

Self Contained and Ultralight Bikepacking Comes of Age

Thanks to gear breakthroughs and pioneering riders, there's a new style of bicycle touring



Story and photos by Aaron Teasdale

"I've gotta get a photo of you guys with your bikes," said a man we'd just met on the trail high in the Canadian Rockies. Anyone who's traveled by bicycle has experienced this: meeting people who are so blown away by what you're doing that they just have to take your picture. The difference with this guy and his two friends was that they were traveling by bike themselves. They pulled trailers stuffed with everything they could theoretically ever need, their pregnant cargo bags threatening to burst open in an explosion of gear. Normally, people would be asking to take pictures of *them*. But then there was our group. Nearing the end of a five-day tour, we had no trailers, no racks, and no panniers.

"Where's the rest of your stuff?!" they'd asked incredulously, looking at our lightly loaded rigs.

"This is it," we said with smiles. "Everything we need is on our bikes right now."

After assuring us they needed all the stuff they'd brought, they spent a minute examining our bikes like they were mystical objects from another world — fascinating to view but impossible to understand.

"I've toured with trailers plenty of times and they're great," I told them, "but over the years, I've learned that riding light is a lot more fun. You're trading a bit of comfort in camp for comfort on the bike, and it opens up all kinds of riding terrain."

With their heavy loads, they planned to spend the rest of their trip muscling along well-traveled valley bottom roads. Oppositely, we had just spent the previous

four days exploring remote backcountry trails and our last night was soon to take us into high, wild peaks on a trail navigable only on mountain bikes with the lightest possible gear.

This is bikepacking, bicycle touring's new frontier.

Our trip had begun five days earlier when our group of four assembled in northern Montana at the end of June as something of a bikepacking all-star team. There was Jeff Boatman, the adventure mastermind from the backwoods of California who'd created Carousel Design Works and the gear-carrying system that has taken ultralight touring to new levels of efficiency. Endurance biking legend John Stamstad had come over from Washington to join us for the first part of the trip. We'd met at Todd Tanner's place, a former World Cup-winning professional downhill mountain-bike-racer turned guide and all-around uber rider who'd recently embraced touring with vigor. Then there was myself, the least likely person in the group to set any speed or endurance records, but an avid backcountry explorer who's been at the forefront of publicizing ultralight bikepacking.

We'd all come together to ride for a few days, compare notes, and celebrate the sport, which was benefiting from recent gear breakthroughs and burgeoning interest from the mainstream cycling media. After years of existing in touring's shadowy fringes, bikepacking had finally arrived.

But that fact hasn't made it any easier to find quality places to do it. In the



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U.S., large, non-motorized, backcountry areas with ample singletrack are all too often closed to bicycles, leaving bikepackers stuck on washboarded dirt roads with dust-spewing trucks and ATVs. This was not the experience we sought, so we did what many sensible Americans would do: we headed for Canada.

There, just west of Calgary and south of Banff, where Alberta's flaxen plains rise up to the serrated summits of the Canadian Rockies, sprawls a spectacular wildland complex known as Kananaskis Country. Encompassing 20 contiguous provincial parks and recreation areas, and approximately 1,500 square miles of mountains, rivers, and trails — almost all open for cycling — it's one of the premier locales in North America for off-pavement bike touring. The locals call it K-country, after too many of them sprained their tongues saying Kananaskis, but we were soon calling it bikepacking paradise.

As soon as we set out from the parking lot at the Elbow Pass trailhead on the trip's first day, it was clear this was one of the most beautiful mountain landscapes any of us had ever seen. Jeff, who'd never been

in the Canadian Rockies before, was nearly dumbstruck as we followed old rock-riddled, four-wheel-drive roads (now closed to anything motorized) through sweeping subalpine valleys glowing emerald with fresh spring growth. Lined on either side by the Opal and Misty mountain ranges, their vaulting limestone spears and cliffs harboring a pearly lacework of snow, it was a landscape that could convert atheists.

After topping out at the day's second

pass, we made like water and flowed down valley for a dozen miles, crisscrossing and fording the Sheep River and its tributaries a dozen times on our way into the deep forest of the mountain foothills to the east. High-country snowmelt was juicing the waterways and impossibly cold creek crossings were abundant the first couple days. (Breaking news: coldest matter in Universe discovered to be supernaturally frigid creek water in Canadian Rockies!)

As the day rolled on — and I intermittently stopped to look at flowers, animal tracks, and birds — it became clear that I was used to riding at a more leisurely pace than the rest of the group. This was no surprise — after all Stamstad launched Great Divide Route-racing by time trialing the entire 2,500 miles, self-supported, in 18 days back in 1998, while Todd and Jeff are both considering racing the Tour Divide, one of the hardest bicycle races the world



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What is bikepacking?

Bikepacking is one of those great words that makes sense as soon as you hear it. A nifty amalgamation of “biking” and “backpacking” (or portmanteau, as these things are called), the word perfectly represents what bikepacking is. Simple enough, right? Alas, like life, taxes, and trying to mount a new rack on your bike, it’s more complicated than it appears.

While the term is seeing a surge in popularity right now, “bikepacking” means different things to different people. Most recently, the ultralight multi-day mountain-bike crowd has embraced the word as a name for their activity. If you think of using a bike to go where people usually backpack – singletrack trails in the mountains – this definition makes sense. It’s also a lot easier to say than “ultralight multi-day mountain biking.” Clearly the activity needs its own name and bikepacking would seem to be the perfect choice.

The only problem is that it’s been in use for a lot longer than this new form of touring. The seminal 1973 article in *National Geographic* by Greg Siple and Dan Burden about their pioneering tour was called “Bikepacking Across Alaska and Canada.” Then a general book about touring came out in 1982 with the name *Backcountry Bikepacking*. And Adventure Cycling editor Mike Deme has used the term in this magazine over the years as well. More recently, touring the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route and other dirt-road tours is often referred to as bikepacking. And it works really, in a general sense, for all of these uses.

Here’s my suggestion: Since road touring already has a generally accepted name – “touring,” or if you want to get wordy, “bicycle touring” – and dirt-touring enthusiasts need a more succinct name for their activity, and they’ve embraced the term bikepacking, let’s roll with that.

Bikepacking: off-pavement touring, often with minimal, lightweight gear (preferably on singletrack trails). The deeper in the boonies the better, far from the madding crowds and strident whine of motors, where the hand of man does not rule and wild beasts still roam the land.

has ever known, and would no doubt do quite well. As for me, the last thing I want to do on a bike trip is hurry. Racing something like the Great Divide Route sounds about as much fun to me as doing my own dental work — even if I could pedal 100-plus miles a day for three weeks without dying — so it took a little while for our group to calibrate.

While the other guys could have easily ridden much farther each day, I was content (and tired!) after 25 miles or so. Fortunately, as the trip’s orchestrator, I was able to dictate things a bit and show the speedy endurance-junkies how to tour Teasdale-style. After all, there were pictures to take, views to savor, and campfires to sprawl around each night (and morning).

Todd would later admit, “I didn’t expect so much campfire time.”

To which I replied, “You’re welcome.”

It came as no surprise then, late on that first day, that I was in my usual position well behind the speeding pack when a

black bear suddenly appeared in the forest in front of me. The sun had just gone down and I’d been scanning trail-side meadows for wildlife when there it was, rearing up on its hind legs not 30 feet up the trail from me. It’s amazing how quickly you can stop in these situations — in what felt like a fraction of a second, I took my pepper spray out, popped the safety off (just like I’d practiced countless times), and aimed it squarely at the disgruntled beast.

“It’s okay big guy,” I said in the most gentle and reassuring voice I could muster. “Let’s just leave each other alone.”

This caused it to start woofing. I was clearly no bear whisperer.

“Uh, guys?” I called out. I could hear their voices ahead on the trail. “You might not have noticed, but there’s a bear back here. With me.”

No response — the bear wasn’t taking his eyes off me — then laughing and more talking. The bear woofed again.

“Guys!” I yelled, with significantly

more gusto this time. “I’ve got an unhappy bear here. Can you start walking back here, all together, slowly and loudly?”

“Is that bear still there?” a voice called back.

“Yes, the bear is definitely still here.”

I heard murmuring as they confirmed what I’d said. My thumb stayed tensed on the bear spray trigger, my eyes locked with the bear’s.

Finally, they started moving back toward me in a yelling mass of bikepackers. Just as I’d hoped, this was enough to send the bear loping into the forest, where it stopped about 70 feet away and resumed snuffling along the ground as if we weren’t there.

After re-holstering the pepper spray and sharing a laugh with my saviors, we followed a trail through dimming light until reaching the shadowy shores of Bluerock Creek, which fulfilled our needs by delivering both a clean water source and deep beds of pillowy moss to sleep upon.

Swapping stories about wildlife encounters we’d had over the years, we cooked over the camp stove while our shoes and socks dried around the fire. Talk turned to our favorite riding locales (Todd: South Africa; Jeff: Sierra Nevada; Aaron: anywhere untamed.), and as John sliced pieces of summer sausage and cheese into a pot of boiling Ramen noodles, he said his was Alaska, where he’d won eight consecutive Iditasport winter races in the 1990s. He then pointed to the alcohol stoves we were both using and said nonchalantly, “that’s where I learned these don’t light when it’s colder than 30 degrees below zero.”

“Good to know,” I said with a laugh, and then added, “I’m so glad I’ve never had to learn that.”

After stringing our food up from a scraggly cottonwood by the creek, we retired to our respective shelters, or in the case of John, a space-blanket bivy sack directly on the ground (ever the ascetic, he also eschewed a sleeping bag). Jeff, the consummate craftsman, slept under a custom tarp of his own making that incorporated his front wheel on one end and his bike on the other for an impressive bike-supported shelter. As an ardent devotee of sleep, my accommodations were deluxe by comparison, and I laid back on my full-length sleeping pad under a fast-fly tent and let the murmurs of the creek carry me into slumber.

With a good map and no itinerary other than to simply explore, we rode for the next three days on rugged trails and old



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exploratory roads across ridges and down through the foothills of the Rockies. Under blue summer skies we passed fields of wild horses, came upon 500-foot canyons opening suddenly from the forest floor, and climbed alongside tumbling rivers into mountains weeping with snowmelt. Camping in meadows and on mountain-

sides, we had campfires every morning and night, and immersed ourselves ever deeper in the landscape of Kananaskis.

John bade us farewell on the trip’s third morning, beckoned by responsibilities in the teeming world beyond trails and campfires. Though he’s spent the last decade largely focused on trail running, he



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seemed impressed with the current state of bikepacking, a pursuit he helped inspire. "I've got to do more rides like this," he said, "This kind of riding wasn't possible 15 years ago — it's awesome what the new gear now allows you to do."

We couldn't have agreed more. With our svelte 10-pound loads seamlessly integrated into our bikes, we were free to enjoy the simple yet profound pleasures of riding. On many a downhill, the woods and mountains rang with our exuberant whooping.

If we have the backpacking world to thank for developing ultralight camping equipment, we have Jeff Boatman to thank for bringing them so elegantly to the world of cycling. As a backpacker, mountain biker, and expert outdoorsman, he longed for a way to apply the ethos of ultralight backpacking to backcountry cycling and combine his two favorite activities into one. Like other adventurous mountain bikers in the early and mid-2000s, he experimented with strapping lightweight gear to the top shelves of racks, but the racks eventually broke. He knew there was a better way. So he set out to create a rackless cargo system that would be durable, light, and suited for the kind of high-mountain riding he loved. In 2006 he launched his company, Carousel Design Works (CDW), and unveiled the handlebar, seat, and frame bags that would revolutionize lightweight bicycle travel.

We were all using CDW bags on our trip, and every cyclist we met along the way marveled at them and our Lilliputian loads. "We're on a multi-day ride," Jeff would say as he explained how the system worked —



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Nuts & Bolts: Kananaskis Country

K-country is a velo-wonderland for dirt lovers of all stripes. Besides the boundless trails webbing through the mountains and foothills, tourers with traditional loads will enjoy the Sheep and Elbow River trails, plus the many dirt-road options in the foothills to the east. The Great Divide Mountain Bike also cuts through the western side of the Kananaskis region on its way into British Columbia. Loops from Kananaskis south to the Fording River Pass into British Columbia and then back up the GDMBR to Kananaskis are also possible.

Maps: *Backcountry Biking in the Canadian Rockies* by Doug Eastcott details many of the best routes in the area. For maps, check out Backroads Mapbooks (www.backroadmapbooks.com) for landscape-scale planning and GemTrek maps (www.gemtrek.com) for on-trail navigation.

Bears: There are bears here, big ones, including Grizzlies, but human encroachment has reduced their numbers dramatically from

historic levels. For your safety and theirs, keep a clean camp, always hang your food at night (or use the bear proof storage containers at designated campgrounds), and make lots of noise around blind corners. Carry pepper spray too, and make sure you can access it quickly while riding. Packing Lists and a How-to To see Stamstad's, Boatman's, and Teasdale's packing lists for their Kananaskis ride, check out www.adventurecycling.org/ultralight, where you can also learn the basics of ultralight touring techniques.

Resources:

- www.bikepacking.net offers forums, gear reviews, and route information.
- www.travelalberta.com
- www.irideadventures.com is Todd Tanner's guiding business for multi-day rides (rental gear available). He also rents cabins and has a bike shop near the Great Divide Route just south of Eureka, Montana.

clothes in the seat bag, shelters and sleeping bags in the handlebar bag, food in the frame bag. "You know, bikepacking."

After talking with the overloaded-trailer guys who took our picture, we spun through the mountains debating where to go for the final night of our ride. We wanted to do something dramatic, something

that would push the limits of bicycle travel and be a worthy culmination for our trip. When we spied a trail on our map that leapt contour lines up to a high chain of alpine lakes we knew we'd found it. So it was that two hours later we found ourselves alternately pedaling and pushing our bikes up a mountainside through aspen forests and along exposed, open slopes. The trail steepened savagely as it climbed into the alpine, until we were traversing scree slopes and shouldering our bikes over lichen-speckled fins of limestone. The chirping calls of pikas echoed off the surrounding mountain faces as we threaded our way through patches of snow and car-sized boulders to a high knoll between the lakes. With its panoramic view, it was a perfect place to camp.

"We may not be the first people to bike here," I said that evening as we sat around a campfire and watched the day's last light illuminate the magnificently contorted strata of the encircling summits, "but I bet we're the first to ever bike here and spend the night."

After one last look around at the peaks the next morning, we headed back across the scree traverse and pointed our tires down the mountainside we'd climbed the previous day. It was the only trail down, so



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our precipitous climb was about to become a rollicking descent. After five days in Kananaskis, this was exactly the kind of farewell we were hoping for. As we paused for a minute to take in the view of the massive valley dropping away below us and the jagged pyramids of rock cutting into the sky in every direction, we agreed this had been one of the most glorious bike tours of our lives.

"And this is our last downhill!" I said.

Then, as gravity began pulling us down the serpentine trail, a funny thing happened — we all went fast. The racer, the artisan, and the photographer, all charging down the mountain together like a trio of wild horses celebrating their freedom. Whoops and laughter filled the air as we dodged rocks, darted between aspen trunks, and launched air off roots with abandon. We were like boys now, giddy kids romping through the wilderness. This is one of the beautiful things about cycling — it can make us feel the speed of a stallion and the glee of child together in one euphoric rush.

Maybe that's why some people consider the bicycle to be mankind's greatest invention. If that's so, then thanks to innovators like John Stamstad and Jeff Boatman, and places like Kananaskis, it just got a little greater. **AC**

Aaron Teasdale is an ex editor of Adventure Cyclist who lives in Missoula, Montana, with his wife Jacqueline, and sons Silas and Jonah.

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