

Montana

On our first day in the United States, we crawled out of our tent just as dawn broke over the purple mountains of Glacier National Park, and quietly went about our usual morning routine, pausing now and then to enjoy the warm sensations of low, golden sun on our faces, and steaming mugs of hot chocolate. A park warden happened to pass us by, and he stopped for a moment, gesturing toward the Canadian flag on the back of our trailer.

"I hope you folks aren't planning on heading home anytime soon..."

We didn't know what he was talking about. He explained that all borders had been closed, and went on to describe events unfolding on the east coast that were so shocking and awful, at first we really didn't believe him. At a nearby bar we joined a gathering crowd, as people from all over the area filed in to stare at the television, each with the same bewildered look in their eyes. Nobody said a word. As the day dragged on, the patterns of normal life began to dissolve, and an asphyxiating silence fell over the town. We drifted through what remained along with everyone else- expressionless, purposeless. Where before, we were surrounded by people so alive with laughter, stories, dreams, and feeling- their hearts and minds reaching out into the world in every direction imaginable... it was hard to grasp what had been lost. The only small measure of comfort came at the end of the day with the realization that without voicing a word, we had grieved with these people, and a strange intimacy had been conferred upon us. Occasionally our stares drifted from the repetition of images on *CNN* toward the window, where outside the earth itself conveyed a different message. The same tranquil alpine valley from this morning now shimmered in late afternoon sun, as though oblivious to the sufferings of a diminished humanity.

For a handful of the Americans we met (mainly in southern California), Montana might as well be the North Pole. The name conjures images of a vast wilderness frontier they've only heard of, and beyond which the continent quickly fades off the radar. Everyone knows Canada is up there somewhere, but for a few, within their own imaginations at least, Montana is somehow farther still.

"You pedaled all the way from Montana?!", people would gasp- eyes bulging and mouths hung wide open. When we explained that we'd actually come from the Arctic Ocean and were planning to continue on toward South America, many seemed a little confounded, drawing silent for a moment before continuing to smile and shake their heads in amazement.

"Woooo weeee!!...all the way from Montana!"

To be fair, Montana is somewhat peripheral, and with the exception of *'Unabomber'* Ted Kazinsky, it boasts few celebrities. As such, it seems understandable that not everyone would have the most up-to-date information, but even people from neighboring states seemed confused. Most cautioned us against traveling there at all. They shared tales of crewcut survivalists lurking in the woods, living out of buried school busses packed with hoarded food and ammunition. We were told that rifle practice from the back of a speeding pickup was popular sport, that logging trucks proudly displayed the markings of every bicycle that had ever been unlucky enough to get in their way, and that a man dressed in lycra shorts ought to be very careful about walking into a bar for directions. And all of this, so we were told, was just part of the regular order of living in Montana.

We had to wonder if any of these people had even been there. Montanans have a beautiful state and they know it. Perhaps this, combined with their relative isolation, is why they tend to think of themselves so much as hosts, bringing a smoothness, enthusiasm, and simple good fellowship to even the briefest encounter. Every time we rode into a new town we were greeted and welcomed. They cooked for us. They treated us like family. More than in any other place we'd been, they seemed truly glad that we'd come to visit. And the one time I did walk into a bar for directions, I stopped cold- until one by one, little bright smiles from behind great grizzled beards twinkled in the darkness. Montana has several nicknames, including *'big sky country'*, and (my personal favourite),

'tall, wide, and handsome'. Both speak as much for the depth and breadth of Montana's open-heartedness as they do for the place itself.

Going to the Sun road in Glacier National Park is Montana's premier blockbuster attraction. More amusement park thrill ride than roadway, it is also one of the National Park Service's more visionary civil engineering projects from the 1930's, and a testament to America's enthusiasm for automobiling. A transmountain road could have passed effortlessly through the broad valley along the park's southern boundary, but planners had something quite different in mind- a simulated roller coaster ride among Glacier's highest peaks, where the thrilling views previously available to only the most intrepid climbers could be shared by everyone...all from behind the steering wheel of your own car. While the mountains in Banff and Jasper are actually far more spectacular, it's the *road* that makes Glacier unforgettable. Cliff faces were carefully shaved down to form a narrow ledge that winds its way skyward. Where crevasses and waterfalls intervene, soaring buttressed archways negotiate a delicate path- all constructed from reclaimed rock, and in such a way that they seem to blend magically into the mountain side. And to ensure that none of the dizzying views would be obscured after so much hard work, an eight inch stone curb is the only thing preventing a stray wheel from slipping over the edge. All of this may have been well and good in the 30's, but today's larger vehicles are just barely able so squeak past each other, and it's great fun to watch panicked drivers, unglued by the vertigo, sweat their way along. As a cyclist sharing the road, you may select your direction of travel depending on which terrifies you more- the thought of being accidentally mashed against the inside rock face, or getting bumped off the edge and into the abyss. Either way, it's a trip you'll want to do over and over again... or never again.

Idaho

Sandpoint, Idaho is a pretty town on lake Pend Oreille, in the state's rugged northern panhandle. Steep forested hills shelter the lake's black waters, and wind-sculpted pine populate a sprinkling of rocky granite islands, lending it the unmistakable feel of Northern Ontario's cottage country- a place we normally spend many a long weekend during summer months. We arrived on a particularly hot afternoon, which, together with our nostalgic excitement, made going for a dip irresistible.

Sandpoint has no campground. It does, however, have a large, beautifully manicured downtown park right next to the city beach. Camping in city parks had become a routine operation over the last few months, and prior to Labour Day, school yards had been a favourite as well. Find a nice secluded corner, avoid areas with obvious signs of an automated underground sprinkler system (a lesson we'd sorely learned once already), hang around until dark, put up the tent, and get out first thing in the morning. No problem. So, after swimming until the sun had gone down, we set-out to do just that.

Somewhere in the wee morning hours we received our introduction to the local law enforcement.

"Get out of the tent right now! This is the police!"

We just froze.

"GET OUT RIGHT NOW!!"

Delirious with sleep, I leapt outside where they had me cornered between thick bushes. They told me forcefully, and in no uncertain terms, that it was illegal for us to be here, that if we tried to camp anywhere within 10 miles of city limits we would be arrested, and that if we didn't leave RIGHT NOW we would also be arrested. I tried to explain our situation, hoping they would realize that it was all very innocent, that we couldn't possibly ride 10 miles out of town

in the dark, that we really didn't know any better (a bit of a lie), and that we wouldn't do it again (also a lie). But they would have none of it, and I wasn't about to argue with armed men who had me cornered in the dark with flashlights, while I stood blinded and barefoot in my underwear, in a downtown park, in the middle of the night. Looking in from the outside, it would have been like watching one of those really boring episodes of the television show *COPS*- where cameras follow a cruiser around some sleepy small town all night, and nothing really happens, and it would be boring beyond belief were it not for the overzealousness of the police, keen to make the business of driving a drunk home look as dangerous as possible for maximum dramatic effect. And I imagined also that my mother would probably be watching from her living room in Toronto (she likes *COPS*), and she would think that Sandpoint, Idaho was a really dangerous place, where decent people can't go to the park because there are criminals who sleep there in their underwear.

We didn't know what to do. We rode around Sandpoint's vacant streets for a while, looking for something... anything... and eventually came upon a small, fenced-in parking lot attached to the *Best Western* motel. A few RVs were spending the night, and we wondered if perhaps we could too. After grudgingly forking over \$50 for the privilege, we setup in the dirt, let out a few weary sighs, and drifted back to sleep. Unfortunately, we failed to notice the elevated railway berm just 20 feet away. Altogether, I think I slept for maybe an hour that night. The noise was unbelievable, even terrifying. At one point, I remember leaping up in a panic, having been ripped out of a dream, horrified to see us both bouncing violently on the ground as yet another 100,000 tons of freight train came thundering through.

A bit dazed, we spent the next day reading (and sleeping) at the Sandpoint Public Library. Here we met Chris, who was quite excited about our travels and insisted that we spend a few days relaxing at his country farmhouse. He lived alone and wouldn't be there until quite late, but the door was unlocked and we were welcome to make ourselves at home. We gratefully accepted, and followed his directions out of town. Long after the sun had set we were still riding miles and miles down an empty gravel road, and just as it seemed certain that we'd lost our way, there it was- very large, and set way back off the road. But it didn't look very welcoming. In fact, it looked abandoned. We checked the address again and this was definitely the place, so with some hesitation, we pushed open a door and stepped inside.

Long, empty hallways pushed through the darkness, and our every movement echoed through the most distant, unseen reaches of the house. Slowly, a few things came into view. We discovered a stair to the second floor, but it had been firmly sealed with a barricade of heavy planks and even heavier locks. Stacks of boxes made it seem as though someone had packed and was preparing to move. We wandered into a wide, lofty main room, where most of the ceiling and second floor appeared to have collapsed, exposing an undercarriage of massive roof joists just barely visible in the darkness three stories above. Several smaller rooms opened into this main room, each containing a single well-made bed- a lot of beds for a guy who said he lived alone. There were also many books in these rooms, topics related to *'the end of the world'* appearing to be the most popular. I felt a chill on my neck. This was not the country farmhouse we had imagined, and having seen more than enough, we turned to leave.

At once we were startled by the figure of a man staring down from the wall. It was a tremendous portrait- very large and quite dark, but the subject's face came to us vividly, having been painted with a mysterious illumination. We were gripped by the fierce expression, staring right at us through eyes that flamed with sparks of white light, and the way it appeared to watch over this empty house in complete solitude made its presence all the more arresting. This was no ordinary decoration; oddly reminiscent of those peek-a-boo portraits in Scooby-Do cartoons.

"Any idea who that is?"

"Nope"

"Think there's somebody hiding back there?"

"Yup"

“Want to get the hell out of here?”

“Yup”

Had there actually been someone – or something -- hiding behind the painting, this would have been the perfect moment to reveal itself with a little wink, thus making us pee our pants instantly. Either way, the prospect of accidentally bunking-up in the secret compound of a local doomsday cult had us hurrying back down the empty gravel road in complete darkness.

Headlights crested a hill in the distance, and as they approached, the vehicle stopped, blocking our way. Chris had come to fetch us in his tan Magic Wagon, all smiles and friendly enthusiasm.

“Hey guys!, where are you going?” We were mortified.

I can't say why we went back. I suppose we may have been drawn by the same logic that compels horror film victims to wander off in search of missing friends, one at a time, only to disappear themselves. Chris terrified us, but he was just so friendly. The final heart-pounding episode came as he was cheerfully making dinner, and we saw for the first time the enormous stainless steel meat-grinder standing conspicuously in the middle of the kitchen. It was now all too obvious- Chris was going to cook us for dinner and we were too polite to do anything about it.

It took a whole night of explanation, but after baiting him with questions about everything we'd seen, Chris turned out to be exactly who we thought he was in the first place- just a really friendly guy (albeit with a rather unusual metaphysical bent and a very creepy house). We felt like idiots. We spent four nights at the farmhouse, and had a great time. Thanks Chris. Sorry we thought you were trying to kill us.

Washington

Break-out the A5-35, because northern Washington is a toughie! Several densely packed mountain ranges run north-south across the state, which means that if you're traveling east-west (as we were), you have to pedal over every last one of them. Sherman pass (5,575 ft), Wauconda summit (4,310 ft), Loup Loup summit (4,020ft), Washington pass (5,477ft), and Rainy pass (4,855ft) are among the most intimidating climbs, with many, many lesser ones in between. Some of those mentioned take a full day to summit, followed by near-vertical descents that can last for more than a half hour. The next morning (if you can get out of bed), you do it all over again.

If it's any consolation for the cyclist, even the weather has a hard time getting over Washington's formidable obstacles. Sizing-up *Loup Loup* summit on a beautiful clear morning, we dismissed the fragments of dark cloud swirling above the mountain as nothing, and began our ascent. A violent storm was trying to push through from the west, but had been held so firmly in place by the mountain that we remained oblivious to it, in spite of a slowly enveloping darkness. Hours later, just as the summit had come into view, a frightening blast of wind plowed us so hard we nearly collided. Perhaps we could have taken this as a warning, but by then it was too late anyway. Like the Midwest farmer who hears the wind escalating outside but thinks little of it until the roof peels off his house, a terrible noise swelled in the forest, and in an instant we were exposed to the storm's full size and strength- digging in, raging, smashing against trees and rock, assembling heavy sheets of rain, lightening, and ripping winds. Our defenses so lowered, we never regained composure. Another series of quick concussions first soaked us, then twisted us off balance, then threw us to the ground. We were stunned, bewildered, beaten... and a moment later, just as suddenly, the wind calmed, the rain stopped, and there was the most serene pause. We looked at each other in dismay- puffing heavily, then slower,

slower... calm... It's a funny thing, being screwed by the wilderness. It's so harsh, and you're so helpless, and your best efforts in the face of something so fierce can only be described as pathetic. Which is funny (if you survive). I lifted a half smile, imagining that this bizarre phenomena had simply exhausted itself, and then, in one last humiliating blow, like grand prize jackpot winners, a great load of hail poured out of the sky. Upon reaching the relative calm of the western valley, we could finally see it with some perspective- billowing and sparking high above as it continued to try to punch through the mountain top with one thunderous crash after another.

We met lots of people on the mountainsides of northern Washington. They would applaud and cheer as we came chugging up the road, which is always nice for a boost of morale, and we liked to humour them by putting on a little spirited display of superhuman energy. We'd straighten out our weary bodies, force a cheerful smile, and pick up the pace for a moment, as if to say *"Oh yes, this is really not hard at all, and we love every minute of it!"* The moment we curved out of sight, we'd crumple under the strain once again, and continue plodding along. While this happy charade is mostly for their benefit, on bad days it lets us retain some of our dignity, and on *really* bad days, it helps maintain a level of denial necessary to hold at bay the realization that we could, if we wanted to, get on the next bus, relax, have a hot meal at a nice restaurant and check into a comfortable hotel. It doesn't matter how tired, soaked or freezing we are- if you meet us on the mountainside in the dark with flat tires during a hurricane, we'll insist that we're having the time of our lives.

Almost every rural town in Washington has a fairground. They are invariably peaceful, jovial places, in country settings, with a few essential components- an arena for running horses, a playing field, stables, and benches for spectators. They were also our very favourite places to spend a quiet night. After dark we had them all to ourselves, and from the tops of high wooden bleachers we'd look out over fields of chirping crickets, flooded by outfield lights for baseball games that never materialized. Some appeared to have lain dormant for a long time, while others sprang to life at sunrise, and we liked to lie in our tent listening to the day unfolding outside. Saturday morning baseball games. The soft canter of hooves in freshly groomed earth. Children gathering for a weekend rodeo. The fairgrounds were magical and we loved to linger in them, sedated by the sounds and scenes of youthful innocence. And at the end of each day, when they were ours once again, we looked forward to laying down in a cushion of autumn leaves next to barns full of sleeping horses, and dreaming sweet dreams, in the comforting arms of rural America.

Seattle

While bicycle touring is marvelously suited to exploring the countryside, visiting big cities can be a real hassle. It can take hours of wading through unfamiliar urban sprawl just to get into a city- often a stressful and exhausting experience. Downtown hotels rarely fit our budget and few cities have conveniently located campgrounds, so staying in town is often out of the question anyway. Even a brief stop on the way through can be problematic because our equipment can't be securely left alone, we have far too much of it to carry around with us, and very few museums, theaters, restaurants, or other places we'd like to visit have the facilities (or the inclination) to store it for us. While a car can be left alone and a backpack can be taken anywhere, one or both of us usually ends up chained to our bikes the whole time.

Seattle was a refreshing exception. Thanks to the unique geography of Puget Sound and the Olympic Peninsula, the Seattle area has something few other cities have- a developed inner coast (the eastern shore of Puget Sound), and an undeveloped outer coast (the entire Olympic Peninsula). The end result is that while Seattle continues to grow and

expand, just across the water lies pristine rain forest, snowcapped mountains, and several tranquil islands- all of it tied together by a convenient network of ferries. This allowed us to approach Seattle along rural roads, skipping from island to island, before settling into a small forested campground on the east coast of Bainbridge Island, right across the water from downtown. Nothing could have been more convenient, more affordable, or more dramatic. For those familiar with Toronto, it was an experience comparable to camping on the north shore of the Toronto Island (which is unfortunately not allowed). We explored Seattle by day, then a quick boat ride and a short cycle down a country road later, we spent our evenings in another world- beguiled by the novel juxtaposition of radiant city skyline behind a sparking campfire. And each night, making it's appearance right on cue and in a scene too beautiful for words, a deep red harvest moon crested the horizon, rising up from behind it all.

You'd never guess it, but Seattle and Dawson City, Yukon are something like twin brothers that have gone their separate ways and long since fallen out of touch. Prior to the Klondike gold rush, there was no Dawson, and Seattle was a backwater. Overnight, this same historical event made both prosperous, populous, and famous. Seattle would provision more than 40,000 adventurers on their way to the Klondike, and Seattle, in turn, was where most of the gold would end up. As such, it became the banking center for fortunes made in the Yukon, and when the gold finally disappeared, Seattle's prosperity had already been solidified. These two cities, once so intimately bound, set off along completely divergent paths, and sixty years later, long after the gold rush had faded from memory, Seattle would be celebrated as a young metropolis at it's visionary zenith with the 1962 World's Fair. Some of that optimism endures in the built work of the time. Most are familiar with the elegant *Space Needle*, but we were far more thrilled to discover the Seattle monorail. After all, *everyone* loves a monorail! Gliding above the street between high-rise buildings with *Jetsons* efficiency... *swoooooosh!!* Alas, the bubble broke when, after whizzing back and forth over the same eight blocks several times, we realized that that was all there was to it. Like so many others who walked away confused and disappointed, we had been duped by Seattle's phony monorail promises.

Today, the Seattle area is one of the largest urban centers in the United States, and while creaky old Dawson remains stuck in the mud, Seattle has it's sights on a new sort of pay dirt- from the likes of hometown corporations Starbuck's, Boeing, and Microsoft.