan).

With a swipe of my credit card — funny how money sometimes can buy happiness — the bike tour switched from misery to delight. Unencumbered by the trailer and mixing in driving intervals, brutality gave way to enjoyment. And isn't that the point of travel? My real life is difficult enough, balancing career, marriage, fatherhood, and, when I can, personal growth. I can experience adventure without descending into an abject struggle to survive.

The 18 miles up Big Salt Lake Road between Klawock and our cabin at Control Lake was the only stretch I didn't double-back to complete under my own power. A mile or so to the cabin, I stopped to shoot photos of Libby and Karla steadily curving into view. Clouds lifted, exposing higher peaks and patches of snow. Primeval would be a good word to describe the scene. Along the roadside stood giant

spiky devil's club, cauliflower-sized lobes of cow parsnip and skunk cabbage heads large enough to sit inside. Suddenly, we heard loud honking in the forest canopy.

"Pterodactyl!" Libby shouted as we spied two immense winged creatures burst into the sky.

These turned out to be sandhill cranes, but still, I understood what she meant. Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised to see a brontosaurus in the bog. In fact, a few days before, a Discovery Channel film crew had been out that way searching for Sasquatch.

Down a gravel trail sits placid, lily pad-glutted Control Lake. Thus began the "paddling" portion of our tour. The cabin lies across the lake. The Forest Service provides an aluminum rowboat, into which we loaded Libby, Karla, and their gear — the boat had a 500-pound weight capacity. I watched them row into the mist, the wheels of their upside-down bicycles spinning lazily, reflected in the glassy water.

The Control Lake cabin is the nicest Forest Service cabin I've ever stayed in, and I'm not just saying that because I'd been out in the rain for three days. We almost didn't leave.

But there remained too much undiscovered country for us to succumb to laziness. Here, "Kicking Bird" gave us a well-deserved rest day as we checked out the island. It also enabled us to take spur-of-the-moment side trips that were too far for bicycles. Without motorized wheels, for instance, we wouldn't have taken the 31-mile road to Hydaburg, and we would have missed the group of kids snagging silver salmon from a bridge and the harbor seals that kept stealing them.

The trip to El Capitan Cave — Alaska's only public access cave — took us past a set of 10,000-year-old Kootznووoo petroglyphs; the seriously Tolkienesque Beaver Falls Karst Area and Cavern Lake Cave, replete with sinkholes and waterfalls that disappear into the ground. There we watched a bear fish alongside an attractive blonde woman carrying a .44 pistol and a can of Rainier. Now that's Alaska.

Accessing El Capitan requires a ranger-led tour, which leaves three times a day. After 370 wild huckleberry-lined steps leading to the cave entrance, we passed through a heavy steel gate.

"Sasquatch fuzz," our guide said, motioning to some white fluff. Then she laughed. "The Discovery people were convinced they'd find him in here."

WALZCAPS

For on the bike...

...and off!

Wear One Today.

www.walzcaps.com

Véloroute DES BLEUETS

THE VÉLOROUTE DES BLEUETS IS MORE THAN A BIKE PATH... IT'S AN ADVENTURE!

256 km

Lac Saint-Jean

Saguenay Lac Saint-Jean

www.veloroutedesbleuets.com

Bike Tours in Europe

Representing European bike tour companies

Over 200 routes in 30 countries
Many weekly & daily departures
Custom tours available



BikeTours
DIRECT

One-week tours from \$650
1.877.462.2423
info@biketoursdirect.com

biketoursdirect.com

Although Sasquatch failed to materialize on the tour, we did see plenty of flowstone, wet and glistening, hanging like tapestries from the ceiling, as well as other creatively named formations such as “Dragon Scales,” “Dragon Snot,” and “Bacon.” Back outside, our guide pointed to scratch marks high in a tree, possible evidence of a real-life elusive creature, the Prince of Wales flying squirrel, found nowhere else on Earth.

After another night at Control Lake, the morning began with an 18-mile mostly downhill ride into Thorne Bay, a town of about 600. There’s a grocery store — fresh food arrives on Tuesdays — a liquor store, one bar of cell service way out on the float-plane dock, and a coin-operated shower at the harbor.

At the far end of town began the tour’s rugged section along Sandy Beach Road. This meant far less traffic and a respite from logging trucks. However, it also meant no more hitchhiking. From here, I’d be riding shuttles, driving ahead then biking back to join my companions, driving ahead, biking back, etc. In this way, “Kicking Bird” may have actually added mileage to my total.

Right outside Thorne Bay, the road climbed again, winding into dense secondary growth. Then, to the right, the trees broke. In an instant, my vision filled with shoreline, fjords, and islands. This was spectacular dirt riding, no one in the world but me and the crunch of gravel. For the first time, I didn’t feel at a disadvantage for riding on fat, knobby tires.

At Sandy Beach Picnic Area, a cove looking across to the mainland, we ate in silence, sitting on driftwood, watching the sun peek through the clouds and a cruise ship sail across the horizon. Sandy Beach is an inter-tidal dream, strewn with sea stars, sand dollars, clams spurting water three feet into the air, and more than several crabs, um, “having it,” is the phrase Libby used as she enthusiastically snapped photos of the copulating crustaceans.

The following morning, Ratz Pass — the steepest, longest stretch — lay in wait. Our goal: up, over, and on to Coffman Cove before the grocery store closed. My attempt at adjusting both derailleurs managed to quiet the grinding. However, the chain no longer wanted to shift off the front middle sprocket. I tried not to let this ruin my fun along the initial 10 miles of twists, turns, drops, and moguls.

Then I reached the pass. This was the steepest road I’ve ever ridden — and walked a bicycle up — in my life. The more elevation, the harder the rain fell, but I feared losing

momentum. Finally, in the distance, I discerned a sign. The top? Nope. Still a few more miles up around a bend. My legs and lungs burned. My eyes froze into slits. I pressed on until finally I reached another sign: “Warning: Narrow Road, Steep Descent.”

My journal entry for the ensuing six-mile portion totals one word, in large capital letters: AWESOME. That’s all I remember, and all I need to.

Another nine miles along flat ground — during which I caught a glimpse of a bear leaping into the woods, still-bloody bits of carcass scattered across the road — brought us to Coffman Cove. We spent that night at a private campground right on the ocean, gazing up at the newly cleared sky, shooting stars, and the faint glimmer of Northern Lights, a rare treat indeed. You don’t see aurora in Southeast Alaska very often, and almost never during summer.

By the time we woke up, the sun shined full-bore. It was hot — in Alaska, 65 feels like 85, especially as we turned off the dirt road and back onto black asphalt. With continued gearing issues and a barking knee, I decided to take it easier and enjoy some of the area’s ample salmon fishing. How ample? In the words of the clerk at the grocery store that morning, “All the cricks are holding.”

Locals say you’ll find the most productive spots at the inlets and outlets of lakes, specifically Sweetwater Lake. However, not wishing to hike an extra five miles and back, I decided to scout a different hole right off the road. About 13 miles out of Coffman Cove, I reached an idyllic little pool beneath Log Jam Bridge, with a beach and a trail wide enough to accommodate our bicycles. The place was perfect (up north, we call this “skookum.”)

By the time we returned, Log Jam’s tranquility had disappeared. In its place were chainsaws, machinery, and diesel engines — a clear-cut in progress. Through the trees, in the midst of this beautiful green and blue day, stood a denuded hill, all dirt, bramble, and sawdust.

“I’m surprised we haven’t come across this earlier,” Karla said, clearly upset.

Libby and I took a closer look at stacks of logs, dropped one onto another, then picked up and placed onto a flatbed. When that flatbed filled, another took its place, then another, then another, with eerie efficiency. It was sad but beautiful, like photographs of war.

But this is reality on POW, and why people like Karla are trying to stimulate tourism as a way to supplant logging. Specifically, she hopes to accustom locals to the presence of human-powered vehicles and help them

see bicycle touring as another slice of a diversified economy.

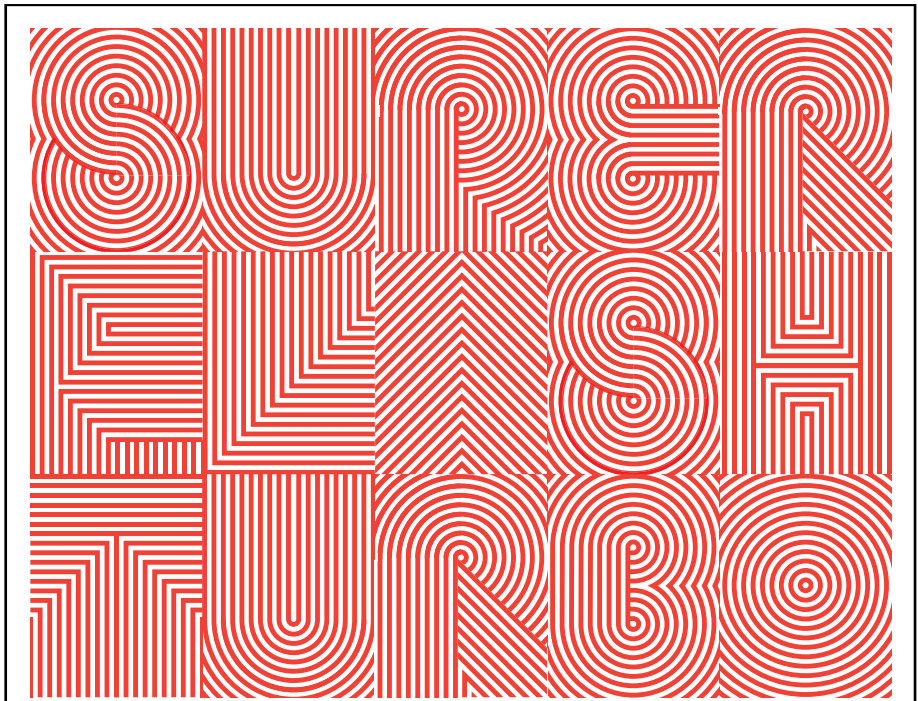
“Maybe even support a bike shop,” she said. “That’d be nice.”

The remainder of our trip entailed backtracking, another night each at Control Lake and Harris River, with encores of Northern Lights at both.

As Karla roused us for our 5:00 AM wake-up ride to the return ferry, one final leg remained. I ticked off each mile as I watched my early-morning shadow elongate across the pavement. Sore, sunburned, and covered in salsa (tighten those jars before you slip them into your backpack’s water bottle holder), I rolled into the ferry terminal feeling a heady mix of elation and exhaustion.

In staying alive, I’d kept my promise to my wife. I was thrilled to hook up again with the portion of the tour that included a nap — and halibut burgers. **AC**

Geoff Kirsch (geoffkirsch.com) has written for The Huffington Post, Comedy Central, and The Chicago Tribune. His first book, Run For Your Life Apocalypse 2012!, is forthcoming from Workman Publishing. Photographer Libby Sterling is a visual journalist for the Juneau Empire. View her photos at libbys.com.



The evolution of bicycle safety.
Superflash Turbo



BETTER BICYCLE PRODUCTS FOR A BETTER WORLD

planetbike.com

FREEWHEELING
Adventures
Extraordinary Active Holidays

Ride Nova Scotia in 2011
with a small group
or self guided!

1 800 672 0775
www.freewheeling.ca

Canada, Iceland,
Israel & Europe