Northwest Montana: The Last Best Place to Ride

Story and photos by Chuck Haney
I knew I was supposed to be unbiased when it comes to journalism, but you will have to excuse me on this particular piece. I will admit I’m biased, because I think the Flathead Valley in northwestern Montana is the most wondrous place to live and play in the world. I first came through Whitefish, the place I call home, in 1989 when I was cycle touring across the country. I arrived back in my home state of Ohio needing a career, so I enrolled at the United Bicycle Institute in Ashland, Oregon, for a crash course in bicycle mechanics. After completing the course, I spotted a listing of job offers at the school, and wouldn’t you know it, there was an offer from Whitefish, Montana! I somehow convinced Ron and Jan Brunk from Glacier Cyclery that I was the man for the job, and soon after my arrival in my home state of Ohio, I met Jan immediately struck a cord within me. I knew right then that I would soon be living in Whitefish. Long story short, after months of touring across the country, I returned to my home state of Ohio and after months of touring across the country, I returned to my home state of Ohio.

Working in a local bicycle shop was a great way to connect with the local cycling community, and soon I was off exploring every paved route in the valley with my road bike and every singletrack trail with my 1980s primitive (pre-shock) mountain bike. I was in cycling nirvana! So now I share my secrets — some of the best rides in northwestern Montana from over 20 years of diligent rider research.

At the north end of the Flathead Valley lies the town of Whitefish, population roughly 7,000, a popular resort town fringed by a large lake and the ski slopes of Whitefish Mountain Resort. The town is also the crossroads of numerous Adventure Cycling routes such as the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route, the Northern Tier Route and the Great Parks Route. It’s not uncommon to see numerous vans from various bicycle tour operators in the hectic summer months. The Flathead Valley has more paved county roads than any other region of Montana, making for a plethora of options. Road surfaces aren’t as smooth as in some other parts of the country, but low traffic and outstanding scenery more than make up for some chip seal pot-holes.

A popular ride right from my hometown is to pedal across the railroad switching-yard bridge and head north on Wisconsin Avenue where there is a newly constructed bike path that will whisk you away from the busy shops, lodges, and restaurants to a forested byway that weaves up and down on hillside above scenic Whitefish Lake. The road becomes East Lakeshore, but continue to follow the pavement for about 10 miles until it ends, and then turn around. If you would like to add some serious climbing to this ride, just turn off onto the Big Mountain road and chug 1,800 feet up in five miles to the village area at Whitefish Mountain Resort. There you’ll be rewarded with outstanding views of the Flathead Valley all the way to the shimmering waters of Flathead Lake, the largest natural fresh water lake in the American West, some 25 miles to the south.

Another one of my favorite rides from town heads east on Edgewood Place to the neighboring small town of Columbia Falls via a series of rural county roads that travel past hay fields and pastures of grazing cattle and horses. Columbia Falls really doesn’t have a natural falls. The town was originally named Columbia for a nearby mountain, but the post office officials nixed the name, claiming it sounded too much like Columbus, Montana, so the local postmaster just added “falls” and the name stuck. Head north on the North Fork Highway (Montana State Highway 496) where the road shouldered road will be paved for 12 miles and bumping up against the North Fork of the Flathead River and neighboring Glacier National Park. The Flathead is designated as a National Wild and Scenic River so don’t be surprised to look down and see a raft or two gliding through the rapids. The water has a distinctive emerald or jade color caused by fine particles called glacier flour, carried along from distant mountains in Canada. This out-and-back ride is approximately 44 miles.

Of course, one of the biggest draws to the area is Glacier National Park. The park boasts over a million acres of stunning scenery and is home to elk, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and grizzly bears, to name a few. It is a mecca in summer months to both backcountry hikers and sightseers in automobiles. There is also an incredible array of cycling opportunities in Glacier. The famed Going-to-the-Sun Road gets most of the publicity, deservedly so, but there are other, less traveled roads in the park on which to have a great pedaling experience. Start at the park’s western side near West Glacier and head up the Camas Park on which to have a great pedaling experience. Start at the park’s western side near West Glacier and head up the Camas Road, which is paved for 12 miles until reaching the North Fork of the Flathead River. The road receives a fraction of the traffic that Going-to-the-Sun receives and there is a good chance you’ll spot wildlife along the way. I’ve seen black bears, wolves, coyotes, and even a den full of red fox kits while cycling along this quiet route.

Going to the Sun Road is a modern engineering marvel. The road literally hugs the mountainsides while snaking its way up to 6,646-foot Logan Pass. It is a 32-mile ride through the mountains, crossing the Continental Divide, and ending at 6,646-foot Logan Pass. It is a 32-mile ride through the mountains, crossing the Continental Divide, and ending at 6,646-foot Logan Pass.
from West Glacier to the pass, and there are regulations about what time of day you are allowed to be on certain sections. Getting an early-morning start is the way to go and allows for a relaxing and invigorating ride. You’ll ride against the rushing whitewater in McDonald Creek along a dense forest where the scent of cedar trees accents the cool mountain air before ascending the narrow roadway where waterfalls literally pour out of the wildflower-laced mountains. The payoff for all of the climbing is the beauty of Logan Pass where an alpine world of wildflowers, snow-capped mountain peaks, and wildlife abound. Hopefully, you have picked a good weather day for your ride because it can be downright socked in with blustery conditions even during the middle of the short summer season. From the pass, it is an 18-mile descent to the small town of St. Mary. The east side of the park has a decidedly different feel to it as the dense forests of the western side give way to a more open and grand landscape. Here the prairies meet the mountains, and the views really open up.

Going-to-the-Sun Road has been in a perpetual state of reconstruction for the last five years, but the light is at the end of the proverbial tunnel as new pavement has reached all the way to the pass as of the fall of 2011. The next few years should prove promising for a smooth spin on the fabled highway.

For a different spin, try riding Going-to-the-Sun in the full moon. That is, equip your bicycle with the mandatory headlight and taillights and spin up to Logan Pass under the light of a full moon. It is a surreal experience. My favorite way to do the ride is to start at Avalanche Creek around 3:00 a.m. and reach the pass, 16 miles, uphill at about 5:00 a.m. Then you can descend more safely at dawn and get the bonus of first light in Glacier, which is spectacular!

From the park’s eastern side in St. Mary, you can’t go wrong heading out in either direction. To the north, I like to ride Highway 89 to the Chief Mountain road and climb all the way to the Canadian border and Waterton Lakes National Park. This ride is especially nice around the first of October when the vast stands of quaking aspen trees turn golden. South from St. Mary, climb up six miles on Highway 89 and then roller coaster up and down on the twisty highway where you can really get a feel for the transition from prairie grasslands to mountain peaks. Turn south at Kiowa Junction and take Highway 49, which will sport a variety of road surface conditions, but mile for mile it is one of the most scenic roads to cycle in the country. Take a side trip into the splendid Two Medicine Valley and gaze at stunning Two Medicine Lake while treating yourself to a huckleberry ice cream cone at the park service store, then blast into the town of East Glacier past stands of wildflowers and groves of aspen. All the while, the Rocky Mountains are a constant companion.

One of my favorite road rides with local cyclists is the 85-mile loop around Lake Koocanusa near the town of Eureka, just a hop and skip from the Canadian border. The lake is actually a massive reservoir that stretches nearly 90 miles north into British Columbia. The lake’s unusual name was formed by combining the Kootenay (Canadian spelling) River, Canada, and the U.S.A. Get it? The best way to do this ride is to start at the bridge that crosses the lake near Rexford where there is a park-
ing area. Head south on Highway 37. One hill follows another, and you will soon pass an area popular with rock climbers called Stone Hill. There are great views down into the lake and plenty of osprey nest sites where parents are busy rearing their young chicks in summer. Cross the Kootenai River (U.S. spelling) below Libby Dam and begin a big climb to the dam’s parking area, which is a little past the halfway point of the ride and an excellent place for a lunch stop. By the way, on this ride, there are no stores at which to stock up on provisions so pack plenty of food and water. The best part of the ride is the return north on the paved forest service road on the lake’s western side. There is hardly any traffic, and it’s more downhill than up. In fact, my friends and I have done the ride many times when the number of cars during the last 37 miles ranged from zero to three!

If you come to our beautiful part of the world, be sure to bring your mountain bike along. There are literally hundreds of miles of singletrack trails and old forest roads to explore in our vast national and state forest lands. Many of them aren’t signed very well so pick up a guidebook at one of the local bicycle shops.

There has been a new and welcome trail built just on the outskirts of Whitefish. It’s aptly named the Whitefish Trail. From the trailhead, you can ride for several hours on flowing singletrack that was designed and built by local mountain bikers. In short, the trail is an absolute joy to ride as the sinewy trail is devoid of obstacles. It’s a smooth roller coaster of a ride through a pine forest. At the time of this writing, there are over 15 miles of trail with more to be added in the near future. Be sure to check out the great view of Skyles Lake from the overlook spur trail before descending along a narrow cliff section that was chiseled from the mountainside. From the village area of Whitefish Mountain Resort, the Summit Trail zigs and then zags across the ski slopes of Big Mountain. It’s nearly eight miles to the summit of the mountain. The trail passes by fields of alpine wildflowers, and the views of Whitefish and the Flathead Valley just keep getting better by the pedal stroke. In some years, there are stands of tall, white, and puffy wildflowers called beargrass along the trail. The plants only flower every six or seven years, but when they do, it can be magical, transforming the slopes into a fairyland. If you happen to be riding in mid-August, take time to stop along the trail and pick a few of our prized sweet huckleberries. Known locally as the fruit of the forest, these prized berries are considered a delicacy in these parts, mainly because they cannot be domesticated. If you’re not here during huckle-picking season, reward yourself after a hard ride by ordering a slice of huckleberry pie back in town.

Hanging in my garage for the past 20 years, I have a large handmade map that is color coded with my favorite paved road and singletrack trails sketched across the paper. I still refer to it before heading out for another Flathead Valley excursion. I try to do my favorite loops in slightly different variations to keep the rides fresh. The one thing I do know is that all roads lead back to my home, the best place in the world.

Chuck Haney is a regular contributor to Adventure Cyclist and his photography is used extensively in many Adventure Cycling Association publications. For more information, visit chuckhaney.com.